Dissident Discipleship: Radical Christianity's identity and performance in urban praxis

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Elaine Cortes Pasqual, declare that the work presented in the following thesis is my own. Where the works of others have been consulted, this is clearly stated in the text and bibliography.

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*pseudonyms

Abstract

Postsecularity studies have aimed to understand the persistence and development of religious movements in our time, particularly when it comes to public religion. The purpose of this research is to provide an in-depth analysis of Christian communities and individuals (which will be defined as “Radical Christianity” and “Radical Christians” respectively) whose beliefs centre a radical stance for socioeconomic and climate justice via political activism and advocacy, and the development of spaces of inclusion and resistance in urban centres.

Radical Christianity is identified here as a cluster of evolving networks. The data analysed comes from the participant observation of one local church and one national advocacy group over one year, and 22 in-depth, semi structured interviews with individuals who self-identified as Radical Christians.

The findings of this fieldwork indicate that Radical Christians have a collectivist faith that is more immanent than transcendental, and thus calls for practical and structural action towards equity in society. Further, this research indicates that these individuals organise within two settings. First, in local institutional networks, typically churches, that serve as microcosms of inclusion and resistance in the local community. Second, in dispersed networks where they can have communion with like-minded people spread across the country, and advocate for specific issues such as climate justice, LGBTQ+ inclusion in the Church, refugee and migrant rights, etc.

The particular formation of Radical Christian networks leads to a dissident form of discipleship in which they feel called to come together to practise their faith in community, understanding Christianity as a religion that centres the marginalised and seeks to abolish systems of oppression of their sociological context. By understanding these people’s motivations, goals, and how they organise, productive dialogues and partnerships can be formed and further research can be done into the Radical Christian framework as these networks develop.

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Introduction

This research aims to contribute to the discussion of how religion - specifically the Christian faith - can motivate and structure civic engagement in a global city, focusing on the intersection of political and religious formation, identity, and performativity in urban praxis. It centres a particular category of local communities and broader networks, which I will be calling "Radical Christianity", that have unifying inner mechanisms and biblical hermeneutics which place them as political actors, holding faith as a justification for their collective political actions for socioeconomic and climate justice.

Radical Christianity is the normative term I will apply to Christian institutions, networks and individuals who interpret the Bible, especially the Gospels, as a call to embrace the disenfranchised and marginalised in one's society, being committed to political resistance and social justice through direct action. I will address emerging narratives of Christianity that form an intersection between religion and political citizenship in the context of a postsecular city.

There is a lack of inclusion - and in times deliberate exclusion - of studies of religious actors as revolutionary agents that intentionally challenge power structures in urban society in urban critical theory, which I want to address with this research. Stephan Lanz claims, in *Religious Pluralism and the City*, that "in the 2000s it became clear that religion was a blind spot in critical urban studies dominated by Marxist approaches and a narrow analytical focus on the cities of the West" (Lanz, 2018). On the other hand, postmodernity and, alongside it, postsecularity theory have allowed for a wide range of postcolonialist studies on religious movements that not only have survived the scientificism of modernity but have thrived.

Cloke and Beaumont (2013) have described "postsecular rapprochement" as a process in which religious and nonreligious individuals display a willingness to work together to address crucial social issues, and in doing so putting aside other frameworks of difference involving faith and secularism. More than the "incorporation of religious capital into neoliberal governance', postsecular rapprochement demonstrates 'both an expression of resistance to prevailing injustices under neoliberal capitalism, and an energy and hope in something that brings more justice for all citizens" (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013).

Calling for a "crossover narrative" (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013) between secular and religious ideals of social justice, we can find convergence between theological, ideological and humanitarian concern and thus build a richer critical theory. Given this landscape, my intention here is to find an expression of faith in the centre of a "global city" or "urban society" that is systematically involved in direct action for social and economic justice in the city and in the wider context of Britain in the 2020s. Radical Christianity holds its theopraxis as an important source of resistance and reclaiming of the urban.

My research interest came from slowly finding microcosms of political engagement for issues relating to radical social justice and economic equity in the city, after having recently moved to London for the first time. These expressions of faith reminded me of previous research I completed on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of "religionless Christianity" (1944), in which he identified in modernity the opportunity for religion to flourish as it was no longer necessarily attached to hegemonic cultural and political power structures, and thus revelation could be, to an extent, freed from historical situatedness, allowing for an authentic expression of faith. With this separation, religion can act as a propeller for social change, instead of serving as a normative maintainer of status quo. Although Bonhoeffer's theory is now almost 80 years old, I saw a clear parallel between what he hoped would happen in the second half of the twentieth century, and what the framework of postmodernity has been showing to be true.

Inspired by these connections I witnessed in the city, I wanted to use London as the backdrop for this research. In order to paint a rich picture of these groups, I have chosen to conduct fieldwork comprising two case studies: one local church and one national activist network, both involving active participation methods over the course of a year. In addition, 22 in-depth interviews were conducted with members of these groups and other people who identified with an initial working concept of Radical Christianity. The data stemming from this ethnography is then further analysed.

This research starts from the tentative understanding of Radical Christianity as networks of like-minded individuals who, for the most part, have grown up in religious environments. Through personal experiences and various encounters with secular political philosophies and activism, they have adapted their worldviews so their religious identities aligned with their belief systems. Individually, this process can take many forms, starting from various places and relying more or less heavily on secular activism or political ideology in their religious formation culminating in these individuals ending up in similar spaces of action and community building.

My aims with this research are to identify who exactly these people are, mapping a common group language, systematic theologies, and denominational ties. Ultimately, the main questions to be answered are why these people find it necessary to be engaged in direct action for socioeconomic and climate justice, what their motivations are, what their end goal is and how all of that is connected to their expressions of faith.

1. Literature Review

The proposed work of mapping out expressions of Radical Christianity in a global city is very focused on finding specific faith communities, their microcosms of inclusion and actions on the broader society. In order to reach a point where these communities can be identified, and even have a solid understanding of what I mean by Radical Christianity, a comprehensive literature review is needed, as this theme reaches from theology to critical theory, from sociology to ethnographic studies.

The following literature includes the main influences on Radical Christianity, focused on the research question itself and the methodology offered. In this sense, the following sections should be regarded as the different strands that, when combined, make up a genealogy of Radical Christianity's identity, presence and practice today. They are the theological, philosophical and methodological traditions that led me to identify Radical Christianity as an emerging category worthy of consideration.

I will begin with a perspective on the historical and philosophical influences of Radical Christianity, highlighting some of the authors who, I suggest, offered insights into how religion could function in more authentic and deconstructed ways, even before postmodern thought and postsecularity were available in social analyses. This also includes alternative narratives within theology, centering the voices of Black, Latin American and female voices.

Next, I will provide a panorama of the structures within which I will be working. I will go through the origins and meaning of postsecularity, both from its inception through to more recent interpretations, and the impact this framework has on the study of contemporary religious movements. I will then outline several key concepts and elements of urban critical theory that will be important as I centre this work within the context of urban movements that are active in the struggles for systematic social change and for a just city. I will highlight tensions in the literature concerning the role of religion in the studies analysed.

In order to resolve this tension, I will also look at influences on the sociology of religion from the turn of the twentieth century until recent developments, and construct the argument for Radical Christianity in the city. At the end of this review, I will have determined various possibilities for the study of Radical Christianity, including deciphering the claims that some expressions of Christianity have on radical social movements and the spaces that religion not only occupies, but creates within the public square as a producer and sponsor of social change.

One of the intentions of this work will be to resolve some of the cognitive dissonance that can result from the way that the social sciences have analysed the role of religion in today's society by bringing forth alternative perspectives on religious actors in the city that, in my view, have not received enough attention. I want to foreground the narratives of people and institutions that are linked with the Christian faith - either through mainstream association or

alternative interpretations of Christianity -, and because of their faith choose to actively promote radical social change in their local communities.

I will argue that public (especially politically progressive) religion has been systematically left out of Marxist analysis of urban relations and of critical studies on the production of space. Due to this oversight, there is still limited recognition in this field for religiously motivated actors that do not fall into the dualism of progressive secularity and conservative religion. I will highlight the authors representing a shift in this thinking, exploring some of the concepts and frameworks they use to convey different expressions of Christianity in various contexts within the global north. A combination - and further development - of the concepts available from urban critical studies and those used in studies on progressive religious movements will be instrumental as I build a framework of Radical Christianity in the context of a global city.

An example, which will be explored in the following sections, is of adopting social justice as a normative concept in the study of religious actions in the inquiry into the role of religion in the public square alongside, and perhaps leading, movements for a just city. While social justice as a normative concept is used in both the works of critical urban theorists such as David Harvey and liberation theologians to convey very similar interests and goals, it is not as common to find dialogues in these works between secular and religious actors.

Therefore, I will be interested in analysing networks which engage in this dialogue, to see how they integrate and negotiate their ideals and methods. In this sense, the concept of networks for social organisation and the categories of local and global action will also be important for this research. How does radical religious action participate in the meaning-making in the city, integrate itself in activist networks and contribute to the agenda of social change both in the local community and as a global ideal?

By the end of this review, I will have determined what are the key conceptual frameworks that will facilitate the subsequent research into Radical Christianity, as well as have a solid understanding of who is being considered when talking about Radical Christians today.

1.1 Glimpses into Radical Christianity from twentieth century theology

I would like to argue that from the early twentieth century, before a category of postmodernity was possible, there were relatively marginal lines of thought in philosophy and theology that were already proposing a mature dialogue between civil society and religion that foreshadowed postmodern thought. I will expand below on works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jean-Luc Marion, John D. Caputo and James K. A. Smith as theologians who argued the impossibility of epistemologically conceptualising God and for the identification of religion as political action. I believe this framing will provide a comprehensive overview of these processes

over a long period of time, moreover these theologians represent the shifts in radical Western theology from different denominational and cultural backgrounds.

Reaching the turn of the century, we find authors drawing from what is being established as a Radical Christian theology and from the influence of deconstruction and post-structuralism to explore new possibilities for religion in light of a postsecular framework, as well as to make the religious language more accessible with phenomenological terms. It is, thus, analogous that Radical Christians have been influenced by the same cultural shifts and historical contexts, enacting the possibilities that these philosophies spoke of and pointed to.

The authors mentioned in this section all take into account that philosophy works fundamentally within a linguistic domain, bound to the regulation of what is logical within language. The problem of God, constructed in terms of act and being, could essentially represent a gap between text (or linguistics) and reality, in the same way that an individual can read about a transcendental event without it meaning that they are participating in said event.

1.1.1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity as a rehearsal of Radical Christianity

In *Act and Being* (1929-30), Dietrich Bonhoeffer argued that while humans should be comprehended as existence and potentiality, God can only be speculatively conceptualised as *pure act*. He criticised theology's tradition of mimicking philosophical methods, because both transcendentalism and idealism were incapable of generating epistemological knowledge of God. He would later develop his ideas on how to conceive of religion as action through the concept of "religionless Christianity".

Bonhoeffer first used that term in April 1944, in letters sent from prison a year before his death in a Nazi concentration camp. The particularity of that historical and personal moment completely coloured his worldview, but religionless Christianity continues to be a surprisingly relevant term. In 1944, Bonhoeffer saw the national Church[1] in Germany not only protecting the status quo, but systematically aligning itself with the political ideology of Nazism.

Under these circumstances, Bonhoeffer believed that God was being increasingly pushed out of a world that had come of age, that would soon become religionless. When he writes about religion in this context, it is important to note that Bonhoeffer is referring to historically conditioned forms of self-expression, metaphysics and inwardness, as seen in his 30 April 1944 letter (Bonhoeffer, 1997, pp. 278-282). Therefore, this should be understood as a criticism of pre-modern and modern concepts of transcendence and ultimate questions.

He criticised the strategies theology used to push against secularism, either by developing apologetics against scientificism or by restricting God to the "ultimate questions" and

[1] I will capitalise the word "Church" when referring to Church as a wide institution, as opposed to local church communities or one individual church.

as the *deus ex machina* solution to life's problems, needs and conflicts - which proved more difficult as people increasingly did not feel the need to answer these questions or were fulfilled through emerging interpretive frameworks including existential philosophy or psychotherapy:

> It always seems to me that we are trying anxiously in this way to reserve some space for God; I should like to speak of God not on the boundaries but at the centre, not in weakness but in strength; and therefore not in death and guilt but in man's life and goodness... God's 'beyond' is not the beyond of our cognitive faculties. The transcendence of epistemological theory has nothing to do with the transcendence of God. (Bonhoeffer, 1997, p. 282)

Bonhoeffer argued that it was as if theology - and, one can assume, the institution of religion - was "making everyone into a sinner" so they would have something to treat, whereas Jesus called people out of their sin. Or, in other words, solving self-made problems. "Never did [Jesus] question a man's health, vigour, or happiness, regarded in themselves, or regard them as evil fruits; else why should he heal the sick and restore strength to the weak? Jesus claims for himself and the Kingdom of God the whole of human life in all its manifestations... Let me just summarise briefly what I'm concerned about - the claim of a world that has come of age by Jesus Christ." (Bonhoeffer, 1997, pp. 341-2)

Bonhoeffer started from the assumption that religion is only a garment of Christianity, subsequently wondering about the existence of religionless Christians and deliberating on what a religionless Christianity looked like. In a later letter, Bonhoeffer outlined the book he wished to write on these ideas. He pointed to the real meaning of the Christian faith as "[Jesus] being there for others" (Bonhoeffer, 1997, p. 380). Being there for others is the experience of transcendence, the grounds for God's omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, and faith is the participation in this being for others. Therefore, the interpretation of biblical concepts must be made on this basis. The conclusion outlined is that the church is the church only when it - radically - exists for others, sharing in the secular problems of ordinary human life by helping and serving, as opposed to overcasting them.

As Bonhoeffer was gradually censured from speaking against the government of his time, he was forced to look outside of the Church, to deconstruct his belief systems and disobey both law and ethics in order to achieve what he believed was a radically Christian justice. He would embrace modernity as the opportunity for religion to flourish, as it was no longer attached to cultural and social establishments. Thus, belief could be fully freed from historical situatedness, allowing for an authentic expression of Christianity that looks to the roots of the religion. With this separation, religiosity should be a propeller for social change, instead of serving as a normative maintainer of status quo.

While Bonhoeffer never had the opportunity to develop his religionless Christianity further, I would argue that it is an expression of a Radical Christology, concerned with the

liberation of humans from structural injustices, where the act of being there for others trumps any systematic theology.

1.1.2 Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology as religious deconstruction

Jean-Luc Marion's work follows this theological lineage, having the same starting point that onto-theo-logy's predictive language is inadequate when directed towards God. Marion's question is of how to think of an unthinkable God, who is absolute, unknown and consequently free of affiliation with anything and incomprehensible to the terms which mould our worldview.

Marion took the idea of thinking of God as *pure act* to the last consequences in *Dieu sans l'être: Hors-texte* (1982). In this work, he defied the fundamental premise of traditional metaphysics that God, before all else, must *be*. He created space for a phenomenology that places any determination regarding God's nature in brackets. The matter of "God without being" is the culmination of his critique of metaphysical development and the way in which it stopped concerning itself with being and began concerning itself with knowledge as human understanding (Marion, 1999).

Although, as we will see, Marion distanced himself from Heideggerian ontology, this critique is consistently shaped by Heidegger's thought, in which philosophy, in its essence and history, is metaphysical, and metaphysics is an onto-theo-logy. Marion's phenomenology is made possible by Heidegger's accusation of philosophy's obsession with an ontological and abstract Being which led it to forget the real being. From there stems an overcoming of classic metaphysics so that understanding could be placed back on real life experience, where philosophy can flourish.

Heidegger's Being is not presented as abstract and inherent; it gives itself. Since experience can mediate truth, we are capable of transcending epistemological scepticism and holding the idea of this donation (*es gibt*) as a dynamic reality rich in implications for the concept of revelation. By dethroning the objective ideal of being, Heidegger abandoned not only classic metaphysics, but also classic theology, which he called onto-theo-logy (the theology of God as *ultima ratio*, *causa sui* and *causa prima*).

> Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god. The godless thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as *causa sui*, is thus perhaps closer to the divine God. Here this means only: god-less thinking is more open to Him than onto-theo-logic would like to admit. (Heidegger, 1969, p. 72)

Marion understands as philosophy a metaphysics which continuously radicalises the implications of the principle of sufficient reason: all that *is* exists because a concept gives explanation for its existence, for its non-existence or for its exemption of cause. When Marion

looks beyond metaphysics, he not only does that in an attempt to avoid the self-defined horizons of being and objectivity, but also to reconfigure the matter of presence.

1.1.3 Conceptual mechanisms: God as gift

The title itself, *Dieu sans l'être: Hors-texte*, shows us clearly what Marion's intentions are: to speak of the possibility of God without them being inserted within the concept of being. *Hors-texte* indicates a reference to Derrida by inferring that God is outside of the capacities of linguistic conceptualization. Ultimately, affirming that "God *is*" might be a conceptual misunderstanding, because God would need to reveal Godself in order to be understood. Marion's philosophy is marked by the idea of God as a present, something which takes agency and gives itself; a theological resignification of Heidegger's *es gibt*.

Central to Marion's defence is the distinction between phenomenology as a description of possible experiences and theology as the statement that a certain type of experience, revelation, is not only factual but also truthful. Marion reconstructed a phenomenology not only in appearance, but also in terms of donation. Other than that, he also resignified the self as an existential act and not as an intentional being.

In *Dieu sans l'être: Hors-texte*, Marion's first question is what makes God God, even in philosophy. His answer is givenness. This is the supreme expression of divine intentionality. So, while in onto-theo-logy *being* is God's first name, here it is *givenness*. In contrast with the donation of phenomena through being in Husserl, Marion presents a radical phenomenology in which divine givenness opens the possibility of transcendence in phenomenological reduction. The author asks if, ultimately, God is, by acting, concerned with being, and if their relation with being defines all other beings. His intention here is rethinking *Dasein* as Heidegger's authentic existence because the notion of being as existence implies that God must be before a discussion about their nature could begin.

Accordingly, Marion critiqued the idea that being must be the base for the discussion of all other beings, especially when one speaks of God. He launched a campaign against the metaphysics that imposes on God the conception of the highest being, the same discourse that, as we have seen, consequently limits them by binding God to human conceptions.

1.1.4 The idol and the icon

In *Givenness and Revelation* (2016), Marion presented the concepts of idol and icon, which correspond to two forms of representation of the divine as different intentions in the creation of an image (or a concept). If our gaze stops at the representation as if it is the integral representation of a whole, then transcendence is lost. There is an indissociable identity

between thought and being, an identity in which thought mirrors the object while at the same time the object becomes a mirror of the projected content of consciousness. Marion identifies this objectification as the creation of an idol. If, on the other hand, the gaze transcends both itself and the object, recognising the inadequacy of thought and being, mind and its reference, we have an icon, a representation of the divine which is recognisably a memory of the incomprehensibility of transcendence.

The idol, on the other hand, has as its limit the gaze upon it and in this sense works as a mirror instead of as a portrait. It is seen and known for the fact that it is seen, confined in the divine-directed gaze and whose look reflects the observer as a mirror. Observation in itself constructs the idol and its signification comes from the self who gazes. The idol represents the preconceived notions of knowledge of God where a person has predetermined what and how God must be perceived. It does not suit us as an image of the divine, but instead as the expectation of the self upon it. Conversely, the icon is the gaze that transcends the observer into a real experience of the divine.

The movement of the gaze upon the icon is not from the bottom up, as the speculation of the divine is commonly imagined, but from top to bottom, reflecting the individual who gazes. In this sense, the icon is not the result of a gaze, it is something which provokes it. It opens up the possibility for the divine to be gazed at in its profoundness. This implies the idea that God first gives Godself and therefore the intentionality of the person's subsequent response is more important than thought itself or posterior reflection.

The condition for this event, however, is that the divine is only made visible when there is an infinitely intense gaze. Therefore, the only path to an apparently measurable knowledge of God, although it is merely as a mirrored image, is in the idol, given that the icon does not make itself known in the event. The icon produces a face whose invisibility gives itself so remotely from what can be understood that its revelation causes an abyss which human cognition could never grasp. Once Marion rejects the possibility of there being knowledge regarding the nature of God, a relationship between the self and transcendence as God needs necessarily to pass through the role of the icon, which traditional metaphysics destroyed.

The idol, when it "possesses" the divine in knowledge and names it God, defines God. Consequently, by defining them, it also measures God's dimension. This concept then assumes the essential characteristics of an aesthetic idol because it apprehends the divine with foundations on *Dasein* and measures it in regards to being-in-the-world. The limitation of the divine in *Dasein*'s experience provokes a reflection that prevents the self from looking outwards, to the invisible, and allows the divine to be fixed within a concept, a visible image.

Marion wrote about the process of the "death of God" as something which presupposes a determination of God which formulates them into a precise and rigid concept. This process

implies in principle a domain of the divine - which is limited and, consequently, intelligible. This entails equivalence between God and a general, measurable concept.

Ultimately, the idol as a limited and misguided image, with its function indefinitely intertwined with *Dasein*, always culminates in self-idolatry (Marion, 2012). What Marion speaks of in this context, referencing the history of the philosophy of religion, is the reduction to a moral God. The apprehension of God as the moral author of the world implies an experience of God that is founded in a finite definition and has its beginning not in God's nature, if there can be one, but in its experience that belongs to *Dasein*. The death of God regards a moral God and, therefore, the idol of which one can have experience through the invisible mirror. According to Marion, this idolatry was established throughout metaphysics in a way that its essence depends on ontological difference. Thus, Marion finds in the history of metaphysics a development from idolatry to a conceptual atheism (Marion, 2012).

I felt it was essential to bring Marion to this discussion firstly because I consider his writings to mark a paradigm shift in the theology of the late twentieth, early twenty-first century. The way he reimagines God in the most basic philosophical sense has opened the door for discussions that have ongoing potential to reshape how we understand people's relationships to religion. Secondly, his innovative work has greatly influenced the work of John Caputo, which I will return to throughout this research as his concept of "weak theology" is extremely important for understanding the inner workings of Radical Christianity. Thus, Marion provides the background and a rich mechanism which will help in diving further into the philosophy of Radical Christianity.

1.1.5 The philosophy of Radical Christianity

John D. Caputo built on Marion's phenomenology by proposing that "the name of God is an event, or rather that it harbours an event, and that theology is the hermeneutics of that event, its task being to release what is happening in that name, to set it free, to give it its own head, and thereby to head off the forces that would prevent this event." (Caputo, 2006, p. 2) By event, Caputo means that God is an excess, unconditional and uncontainable within a name or a concept. Since a name is never equal to the event, it can never be taken with literal force.

A name, a concept, is a temporary stop and imperfect hold on an event which overflows and cannot be constricted to a Being or ontological order. As Peter Rollings puts it in *How (Not) To Speak of God*, we seek to colonise the name "God" with concepts (Rollins, 2006). The event is the truth of a name (Caputo, 2006). It has a temporal character as a way of living in time, but instead of being composed in a particular chronology, it is a movement which transforms the moment.

Both Marion and Caputo suggest that in negating the Being, or presuppositions of the nature of God, we open space for faith to come alive and for us to have a more insightful understanding of religion. From this negation stems a "weak theology" and, for Caputo, the powerlessness of God is precisely why faith is relevant and it is how it matters. "A theology of the 'event' is inevitably a thin thing, taking the name of God as the name of a call rather than of a causality, of a provocation rather than of a presence or a determinate entity." (Caputo, 2006, p. 8)

A strong theology has historical determinacy and specificity. Conversely, by untying the name of God from the order of Being, a weak theology sets it free to provoke and disseminate itself into an open-ended vocative force. Caputo thinks "of the world as addressed by a call, not produced by a cause, as an addressee, not an effect, and of God as a call, not a cause, as a beneficence, not a sovereign power." (Caputo, 2006, p. 39) This disruptive event, translated in the New Testament as the Kingdom of God, is a call for us to co-create the kingdom in a poetics of the impossible.

The poetic event of the crucifixion of Christ and the unconditional forgiveness of sins is a symbol of God's powerlessness as it is understood that the historical act of the crucifixion and resurrection is only a symbolic event from a forgiveness which is already consummated. As we have seen above, the event is an excess, so it translates as a gift beyond economy and justice, beyond law and hospitality, beyond proprietorship and forgiveness, beyond getting even (Caputo, 2006).

The gospel is already *done* and the Kingdom of God is already present as an event, so the subsequent act expected of humankind is not to obtain forgiveness through an economics of faith, but to reveal the kingdom and its justice. The weak force of God calls for action to co-create their kingdom.

We can clearly identify in the theological inquiries above a tendency to strip religion of both metaphysical and ontological truths. We have Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity, Marion's God without Being, Caputo's weak theology and theology of the event, Peter Rollings' unknown God. These authors argue against an institutionalisation of God and outlining of strong religious ethics in order to release theology from social constructs and political ideologies.

An argument that is consolidated by this tradition, and which will be explored further, is that of action against idolatry; a detachment from Marion's idol or Caputo's strong theology. The idea of an absolute religious truth is dismissed for the idea of theo-poetics interpreted and translated into contemporary action. So, in this sense, there is no claim to truth to be addressed or, in Smith's words, no generic values, as "virtues are thick realities tethered to particular communities governed by a particular Story." (Smith, 2016, p. 159)

1.1.6 What one believes in and how one believes

There is a shift from the question of what matters to the question of *how* things matter, which moves away from discussions of dogma towards discussions of praxis. This is not to advocate a necessary abandonment of traditional religion or doctrine. These exercises of deconstruction intend perhaps exactly the opposite: to find what is at the core of a Christocentric approach to Christianity. This should allow for a more authentic analysis of religious action, which has as its starting point the Kingdom of God as something which is a historical calling symbolised through the story of Christ's death and resurrection. The subversion here is that Christianity is not a moral system which gives way to salvation, because salvation in the form of liberation has already been declared in the story of the gospels and therefore religious action must come from a standpoint of universal love and acceptance. From that reasoning stems the focus on praxis, on *how* to consolidate the liberation which has been given freely. This line of inquiry is essential when it comes to understanding the Radical Christian ethos.

What governs the Radical Christian belief is, first and foremost, love and acceptance of the gift which has already been given freely. Only then can one come to an understanding of how to implement this ultimate gift through works in their particular society and culture in order to achieve earthly justice. Peter Rollins calls this a "prejudice of love": "(Jesus) thus remained faithful to the text by reading it with the poor, weak and marginalised in mind. Failure to engage in this loving prejudice towards the poor can result in readings from power, readings in which we legitimise our own desires over and above the needs of those around us." (Rollins, 2006, p. 61)

This is how one co-creates the Kingdom of God: love governs one's morals which are translated into policies. If these three steps are placed in another order, the message of the consummated gospel is misinterpreted, for the claim that one must repent and comply with a particular structure centred around personal piety in order to reach an individualised conception of the Kingdom of God enforces a power structure and economics of salvation in which it is no longer a gift, but an exchange. Furthermore, it privatises faith and diminishes Christianity to strictly a message of personal salvation, which is only a small fracture of the whole message to be explored.

In *You Are What You Love*, Smith emphasises that "our engagement with God's world is not about running the show or winning a culture war. We are called to be witnesses, not necessarily winners." (Smith, 2016, p. 174) The importance of the Christian faith is placed in its constant innovation in seeking justice and peace throughout changing sociohistorical contexts. It should see through the status quo of the stories one is told and instead envision the Kingdom of God in the alternative narratives of the powerless of a given society.

Smith places importance in the *how* of the Kingdom of God, rather than the *what* or *where*. I already touched on the concept of utilising *how* instead of *what*. The fixation of particular sets of morals or the construction of a particular Christian ethical system disregards the fact that such systems are built on top of particular cultural and historical contexts which render them both relative and generally supportive of temporal power structures. Hence the importance of placing love before morals and policy, in consistently going back to the scriptures in order to understand how to love and how to act.

Regarding the *where/how* differentiation, Smith considers the tendency in Christian tradition to spatialise political theology, "carving out 'church' and 'state' as two realms or jurisdictions" and thus framing a conceptual dichotomy which inhibits relevant action in bringing justice to society. Once theology and the Church understand the kingdom as a way of life which is all-encompassing and already there, they can truly love and apply theological wisdom to political action. Smith dialogues with Augustine's *City of God* and considers that, if true justice (of the Kingdom of God) requires true worship, "Christian cultural criticism has to be a mode of *liturgical* analysis" (Smith, 2017, p. 26). The liturgies of a culture, then, are the embodied scripts that form their love and shape their devotion. In this sense, once we consider that there is no physical or conceptual distinction between a realm of the Kingdom of God and the secular, religious liturgies must include the political as well, embodying love and justice in the political engagement of the church.

This still leaves a question of how this justice is translated. How does the Kingdom of God and the Christian commission translate into actual policies, according to what was covered so far? Jonathan Bartley does a great job at exploring this theme in *Subversive Manifesto*. He calls the tendency to approach the biblical text as an individualised ideology of salvation and as merely a source of comfort and guidance 'biblical emasculation'. "In doing this, however, we are stripping the biblical text of its power. By focusing on only one dimension - the personal - the gospel message is being emasculated." (Bartley, 2003, p. 11)

Bartley highlights several political messages in the Bible which have been traditionally taught as lessons about personal development and individual ethical guidelines. Taking the parable of the Good Samaritan, for instance, he wondered why that lesson is typically only applied on an individual level as one-to-one charity, when it can be understood as a story about nations helping nations, considering it is a direct challenge to nationalism in Jesus' time, in putting the interests of Israel above those of other nations. Should Christians not see it then as a call to aid the immigrant, the refugee, the persecuted minorities on a structural level, instead of perpetuating a safer interpretation which doesn't challenge power structures?

The salvation story is based around political scenarios, both in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament (Bartley, 2003). The meaningfulness of this is often lost when we isolate passages and place the individual as the central point of each story, parable, event.

However, when the Bible is seen as a unified story in which Jesus is the protagonist and has his politically motivated execution as a climax, the radically political character of the text is evident.

By "political message", I mean the way in which society is organised. Moreover, "political" here considers public life, how healthcare, social care, the police, international laws operate, and for whom.

> The Bible tells a story of kings, judges, laws, justice, economics and policy-making. It tells us that God's purposes for both private and national life go way beyond spiritual renewal. God cares about spiritual reawakening, but not for its own sake. God cares about it because it is a part of the divine plan, but only a part. Until we recognize the fullness of the vision that the Bible gives us, our efforts will fall far short of the richness into which God wants us to enter. Indeed, taken in isolation, we will misunderstand what it means to be spiritually reawakened. (Bartley, 2003, pp. 16-17)

Establishing that this is a political message from a political God, humans too are political beings called to act responsibly in public matters. When faith is privatised and spiritual life is handled as something completely separate from historical situatedness, Christianity accepts the world as a damned place which is not of humans' concern, instead of a place where the Kingdom of God and its justice can flourish. In the latter, the Christian has a sense of urgency in being called to co-create the kingdom and materialise religion here and now in their role as political actors.

The question for Radical Christianity is how are these people being witnesses to the Kingdom of God, how can performances of belief be political actions? This is not to be translated into the imposition of a particular political project which can also become rigid or dominating. The political calling of the Kingdom of God is a subversive one insomuch as it is the calling to be a political outsider, to submit oneself to service. "In place of the violence and control that most political systems display, Jesus brought peace and freedom. Instead of battles for power, Jesus presented a new way of powerlessness." (Bartley, 2003, p. 49)

The powerlessness of God appears again in their mission of calling the faithful to a constant confrontation and struggle in suspending the status quo and challenging power structures. This is a radical project of decolonising Christianity from a historical process that either relegated the Kingdom of God to a private and individualised salvation narrative or adopted the narrative of secular power structures. In this project, the love for the Kingdom of God comes into conflict with the powers of the world and their domination systems, and brings with it a subversive politics of systematic equality for the disenfranchised, the colonised, the marginalised, the outsider, the powerless.

The recurring theme throughout the last section was the deconstruction of preconceptions of religion formed by traditional metaphysics and moral onto-theo-logy. In various ways, the theologians present here have recognised that the philosophical language is

not sufficient to speak of the idea of God and that their objectification or identification as an entity in affiliation with the “thinking I” fundamentally turns God into an idol. Therefore, one must conceive a philosophy of religion that is suspicious of epistemic concepts which might be turned into ideologies and where Christological action comes prior to religion itself.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this reflection on the theological groundings of Radical Christianity, my argument is that there is a thread that runs through these traditions and authors. They provide a lineage which was originally made possible by the philosophical and cultural shifts - mostly in the global north - during the late twentieth century, and have pointed to the developments in Christian movements of which Radical Christianity is a part of.

1.2 The decolonisation of Christianity

Another theological tradition that is essential for this understanding of a postsecular Radical Christianity is that of liberation theology, with theologians from marginalised backgrounds who developed a modern tradition to see in religious expressions a radical commitment to the normative construction of social justice in an urban and postcolonial society. The connection to liberation theologies is integral to Radical Christianity as it seeks to deconstruct theological traditions that are incongruent to their values of political liberation, inclusion and equity of marginalised peoples, and undoing religious harm.

Leonardo Boff affirmed in several instances in his book *Teologia do Cativeiro e da Libertação* (2014) that liberation comes before a theology of liberation. In decolonising Christianity and radicalising it, we must decolonise theology from Greek philosophy’s systematic separation of body and spirit, earthly and transcendental or sacred things, in order to identify and deconstruct the ideology - the idols - that have established themselves within this theology.

Many liberation theologians have spoken against both these issues. James Cone, for instance, says in *A Black Theology of Liberation* (2010) that “in the New Testament, God’s revelatory event takes place in the person of Jesus. He is the event of God, telling us who God is by what that God does for the oppressed. In Christian thinking the man Jesus must be the decisive interpretative factor in everything we say about God because he is the plenary revelation of God.” (Cone, 2010, p. 31) Revelation is intrinsically connected to the person of Jesus, who is intrinsically connected to liberation and, in turn, intrinsically connected to historicity. However, when theology becomes crystallised in a suprahistorical, philosophical or moral ideology, and the religious institution is complacent with the status quo, then a Christian response to any historical circumstance is irrelevant.

Christianity is a historical religion and calls for continuous reflection based on revelation and action throughout history by and for the oppressed. God, in their historical character, gives the oppressed the revelation needed to fight injustice. Such injustice is caused by humankind

and, therefore, must be fought by humankind not by an abstract transcendental salvation, but by actions towards historical liberation. This is the responsibility of the Christian person.

Gerhard Ludwig Müller, in dialogue with Gustavo Gutiérrez, outlines the order in which Christianity must work in the world for it to be relevant and bring genuine transformation:

> Therefore, theology does not undertake an abstract and theoretical relationship to reality. Instead, theologians first participate with their minds and their actions in the transforming process of history, which is a history of liberation by God. In a second step of reflection, they come to a spiritual-intellectual [that is, theological] grasp of this process. In a third step, their participation in the process of liberation and critical reflection upon it lead to an intellectually understood transformation of reality directed toward its God-given goal. (...) Through this process, there results an option for the people who need to be freed and who participate actively and consciously in the faith that is set free in the process of liberation. These people are those who are oppressed, poor, and suffering. God's liberating action empowers them to become personal subjects. As such, they not only receive passively the gifts of freedom, but at the same time they become collaborators in God's liberation process. They move from being objects for assistance from the state and the church to being personal subjects who actively undertake and cooperate with God's process of liberation. (Müller, 2015, pp. 62-63)

Bringing the methodology of liberation theology - encompassing all contexts in which it has been applied, such as black, womanist, feminist and postcolonial theologies - into the research of radical expressions of Christianity in London today is important precisely because these theologies are not intended to be contained in specific locations or reflective of specific peoples. If Christianity is understood as a movement for universal and immanent transformation, as outlined in the previous pages, then the concreteness of its liberation must be taken seriously by all people engaged in this movement.

There must be a loss of innocence and neutrality for this to be accomplished, as there might be a tendency to detach oneself from the calling for liberation. The educator Paulo Freire talked about the method of "banking" in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2017) as a methodology in which the subject teacher deposits information into the subject student. In this instance, the student is led to mechanically memorise the narrated content, being thus turned into a passive entity to be moulded by the teacher. The more they "work in storing the information given to them by the teacher, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world" (Freire, 2017, p. 46). This method is used along with a paternalistic social apparatus which brands the oppressed as "welfare recipients".

Theology and religious structures often do the same, conquering their subjects in an antidialogical method, or “depositing myths indispensable to the preservation of the ‘status quo’” (Freire, 2017, p. 112). A theology that liberates, on the other hand, is interested in transforming the status quo. It opens a radical path to postsecularity as it places historical liberation in the sacred narrative. It loves the world and its people, and because of this love it can open up a dialogue. The concrete love for the world and the oppressed is an act of freedom which endeavours to generate continuous acts of freedom in inter-faith and secular-religious partnerships.

In *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology* (2004), the Argentinian theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid poetically said that a theology must walk. It is not to be a static idol that one worships passively, but an agent of transformation and liberation. Does theology in London, a multicultural city in the global north, walk? Does it walk with the oppressed, with the Black Lives Matter movement, with the people concerned about the climate crisis, with the asylum seekers arriving on British shores?

When hermeneutics become static and fail to be transformative for the context in which one is reading the Bible, it becomes an idol which speaks in the language of oppressing structures. The same can be said when local experiences are put under a lens of restrictive cultural traditions moulded by systematic theology, instead of being a source of lived theology by themselves.

The core belief in the Christian faith, the resurrection of Jesus, is an act of protest in itself, of not accepting that the fate of preaching transformation is death. This symbolises a break with the order of nature and history, affirming the humanization of the human condition as a whole.

> Nature with its orders and its chaos does not give an answer. History, this "mishmash of error and brute force" (Goethe), does not give an answer either. The theodicy question must become a questioning of the future, and from the future we can expect the advent of a new creation of God, and in this expectation we can actively try to change the present, so that our world becomes transformed into the recognizable world of God, and our sinful humanity into the recognizable humanity before God. (Moltmann, 1968, p. 145)

Christianity must choose life, as Jesus chose it, regardless if the consequence is death. Therefore, to be a Christian is to share resources and affirm the life of the oppressed (Williams, 2013). To embody Jesus is to be a force of liberation, because he is a liberating presence, not a theological concept.

Therefore, the Radical Christian is a prophet who creates meaning and calls for justice through an experiential lens. Just as the Old Testament and the Jewish story of liberation is the historical source material for Jesus, our social and historical context must become source

material for Christianity today. “The dialectic between the social situation of the believer and Scripture and the traditions of the Church is the place to begin the investigation of the question, Who is Jesus Christ for us today? Social context, Scripture, and tradition operate together to enable the people of God to move actively and reflectively with Christ in the struggle of freedom.” (Cone, 1997, p. 105)

As I begin diving into the data from this research, I will assess how religion interacts with grassroots initiatives: How do these grassroots networks elect diverse narratives and promote co-creation, actively rejecting a conquest project? In turn, are postsecular movements able to sufficiently negotiate a suspension of disbelief in order to work with religious entities? Does theology have an appropriate response to the radical actions that are being called? Is theology in this context being moulded into political movements, or are political movements coming up from a grounded effort to bring liberation as a consequence of people’s beliefs?

1.3 The re-emergence of belief in the social sciences

In the last fifteen years, we have seen a resurgence of interest in how religion produces space in urban areas and an emergence of discussions surrounding belief within the social sciences. This can be attributed to earlier critical reappraisals and revisions of the ‘secularisation thesis’ which shaped how sociology and human geography viewed religious phenomena. Radical Christianity appears in the midst of this re-emergence, after the increased systematic observation of scholars of religious movements and groups that are engaged politically and civically in myriad ways. Therefore, we see that it does not appear in a vacuum, but fits into a larger picture which the following authors and works provide the methodology to unpack.

This century saw the introduction of the concept of postsecularity as modernity entered into a space it did not fully grasp, with the social sciences having to react to the persistence of religion instead of the predicted secularisation of the “modern world”. A memorable moment of this shift was when Peter Berger, one of the key advocates of the secularisation thesis, reconsidered his former work and wrote at the end of the twentieth century of a “desecularisation of the world”. He considered that what in fact happened is that religious communities which tried to accommodate themselves to the changes in society appear to be in decline, - the case of many western Christian traditions - but religions which strongly appealed to affect and did not actively try to adapt to the alleged requirements of a secularised world not only survived, but flourished. According to Berger, “to put simply, experiments with secularised religion have generally failed; religious movements with beliefs and practices dripping with reactionary supernaturalist (the kind utterly beyond the pale at self-respecting faculty parties) have widely succeeded.” (Berger, 1999, p. 4)

When this first wave of postsecular thought considered the European case, the tendency was still to perceive “traditional” religions - meaning, those associated with the institutionalised Christian Church - as becoming privatised. A shift in the institutional location of religion, rather than secularisation, would be a more accurate description of the European situation (Berger, 1999). What was then explored was the growth of religions associated with immigrant communities and different cultures, which tended to create a process of othering these communities and their beliefs. Currently, fundamentalist and conservative movements are still highlighted as the main expressions of faith to increase or become more vocal.

Berger points to the success of reactionary movements in protesting and resisting against “secular elites” as a cause for the persistence of religion, meanwhile non-religious movements for social justice and class interests can also at times be backed by religious rhetoric (Berger, 1999). While Berger’s revision of the secularisation theory marks a turning point for how we study religion in the social sciences, he still does not provide much of an in-depth discussion regarding different roles of religion in the public space.

In the beginning of the twenty-first century we still have an oversimplified portrayal of religion as dangerous to civil society as the default, while progressive religious actors are likely to be people who have reconciled their personal beliefs with the current times. However, this period is also characterised by widespread renewed interest in public religion, as it becomes increasingly clear that the influence of religion in people’s personal lives, culture and politics is not disappearing. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 also elevated the importance of talking seriously about religion, as it quickly became a central topic globally (Reder and Schmidt, 2010; Calhoun, Mendieta and VanAtwerpen, 2013; Juergensmeyer, Griego and Soboslai, 2015).

Jürgen Habermas, who until the middle of the 1990s had not written about religion systematically, is also a token of this change. Like Berger, and most “secular” academics at this point, he speaks of a religious resurgence based on the advancement of conservative religious organisations, particularly in the radicalised fundamentalism of rapidly growing religious movements such as Pentecostalism and Islam, highlighting the acts of Islamic terrorism that had taken place in and after 2001.

In his communication theory, Habermas assumed that religion’s social role of fostering cohesion and integration would be transferred to the authority of a secularly achieved consensus (Habermas, 1987). His idea of communicative action was that “communicatively acting persons reach agreements concerning their normative validity claims through rational argument… Religion is in danger of blocking precisely this communicative action because it does not leave the religious participants in discourse free to enter the presuppositionless space of rational communication, but instead equips them with clear directives concerning the goal of the discourse.” (Reder and Schmidt, 2010, pp. 4-5)

Later, Habermas recognised the importance that religion continues to hold in modern societies, and stressed the need to reflect further and develop a dialogue between religious and secular languages. Faith and knowledge are still considered completely separate entities, but entities that we should try to mediate for the benefit of a constructive coexistence - the concept of a "postsecular" society is expressed in this. Habermas' main line of inquiry from the turn of the century is how, in light of current social developments, we might conceive a dialogue between religious and secular languages, in which the contents of religious languages needs to be translated into a secular vernacular to make them accessible to all (Reder and Schmidt, 2010).

Habermas considers this a collective effort, as two things must happen: religious actors must accept the authority of natural reason as the fallible results of institutionalised sciences and the basic principles of universalistic egalitarianism in law and morality; whilst, simultaneously, secular reason should not act as judge concerning the truths of a particular faith, although it accepts as reasonable or valid only that which can be translated into its own, in principle universally accessible, discourses (Habermas, 2010). Secularisation, therefore, "functions less as a filter separating out the contents of traditions than as a transformer which redirects the flow of tradition." (Habermas, 2010, p. 18)

There is an implied disparity between these two presuppositions. For Habermas, in order for religious citizens to be regarded as "loyal members of a constitutional democracy", they must accept the translation of their beliefs "as the price to be paid for the neutrality of the state authority toward competing worldviews." (Habermas, 2011, p. 26) Meanwhile, secular citizens "are obliged not to publicly dismiss religious contributions to political opinion and will formation as mere noise, or even nonsense, from the start." (Habermas, 2011, p. 26) Although Habermas considers these "complementary burdens", losing one's ability to fully communicate what they mean - a side effect of any translation - is quite different from listening to a discourse before choosing to accept it or not. Ultimately, there is still an "othering" of religious citizens which relegates them to second-class citizens instead of placing them in an equal position.

The other problem with Habermas's approach is the presupposition of a rational language or post-metaphysical realm which is universally accessible. Surely there are zones of a secular state which must use neutral language, but not where public deliberation is concerned, as Habermas implies. Charles Taylor describes these zones as "the official language of the state: the language in which legislation, administrative decrees, and court judgements must be couched." (Taylor, 2011, p. 50) Taylor argues that this neutrality has nothing to do with religious language itself, but with any ideology or philosophy. Therefore, the same way that a democratic state cannot be Christian, Muslim or Jewish, it also should not be Marxist, Kantian or utilitarian (Taylor, 2011). Habermas maintains, however, that religion is a

special case because while one can explain secular ideologies, revealed knowledge still cannot be translated into cognitive knowledge (Habermas, 2010, 2011).

With this overview in mind, we continue to see in Habermas a line of postsecular thought which provides insufficient explanations for the persistence of religion in postmodernity and maintains a Eurocentric perception of diverse religious expressions. Christian and Judaic ethics are validated as they represent roots of Western ideals of freedom, morality and democracy, but only as long as they can be instrumentalised and translated into secular terms.

In order to open new lines of dialogue between religion and civil society, particularly with interest in urban praxis, we must shift the narrative towards performance, distancing the dialogue further away from dichotomies of fundamentalism and progressiveness, finding possibilities of convergence through practice (Stacey, 2017). I will analyse the data stemming from this research with this consideration in mind.

1.4 New perspectives on religion in the public sphere

The dialogue between belief and social analysis has developed considerably in the last decade, as can be seen in the works referenced above. I will now consider the urban geography roots of these shifts, from its conception as a discipline in the 1970s, and how urban critical theory has been impacted by religion in the last decades. This will further ground this research in the previous inquiries and observations that have been made in relation to contemporary religious movements. Following these lines, I will also aim to find the relationship between locality and Radical Christianity.

Henri Lefebvre pioneered the developments in urban geography as a sub-category of human geography with his concept of the right to the city and critique of everyday life. In *The Urban Revolution* (1970), Lefebvre wrote about the signs of the urban as signs of assembly, and urban society being in its pure form a place of encounter, a centre of attraction and life. For Lefebvre, the urban is a concrete abstraction associated with practice. Its contents - living creatures, the products of industry, technology and wealth, works of culture, ways of living - are mutually exclusive because they are diverse, but inclusive because they are brought together and imply their mutual presence (Lefebvre, 1970). In this sense, the urban is both void and plenitude, a space where meaning, belonging and the city itself are produced. He is concerned with who has the right to the city, and how encounters between people produce citizenship.

1.4.1 Key concepts in David Harvey: the right to the city

This critical analysis of the urban and meaning-making in the city gained traction in the 1970s, spawning another essential work: David Harvey's *Social Justice and the City* (1973).

Harvey advocates for an active and productive, rather than reactive and reproductive, geography as revolutionary theory. He focused his attention on the mechanisms governing the redistribution of income and suggested that these seem to be moving citizens towards a state of greater inequality and greater injustice. He cautioned that, unless this trend could be reversed, we would be headed for a period of intense conflict within the urban system. His concern centred on the lack of all-encompassing understanding of the systems of the city to be able to make wise policy decisions, even when motivated by the highest social objectives. The successful formation of adequate policies depended on a broader interdisciplinary attack upon the social process and spatial form aspects of the city system (Harvey, 1973).

Harvey appealed for a revolution in geographic thought and a reformulation of geographic theory to "bring it up to date" with the realities and issues of urban society, "as well as to help with the broader social task of stimulating a political awareness in that segment of the population called 'geographers'." (Harvey, 2008) This new model of geographic and particularly urban analysis would be equipped to dialogue with the broader social context and should ultimately be replaced by a real social movement.

While traditional human geography characteristically had used efficiency as a normative tool to examine location problems, Harvey introduced social justice as a key normative concept, which had previously not been incorporated into geographical methods of analysis. He argued that, "in the long-long-run", social justice and efficiency are very much the same thing, but questions of social justice have been neglected (except in political rhetoric) and there is a persistent tendency to lay them aside in short run analysis (Harvey, 1973). He applied the principle of social justice to the division of benefits and burdens arising out of the process of undertaking joint labour. "The principle also relates to the social and institutional arrangements associated with the activity of production and distribution. It may thus be extended to consider conflicts over the locus of power and decision-making authority, the distribution of influence, the bestowal of social status, the institutions set up to regulate and control activity, and so on" (Harvey, 2008).

The development of a critical urban geography appears in a moment when global and local space relations are quickly changing, accompanying economic and political shifts. Therefore, urban geography had a lot to say about the understanding of space and place dialectic in evolving capitalist societies. For example, how places, regions or territories evolve given changing space relations, how geopolitical relations of power become interconnected with market position in a changing structure of space and how these relations privilege certain locations and territories for capitalist accumulation (Harvey, 2000).

Following Harvey's methodology, I would also like to propose the use of social justice as a normative concept for the study of religion in society, in this case when dealing with Radical Christianity. As indicated before, this is a line of analysis that is missing in critical theory.

1.4.2 Neil Brenner: the production of urban space as resistance

Neil Brenner argued in *New State Spaces* (2004) that, despite the supposition that the forces of global economic integration would mean the demise of national state power, the turn of the century saw a transformation, rather than a dismantling of national states. This has been uncovered by an emergent interdisciplinary literature which is exploring the ways in which diverse arenas of national state power, policy formation, and sociopolitical struggle are being redefined in response to both global and domestic pressures.

Brenner defended the proposition that globalising city-regions would provide fascinating sites in which to investigate such transformations of statehood systematically. He suggested that urban policy has become an essential political mechanism through which institutional and geographical transformation of national states has been occurring (Brenner, 2004), and that transformations of said policies have been crucial to a fundamental reworking of national statehood since the early 1970s.

We find that the common language of these studies seems to be that "new spaces and space relations are constantly being produced" (Harvey, 2010, p. 143), and the centrality of capitalism in the politics of urban life. In the volume organised by Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer, *Cities for People, Not for Profit* (2012), they discuss the consequences of capitalism and neoliberal policies for social and economic inequality. They define how critical urban studies should seek to systematically investigate the relationship between capitalism and the urbanisation process, understand how processes of urbanisation shape socio-spatial inequalities and institutional arrangements, expose the naturalisation of inequalities and injustice that result from capitalist urbanisation, decipher the crisis tendencies, contradictions and lines of conflict that exist within contemporary cities, and the prospects for socially progressive and sustainable alternatives to contemporary capitalist urbanism (Parker, 2014).

Harvey stressed in *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (2010) the importance of human geography in understanding inequality, capital distribution and the shifts in geographical and sectoral loci of capitalist class power. The conquest of space and time, along with the domination of nature, take centre stage in the collective psyche of capitalist societies:

> The production of 'the urban', where most of the world's burgeoning population now lives, has become over time more closely intertwined with capital accumulation, to the point where it is hard to disentangle one from the other (...) Human landscapes of geographical difference are thus created in which social relations and production systems, daily lifestyles, technologies and organisational forms and distinctive relations to nature come together with institutional arrangements to produce distinctive places of different qualities. Such places are in turn marked by distinctive politics and contested

ways of life. Consider, for a moment, the various ways in which all these elements hang together in the place where you live. This intricate physical and social geography bears the imprint of the social and political processes, as well as the active struggles that produced it. (Harvey, 2010, pp. 146-148)

This analysis is made with the objective of providing a vision and empowering anti-capitalist movements of radical egalitarianism to challenge the reproduction of destabilised, and therefore weakened, class power as "a revolutionary politics that can grasp the nettle of endless compound capital accumulation and eventually shut it down as the prime motor of human history requires a sophisticated understanding of how social change occurs" (Harvey, 2010, p. 228). This represents an interesting shift from Harvey's earlier works, from requesting that human geography re-evaluates its methods in order to dialogue with a broader social methodology to a critique of current social sciences for ignoring urban geography's developments in its critical theory. There are also recent debates regarding the differences and contributions of "critical urban theory" and "critical urban studies", as well as *how far* can the term "critical" go in such studies (Marcuse, Imbroscio and Parker, 2014, pp 1904–1917).

1.4.3 Manuel Castells: the centrality of social networks

Other studies have also been analysing the global city and the changes in urban space through the last decades using alternative organising categories and offering different focal points. A key conceptual work that provides another perspective on the shifting political and economic dynamics, both locally and globally, in the last decades is *The Network Society* (2004) by Manuel Castells. In this book, Castells analyses the social dynamics and production of meaning in our society in terms of networks, which work in binary terms of inclusion or exclusion and are an essential pattern of life (Castells, 2004).

Castells argued that, under the conditions of pre-electronic communication technology, "networks were an extension of power concentrated at the top of the vertical organisations that shaped the history of humankind: states, religious apparatuses, war lords, armies, bureaucracies, and their subordinates in charge of production, trade, and culture." (Castells, 2004, p. 5) Further, "the ability of networks to introduce new actors and new contents in the process of social organisation, with relative independence of the power centres, increased over time with technological change, and more precisely, with the evolution of communication technologies." (Castells, 2004, p. 5)

In the last decades, with the developments in the technological environment, networks became increasingly more efficient given their flexibility, scalability and survivability: by flexibility, Castells refers to networks' capacity to reconfigure according to changing environments, keeping their goals while changing their components; by scalability, their possibility to expand or

shrink in size with little disruption; and by survivability to their lack of a centre, therefore being able to operate in a wide range of configurations (Castells, 2004).

Castells emphasised information and knowledge as essential to the economy and to society at large, but focused above all on the concept of networks. Moreso, that, "on the basis of a new technological paradigm (informationalism), a new social structure has emerged, a structure made up of electronic communication technologies - powered, social networks". (Castells, 2004, p. 41) In this sense, he proposed that we saw our society as a *network* society as opposed to an information or knowledge society, "[placing] at the centre of the analysis the networking capacity of institutions, organisations, and social actors, both locally and globally" (Castells, 2004, p. 42), as connectivity and access to networks becomes essential:

> The concept of the network society shifts the emphasis to organizational transformation, and to the emergence of a globally interdependent social structure, with its processes of domination and counter-domination. It also helps us to define the terms of the fundamental dilemma of our world: the dominance of the programs of a global network of power without social control or, alternatively, the emergence of a network of interacting cultures, unified by a common belief in the use value of sharing. (Castells, 2004, p. 43)

This conceptual framework allows for very interesting studies on the agency of both local and global groups, what moves networks of people and which of these are in place at any given moment, producing space and meaning. I will have this in mind when following religious groups in their movements, to see how these concepts apply, and the connections that are being made by religious and secular actors in their efforts to generate change in their contexts.

1.4.4 Saskia Sassen: the global city

Another concept that will be essential for this analysis is the "global city". The term was coined by Saskia Sassen "as an attempt to name a difference" (Sassen, 2001, p. xix), in regards to why and how key structures of the world economy are *necessarily* situated in cities. Although the cities analysed in *The Global City* (1991) (London, New York and Tokyo) had very different histories, internal dynamics and cultures, they also "[responded] parallely to changes in economic base, spatial organization and social structure since the 1960s." (Sassen, 2001, p. 4)

The Global City analysed the organisational structure entailed in the globalisation of economic activity. According to Sassen, the concepts of the global city and the global city region were important elements for theoretically and empirically capturing the new types of conceptual architecture brought by the changes to the international economic system over the last decades "as a result of privatization, deregulation, digitalization, the opening up of national economies to

foreign firms, and the growing participation of national economic actors in global markets." (Sassen, 2001, p. xviii)

Sassen begins with the thesis that the territorial dispersal of economic activities in the last couple of decades created a need for expanded central control and management, as opposed to generating a decentralisation in ownership and appropriation of profits. While the internationalisation and expansion of the financial industry brought growth to a large number of smaller financial markets, top-level control and management of the industry became concentrated in a few leading financial centres as geographic control sites in the international economic order. Therefore, essentially, the more globalised the economy becomes, the higher the agglomeration of central functions in a relatively few sites - the global cities (Sassen, 2001).

By focusing on the production of the capabilities for global operation, coordination and control contained in the new information technologies, Sassen opens a deeper discussion of the production of a spatiality for the urban. She does so in order to displace the focus of attention from the familiar issues of the power of large corporations over governments and economies, or supracorporate concentration of power, and then shifting her attention to the practice of global control, that is, the work of producing and reproducing the organisation and management of a global system (Sassen, 2001): "My focus is not on power, but on production: the production of those inputs that constitute the capability for global control and the infrastructure of jobs involved in this production." (Sassen, 2001, p. 6) Sassen mentions marketplaces and production sites rather than large corporations and banks, examining the wide array of economic activities, many outside the corporation, needed to produce and reproduce that power, and its impact and consequences for the dynamics of the city.

The main impacts that are discussed throughout the book are new forms of agglomeration and locational concentration that come from the increased mobility of capital and geographic dispersal. This comes not as a persistence of old forms of agglomeration and inequality, but as a response to a new, more complex economic logic fed by globalisation and dispersal of economic activity: "I emphasized that it was not just a matter of growing inequality but also a qualitative transformation in the social forms emerging out of the increased distance between the world of work and home of the new professional strata at the top and the world of work and home of those at the bottom." (Sassen, 2001, p. 244)

The organising concept in *The Global City* is "that of the *practice* of global control - the activities involved in producing and reproducing the organization and management of the global production system and the global labor force." (Sassen, 2001, p. 335) Furthermore, Sassen argued that the new practices of global production contributed to transformations in the social structure of the cities where its organisation and management are concentrated. "This transformation assumes the form of increased social and economic polarization. (...) Finally, the growing inequality in the bidding power for space, housing, and consumption services means

that the expanding low-wage workforce that is employed directly and indirectly by the core sector has increasing difficulty living in these cities." (Sassen, 2001, p. 335)

Following up on this, I will enquire how religious actors have the potential to produce (and have been producing) pockets of resistance and spaces of equality and inclusion within the context of a global city, aware of these inequalities and eager to organise against them and reclaim the urban for the people who have systematically suffered from the processes described above.

1.4.5 Doreen Massey: rethinking the local as a place of agency

In *World City* (2007), Doreen Massey makes a similar analysis of the impacts of, at the time, recent developments in economics and politics for geographical unevenness. While she takes the case of London specifically, and with the global city in mind, the questions raised in this work can also be asked of any place. *World City* offers an argument *against* localism but *for* a politics of place, rethinking the local as a place of agency and articulating a politics of place that "both meets the challenges of a space of flows and addresses head-on the responsibilities of 'powerful places' such as global cities." (Massey, 2007, p. 18)

There are complex paths to be threaded in the politics of space of the global city. The case of London is brought in the introduction of the book to analyse the negotiations between locality and globalisation, as well as the difference present in the context of the global city. Massey illustrates this point with the reactions of politicians and the general public to the terrorist attack of 2005 in London. In the aftermath of the attack, the prevailing discourse was of the celebration of London based on its ethnic and cultural diversity and harmony. However, Massey stressed the importance of recognising conflictual negotiations of place within the global city against the notion of a "bland diversity". (Massey, 2007, p. 13)

Furthermore, a pluricultural society as the future of the global city is a choice, one potential future among others. Agency can become lost in some discourses that celebrate diversity for diversity's sake. There are also questions of power relations, inequality, historical continuity, political struggles, as well as economic aspects of the global city which have to be addressed within the matter of respect and appreciation for diversity.

Massey explores the concepts of "local" and "global", and how they might be instrumentalised as opposite geographical imaginaries. There is an ongoing juxtaposition of the local as representative of authenticity - "real, grounded, the sphere of everyday life - with the global functioning in contrast as an abstract dimension of space. In other versions the local is the produced outcome, the global the sphere of the forces that produce. So, on this reading, the local is a product of the global and, in counter-position, the global is figured as always emanating from elsewhere." (Massey, 2007, p. 99)

In this repeated duality, what Massey calls a “spatial fetishism”, the “local” is portrayed as a place of “goodness and warmth” (Massey, 2007), often being put in a position of being a “product” at the receiving end of global forces. This characterisation will eventually slide into the idea of the local as “victim” of the global, making a politics of defence of the local against globalisation. This idea has been appropriated by both the political right and the political left. Depending on the worldview that is being painted, the local might need to be defended against outside arrivals, such as that of economic migrants, or perhaps from multinational corporations. Moreover, the global is generally associated with space, history and agency, while the local is associated with place, minorities, history, labour.

Massey points to the danger of separating the economic from the political, as well as the fetishisation of the “local”, which erases human interference and robs self-determination. Geographies of the local are also geographies of power and influence, and cannot be separated from the social relations of production that are specific to a particular place in a particular moment in time. “Rather what is needed is a politics that is prepared not just to defend but also to challenge the nature of the local place, its role within the wider power-geometries. What is needed is a politics that recognises, rather than persistently deflects, the role of the local in the production and the maintenance of the global.” (Massey, 2007, p. 102)

At last, a geography of responsibility originates through these questions. The local place becomes one potential space, among others, for action to change the global. Massey suggests a networked internationalism as a way to rethink the ethics of place and agency of the local, challenging “the dominant geographical imaginary which understands the world in terms of scales and nested hierarchies” (Massey, 2007, p. 108), as well as binary narratives of “us versus them”.

According to Massey, “local internationalism” ignores the hierarchical presumptions that local politics are less important than global politics and that they cannot also deal with global issues. Individuals can be incentivised and empowered into taking responsibility for the wider implications of their places, not only through local elections, but in a more grassroots sense. “The politics and economies of cities, and social struggles over them, are of crucial importance in defining the kind of world that is currently under construction.” (Massey, 2007, p. 110)

One thing to note throughout these works is that religion is barely mentioned, with the few instances of religion as an example of human public organisation in urban spaces, in very neutral wording and without a specific analysis for this type of organisation. This may be a step up for Neo-Marxism, but as I will cover in the next section, there have been more recent works that offer a deeper analysis of religion in urban critical theory and take grassroots religious movements into serious consideration when doing research into the production of urban space.

Therefore, in the works I have covered above, religion is at best viewed as a means to an end, but is not regarded seriously as an actor in the production of space, much less are

religiously motivated movements seen as potentially movements for radical egalitarianism. Although the authors mentioned (and generally the field of urban critical theory) focus a lot of their writings to highlight how important local and particular geographic contexts are, and that therefore theories must embrace geographical difference, religion still seems to be held to a strict and outdated Marxist standard, notwithstanding its active and pluriform roles in the life of global citizens.

Nevertheless, the themes explored above - of the right to the city, the local versus the global, the production of space, justice and inequality in the global city, etc - will be essential when building a framework of Radical Christianity in this highly urban, globalised context. I will come back to these themes throughout this research, with religious identities in mind as well, trying to understand not only how faith and religion interact with urban struggles, but also the intersectionality that may exist between religious, secular or nonreligious urban social movements.

1.4.6 Religion as a producer of space and suspension of disbelief as a method of rapprochement

In recent years, there has been a push towards a more complex and layered civil identity analysis which includes belief and religiously motivated ethics and actions, drawing on recent geographic theory on one side and various forms of religious studies on the other. In *Geographies of Postsecularity* (2019), a volume organised by Paul Cloke, Christopher Baker, Callum Sutherland and Andrew Williams, postsecularity is seen as “a condition of being that is characterised by practices of receptive generosity, rapprochement between religious and secular ethics, and a hopeful re-enchantment and re-shaping of desire towards common life.” (Cloke, Baker, Sutherland and Williams, 2019)

I would argue that a key element for these developments is the idea of suspension of disbelief. Timothy Stacey suggested suspension of disbelief as “an alternative for drawing on the power of myth to inspire solidarity. Rather than forcing religions through a prism on the other side of which they have lost all of their power, this new methodology seeks ways of opening up to various religious and nonreligious myths by exploring them as if we believed.” (Stacey, 2017, 148)

In a way, a theoretical suspension of disbelief can be understood as the opposite approach to a required “translation” of religious language in order for it to be discussed in a secular context, as was discussed in Habermas’ work above. At the same time that religious actors are expected to be able to communicate in secular terms while engaging in civil discourse, the transcendental and spiritual experiences related to a religious narrative might in several ways be essential for the interlocutor to explain their reasonings for taking up civil

action. While this is something which should be negotiated, suspending disbelief towards this type of religious discourse might allow for a more nuanced and productive conversation around the right to the city and the production of space.

Made possible in a postmodern framework, the suspension of disbelief facilitates a theology centred around revelation to dialogue with both theory and practice in the social sciences in order to create meaningful impacts on society. Unlike the Habermasian view that religious citizens should translate their religious language to a neutral one, this new line of postsecular geography will advocate for a dialogue with religion that openly listens to religious experience. The religious experience continuously adds to the production of space, to the consolidation of identities, to radical urban actions and to the resistance against capitalist intervention. Therefore, in order to make sense of these contributions, rather than religious actors having to find a way to translate their experience, it might be more productive for it to be accepted as a lived experience filled with meaning to be explored.

Justin Beaumont understands that the concept of the postsecular does not imply that we live in a radically different age compared with half a century ago when Harvey Cox's (1960) *The Secular City* first appeared. Rather, the term indicates that within secularised social structures of modern late capitalism both religious actors and organisations are very much present and will not disappear irrespective of widespread aversion to the idea among secularist commentators. In other words, postsecular refers to the limits of the secularisation thesis and the growing realisation of radically plural societies in terms of religion, faith and belief (Beaumont, 2010). In this sense, the term postsecular is claimed by those who seek to go *beyond* the secular city (Knott, 2010). This new movement will undoubtedly follow critical theory's path of critique and challenge of power structures, as well as find more mature forms of religion in urban society as actors of social change.

According to Stephan Lanz, "over the course of the 2000s, it gradually became clear that religion was a blind spot especially in critical urban studies dominated by Marxist approaches and a narrow analytical focus on the cities of the West." (Lanz, 2018, p. 65) The development of studies using a postsecularity framework, taking also post-structuralist and postcolonialist ideals, have allowed for a much broader understanding of religious phenomena in contemporary society. Although, for Lanz, one must note that the postsecular framework usually presents a one-sided emphasis on the positive effects of the religious urban presence which can be "naively optimistic", coupled with a Eurocentric "linear timeline" (Lanz, 2018).

1.4.7 The city and the religious

Global Prayers (2014) is an important example of an interdisciplinary study that "aimed to investigate the renaissance of religion in the world's metropolises."[2] Organised by Jochen Becker, Katrin Klingan, Stephan Lanz and Kathrin Wildner, it pointed to the problem of a secularist gaze in Western urban research, where the consideration of modern urbanity's spiritual decline towards secularity is a product of two formative theoretical manoeuvres: the selective association between city and modernity, and "developmentalism", conceptualising cities outside of the global north as underdeveloped and deficient.

Global Prayers offers a balanced approach to the integration of religion in urban studies. Lanz refers to Marxist urban theorists supporting a normative secularism through their tendency to discuss issues in urban diversity and justice without mentioning aspects of the religious (Lanz, 2013). The contributions in this project focus on the most various religio-spatial practices and how they produce urban spaces as an entry point for a broad research of localised political and social tensions and struggles.

Birgit Meyer comments on her contribution to *Global Prayers* how this volume offers a critique of traditional urban theory in its tendency to view urban centres in the global north and south under a single framework and "for reproducing a teleological perspective according to which cities in the Global South have not yet fully entered modernity, with the public presence of religion being taken as a symptom for still-prevailing traditional (if not backwards) patterns of thought and action." (Meyer, 2013. p. 591) As a reply to this critique, this volume offers a rethinking of the basic assumptions behind current divisions of academic labour in the production of knowledge today. The portraits it takes of different religious experiences throughout different cities, countries and continents are a testimonial to the relevance religion holds in the public sphere, and how fruitful these studies can be for understanding the production of urban praxis.

While classic secularism is marked by a rationalist fundamentalism, in which its values are non-negotiable and constituted in the awareness of communalities, postsecularism is able to account for a plurality of values and interculturalism. Thus, a verdict of reason gives way to a spirit of mediation, finding pragmatic solutions for value conflicts - which is possible since the area of commonality is far larger than strongly contrary attitudes (Schiffauer, 2013). The last ten years have been fruitful in dealing with these issues not only in the sociology of religion but in traditionally Marxist fields such as critical theory as these rediscover the intellectual contribution of liberation theologies as well as the importance of grassroots congregations and religious, social and political actors in the global south for postcolonialism (Schiffauer, 2013).

Lanz indicates theoretical manoeuvres that are important in this process. He mentions considering *the city itself* - religion expanding into all other areas in the permanent production of

[2] Taken from the Global Prayers website: https://globalprayers.info/

the urban - as opposed to religion *in* the city. Likewise, taking an actor-centred perspective, “thus avoiding a homogenising explanatory approach within a conceptual reduction” and a practice-theoretical research approach “focusing less on the (religious) worldviews appearing in urban-religious configurations than on accessing the concrete world of their actors and investigating their ‘way of doing things’” as a way to reconstruct these actors’ perspectives and the experiences underlying them and critically reflecting on them. Lanz also cautions here against an over optimistic use of the term “postsecular city” normatively (Lanz, 2013).

1.4.8 Religion as performative praxis

The theme of performative praxis appears as a key way to understand religion from the turn of the twenty-first century onwards, as well as the concept of authenticity in a postmodern society. With the loss of metanarratives, people’s disenchantment with secular ideologies and the decay of modern materialism, performative religious practices once again become a major line of inquiry. With that in mind, studies regarding faith-motivated individuals and organisations providing care and welfare and promoting issues of justice becomes increasingly apparent in contemporary society (Cloke and Beaumont, 2012).

The processes of degradation of the welfare state, neoliberal reforms and globalisation led to open spaces for NGOs in general to aid in the development of new forms of governance. Within this new framework, the third sector emerges as a key player engaging in economic, social and political actions with vulnerable, excluded and marginalised citizens, having to reinvent themselves both in terms of their “clientele”, their methods of combating exclusion in cities and their relationships to the state (Cloke and Beaumont, 2012).

In this context, religion appears as a provider of necessary support for social life, as the state finds it needs a robust civil society with a set of shared values in order to function. Faith-based organisations (FBOs) will then have the matter of negotiating their religious ethos in order to provide care for and serve a wider community. Here is a significant opportunity for a dialogue between secular and religious actors concerning what approximates them, and what can be seen as consensus of fundamental beliefs: “The combination of multiple FBOs and non-FBOs has created a genuinely postsecular space in which the religious, the secular and the postsecular enter into effective and democratic dialogue, releasing the potential of each component organisation through collaboration and recognition of commonality and rights.” (Herman, Beaumont, Cloke and Walliser, 2012, p. 59)

Additionally, different types of FBOs can be identified, between providers of basic and immediate social services and political mobilisers. Generally, three forms of FBO activities will be considered, although they can be internally diverse and complex:

> [S]ervice delivery (including relational as well as infrastructural service provision); capacity building (including resourcing, networking and faith sector advocacy); and political campaigning (including representing marginalised groups, consultation, lobbying and protest) (Cloke et al, 2009, p 286). Most of the activities performed by FBOs are officially legitimised or at least not illegal, for example, sheltering homeless people, or helping drug addicts to get rid of their drug dependency, but FBOs may also cross the borderline to illegal action, for example, by helping undocumented immigrants, or supporting doctors giving healthcare to these people. (Elander, Davelaar and Walliser, 2012, p. 81)

I am particularly interested in religious expressions, through FBOs or otherwise, that display a theological sense of urgency in joining the eschatological element of hope with practical political stances. A postmodern religious faith that looks to a transcendent concern with producing transformative justice, intentionally or not, as a performance of deconstruction and embodiment of their faith identity. It is not only what people say they believe *in* that matters, but also how, when, why, and with whom (Day, 2011).

What was not accounted for in the mainstream social sciences at the end of the twentieth century was postsecular realms creating space for this type of religious expression to flourish. The process of the "world come of age" cuts both ways. While the civil structure has emancipated itself from religion, religion persevered both in the private and public spheres, adapting or becoming something new altogether, and was emancipated from the state. In postsecularity - and especially post-Christendom - the possibility of liberation from constraints of spatiality and culture is more easily available, thus creating a more genuine identity (Baker, 2009). This in turn allows for more extensive movements against power structures from within religious entities. Thus, postsecularity becomes a vital condition for religion to find a relevant stance in the political realm, where faith-motivated communities re-emphasize praxis rather than dogma, and seek new forms of partnership with non-religious individuals and groups.

As mentioned earlier, in recent years the growing interest in space, place-based political and social actions and the characters involved in them meant a fruitful terrain for this type of study. The outlook of religion as praxis follows very contextual accounts of "rather ordinary faith-motivated people who have become determined to act on social issues, and in so doing discover something significant about their faith identity." (Cloke, Thomas and Williams, 2012, p. 105)

1.4.9 Radical Christianity in religious institutions

I understand the importance of caution in idealising religious-secular relations, and have shown previously that these represent one possibility among many others in the framework of

the postsecular city. The interest of this research is in analysing religious networks which are concerned with structural issues and see inequality as an eschatological as well as political matter. It is understandable that these are niche groups and thus the interfaith and religious-secular relationships that their members build may be unique to their context. Although the advancement of postsecular spaces allows this type of faith to flourish, it will likely still be considerably more marginal than faith based expressions that tend to comply with the status quo, expressing their religious identities in private and strictly spiritual outputs.

In *Hybrid Church in the City* (2007), Christopher Baker explores the possibility of constructing a local performative theology, and highlights the importance of a Radical Christian realism "directed at working on contextual solutions to local problems while at the same time taking the lead in defining the key principles from a Christian theological tradition by which faith-based initiatives can be articulated and assessed." (Baker, 2009)

Radical Christian realism inherits from critical theory its interdisciplinarity and rejection of grand theories, as it focuses on a narrative and holistic approach to human history. It finds there a potential locus of salvation and transformation on the basis of human endeavour. Radical Christian realism is an action towards the creative construction of spaces of hope and inclusivity based on redistribution of scarce resources and the empowerment of human processes, engaging hopefully with the future and present (Baker, 2009). This drive and restlessness generates an unstable but potentially creative space, a *third space* which emerges through acts of negotiation and translation. An area where neither the general nor the specific hold sway, but symbolic, cultural or linguistic interpretation is an ambivalent process that needs to be negotiated between the two (Baker, 2009).

A dialogue between religion and the production of urban space, with radical movements and the construction of social justice in sight, offers multiple possibilities. The global city could be a key realm where belief is translated into active citizenship, a prophetic calling of faith-motivated actors to speak truth to power and to stand with the poor, vulnerable and marginalised (Cloke, Beaumont and Williams, 2013). Later I will explore how a radical expression of Christianity might flourish in this realm in a particular way, and see in practice how radical religion dialogues with the city.

1.5 Recent developments in the sociology of religion

As I touched on above, there was a structural delay within the social sciences, in particular when it came to critical theory, to begin addressing the role of religion in the analysis of the urban and, in a general manner, the production of meaning in society due to the prevalence of the secularisation theory until the end of the twentieth century.

Grace Davie is one of the key authors who analysed the phenomena of secularisation and the permanence of religion. She defined the space of the sociology of religion at the turn of the twentieth century with her book *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (1994), a term she introduced alongside the argument that, although religious practices and church attendance patterns in Britain had declined, many people still consider themselves religious on an individual level. Moreover, members of traditional European religions tend to delegate participation in religious activities to a minority of active believers. Vicarious religion is the term coined to explain the particularity of churches and church leaders having the expectation of not only conducting ritual, but to believe on behalf of others, in the sense of "holding the faith" for society as a whole (Davie, 2015). As Jose Casanova also concluded, while religion was being pushed from the public sphere, people continued to believe in God and religions continued to thrive in different ways (Casanova, 1994). However, at this point these authors pointed to religion being privatised, with people expressing their faith more individually and silently.

In Davie's contribution to *The Desecularization of the World* (1999), edited by Peter Berger, she claimed that rather than saying that Western Europeans have become secular populations, it is more accurate to say that they are *unchurched* populations, and that this distinction is important for how public policy behaves around religious matters. Throughout her more recent works, Davie has further confirmed and developed these concepts, which have now become standard when considering the British and European cases as new statistics become available (see Davie, 2002 and 2015).

What has become clearer over the last two decades, as Davie points out continuously, is that rather than disappearing altogether, Europe's churches have undergone a metamorphosis in the last century in the face of societal changes. No longer providing a "sacred canopy" (Berger, 1990) for the whole of society, they have shifted to the sphere of the voluntary sector and many continue to thrive in these new endeavours. Therefore, in order not only to analyse religion through a sociological lens, but to find where religious actors are operating, one must understand these structural changes. In the British case especially, it is important to note that the presence of religion in civil society comes from the historical absence of a political split which coincided with a major religious division (Davie, 2015), which means that "the interactions between religious traditions and a wide variety of economic and political variables are multiple." (Davie, 2015, p. 91)

Moreover, Davie concludes from the patterns of decline in religious practice and strictly Christian belief in the post-war period that "religious belief is *inversely* rather than *directly* related to belonging. In other words, as the institutional disciplines decline, belief not only persists, but becomes increasingly personal, detached and heterogenous and particularly among young people" (Davie, 2002). This echoes Bonhoeffer's claim, over five decades prior,

that the "world come of age" would allow for the flourishing of religion, as it gradually ceased to be part of a cultural system one is necessarily a part of, and becomes a matter of conscious and individual choice, based on a personal belief system.

Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto also point out a change in the way people believe and in the structure of religion in the British context, offering an interesting perspective on the British case. The authors of *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (2012) make a parallel between the changes in religion in the United Kingdom in the second half of the twentieth century with the loss of faith in the welfare state. They write that through the 1960s, church and the welfare state were developing in a largely symbiotic relationship, with the Church of England deeply involved in initiating and supporting a number of social reforms.

However, by maintaining this close relationship with the welfare state and secular priorities, the churches lost much of their distinctiveness, becoming part of the social fabric and the reigning moral and cultural ethos (Woodhead and Catto, 2012). As the welfare state gradually lost strength, giving way to the new ideology of neoliberalism, and with it Thatcherism, religion also began to disappear from the public eye. The authors affirm that "whereas welfare utopianism sought to confine religion to a private sphere of diminished significance and expected its imminent demise, neoliberalism was much more willing to make alliance with it." (Woodhead and Catto, 2012, p. 11) This political shift opened the way for a process of corporatisation of religion as charity organisations or providers of social services.

Davie's *Religion in Britain: a persistent paradox* (2015) offers a very interesting follow up investigation of belief and religious practice in the British context. Over the first decade of the twenty-first century, while church affiliations continued to decline, the debate around the public presence of religion only intensified, beginning to include not only the role of churches as such, but also the place of faith and faith communities in a liberal democracy (Davie, 2015). Davie also observes a "gradual shift from a culture of obligation or duty to a culture of consumption or choice", demonstrating the argument mentioned above, that what "was once simply imposed on substantial sections of the population, or inherited, becomes instead a matter of personal choice." (Davie, 2015, p. 7)

According to Davie, people now have a multiplicity of possibilities: moving between religions, becoming adept to a religion after coming from an entirely secular background, or re-attaching themselves to an existing religion in new ways. In all of these new possibilities there is a common rejection of the status quo, and "an awareness that the regulatory power of traditional forms of religion has largely eroded." (Davie, 2015, p. 142) This also appears as a reflection of a consumer society, where one is entitled to a range of options from which they can choose the one that better suits them.

Another point that follows from these new trends is that more people are opting into conservative churches than liberal ones, meaning that conservative religion is the one

flourishing in the twenty-first century (Davie, 2015). As seen above, this phenomenon tends to also be more broadly explored within the social sciences, in authors such as Casanova, Habermas and Berger. However, Davie's panorama allows for a wide range of research themes and lines of inquiry to appear based on the data gathered, including deep dives into particular faith based groups, religious movements and the place of religion in civil society, from traditional religions to radically deviant faith based groups.

1.5.1 Religion as praxis

In her book *Believing in Belonging* (2011), which analyses belief and social identity in contemporary society, Abby Day writes that studies into religion often start from the standpoint of practice as acts that *produce* ideas, values and beliefs through performance, and ritual as acts that *reproduce* preformed ideas, values, or beliefs (Day, 2011).

Danièle Hervieu-Léger offers another interesting approach to the sociology of contemporary religion in *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (2000). With a similar interest in the practices associated with religious beliefs, she begins the book with the intention to analyse the structures and the dynamics of modern religion, including not only their beliefs, but the body of practices, behaviour and institutions in which these beliefs find expression, as well as what dynamics of belief its analysis will generate in return (Hervieu-Léger, 2000).

With the difficulties associated with establishing definitions of religion in modernity, particularly with the rise of new spiritual belief systems and the sociological study of religion in itself, there is a general shift in the study of religion from definitions of belief to expressions of practice, or religion as a *way* of believing. Hervieu-Léger affirms that, by referencing only "traditional" religion, "functional definitions of religion can only testify to the dispersion - intellectually beyond control - of religious symbols in contemporary societies; while substantive definitions can do no more than reiterate analysis of the loss of religion in the modern world. Both constitute a partial, yet radically limited, response to the question of the location of religion in modernity. Religion is nowhere, or else it is everywhere, which in the end comes to the same thing". (Hervieu-Lége, 2006, p. 38)

In modernity's deconstruction of traditional systems of believing, Hervieu-Léger affirms, "believing finds expression in an individualized, subjective and diffuse form, and resolves into a multiplicity of combinations and orderings of meaning which are elaborated independently of control by institutions of believing, by religious institutions in particular. This independence is, however, relative inasmuch as it is restricted by economic, social and cultural determinations which weigh heavily on the symbolic activity of individuals no less than on their material and social lives. (…) The combined processes of rationalization and individualization give the

modern domain of believing the characteristic of *fluidity* that is proper to it and well illustrated by the reversible interplay of metaphor." (Hervieu-Lége, 2006, pp. 74-75)

Hervieu-Léger concludes her book with the thought that, in modernity, traditional religions can maintain themselves as a unity by tentatively exploiting the symbolic resources at their disposal in order to reconstruct a continuing line of belief, which is independent from any concept of individual believers' experiences, precisely because they rely on tradition. However, the numerous mechanisms put in place in modernity allowed for the production of various new patterns of belief, as well as the ascension of previously marginal belief systems. Her final remarks consider the collision of policies based on tradition and the production of the religious in modernity, the role that new patterns of belief play in this encounter, the interlinking of religion with politics and culture that is likely to come from it and much more.

Praxis and the many expressions of lived faith in the postsecular public square are common themes that arise in the work of the authors explored above, and help focus on what is of particular interest in this sociological contextualisation.

1.5.2 New approaches to the sociology of religion

In conclusion, we can identify a changing landscape in the sociology of religion in the past two decades, and even more so in recent years. Many authors have researched the renewed interest in spiritual searches for meaning by younger generations. The fragmentation of the religious market and easier access to varying expressions of faith opened the possibility of self-authenticating belief systems and performances, be those strictly spiritual or not. Studies that explore how or why people identify as religious demonstrate the fluidity and nuance of these new possibilities.

Abby Day, Stephen Bullivant and Louis Lee, for example, all explore different aspects of the meaning of belief, particularly for younger generations, and show how several aspects of our general understanding of religion are outdated for the necessities of today's possibilities of identity. The very notions of "belief" and "religiosity" are re-evaluated, as well as "secular" or "nonreligious" as self-identifiers.

For example, Day points to limitations in Davie's analysis of the British case. Over two decades ago, Davie wrote about the persistence of faith in Britain but failed to define belief further than belief in God. Moreover, as she suggested classifying the British population as unchurched rather than secular, Day argues that this "reflects a Christian-centric idea that a natural state is one of being 'churched'." (Day, 2010, p. 11)

Regarding the concept of belief, Day presents it as performative, therefore specific to contexts, times and places. This changes the narrative on the "believing without belonging" argument. Belief satisfies a social concern, and therefore is not universal but must respond,

collectively, to changing circumstances (Day, 2010). She draws the idea of performativity from Butler to expand on this interpretation of belief: "Butler (1990) extends the idea of performativity beyond single language acts to incorporate a function or purpose: a lived, embodied performance brings into being an identity through repetition, regulation and normative adherence." (Day, 2010, p. 18)

While much of the secularisation dialogue of the end of the twentieth century had to do with philosophical or creedal belief systems, more recent studies have prompted a phenomenological interpretation of belief. This may be illustrated as a shift from a truth claim "*I believe in...*", to an open statement of "*I believe that...*". Day suggested "that performative belief is one way of describing how beliefs are acted and help shape identities. Belief is not separate from identity or social context but a way of creating who 'I' am relative to 'you' here and now. Through the quality of emotion and corporeal experience in human relationships, performative belief is how people can adjust to given social contexts, expectations and aspirations." (Day, 2010, p. 26)

Another interesting aspect of the changes in the ways people can identify in terms of belief and religion pointed to by Day is that in her fieldwork she found that many people who were not even sure whether God exists, or portrayed antagonistic feelings towards religion, had selected "Christian" on the latest census at the time as a way of "believing in belonging" or identifying with a social or ethnic grouping (Day, 2010). On the other hand, she also saw people who described themselves as Christians even though they maintained a distance from traditional Christian teachings and rejected forms of propositional belief.

One thing I will look for during the course of my fieldwork is where Radical Christianity fits in this spectrum. Are the individuals encompassed in this definition likely to self-identify as Christian, religious, spiritual, or is there a resistance to being labelled at all? What is the relation between belief and belonging in these cases? If belief is to be understood as performative, how these questions are formed will shape what the answers are, as I intentionally engage with the social and relational nature of belief.

Day also touched on those questions in an article about non-religious Christians, in which a "multi-dimensional, holistic analysis of that phenomenon [non-religious Christians] resulted in a 'performative' understanding of belief and social identity arising from and shaped by social relations. Performing Christian belief and identity is a social action that positions and engages people in their social worlds in specific ways." (Day, 2012, p. 36) Day's 'non-religious Christianity', proposed as an analytical tool, seems similar to what I have been calling Radical Christianity, and may even correspond to what Bonhoeffer envisioned when he wrote about a "religionless Christianity". It follows the thread highlighted previously of expressions of belief that might arise as compliance to a particular religiosity is no longer an obligation and becomes one option among many.

In addition to all of this, there seems to be an increased resistance to gatekeeping behaviour that is specific to younger generations. By this, I mean that the decision to express oneself religiously has become highly individualised, with religious actors being able to diverge from "standard" or culturally established forms of religious expression and reshape their spirituality in ways that speak to them personally, forming alternative communities around issues that matter to them, and with reinterpreted religious traditions.

As well as the illustration from the authors above of the wide range of religious identifications individuals have been adopting, I will cover in the next section examples of research into religious communities that choose to actively democratise spirituality through intentional networks with people that have different lived experiences and alternative narratives regarding belief and religion.

The lines that separate religion, belief, belonging, secularity and non-religiosity in the twenty-first century have been shown to be less straightforward than they once were - or were thought to be. Individuals now have more options and a general encouraged emphasis on finding one's personal identity that does not need to fit into a prepackaged set of creeds or beliefs. Qualitative studies on the fluidity of religious lived experiences have been telling stories that cannot be told by census data.

Conceptions of secularity and nonreligion have also been challenged by the new possibilities in the realm of belief, as Lois Lee illustrates in her studies, and we see a growing overlap between lived faith and nonreligion in the attitude of younger generations. She proposes that we see nonreligion in a positive light, as its own phenomenon, something different from the absence of religion and separate from a singular secularity phenomenon. She notes how many people who reject traditional religiosity may consider themselves to be spiritual and may therefore identify as nonreligious, even though they do show interest in spirituality. Therefore, Lois Lee concludes that nonreligious identification cannot be used as a direct measure of secularity (Lee, 2014). Moreover, affiliation data "do not reveal anything more extensive about secularisation because it is not possible to differentiate between positive nonreligious identities and minimal or negative ones." (Lee, 2014, p. 476)

In a survey conducted in 2017 into those who self-identify as nonreligious in the United States of America, the most common reason given by the "religious 'nones'" for their lack of affiliation with a particular religion was that they question a lot of religious teachings[3]. The second-most-common reason was an opposition to the positions taken by churches on social and political issues, followed by a dislike of religious organisations. Not believing in God only appeared in fourth, cited by 37% of the respondents. While "nones" who identified as atheists were more likely to say that not believing in God is the main reason for their lack of religious

[3] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion/

affiliation, those who did not identify as anything in particular were more likely to just show a suspicious attitude towards religious institutions.

This indicates that a religious identification or affiliation with a particular denomination is no longer required from people who may still consider themselves to be somewhat spiritual. As younger generations increasingly identify as religious “nones”,[4] further qualitative work into the possibilities included in this category is imperative for understanding the future of religion. I will be considering these developments moving forward, to find where Radical Christianity fits within this framework and how it can provide a glimpse into new expressions of religiosity.

1.6 Current expressions of urban mission

Finally, this section will explore sociological and ecclesiological examples of field research into Christian communities and their efforts to do urban mission within the changing landscape that has been analysed. These studies have been essential in the formation of my research design. The works I will go through were all published in the last decade and show how the changes discussed above bring disruption and renewed strength for religious communities in practice. These are relatively new expressions of Christian faith communities that engage with individuality and postmodern deconstruction in the way that they “perform” church, and the theo-poetics they enact in the interaction with their surroundings.

In the last couple of decades, different voices, groups and organisations began participating in plural efforts to deconstruct their ideas of what Christianity and church are. This was especially noticed in millennials, as their sets of values became at odds with those of traditional evangelicalism (Moody and Reed, 2017). While this was commonly referred to as the Emerging Church Movement (ECM) throughout the 2000s, it quickly became clear that this was not a singular movement, nor did the people analysed in this category necessarily self-identified as that (Marti and Ganiel, 2014).

For the purpose of clarity, I will use the category ECM as an all-encompassing term for this new wave of deconstruction within the church, although “the construction of an identity that includes the laying down of identity itself” (Moody and Reed, 2017, p. 37) is actually one of the main characteristics of the ECM. The movement “recognizes identity as part of the problem rather than proposing the exchange of one identity for another.” (Moody and Reed, 2017, p. 37) Moody and Reed (2017) identify Peter Rollins as the theorist who has best addressed this issue, as he interprets Galatians 3:28 to say that religious identities no longer define and dictate life (Rollins, 2010). However, Rollins does acknowledge that it is impossible for the individual to

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[4] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/

completely avoid identities, so he advocates for the mechanism of liturgical "suspended spaces" through which participants can engage more deeply and affirm one another in excess of their culturally given identities (Rollins, 2011).

The leading voices in the ECM realm point to ideas of doubt, deconstruction and the search for authenticity as important parts of faith. Emerging Christians were marked by a frequent critique of contemporary institutional Christianity and an eagerness to distance themselves from it, while building novel ways to "do church". They claim that "the changes they advocate facilitate a more authentic living out of the gospel and that they help people make better sense of postmodern, pluralist contexts." (Marti and Ganiel, 2014, p. 83) The ECM shows a commitment to a constant process of change, as it continuously reevaluates what is important.

In their volume *American Grace* (2010), Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell point to the ECM as an example of communities that might appeal to the religious nones in their twenties and thirties, who do hold religious beliefs but had distanced themselves from traditional churches. They show the ECM, particularly in the American context, as a reaction to the megachurch culture. However, more than a change in worship or congregation style, the leaders of the ECM stress that what differentiates an emerging church is their commitment to "'missional living,' by which they mean an emphasis on what people do rather than the specific doctrines they believe." (Putnam and Campbell, 2010, p. 178) Some of the ways in which emerging churches enact their deconstruction are by challenging traditional formats of church, questioning the language used in the church and repurposing the stories traditionally told to make sense of contemporary social and political contexts.

Peter Rollins's concept of "a/theism" illustrates the ECM concerns, as an exercise in transformative language that becomes "a loving engagement with the world that is mediated, though not enslaved by, our reading of the Bible." (Rollins, 2006, p. 66) He points to the history of the Israelites in the Old Testament "not as a people who live out their faith through unquestioning submission, but as a people who demonstrate their love and commitment to the source of their faith in a radical commitment to fighting with that source" (Rollins, 2008, p. 32), a people marked by *critical engagement*. Influenced by John D. Caputo's theology, Rollins approaches the biblical text not as a direct source of knowledge, but as a life-transforming event that manifests the felt concealment of God (Rollins, 2008). This gives interpretative freedom for the faithful to embody Christianity as constantly evolving and therefore relevant in society.

Rollins suggests that we read the word "orthodoxy" as if it were Hebrew, from right to left. This would turn "right belief" into "believing in the right way". Therefore, the question "what do you believe?" must be accompanied by the question "how do you believe?". This argument connects intellectual deconstruction and lived faith: "by understanding orthodoxy in this manner,

it is no longer distanced from what the liberation theologians call 'orthopraxis'." (Rollins, 2006, p. 66)

Moody identifies the "underlying cohesion" of the ECM in their strong set of values and a cluster of commitments to contextualising expressions of Christian religiosity and mission. In this sense, both emerging Christians and Radical Christians look to the historical traditions of Christianity in order to enrich it for the future, dialoguing with postmodern philosophy, deconstructing their faith and living socially, politically and environmentally just lives (Moody, 2015, p. 16), often leaving the traditional space of the church and exploring alternative forms of belonging.

Katherine Sarah Moody's analysis of the ECM focuses on their grounding in a "radical theology" that signals "a variety of contemporary theologies with a particular lineage within Western philosophy" (Moody, 2015, p. 1) which overlap with many of the references used to think about the theology of Radical Christianity, as well as are also referenced by participants in this research. This radical theology, and the ECM, is developed in response to the trajectory within the Western philosophical theology that traces its origins back to the many readings of the "death of God" (Moody, 2015, p. 4), therefore dealing with a process of secularisation.

The developments that are represented in the ECM were essential in defining my starting point when considering the participants for this research. But the choice to name Radical Christianity, rather than positioning it as strictly an expression of ECM comes in part from newer processes found in the relationships and motivations of these religious actors. I will expand on the possibilities that Radical Christians can and have been exploring when it comes to interfaith dialogues facilitated by an increased postsecular rapprochement, and their emphasis for engaging with decolonial thought, with participants themselves directly mentioning liberation theologies more often than references from Western philosophical theology. While it has been demonstrated that the ECM is not to be taken as a monolith, I believe that this emphasis is structurally more present in the groups I will be researching.

1.6.1 Radical Christianity expressed in orthopraxis

Following from the discussion above about the theology and origins of the ECM, the following case studies show how contemporary faith communities are engaging with more radical and marginal theologies in their lived experiences:

In *A Just Church* (2011), Chris Howson explored how he has been able to enact liberation theology as a City Centre Mission priest and its future possibilities in the context of the emerging church in Bradford, England. Perhaps the main point of the book is that, in order to have an impact, theology cannot remain an intellectual exercise, it must be performed as acts of justice in the world. Howson explores a public theology that is concerned with the wide

relevance of the gospel, assuming that the insights from the Christian faith are relevant to everyone, not just Christians, but also recognizing that they are just one perspective within a wider scope of worldviews.

Howson acknowledges that churches have much to learn from wider social movements that are successful in engaging young people in struggles for a fairer society, but asks what those movements may gain from engaging with churches (Howson, 2011). He proposes that the answer is in the realm of the sustainability of campaigning, as faith and the stillness of religious contemplation can bring to activism a fresh perspective and strength through the strenuous work of activism. He also explains in detail how he tried to create an inclusive environment in his church, focusing on dialogical methods of teaching for the wider community and working towards a holistic transformation that includes systematic social change, rather than solely spiritual transformation in the traditional sense.

Throughout *A Just Church*, Howson points to different ways in which religion has been deconstructed by feminist, black, queer and liberation theologies, and describes concrete ways in which his church had been acting upon these traditions to bring justice to the city. He cites acts such as guerilla gardening[5], creating interfaith spaces for grassroots work, providing support during protests for the environment and for migrant families in the community.

In her recent book *Reimagining Mission From Urban Places* (2020), Anna Ruddick also accounts for ways in which a local missionary community - the Eden Network - in Manchester has taken practical and long-lasting action in their context. The members of the Eden Network had made the life choice to relocate with their families to the neighbourhoods they intended on serving as a way to express their commitment to locality and availability, which enabled them to have shared experiences and regular interactions within the community.

Ruddick highlights that, traditionally, Evangelicals demonstrate a confidence in their own agency and obligation to impact the world. Meanwhile, the world outside of the church is seen as a passive entity, needing salvation and often moral and social transformation. “The linear salvation plan inherent in the evangelical missional narrative is focused on conversion, involving a rejection of the pre-conversion ‘lost’ self so that the new ‘transformed life’ can emerge.” (Ruddick, 2020, p. 120) However, starting from “lost-ness” is in itself a negation of personhood (Ruddick, 2020). The model of mission that will result from this reasoning is “needs-based”, meaning that only the missionary has the power or knowledge to give rather than a “strengths-based” approach, which would be a model based around working alongside and empowering a community with resources available to them.

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[5] Creating community gardens in roundabouts and unused wastelands and throwing seedbombs (mud, soil and a variety of wildflower seeds) into abandoned barren land to attract birds and bees (Howson, 2013)

The goal of the Eden mission is the flourishing of the community they wanted to reach, which is done mainly through interconnectivity and positive reinforcements of their personhood. In interviews with Ruddick, the mission team members showed an awareness that they were not there to "save" people, but to see them flourish through their own agency. The Eden team members are cautious not to "other" those outside of the core mission, seeing them as lost or in need of repentance. Instead, by being incarnational, they aim to grow *with* the community.

Working Faith (2013), edited by Paul Cloke, Justin Beaumont and Andrew Williams, and *Mission in Marginal Places* (2016), edited by Paul Cloke and Mike Pears, also bring numerous examples of faith-based organisations (FBOs) and churches that have been working to achieve the same goal: to bring faith-inspired action into contexts of social injustice and marginalisation in urban areas (Cloke, Beaumont and Williams, 2013).

Those two collections look into FBO alternatives that go beyond the expected charity work and engage in political forms of resistance to the "excesses and social evils of neoliberalism, bringing alternative 'theo-ethics' into being in the performance of care in a society where government has increasingly lost touch with the practical and emotional needs of local communities." (Cloke, Thomas and Williams, 2013, p. 3) These initiatives typically rely on liberation theologies and their ramifications to create an ethos of downward mobility. They are incarnational in their communities by embracing those who fall to the margins of society. In order to do this, they intentionally build partnerships in their neighbourhoods and communities that are independent from faith and are forged by "both sides wanting to locally make a difference." (Thomas, 2013, p. 82)

Cloke and Beaumont (2013) have described "postsecular rapprochement" as a process in which religious and nonreligious individuals display a willingness to work together to address crucial social issues, and in doing so putting aside other frameworks of difference involving faith and secularism. More than the "incorporation of religious capital into neoliberal governance", postsecular rapprochement demonstrates "both an expression of resistance to prevailing injustices under neoliberal capitalism, and an energy and hope in something that brings more justice for all citizens." (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013, p. 27) This is an integral concept in the works mentioned here as current expressions of urban mission.

Current analyses of working FBOs allow for an understanding of the complexities of performing faith in civil society, and comparative studies can show how different religious agents negotiate their beliefs in their goal to help build a fairer society. In his chapter for *Working Faith*, Sam Thomas writes about a reflexive resurgent critique from within Christian networks which prompted the Western church to question how it relates to "the poor", how urban Christian faith communities and FBOs should be structured and which values should be central (Thomas, 2013). Drawing from Shane Claiborne, a Christian activist, Thomas argues that a complacency towards Jesus' teachings on the marginalised has "both depersonalized poverty and has

created a relational, and in some cases spatial and emotional distance, from the marginalized." (Thomas, 2013, pp. 76-77) This critique shows a discontentment with Christian missions that seek to bring something to the poor, continuing to mirror wider society in excluding the marginalised, and calls for a mission that lives with, and among, the marginalised.

An alternative to paternalistic approaches to faith based social work, which is traditionally seen as an extension of neoliberal policies, is to form an action-based postsecular rapprochement between those of faith and those of no faith, forged together by both sides wanting to locally make a difference (Thomas, 2013). This is supported by a postsecular framework, with the alignment of civil society engaging seriously with religious actors, and the Church being willing to also learn and reflect on the role they want to play in the movements for social change.

Paul Cloke, Sam Thomas and Andrew Williams point to three ways in which FBOs have embodied a resistance to neoliberalism and sought to make radical change in their local contexts. First, in the motivations that underpin the FBO's involvement in welfare provisions and the type of needs that are addressed, as faith groups will commonly act where the state has withdrawn their support, thus critiquing the injustices of socio-economic and political policies of neoliberalism and performing in light of that critique. As a consequence, the ethical citizenship that is developed in these spaces can run counter to an idealised neoliberal citizen-subject. Second, FBOs can subvert the discourses of neoliberal welfare by rejecting judgements about who is deserving of what, choosing instead to affirm an unconditional form of social welfare based on an ethics of universality and sociality with the other. Finally, FBOs can revert the logic of neoliberal aid by their willingness to campaign for systemic change and protest the current socio-economic and political orders (Cloke, Thomas and Williams, 2013).

The FBOs that challenge neoliberal politics rely on foundational theo-ethics to map out new spaces of hope. The actions above will be a reality when faith-motivated actors perform a prophetic calling to speak truth to power and to radically and integrally stand with the poor, vulnerable and marginalised (Cloke, Thomas and Williams, 2013). This is the motivation which I sense is behind the embodiment of Radical Christianity.

1.7 Conclusion

The overall themes that permeate the previous inquiries into recent religious expressions are an openness to other ways of believing and a flexibility in regards to how one interprets traditional religions, as well as which traditions they choose to follow in order to create one's own sense of meaning in their search for authenticity and identity. It seems likely that fewer people will tend to identify with a particular denomination or church, as suspicion towards established religion rises. This, coupled with an eagerness to act on or advocate for individually

formed worldviews, is likely to result in a closer proximity between individuals motivated by religious, nonreligious and secular reasonings, as long as they are engaged in achieving the same goals.

This fluidity in religious identification and outlets for religious agents to enact their faith within civil society is facilitated by the rapprochement in recent decades between secular and religious institutions. While these partnerships have always existed in one way or another, particularly as an extension of welfare states, these newer expressions of belief offer a very unique way of creating and empowering bonds and relationships both on a local and global level.

There has been a major shift in the last decade in the core rationalisation of what essentially unites and divides us, which has been causing an identity crisis for Western Christianity as people reflect on what ultimately matters to them. When considering Radical Christianity, I will reflect on how it fits in with this changing landscape: its engagement with Millennials' and Generation Z's search for authenticity and enchantment, their overwhelming sense of responsibility to redress the damage done by previous generations to the planet and eagerness to deconstruct prevailing narratives. In this sense, the unprecedented reach that social media offers for bringing together people who would otherwise not have a space or platform to advocate for their ideals and find like-minded peers is a disruptor to the status quo and a mechanism for converging micropolitics.

Arguably, there is still a gap between the sociology of religion which is dealing with these generational and cultural shifts in people's relationships with religion and the ecumenical work and reflection on the issue. For instance, while the ECM is marked by a desire to be rid of labels and identities, perhaps a more radical approach would be to reclaim personal identities that were previously abandoned.

A Pew Research Center study of 2020 on Generation Z identified this demographic, which is more ethnically diverse and comes from more varied family backgrounds than the previous generations, as more open to and comfortable with different individual identities such as gender-neutral pronouns. They are also more political, in the face of a future of uncertainty.[6] There seems to be a paradox of being open to, while at the same time rejecting, different identities. When it comes to religion, I will be interested in analysing how Radical Christians negotiate the presence of implicit and explicit identities in their beliefs and lived expressions of faith, as well as how - or if - they maintain a coherent identity in the spaces they occupy and in their interaction with non-religious actors.

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6 https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/

As I begin to work out the questions that will lead this research into Radical Christianity, the matters of identity, performativity and authenticity that this chapter has already been pushing forward will be central. Christianity has always been marked by a self-destructive character in the sense that it is ever-changing. At the same time that this allows for new possibilities within the faith, this characteristic also guarantees an eternal return to its roots.

As people seek to deconstruct their faith in light of a radical understanding of justice, grounded at the core of the gospel and relevant to their broader community, they might find deeper, more authentic and more relevant expressions of belief. These, as I have briefly shown and will argue further in the research, typically remain at the margins of the institutions of religion but nevertheless have potential to bring radical change to the larger community surrounding the church.

In a comparison between radical and confessional theologies, John D. Caputo writes that radical theology is theology itself in its radical mode, it is the event stirring within theology that looks to the tradition itself in order to deconstruct and constantly return to its roots (Caputo, 2020). This suggests that the spaces in which Radical Christianity finds itself are more fragmented and non-hierarchical, which could make it more opaque and diffuse, but also highly mobile and effective.

In Caputo's words, "the trouble is here at home. (…) Radical theology has always been there, in the roots and in the rafters, in the prophets and the protesters, in the lost gospels and suppressed gospels, in the heretics and the mystics by which orthodoxy is continually disturbed (...)" (Caputo, 2020, p. 25).

2. Methodology

Having established the basis and influences for the present research into Radical Christianity in London, I will now move on to explaining the methodology that will be used. The following sections offer an overview of the methods used based on Saunders et al.'s Onion model (2007). Afterwards, I will also reflect on the ethical issues that were considered before beginning this fieldwork which involves interviews and participant observation in the participants' communities.

2.1 Techniques and procedures

This research defines Radical Christians as those with a sense of urgency to act out radical hospitality in their lives, following an interpretation of the Kingdom of God as an *immanent* calling to fight for justice and equality. There have been movements and theologies that fit within this framework (in the literature review for this research, I identified liberation theology, as well as theologies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John D. Caputo and James K. A. Smith for instance), as well as ethnographic studies that have followed similar groups as the ones I proposed above (I had previously explored works written and edited by Justin Beaumont, Paul Cloke, Gladys Ganiel, Stephan Lanz, Lois Lee, Andrew Williams, etc).

However, I believe the present study will be important to advance the conversation regarding progressive Christianity and religious activism because this is still a relatively unexplored area when compared to conservative religious movements, or research on secular and religious dualities, and the city of London has not been extensively profiled in research of this kind.

Two previous researches of this kind which take place in London can be highlighted: Luke Bretherton's *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* (2010) and Anna Strhan and David Garbin's *Religion and the Global City* (2017). Bretherton studies the ways in which the Church and individuals can bear witness to the Kingdom of God within the "earthly city", and uses London Citizens as a case study.

In this framework, there is a disconnect between godly justice and what is achievable immanently, so Christians are to engage in remedial acts of just judgement, that extend beyond the church. Bretherton's argument is that in order for the church to be faithful to its own vocation, it inherently must seek the welfare of the earthly city. This often will be done against the pressures of processes of commodification and technocratic administration that threaten (especially poor and disenfranchised) communities. In doing so, the church can encounter God more deeply (Bretherton, 2010).

London Citizens is also analysed by Agatha Herman, Justin Beaumont, Paul Cloke and Andrés Walliser in their section on spaces of postsecular engagement in cities in the book *Faith-Based Organisations and Exclusion in European Cities* (2012). They amplify Bretherton, writing about how the non-materialistic values of religious beliefs can result in lifestyle choices that value the establishment of democratic spaces to empower local communities. By operating through London Citizens as opposed to via a direct relationship with the state, these community actions can have a more active role in shaping and structuring local change.

The writers also mention an interesting limitation of London Citizens, that it lacks transferability to other contexts (Herman, Beaumont, Cloke, Walliser, 2012). This is an important question that I ask in my own research: which aspects of what I will eventually find are specific to London, how are actions shaped by a global city, and how do these actions shape the wider community?

Garbin and Strhan offer another interesting case study of Radical Christian actions in London, around the Occupy movement at St. Paul's Cathedral. During this episode, people were challenged and encouraged to move beyond the "silos of the sacred" and see public space outside 'the Temple' as both sacred and public, to join forces for a common goal (Garbin and Strhan, 2017).

Time to Act, a resource book from the activist group Christian Climate Action published in 2020, can also be added as a unique perspective directly from the people who engage in radical faith-based actions, many of them centred on London.

Having briefly gone through these examples, I believe that my research will be able to add to the conversation and further the analysis of the landscape of faith and postsecularity in London. This research has the potential to illuminate general forms of belief that are still misunderstood and not broadly studied in secular academia, as well as foreground local initiatives and ways people have been making positive impacts on their surroundings.

Taking reference from John D. Caputo's radical theology, I have found that the very core of what is being called Radical Christianity is conceptually unstable as it is in a constant process of deconstructing. As the Church and theology adapt to their context, returning to the biblical texts for reference in light of a particular milieu, so do individuals. For the purpose of defining Radical Christianity, centred on the systematic defence and identification of the marginalised and excluded, its meaning can be located in *how* one believes more than in *what*. It is also located in the margins, either via non-conforming fringe movements or via the people within the mainstream Christian community who seek to reform it.

I will explore very personal and individual experiences that call for a nuanced and in-depth analysis. For this a narrative and constructivist methodology is appropriate to achieve the objective of defining Radical Christianity and mapping out networks actively enacting their beliefs within the wider society.

2.2 Time and space

The research took place in central London, for one year. This is where I have lived since March 2019, seeking inspiration for this research from seeing how the communities around me organise and express themselves religiously and politically. This research was informed at its genesis by localised experiences, so there is a practical and a conceptual side to the decision to place this study in the city of London.

Since this is a combination of participant observation and interviews, easy access to the communities to be included in the fieldwork was important, to facilitate regular meetings. There was also a conceptual emphasis on community organisation as a form of political action.

As mentioned previously in my literature review, the term “global city” comes from Sassen’s work as the conceptualisation of spaces that developed in the twentieth century “as a result of privatisation, deregulation, digitalization, the opening up of national economies to foreign firms, and the growing participation of national economic actors in global markets” (Sassen, 2001, p. xviii). This movement then generates a higher agglomeration of central functions in a relatively few sites - the global cities (Sassen, 2001).

In framing Radical Christianity within one city and over the course of a year, I created a structured portrait of a moment in time, focused on individual and collective actions in local communities, illuminated by a broader sociocultural context.

2.3 Strategies

To achieve the goals proposed above, two major strategies were employed: participant observation and in-depth interviews. Due to the emphasis in the literature on performativity, radical identities, individuality and varying interpretations of religious action, I considered that the best way to generate relevant data would be with interviews and participant observation of religious groups that fit the overall concept of Radical Christianity.

My starting point was to select three or four institutions to centre the case studies in. The intention was to have communities operating in both traditional and non-traditional settings, in order to find a range of possibilities regarding biblical interpretation, institutional support and religious and ethnic backgrounds. This choice should ideally embrace a broad sampling frame, so my intention was to work with at least one Anglican or Catholic church, one non-denominational church and one activist group.

Over the course of the year I would engage in participant observation within the institutions chosen for the case studies. From the relationships built during this time, the target was between 15 to 20 interviewees - community leaders and members, as well as people who

might not be directly associated with a Christian community, but might fit the scope of Radical Christianity in their actions and religious motivations. I would then have multiple in-depth interviews, either through video call and in person, with the selected people.

In light of ongoing COVID-19 health and safety precautions, it was understandable that some in-person activities might still not have resumed. Moreover, having the best interests and safety of the participants of this research in mind, I was aware that some of participant observation could take on a different meaning, if the participants are more comfortable with a socially distanced presence. This included participating in alternative online meetings and existing message groups. Regarding individual interviews, I also gave the participants the choice to meet in person or via video or phone call.

2.3.1 Sampling

During the sampling procedure I attempted to engage with a variety of people of different age groups, ethnic backgrounds, and sexual and gender identities. Another important aspect that I wanted to highlight is people who have a strong sense of belonging in a church or otherwise have associations with organised networks relevant to the topic in question, and people who are not as connected with a broader Christian community, due to not having access to churches they feel comfortable in, or who choose to not participate in traditionally Christian institutions for other reasons.

I was also interested in finding people who are not involved with these (or any) religious groups, given the recent developments regarding the “religious nones” (Woodhead, 2016). Census data in Britain shows that in the last decade the category of religious nones has been on the rise. However, further analyses found that the largest bloc of the nones consists of “maybes”, doubters and “don’t knows”, plus 5.5 percent who do believe in God (Woodhead, 2016). One can conclude from these studies that while there is a growing suspicion of institutionalised religion, there is still a considerable amount of people who are not involved with religious institutions but are somewhat spiritual.

I believe that working with people who identify with progressive Christian views and radical inclusivity and who are involved with their local faith communities might bring new perspectives and bridge a gap between religious nones with interests in Christian spirituality and religiously motivated political actors. With this in mind, I tried to approach people who identify as Christians, engage with their local religious communities’ activities, and show an interest in their social and political actions, but have caveats concerning the larger institution of organised religion, or have struggled with religion themselves.

I was interested in highlighting younger generations in particular (Generation Z and Millennials) as a specific demographic to assess generational differences in wording,

motivations and identification with the Church as an institution. As mentioned previously, recent studies in the sociology of religion that have looked into how the newer generations self-identify with regards to belief and religion have found that there are new forms of religiosity and identity that are particular to younger people (Lee, 2014, Day, 2010 and 2012 and Woodhead, 2016). While this has been considered within the sociology of religion throughout the last decade (and which were covered in the literature review of this research), I believe that further qualitative studies into the actual beliefs of this age bracket are not only relevant for expanding on previous research, but necessary in order to have a better understanding of generational and cultural shifts of the last few years.

In contrast with the sampling methods used for quantitative research, which are probabilistic or random to ensure the generalisability and control of findings by minimising the potential for bias in selection, the sampling of qualitative research is less explicit and often less evident. The justification for the participants and data gathering methods are generally assumed to be selected purposefully to yield cases that are "information rich" (Patton, 2001):

> This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In addition to knowledge and experience, Bernard (2002) and Spradley (1979) note the importance of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner. (Palinkas, 2015)

Interviewees were selected throughout the year, as I continued to meet more people within Radical Christian networks and as initial interviewees pointed me to other acquaintances. The semi-structured interviews gave the participants the opportunity to tell me in their own words what they believe in and how they actively express their beliefs. I was then able to co-create theoretical perspectives to support the behaviours observed in the fieldwork through the narratives given by the participants and observed through their network encounters. This was possible through identifying recurring themes and similar wording used by the participants, and subsequently developing normative concepts to frame their motivations and actions.

The following is a summary of general guiding characteristics for Radical Christians that I began looking for as I chose the initial participants to be interviewed, based on the aspects highlighted earlier in my literature review: affiliation or close ties to a Christian organisation, criticism or suspicion of the institutionalised Church, commitment to progressive politics (particularly surrounding social issues and the climate crisis) which is tied to their religious beliefs, participation in local activism and/or social works. This list is not exhaustive, and only provides a guideline for the initial selective sampling.

I opted for theoretical sampling, which is "the process of data collection directed by evolving theory rather than by predetermined population dimensions" (Draucker, Martsolf, Ross

and Rusk, 2007, p. 1137), having the starting point of a selective sampling guided by the basic characteristics of Radical Christianity determined above. As concepts began to emerge and further relationships began to be formed in the communities I accompanied, I moved into theoretical sampling.

Empirical indicators taken from the data, such as actions and events observed, recorded or described by participants and interviewees were compared, searching for similarities and differences. From these, tentative theories and theoretical propositions were further explored, and additional data was sought (Schwandt, 2001). This method eventually led me to sampling saturation, when unifying characteristics and concepts were determined, and new interviews no longer contributed to new concepts or unique perspectives on already coded concepts. At this point, I considered my theory as “conceptually dense and grounded in the data” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 111).

2.3.2 Positionality

I understand positionality as the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study—the community, the organisation or the participant group. This also implies relations of power and equity between the participants and researchers, as well as intentions and expectations.

A researcher or participant who works for or is a member of the participant community is considered an insider, while a researcher who is not seen as a member of the community studied is considered an outsider for the purposes of the research (Rowe, 2014). There are several combinations of insider and outsider work in field research, which can vary depending on the levels of collaboration with the participants. The following are examples of positionalities that work to address identified problems, create change or explore opportunities: an insider researcher in collaboration with other insiders and vice versa, reciprocal collaboration (equal insider and outsider teams), or an outsider in collaboration with insiders (non-equivalent relationships). On the other hand, researchers as outsiders are related to more traditional research methods involving gathering data about others as objectified research subjects (Herr and Anderson, 2005).

As positionality is multidimensional, it is common for a researcher to have proximity to the participants on some, but not all, dimensions. The differences encountered in the process of the research can create conflicts, and bring further attention to the distance between the outsider researcher and the insider participants, especially when issues of outsider privilege arise.

In an activist research, positionality can frequently be negotiated, and it will be constantly evolving alongside the relationship of researcher and participants. However, the

researcher must always be conscious of their position of privilege, and actively strive to redress power imbalances, bringing the voices of insiders - especially those that represent marginalised segments of society - to the forefront.

Rowe highlights feminist ethnographers as being “particularly sensitive to the issues of positionality, defined in terms of the degree of relatedness of the researcher to the study participants along dimensions of culture, class, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, childhood lived experiences and so on.” (Rowe, 2014, p. 629) More than identity markers, these dimensions shape one's worldview and values, influencing what is perceived and understood as knowledge and creating different lenses of reality (Rowe, 2014).

The feminist critique of the social sciences was also responsible for pointing out that although the social sciences were supposedly objective and value free, they were largely conducted from male perspectives and male interests. The challenge to descriptions and classifications of social life that are based on universalistic male assumptions, called standpoint epistemology, was developed out of this critique. Since women and men lead different embodied existences in the world, they will create different kinds of knowledge, with women's experience of oppression revealing forms of human relationships that may not be visible from a position of privilege, and producing unique understandings (Maynard, 2011). Therefore, Maynard argues, “standpoint epistemology offers the possibility of new and more reliable insights into gendered power and relationships. (...) It also has possibilities for extension into understanding the lives of other (e.g., minority, ethnic, and disabled) groups.” (Maynard, 2011, p. 1073)

Taking a constructivist and engaged approach, my personal background and lived experiences have illuminated the issues that I raised with this study, they inform how I produce knowledge and relate to the participants of the research. As a Latin American immigrant in the global north, I have consistent experiences of xenophobia and sexism. These were often overt acts of verbal and moral aggression during the years I lived in Portugal (as to be expected considering the specific prejudice caused by the historical relationships of a former colonial power and its former colony, in my case, Brazil). However, in London I felt a shift in how I am perceived, as I do hold the privileged position of being educated, light skinned and now having a European citizenship, whereas before I had temporary study and work visas. These advantages have meant that for the last two years since immigrating to Britain I have been more accepted as a part of the general community. I no longer face overt discrimination via the established systems tailored to keep certain people out, and have experienced mostly microaggressions. In both instances, these lived experiences help me to visualise other prejudices felt by disenfranchised people.

I identify as a Christian myself, so I entered into relationships with participants as part of a larger community, and shared many beliefs with them, thus positioning this as a collaborative

research. The beliefs framed in Radical Christianity - radical acceptance, the decolonization of Christianity, a manifested theology of resistance and social justice - are entwined with my insights into marginalised and powerless lived experiences, and thus instruct my aspiration to show the faces behind embodied Radical Christianity as I see it being produced in my surroundings.

2.4 Approach

Although I began this research with certain ideas and concepts in mind, it was essentially an inductive endeavour, especially regarding the group itself which I began looking into. Previous research and a basic theological framework served as a guide for where one might find Radical Christianity being enacted, but I went into the fieldwork without a rigid definition of what that essentially means.

Considering a "Common-sense Hypothetico-inductivist Model", I collected all the relevant data I could and then examined it to see what theory was suggested by this set of data. The theory thus 'emerged' from the data, inspired by a grounded theory methodology: "This is the original 'grounded theory' tradition (Glaser and Strauss, 1968) in which theory emerges by a process of 'induction'. The facts are believed to suggest – or even 'require' or 'dictate' – the theorization." (Wengraf, 2011, p. 2)

I focused on experience-centred work, encompassing co-constructed stories which, along with my observation, offered a link between narrative and agency and generated a multidimensional picture of Radical Christianity in London. This narrative research was formulated as a "poststructural enterprise, aware of narratives' social positioning as discourses and of the problematics of subjectivity, representation and power, and of narratives' multiplicities, contradictions, elisions, dialogism and materiality." (Andrews; Squire and Tamboukou, 2008, p. 9)

2.5 Philosophy

As explored previously, this research has a starting point in phenomenology and deconstructionism within theology, taking inspiration from empiric marginal movements within the wider Christian community that have attempted to live out ideals of radical inclusivity, hospitality and social justice.

Based on John W. Cresswell's definitions of the possible philosophical worldviews that can be used in the selection of a research approach, I have decided to opt for a constructive worldview. A social constructivist approach is the necessary base to create an in-depth analysis of the data, as I want to build a research around participants' views and experiences.

Additionally, this research is informed by politically charged theological works and my own views and lived experiences.

Moreover, I take inspiration from liberation theologies, which have historically offered a methodological lens for understanding Christianity in terms of systematic liberation for oppressed and marginalised groups and individuals. Liberation theology will be applied as a methodological approach for the way in which it is built with concern for contemporary social issues as the writer identifies them in their context and with their personal lived experiences. I have previously written about its importance as a theory concerned with listening to the voices of the oppressed segments in a society and *subsequently* developing a theory for the wider church community in response (Boff, 1983).

Liberation theology influences my predilection for an inductive approach in that it has the lived experiences of the faithful and their struggle for liberation as a starting point which will lead to an empirical description and conceptualisation of Radical Christianity in the contextual framing of this research.

2.5.1 Constructivist theory

This research falls within a constructivist theory that attends to the historical moment, the social structures and situations in which the research participants are embedded. Social constructivists, according to Cresswell, "believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work." (Cresswell, 2014, p. 8) Individuals then develop subjective meanings of their experiences, which are directed towards certain objects or things. Considering the variation and multiplicity of these meanings, the researcher is led to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas. The constructivist researcher relies as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied, and analyses the subjective meanings being formulated through the participants' social interactions, cultural norms and historical context. The questions being posed are broad and general to allow for the participants to construct the meaning of a situation, typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons (Cresswell, 2014).

This worldview assumes that human beings construct meanings as they engage with the world. They will interpret the world based on their historical and social perspectives, as they are inserted into a world of meaning bestowed onto them by the collective culture. Therefore, the researcher seeks to understand the context or setting of the participants through engaging with them and gathering information personally (Crotty, 1998). Consequently, it must be assumed that the research will be shaped by the researcher's own experiences and backgrounds, as they are also an individual inserted into a social, cultural and historical context, with their own interpretation of the world they are in.

The relevance of these socially and politically conscious religious actions is precisely in their existence in society, and I understand that a social reality is constructed by social actors continually contributing to its maintenance and disruption. In this sense, the research must necessarily be based on experience and the concerns and perspectives of social actors within their practices in their social contexts. Working in a constructionist standpoint, in which "the research data is not discovered, extracted or uncovered, means the researcher takes on the role of mineral prospector mining for information; the 'data' is the outcome of the researcher's active relationship with the research context, including the other social actors and their respective accounts." (Bryant and Charmaz, 2011, p. 219)

Grounding my theory in an inductive ethnography provides an important complement to current philosophical and epistemological debates (Bryant and Charmaz, 2011). In mapping and analysing religious actors who are engaging with a broader milieu of progressive political resistance, I can also add to a number of interdisciplinary lines of inquiry, such as critical theory, sociology of religion and theological hermeneutics.

From the outset of this research, I will rely as much as possible on the participants' views and understanding of the issues being raised, as I find socially created meanings. When interviewing them, my questions will be broad and open-ended, to allow the interviewee to construct the meanings themselves and create the possibility for discussions and organic interactions. I want to pay attention to the participants' histories and experiences, as they show us what Radical Christianity can be within our cultural and historical frame.

2.5.1 Activist research

Due to the political nature of this research, in addition to using a constructivist approach I also adopted an engaged, activist approach, inspired by transformative research. Transformative research is a position which "arose during the 1980s and 1990s from individuals who felt that the postpositivist assumptions imposed structural laws and theories that did not fit marginalised individuals in our society or issues of social justice that needed to be addressed." (Cresswell, 2014, p. 9) Transformative writers have historically drawn on the works of Marx, Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas, and Freire (Neuman, 2000), most of which I have mentioned previously and in varying ways influence this research.

The transformative worldview stems in part from a dissatisfaction with dominant paradigms and a desire to create change, emerging from a paradigmatic stance that prioritises issues of social justice and human rights as overarching ethical principles that need to permeate all aspects of an evaluation study (Mertens, 2013). It "pulls together many evaluation approaches that focus on issues of power and on addressing inequities in the name of furthering human rights and social justice." (Mertens, 2013, p. 28) The research conclusions are

based on data generated from an inclusive list of persons affected by the research, with special efforts to include those who have been traditionally underrepresented (Mertens, 2011).

I will adopt the understanding that knowledge is not neutral nor impartial, and they choose to centre their knowledge in the lived experiences of marginalised groups such as women, ethnic and racial minorities, members of the LGBTQ+ communities, people with disabilities, and those who are poor (Mertens, 2011). This position holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political agenda, and thus it contains "an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of the participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live, and the researcher's life" (Cresswell, 2014, p. 9). Throughout the literature review, I have highlighted issues of community empowerment, social justice, and the general stance with people at the margins of society.

Moving forward, a focal point of this study will be to acknowledge and advocate for people who are active in the struggle to bring equality and inclusion within their capacities, working collaboratively with them through this work. According to Cresswell, this activist research provides a voice for its participants, raising their consciousness or advancing an agenda for change to improve their lives and becoming an united voice for reform and change (Cresswell, 2014).

A concern that might come from an activist research is that since it places itself on the side of the oppressed to explain why power imbalances and systemic inequalities exist, and links political and social actions to these inequalities (Mertens, 2010), it can be dismissed as bias by researchers with a more traditional approach. This type of engaged research is more likely to be biassed due to the researcher's (as well as their network's) proximity to the subject, as it involves social issues that are central to people's ideological identity and their lived experiences as part of a society.

When discussing the issue of personal biases in policy-related (or activist) research, Phoebe C. Ellsworth mentions that social researchers in this field "have strong expectations about the likely outcomes of their studies, strong preferences about how they want their studies to come out, and strong motivation to persuade people that their ideas are true" (Ellsworth, 2021, p. 1226). However, she writes about mitigating this bias by truthfully communicating our knowledge. Since activist research involves issues that many people can relate to and feel strongly about, the researcher can expect their work to be closely scrutinised by more people than other researches that have no obvious policy implications (Ellsworth, 2021). Therefore, the researcher will need to provide robust data and be prepared to defend their point of view to a wider, often more sceptical or opinionated, audience.

Moreover, Ellsworth contends that, contrary to the idea that reason and passion are separate systems and that superior thinking requires that we operate solely within the domain of reason, evidence suggests that most thought involves emotion, and most emotion involves

thought. Confirmation bias is pervasive in human thought, and scientific thought is not immune (Ellsworth, 2021). Whether or not a research involves controversial social issues or has clear political implications, it can stem from an emotional stance, and can elicit emotional responses.

I will expand on the particular issues that I needed to be careful of in regards to bias and how I communicate my research in the coming pages. For the time being, I will add that I mitigated bias by approaching this work through inductive data gathering; I was open to finding unexpected stories and explanations from the participants in this study.

The pre-definition of Radical Christianity which has been offered is to facilitate the understanding of the type of people and institutions I was interested in pursuing based on the theological framework being applied, although I have tried to refrain from predetermining exact characteristics. I am instead interested in the language and discourse that came from my contact with the participants, as well as their own conceptual frameworks. I used inductive reasoning to observe the lived experiences of people who consolidate their religious and secular beliefs into systematic political and social action, and built a theory based on the focal points and commonalities found in their intentions, motivations and rhetoric.

2.6 Approach in data gathering

Cresswell indicates that one of the key elements of collecting data in this way is to observe participants' behaviours during their engagement in activities (Cresswell, 2014, p. 19). The ethnography part of this study consisted of participating in a variety of in person and online meetings, so different methods of note-taking were used depending on the setting. For instance, audio recording and taking written notes during sermons, as well as smaller and informal gatherings, with the concern to not disrupt the activity taking place or make any participants uncomfortable with being recorded. In regards to interviews, I refrained from making notes, instead asking the participant for permission to record the audio of our meetings, which I transcribed and decoded at a later stage (Denvers and Frankel, 2000).

When I felt the need to write down notes while activities were taking place I did so through my mobile phone for convenience, expediency and organisation - typing thoughts and insights on a phone, rather than in a journal for example, also looks more natural and was potentially less disruptive for the participants. I also remained vigilant to separate my own experiences and thoughts from the experiences and voices being expressed by the research participants.

I applied radical theology to recurring agenda points in progressive politics, such as immigration, social and racial justice and the environmental crisis. To this end, stories were collected using a narrative approach, which I achieved through open-ended interviews to determine how the participants have themselves experienced oppression or have decided to be

allies and advocates. I hoped to find more about the opinions and motivations of the participants, their faith journeys and how they came to the point they are in their lives, where their beliefs have converged with their political stances.

I remained aware of the problems that come with relying on data from interviews, as they can be seen as providing "indirect information filtered through the views of interviewees." (Cresswell, 2014, p. 191) Interviews also typically displace the participants from the field setting, which can disrupt the information provided. Other limitations to be noted are that not all participants are equally articulate, and the presence of the researcher may bias responses (Cresswell, 2014). Therefore, I contextualised and provided a background for the interviews, to ensure the data is understood in its entirety, and built rapport with the interviewees so that they were comfortable with sharing their thoughts and stories.

Data stemming from semi-structured interviews is often doubted for their scientific objectivity, because although they provide us with a view into complex cognitive links formed through people's understanding of their social contexts, there is a lack of systematic procedures to establish external validation (Price and Smith, 2021).

I believe, however, that this is not necessarily a negative point. This research is interested in listening to people's worldviews and telling their stories, therefore I understand that the data will be partial, as it portrays lived experiences and individual beliefs. I will guarantee rigour through critical assessment of the information provided to me, taking into account the wider cultural and socio-economic context in which this research takes place, and triangulating different primary (interviews and recordings and notes taken from meetings) and secondary (public websites, reports, previous academic research, census data, etc) data.

Heather E. Price and Christian Smith describe how their method for analysing the semi-structured interviews conducted for their qualitative study of intergenerational transmission of religious faith in the following manner: "After performing standard interview transcription and translation (Smith and Adamczyk Forthcoming), we coded data in three phases: (1) a first-order theme coding; (2) a second-order pattern coding; and (3) quantitative summaries. These sequential phases offered strata of triangulation (Armstrong et al. 1997), as the conceptual codes needed to prove stable, accurate, and reproducible (Campbell et al. 2013:295) at each phase." (Price and Smith, 2021, p. 188) This is a good example of a strategy for critical assessment of data gathered from interviews in qualitative studies.

I worked similarly to identify thematic codes of interest and thus create an inductive theory, with interest in not only "storytelling", but finding patterns in lived experiences in their dialogues and intersections with religion and socio-economic structures of which participants are a part of. Paying close attention to methodological requirements, inserting the research findings into a broader historical, societal, and ideological context, and being aware of the limitations of scientific reasoning based on qualitative empirical data ensures that this case

study will provide reasonable results that improves knowledge of religiosity, intersectionality and social movements in the city (Diefenbach, 2009).

Lastly, I also collected secondary data through documents and media created and disseminated by the participants, both internally - with the consent of the owner of the content - and externally. This included public documents such as websites, social media entries made by official pages, minutes of meetings, books and news articles. Additionally, the private documents I analysed were photographs, videos, private social media groups and chats.

This type of data gathering enabled me to obtain the language and words of participants, and further pointed me in the direction of what matters and what deserves the attention of the participants, opening as well a new perspective for meaning-making. It is considered an unobtrusive source of information, and has the advantage of being already written evidence, saving the need to transcribe information (Cresswell, 2014).

Conversely, it is important to note that Cresswell (2014) points to documents and media as possibly being incomplete materials, having the potential of being inaccurate and requiring the researcher to search out the information in hard-to-find places. Nonetheless, using secondary data in qualitative research is commonly accepted, as long as it is used critically. Hinds et al. (1997) describe the following four approaches to secondary data analysis to be used in conjunction with the primary study: research secondary data which has different focal points than the ones covered in the primary study, research data which involves a more in-depth analysis of themes from the primary study with a subset of data from that study, analyses of data from the primary study that appear important, but not sufficiently focused on in the primary analysis, and analyses with newly-collected data that refines the primary study's purpose or research questions (Hinds et al., 1997).

It is also worth mentioning that secondary data can relieve the burden of participation from research participants (Heaton, 2004). Moreover, one can critically assess the secondary data against the data resulting from the interviews conducted in the primary study to give credibility or corroborate the narratives being told, find additional interpretations and build a more robust understanding of the wider context that surrounds the participants of the research.

2.6.1 Increasing rigour and identifying limitations in qualitative secondary data analysis

Recommendations include adding fresh perspectives to the secondary data to be used, either from the primary researcher or from participants in the study, and critically analysing how time or context may have changed the relevance of the data and how the goals and purposes of the secondary data may influence the goals and purposes of the primary research (Ruggiano and Perry, 2019).

This qualitative research focuses on a relatively small pool of people, and frames a very specific moment in time, as it was conducted over the course of one year in one city. Therefore, it was especially important to utilise as much additional data as possible, as well as looking into the primary data through the vantage point of different methodological approaches in order to paint a comprehensive and detailed picture of this moment in time and how it came to be.

2.7 Ethical Issues

When considering the commonly recognised ethical principles in empirical research (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012), I tried to minimise harm by allowing the people being studied to take lead with a semi-structured model of interviewing and participating in their communities and acts with their permission. In practice, this meant looking for opportunities for the interviewees to guide the conversation, actively listening for what matters to them in their lived experience, and not categorising them as convenient stereotypes or trying to identify a pattern in thought or action where one does not exist. Through an activist and inductive research approach, I intended on co-creating meaning as I conversed with and accompanied the subjects' lives, not to prove a hypothesis, but to highlight their lived experience as they allowed me to do so.

The following ethical considerations were central throughout the field research (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2013): Approaching the group or church leaders to introduce myself and my research, and obtaining their consent to proceed with participant observation in their meetings. Once the terms of this relationship were set, we agreed on a day for them to introduce me to the group or congregation as a researcher, making a brief statement about my intentions. There were information sheets available with a summary of my research intentions and contact details. On that day, and throughout my involvement in the groups' activities, I made myself available to talk with anyone who might want to voice concerns or have further questions.

All participants were required to give their written consent before any active involvement began. Considering that the relationship between researcher and research subjects always entails a power imbalance, my intentions were made clear from the outset and I continuously assured the people involved in a prolonged involvement that I was genuinely interested in their stories, while also respecting their autonomy to deny access to particular gatherings or themes. The participants were made aware that they have the right to withdraw partially or completely from this process at any given time, and I will ensure the confidentiality of all data provided.

As adults engaged in public actions, the participants had the capacity to give consent to participate and withdraw their consent if they wanted to do so. Although I did not have particularly vulnerable participants, I recognise that religious beliefs, as well as personal issues

that I intended on going into during individual interviews, can be sensitive topics. I wanted to make the participants as comfortable as possible, empowering them to tell their stories and advocate for what they believe through this research. I will minimise any harm the findings could potentially cause by being cautious of sensitive subjects and properly anonymising the participants.

A final point that I would like to stress is the possible conflicts of interest that come with an advocacy methodology and also my personal positionality. I was cautious to ensure participants did not forget my placement among them as a researcher. I personally needed to be aware of this issue and sought to remain an impartial observant especially during interviews to avoid imposing my own language, views and beliefs on the participants. Moreover, I needed to be cautious to not blur the lines which delimit these relationships. While this research subscribes to an advocacy methodology, its ultimate objective is to tell the stories of the people I will encounter through giving them the space and freedom to do so.

3. Data gathering and analysis

This chapter will detail the methods used and materials resulting from this research on the lived practices of Radical Christianity in London. After having provided the rationale for the methodology chosen for the research in the previous chapter, I will refer back to some of the methods already outlined to provide context for the outworking of the fieldwork and show how the methodology was used.

An initial overarching definition of “Radical Christian/Radical Christianity” was set as a parameter, based on previous research done on groups holding similar beliefs and concerns and recent anthropological studies of progressive Christians in postsecular societies and theoretical works of public and political theology (Bartley, 2006; Beaumont and Baker, 2011; Becker, Klingan and Lanz, 2013; Bender and Taves, 2012; Bielo, 2011; Bretherton, 2010; Caputo, 2007; Cloke, Beaumont and Williams, 2013; Cloke and Pears, 2016; Cloke, Baker, Sutherland and Williams, 2019; Garbin and Strhan, 2017; Graham, 2013; Howson, 2011; Marti and Ganiel, 2014; Rollins, 2008; Ruddick, 2020; Smith, 2017; Tomlinson, 2014; Turner, 2022; Winter, 2017).

The aim of this inductive research was to locate and, over the course of a year, engage with individual people and collectives that self-identified with the working concept of Radical Christian as pre-defined in the participant information sheet provided. The result of this research will be analysed in order to define a more concrete category of Radical Christianity and develop a comprehensive study of the inner workings, motivations and actions of these groups and individuals, as seen in the context of one global city.

The findings of the fieldwork will be presented below, and explored in further detail in the next chapters. Before going into it in-depth I will give an overview of the data gathered, with some additional context as to the eventual changes that happened between the intended and eventual case studies and participants.

Following my intended strategy, an inductive and narrative approach (Charmaz, 2011; Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Kohler-Riessman, 2008; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was used to identify relevant spaces to seek and approach participants, and then to conduct and analyse semi-structured in-depth interviews and case studies done through participant observation. The specific rationale for interviewee selection and the techniques of in-depth interviewing and data analysis using inductive coding methods will be explained below:

3.1 Participant observation

3.1.1 Case study selection and limitations

Originally, I intended to select three or four institutions - at least one non-denominational church, one Anglican or Catholic church and one activist group - in which I would be centering my case studies and eventually finding between 15 and 20 interviewees within those places. The reasoning for wanting representation from different types of institutional churches is in seeing the nuances of their positioning regarding their ties to the government and matters of policy, as well as finding the different points of reference or reasonings that might come from the discourse of their members and leadership.

The first issue I encountered when looking for potential institutions and participants for this research is that Radical Christian networks are not typically centralised in one city, with many relevant institutions being national networks, and key players being spread across the country. This meant that I had to change my approach to the participant selection from what I initially intended to do.

Secondly, most of the churches and groups that I did find which were strictly based in London or have local chapters did not reply to my contact attempts. In two separate instances, I did connect with the leaders of activist networks, who informed me they would not be able to participate due to concerns regarding obtaining informed consent from all members of the group. In one of those cases, I learned that the group was no longer accepting requests from external researchers to participate in their activities, while the leader of the other group also mentioned that he was no longer accepting interview requests.

From these experiences, I gathered that there might be some suspicion of outsiders in these spaces. Particularly in the case of more well-known organisations, although there is not much academic research completed to date in these places, they have gained notoriety in the last few years through the wider media, with a few networks being over-reported on. More generally, it is also very understandable that the leaders and members of small congregations and grassroots organisations may not have the capacity to take on the additional responsibility of having an outsider in their meetings, and the additional workload for leaders.

Prior to starting this selection process, I had made a connection with a non-denominational church that would be a great fit for one of the case studies, so after ethical approval was granted to start the fieldwork,[7] they were the first confirmed case study. After a couple of months of reaching out to local and decentralised organisations, I received interest from a group of young Christian climate activists. I then decided to move forward with just those two case studies.

In order to solve the issue of having fewer case studies than originally intended, ensuring I still had enough data from the research, I decided to add more interviews and in particular interviews with people from more varied backgrounds. This contrasts with the initial

[7] The ethical approval confirmation can be found in the Appendix.

expectation that the interviewees would mostly come from within the case study groups. This pivot allowed me to expand on my reach for potential participants, which was a positive outcome as I eventually found that Radical Christians are not often found in necessarily radical networks, but spread through more traditional settings or not found in religious spaces at all. I will expand this reflection in the next chapters.

Ultimately, this research was composed of data gathered from two case studies based on participant observation, taken place over the course of one year, and 22 semi-structured interviews of an average of 40 minutes to one hour each. The interviews ended up becoming the most important source of data, providing information on Radical Christians from a wide range of backgrounds, denominations and demographics.

Of the interviewees, ten identified as men, ten identified as women and two identified as non-binary. Twenty people were ethnically white, and two ethnically black. Six people were in their twenties, ten were in their thirties and six were over forty years old. All participants currently live in London, with a few people having lived here their entire lives and most having grown up in various areas of the United Kingdom or abroad. I believe that the lack of a case study in a traditional church was resolved with the interviews of several self-identified Anglicans, including two priests and one person going through their ordination training.

3.1.2 Victoria Road Church: Radical Christianity in an institutional setting

The first institution that was identified as a possibility, contacted and selected to be a case study was a local, non-denominational church in East London. From here onwards, I will be referring to them as Victoria Road Church (VRC).[8] Originally founded as a charity, VRC has been operating in the neighbourhood for 150 years, initially as a "home of industry", with the aim of promoting welfare and education for local marginalised communities however they could. The original institution, founded by a female evangelical Quaker and philanthropist, provided the opportunity for many children and adults to read and write and to receive medical attention. The work that started in 1866 eventually took many forms, with conversations about it becoming an autonomous worshipping community starting in the late 1950s. By the early 1960s, VRC was regarded as a central element to the wider work of the charity. This history is made alive today in the congregation, with the leadership continuing to focus on making this a space for inclusion, rest and community organising.

Victoria Road Church does not have an official membership system,[9] and consequently attendees do not subscribe to a statement of faith that one would typically be asked to sign in

[8] All institutions from this point onwards will be referred to by pseudonyms.
[9] For clarification, I will be referring to regular churchgoers and people involved with this community as members in a general sense.

order to become a member of a particular church. On a typical Sunday around 40 to 50 people will meet at 11am for their weekly service, although the group of people who would consider VRC their church is between 60 to 70 individuals. Regular activities throughout the week include community gardening, an online book club, a poetry club, wellbeing workshops and beginner yoga lessons and craft events, which gather smaller groups between church members and people from the wider community. In 2018, when the church building was rebuilt, they opened a separate non-profit cafe in the front of the church, whose mission is to serve the community.

The activities hosted by the church are led by volunteers from the church and friends of the congregation, typically local residents of the neighbourhood who are regulars at the church's non-profit cafe, which is itself run with the help of volunteers. Once per week Victoria Road Church hosts a night shelter in collaboration with a local housing charity, and it has sporadic "pay what you can" supper clubs using donated surplus food. In the winter of 2022 it also began hosting warm spaces, which from February 2023, continued after the winter, rebranded as a craft and community activity, since it was noticed that the problem they were solving was not physical heat, but loneliness in the community.

There is a large focus on community organising and grassroots leadership development, both through the church's regular activities and the projects that they support in various degrees. They promote and financially support the local branch of an interfaith youth-centred charity whose purpose is to encourage young people to be confident in their beliefs and identity and build meaningful interfaith friendships. This organisation leads multi-faith youth encounters to promote these relationships and equip participants to be peacemakers in their local communities and the wider society, creating a more inclusive and loving world. One of the church leaders volunteers for this organisation and occasionally provides updates on the work that they do.

VRC also supports an NGO recently created by a church member. This organisation promotes reconciliation and reconnection within communities by equipping young men at risk of offending, aged 18 and above, to change the direction of their lives and become themselves leaders in the community through a residential course and mentoring programme.

They were also one of four local churches that came together in recent years to form a Community Sponsorship group to welcome a refugee family. Over the course of two years they fundraised, arranged suitable accommodation and worked to meet the home office requirements. In May 2021 they welcomed a family to East London, who they continue to support and build relationships with.

I initially spoke informally with the church's pastor, Martin[10], about my research, and he indicated initial interest in the congregation being one of the case studies. As soon as ethical clearance was achieved, we had a formal conversation about this and decided to move forward. On the next Sunday, Martin invited me to speak with the congregation during the notices section of their meeting, to explain what my research was about, that I would at that point start making notes and gathering data from public church meetings and events, and what their participation would entail. I left participant information sheets in the back of the building and made myself available if anyone wanted to ask any questions after the sermon, or wanted to convey any concerns about privacy and anonymity. I had a few people wanting to know more about the research out of curiosity, both on that Sunday and throughout the rest of my activity there as I informed other people who had not been at that initial service about it. No one showed any concerns or asked not to be included.

My participation consisted of attending Sunday services and other weekday events more sparsely, including volunteering at the night shelter, the supper club, a poetry night and their non-profit cafe, participating in one of their gardening club sessions and joining their weekend away in June 2022. I also joined their Whatsapp group. I relied on the fact that the sermons are recorded and published on the church's website in a podcast format, so I was able to make fewer notes and refer back to VRC's own recordings. I set out to capture any interesting comments, discussions happening at the tables, the relationships between church members and leaders, recurring themes throughout the sermons, and any other relevant moments or scenes.

The interviews that were given by members and leaders of the church, the pastor and people more broadly associated with VRC were also very helpful in capturing the church's mission, the type of people it attracts and why.

3.1.3 Climate Action Youth Group: Radical Christianity in a network setting

Climate Action Youth Group (CAYG) is a community of young Christians aged between 18 and 30 years, taking a non-violent action-based approach to following Jesus and pursuing climate justice. They launched in 2020 as a nationwide ecumenical network, with the original team having members from Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and Quaker backgrounds. The team is formed strictly from volunteers.

Their mission is to provide an inclusive community for young Christians who want to engage with climate justice; to facilitate collective action for climate justice, motivated by faith; and to learn with humility and reflection, so growing in passion and understanding individually and as a community.

[10] All individual participants from this point on will also be referred to by pseudonyms.

Since their inception, CAYG has spearheaded two campaigns, and recently launched their next one. In 2021, their campaign was centred around The Conference of Parties (COP). They organised a pilgrimage from Cornwall, where G7 ministers met, to Glasgow, for COP26. The core group took turns walking to Glasgow in 108 days, stopping in 10 cities along the way to raise awareness and campaign for climate justice. The pilgrimage was also open to people of all ages who wanted to join for stretches of the way. Their second campaign was centred around the 2022 Lambeth Conference, a decennial assembly of bishops of the Anglican Communion convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury. They wrote a letter asking the bishops to take action for climate justice.

Their 2023 campaign was focused on bringing awareness to young Christians about the role that the food system, in particular in the UK, plays in the climate crisis, and inviting them to consider reducing their meat and dairy consumption in order to mitigate climate change, improve health and increase food security. Their view is that as Christians, their role is to tackle every injustice, and they see climate change as one of the greatest injustices of our time. The first step of the campaign was a launch event that took place online with four invited panellists speaking about their perspectives on the connections of food, faith and climate. The campaign then asked their target audience to consider being vegetarian for a week - in the hopes that people will make more permanent changes - in accordance with a more climate sustainable diet. The plan over the course of 2023 was to expand the campaign to Christian festivals and churches, to encourage Christian organisations to start making systemic changes in their food choices as a way of tackling climate injustice.

In addition to the campaigns, CAYG promotes other faith-based and secular activist groups' actions for climate justice, and members may join in actions when and where they can, from going to protests to actively participating in civil disobedience. They have weekly Zoom meetings, and have a general meeting once a year in London.

I initially contacted Climate Action Youth Group via email at the beginning of August 2022, not having any prior personal relationships with members of the organisation. I promptly received a reply from their external communications lead, Charlie. He proposed that we meet in central London that weekend to talk in more detail about my research. We met up, I explained more about the background of my research, told him more about myself and outlined what my participant observation would entail and that I would need consent from the group and would guarantee anonymity to all. After our meeting, Charlie went back to the other group's leads to discuss whether they would agree to participate. By the end of the month, I heard back from him that all committee members were happy for me to go ahead and use CAYG as one of my case studies.

Coincidentally, I was invited to join their weekly Zoom meetings, which most of my participant observation activity would consist of, just as they were coming back from some time

off after their last campaign. The first meeting I joined was their “Vision Night”, where they introduced the group to newcomers joining for the first time and began thinking of campaign ideas for 2023. While their database has around 200 people in it, their Vision Night garnered 20 participants, and throughout the next months meetings would typically have around 10 participants from the core group. They also introduced me to the group, and explained that I would be joining as a researcher. The next meetings would be focused on developing their campaign, and all meetings were fairly organised, with agenda points and minutes being taken. Having access to the minutes and campaign documents was very important for data gathering, but I also made my own notes throughout the meetings, which included more comments and thoughts on the discussions happening.

Other than the online meetings, I joined their yearly general meeting in London in November 2022, where 17 members met in person for a full day of activities. During the introduction section of the meeting, one of the committee members reminded the rest of the group that I was there as a researcher and not a member. Throughout my involvement with CAYG, I interviewed four members who are London based.

3.2 In-depth interviews

3.2.1 Methods and rationale for interviewee selection

The interviewee selection was essential to expand the knowledge of people who may self-identify with the Radical Christian identity. I tried to cast a wide net and find people in a variety of faith-based and secular spaces, expecting that some Radical Christians might not have regular church attendance or be a part of a religious community in general. I wanted to interview members of the communities I was basing my ethnography on, but also find people representing different denominations, people working with public policy and in NGOs, community leaders and people involved in activism.

I initially relied on my personal networks for potential interviewees and recommendations for other people who could be interested. As I began exhausting those sources, I started emailing or sending direct messages on social media to various relevant organisations, sending them my participant observation sheet, giving more context for the research and explaining that I was looking for people in their networks who might be interested in being interviewed. As with my search for potential case studies, understandably many of my contact attempts went unanswered. Some people replied letting me know that they would pass my information along to their team, network or congregation, and some promptly made themselves available.

Overall, I contacted over 25 faith-based institutions including: Anglican, Catholic, Quaker and other denominational churches that were recommended to me as being institutionally engaged with socioeconomic and climate justice causes; progressive networks supporting LGBTQ+ Christians, Christians in politics, and Christian students; and faith-based NGOs whose purpose is related to systemic societal change based on Radical Christian values of inclusivity and equality.

Since I also wanted to reach people who identify as Christians but might not be a part of a faith-based institution, I also reached out to 27 small secular NGOs and activist networks advocating for various relevant causes, mostly via social media. Unfortunately, this did not recruit any participants, but I did eventually connect via a study group with two people who were on the margins of an Anglican congregation but historically had not been very involved in church life and had only been involved in secular activism and political organising.

I ended up with a satisfactory range of 22 interviewees, having representation from multiple denominations, varying involvements in politics, activism and church life. I had a very even divide between age groups and genders, but would have liked to highlight more ethnically diverse voices and include more working class people, as an overwhelming amount of participants were of middle class backgrounds and educated to degree level. I will expand my thoughts on why this ended up being the case in the next chapter.

3.2.2 Interview questions

The semi-structured, in-depth interviews were aimed at answering the following overarching questions: who are Radical Christians, what do they care about and how are their beliefs performed? I originally developed nine structured research questions (and later added two more) that were designed to reflect the personal theologies, practices and lived experiences of people who at least tentatively identified with the term Radical Christian.

Around one third (seven) of the interviews were done in person in the location that the interviewee chose, and the remaining fifteen were done online via a Microsoft Teams call. For in person interviews, I would ask the participant to read through and sign the consent form while I either set up my laptop, so they would not feel rushed. Prior to our meeting, they would have already been sent and read through the participant information sheet. For online interviews, I would send the consent form to participants along with the invitation for the call, and ask them to fill it out and send it back to me at their earliest convenience.

In every interview I explained that it would be quite informal, with just a few structured questions and plenty of time for them to expand on any subjects that they might find relevant or want to bring up. I also joked that it was a great opportunity for them to have a rant or go on any tangents. Before going into the main questions, I asked for some background information,

namely their age, pronouns, where they grew up and whether they grew up in a Christian household.

After gathering this data, I would start the interview questions, which roughly fell into three categories: personal experience, theology, and practice. While most interviews started and ended in the same questions, the middle was often shuffled based on the participant's answers and where the conversation was naturally leading. Many participants would address one question in their responses to something else, in such a way that I did not need to ask that question specifically, or was able to seamlessly follow up on that so the interview had a continuous conversational flow. On other occasions, a particular reply from a participant would render one of my questions irrelevant, so I would skip or reformulate it. Ideally, the interviewee would bring up some of the subjects outlined below without me having to prompt it, but with people who were more direct in their answers I had to use as many questions as possible to try to withdraw more information.

The initial questions were about the participants' lived experiences and the development of their faith:

- How has your faith changed or evolved over time, and what were the catalysts for those changes? This was in most cases my first question. The direction that they took with their reply would dictate where I would proceed.
- Can you tell me more about what you do now, either as a full time job, volunteering work or anything else you are passionate about? I added this question later in the middle of the interview process. I felt it was best to start asking this more directly at the start of the interview, rather than finding a suitable moment to bring it up. This helped guide me and instigate more tailored follow up questions.
- Do you think the places you've lived have impacted or shaped your faith? In my first interviews, I asked if living in London has impacted or shaped their faith, as many interviewees had grown up in smaller towns and then moved to the capital. I later changed it so that the question would be broader in order to consider different contexts, as I was finding myself having to adapt the question based on each interview.
- What importance do you place on being a part of a Christian community (a church or other Christian congregation)?
- What has been your relationship with organised religion or the church in general? I omitted this question in several interviews, as at this point the participant would have already spoken about this subject in an earlier moment.

The second section of questions related to the participant's theology, which gave me more context as to their motivations and how they believe:

- What is your definition of Christianity? This often came as a follow up to the last two questions of the first section.

- What is your personal understanding of who or what God is?
- How do you believe that God acts in the world?

The final part of the interview was focused on their praxis and practical theology and inquired straightforwardly about what is important to them, what matters the most in their belief system and how they conduct their lives:

- How has your faith influenced your actions and how you navigate through society? After I started asking people more directly in the beginning of the interview about their work, this question became slightly repetitive, but still gave me insight into the inner workings of the participant's faith and worldview.
- What are your core values, and what (systemic) societal changes are you working towards or want to see happen in alignment with those values?
- What changes would you like to see to Christianity as a community in order for the Christian faith to be fully lived out and enacted in society? This was the second question I added, after the first six interviews, as I felt it added more depth into what the participant's ideals are and it gave me more context as to what Radical Christianity could look like in practice.

After I used all of the relevant questions above, as well as follow up questions based on the participant's personal accounts and answers, I asked if there was anything else they wanted to expand on, or if there was something they would like to mention that I did not ask about specifically. Doing this provided me with further insight into what these people care about and what had been in their minds recently. It was also an opportunity for them to ask me again about my research aim and make comments directly in regards to it.

The interviews ultimately became my main source of data for this research, and the conversations I had with each participant were very informative regarding their motivations and beliefs. I already intended for this to be, as much as possible, a collaborative effort. Therefore, given the rich narratives contained in the interviews, I will be using several quotes and giving further context for personal backgrounds of participants in this chapter to show a comprehensive picture of Radical Christianity through active lived experiences. The sections presenting the themes that came out of the research will appear as windows into the stories and lives of people who embody this form of religiosity.

Not all individual participants will be quoted throughout the thesis, either because several participants had very similar experiences and opinions that would be repetitive if they were all detailed separately, or because specific participants expressed the same point in more structured, concise or eloquent ways that could be summarised with the citations chosen. However, all of the participants gave important contributions to this research and helped me map out the journeys, motivations and actions that make up Radical Christianity as a lived practice in a global city. The table below shows all of their names (pseudonyms), ages and

occupations, both as a way to recognise their contributions and for readers to refer back to as a glossary when reading through the narrative accounts in the following chapters. The names are organised in the chronological order of when their interviews took place.

Table 1: Interviewees

Name (pseudonym) and pronouns	Age	Occupation and/or relevant volunteer work
Sal (he/him)	30	Undergoing ordination training, previous researcher for a Christian think tank
Alan (he/him)	65	Works with homelessness services and policy, involved with multiple grassroots religious activist groups and networks
Martin (he/him)	57	Pastor of a non-denominational church (VRC)
Frances (she/her)	34	Secular political organising and host of a Christian study group
Penn (they/them)	45	Pastor of a mainline Protestant church
Sarah (she/her)	25	Volunteer work for a Christian student network and for a Christian climate activism group (CAYG)
Emily (she/her)	32	Volunteer work for a Catholic network building relationships with the local homeless and elderly communities
Megan (she/her)	27	Works for a refugee charity and does volunteer work for a Christian climate activism group (CAYG)
Stevie (they/them)	Early 20s	Student, community chair for a Christian climate activism group (CAYG)
Andy (she/they)	27	Secular political organising, voluntary involvement in a diversity committee at her Anglican church
Toby (he/him)	23	Works for a Catholic eco-church
Mark (he/him)	31	Lawyer, Christian political organising
Jack (he/him)	31	Secular political organising, former employment in a Christian NGO and a church denomination
Barbara (she/her)	52	Works in property development, partnering with NGOs and churches
Roberta (she/her)	30	Works in public policy
Jenny (she/her)	32	Works in public policy

Rachel (she/her)	24	Works with faith-based community organising
Patrick (he/him)	55	Anglican priest
Philip (he/him)	41	Works in public policy
Paula (she/her)	39	Works for a Christian NGO, previous work in disaster relief
Brian (he/him)	39	Works for a Christian NGO, involved in faith-based community organising
Jim (he/him)	33	Anglican priest, involved in faith-based community organising

3.3 Codes and concepts

3.3.1 Data sources

My primary data came from the interview recordings and transcriptions and notes taken on my phone into a Google Doc during my participant observation in both case studies; each of the institutions had a different document, in which I specified the date and event, and added notes from what was happening, conversations that I hear or was part of, direct quotes from participants, main discussion themes and my immediate thoughts on what I was experiencing. The secondary data for the case studies came from the institutions' websites, social media profiles, and Whatsapp chats. I screenshot some particularly interesting or relevant conversations or shared photos and added them to their respective Google Doc file for easier access. There was some secondary data from individual interviewees as well in the form of public information from workplaces, religious affiliations or networks mentioned.

3.3.2 Open coding and emergence of concepts

While the fieldwork was still ongoing and I was still in the process of identifying participants and conducting their interviews, I would passively go through the data in more loose terms, in a separate document where I added general notes and began analysing all of the data sources. I started doing open thematic and pattern coding (Price and Smith, 2021), grouping together overarching narratives and specific themes that came up in multiple interviews. Concepts naturally started forming as I gathered more data. I then moved on to my fieldwork notes, following the same process.

After I was satisfied with the amount of interviews and time spent in each institution, confident that data saturation had been achieved, I started working systematically on open

coding, the interpretive process of analytically breaking down the data (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). My analysis relied on the use of comparisons between different data for the identification of similarities and differences. The process of comparing codes ensured that I would guard against bias and consistency, as I was challenging concepts with new data and ensuring that concepts resulted from patterns in the data (Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

I went back to all of the interview transcripts and notes taken from the case studies and labelled them on the documents, highlighting the relevant information and conceptualising the raw data. I then went back to those labels and my original general notes from the time of the fieldwork and withdrew all of the themes that emerged into a new document, codifying them into final concepts.

At this point, several notes and quotes I had highlighted were compressed into one code that encompassed the general idea of those notes. For example, several interviewees expressed their discomfort with the idea of proselytising in various contexts, and I had also noted that both VRC and CAYG did not have religious conversion as a goal at all. Proselytising was never mentioned throughout my participant observation in either case study. Instead, the ideas of renewal and striving for all expressions of life and individuality to thrive were regularly talked about a lot in relation to participants' motivations and end goals. For my axial coding, this became "evangelism as all-encompassing renewal" and "celebration of the fullness of life". A more direct translation into a code is "community organising", which was clearly pulled from the case studies and from several interviewees talking about being involved in community organising, both directly through their faith communities and in secular grassroots involvements.

3.3.3 Axial coding

Once I had exhausted the possibilities to extract themes from the data and had my concepts defined, I moved on to a process of axial coding, in which I related the data from multiple sources, revealing further codes, categories and subcategories grounded in the participants' accounts and their lived practises observed through the case studies (Simmons, 2017).

I initially added the codes into a thematic mind map, grouping them into categories. The thematic mind map was eventually adapted into the final chapters and subheadings present in this thesis, as it made sense to further group codes together into one narrative approach. One interesting result from the process of expanding on the codes and themes into the following chapters is that they naturally appeared as a narrative journey that individuals take in their lives from their religious formation into Radical Christianity, the foundations of their current religiosity and how these people make themselves present in civil society.

As a consequence of this storytelling, in which each section is the natural continuation of the former, there are some overlaps in the typology of the sections at times. The process of weaving through lines of inquiry and the themes that the participants themselves brought to me allows for a richly saturated understanding of Radical Christianity and the processes that Radical Christians go through in arriving at it. The similarity between some of the sections that made up the final analyses chapters also reflects the fact that the data emanating from the case studies and interviews shows people who are incredibly passionate about specific issues and that have arrived at them through very similar trajectories, with little deviation from the main points I will be continuously returning to.

The table below shows the resulting themes that make up Radical Christianity, which will also be the following chapter headings and subheadings.

Table 2: Radical Christian Journey

Radical Christian Journey		
Cognitive dissonance	Faith Deconstruction	Faith Reconstruction

Table 3: Radical Christian Foundations

Radical Christian Foundations			
Optimistic Materialism	Christocentric lens	Life affirming theology	Hopeful realism
Radical hospitality	Healing religious trauma	Safe spaces/microcosms of inclusion	Anti-tribalism
Prophetic action	Community organising	The church as an agent of change	Speaking truth to power
Theopraxis	Religiopolitical ideology	Dissident Discipleship	Political theology

Table 4: Radical Christian Networks

Radical Christian Networks			
Network Roots	**Radical Christian Queerness**	**Generational specificities**	**Spatially grounded and dispersed models**

Radical reimagining of things	**Radical Christian presence**	In church life	In direct action

4. Radical Christian Journey

This chapter describes the general life journey that Radical Christians go through in finding their faith expression, establishing how it dialogues with their personal identities, values and disposition as actors in their communities within civil society. Initially, the concepts explored in this section seemed to be overarching categories that appeared as a canopy for the Radical Christian experience, but it soon became clear that the all-encompassing nature of this section was due to it being almost a universal occurrence for these people, as they personally began understanding themselves as something other than what is traditionally expected of cultural Christians in Britain.

These individuals' journeys take on a linear progression in this chapter mainly because that is the way that most interviewees described them, so I want to remain faithful to the way they explained their lived experiences in their own terms. It should also be noted that there are elements of synchronicity in these narratives, meaning that individual participants may have later interpreted isolated phenomena and events in their lives as connected in order to form their own justifications for how their faith developed overtime.

Naturally, not all journeys I reconstructed had the exact same progression. However, the analysis of the next sections shows the overarching narrative that Radical Christians adopt in their lives when it comes to their identitarian formations. This narrative account is a good starting point especially for readers who are not familiar with Christian traditions such as liberation theology and the more recent ECM, which are foundational for most people who participated in this study.

Most interviewees were brought up in a Christian household, mainly in Anglican churches, but Protestant, Pentecostal and Catholic traditions were also represented. Their familial religious formation largely follows what would be expected in relation to cultural backgrounds and census data, with the majority of British participants coming from an Anglican background and their families presenting varying degrees of involvement in church life.

Interestingly, although there were several participants who explained that their family was not overtly religious throughout their childhoods, they all either would mark "Christian" on a census and perhaps go to church at Christmas. For some participants, there was one family member - either a parent or grandparent - who did have a stronger personal religiosity.

The fact that the people who today would fall into the category of a Radical Christian (participants in this research and people who I have encountered via the case studies and further research into the landscape of Radical Christian networks) come from Christian backgrounds is in itself worthy of analysis. As mentioned, the vast majority of participants (as well as people I encountered through my participant observation) were brought up by at least one Christian parent or parent figure.

Two further considerations stem from this familial background: firstly, it is understandable that religion is present in people's formative worldviews, and that it may be carried on to further expressions of activism and belonging as these individuals seek community as adults. Radical Christians, generally, decide to hold onto their Christian identity as they develop other aspects of who they are and what they care about that need to dialogue with their religious formation. Secondly, as the participants in this research were found mostly via faith-based institutions and networks or from being referred to by other religious actors, they naturally come from this religious milieu and have religion as a motivator and important self-identifier in their adult lives. However, this research will show that this is not a matter of conformity or normativity, but of an identity rooted in Christianity and the subsequent subversion of the status quo.

The journeys that will be drawn out here show an important process of coming to oneself as a political actor and the development of networks that are directly guided by religious motivations in what they believe in and how they seek to achieve their end goals. For Radical Christians, their religious expression is not a box that is ticked on a census research, but it is the core of who they are, often differently from their parents' relationship with religion. For them, this is not a matter of transforming and shaping religion to fit into their worldviews, but of living out an authentic religious experience.

It is also important to consider that these people might not have found their identities in Christianity had they not had that previous cultural formation in it - however much they built upon and conceptually challenged what Christianity even means from their formative years to now. Christianity *is* the normative religion in Britain, but often participants made sure to inform me that they had a conversion experience at a later point in life. By this they mean that although their upbringing was at least loosely Christian, they did not "become a Christian" until they decided to do so as fully formed individuals, in their own terms. The following is the typical life journey of the Radical Christian living in London today, told by these individuals themselves.

4.1 Awareness of cognitive dissonance in religious environments

There were a few participants in this research who were always immersed in progressive church environments that encouraged questioning and whose social initiatives considered the root of the issues they were addressing, with some of them noting that the first time they actually were confronted with more culturally conservative expressions of religion was when they entered university and tried to connect with Christian unions.

There are, also, people who explained a more seamless process in their faith formation despite coming from conservative backgrounds. This might be due to a lack of personal feelings of being attacked or rejected by their religious communities due to their personal identifiers (as

someone who “fits" into a normative identity of whiteness, heterosexuality or gender) or even a disinterest in dissecting this process of coming into one’s own faith identity. This process can be quite painful to deal with, as it entails recognising one’s own oppression by their family and wider community. In this case, not speaking outwardly about the process of cognitive dissonance and religious deconstruction might be a way of protecting oneself and one’s community from scrutiny. For both of these groups, the journey into a Radical Christian identity was smoother than for others who had to undergo a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of their faith.

The more common Radical Christian faith journey is often marked by cognitive dissonance and consequently suspicion of authority and hierarchy within the church. Virtually all of the queer[11] and female-presenting interviewees verbally expressed feeling excluded from their churches at some point, which became a formative experience in how they found their place in religious communities and how their faith progressed.

Another important marker here is of people coming into contact with more diverse communities and ways of living through their experiences of going to university or moving to bigger cities from the small towns in which they grew up. For people who were not immediately confronted with feeling othered by their original faith communities, this is the point in their lives where they first come to the crossroads of deciding that there might be other valid ways of experiencing religious belief and more generally of living one’s life outside of their homogenous groups. Whether they originally moved to a global city in search of this type of diverse community, or had their worldviews changed because of their new geographic location, participants in this research pointed to the fact that, for them, it would be impossible to retain a limited, culturally conservative worldview and strict religious expression after having broadened their horizons and found beauty in different lived experiences. This is either fuel or further confirmation for their preexisting cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance is defined as a state in which there is a difference between your experiences or behaviour and your beliefs about what is true.[12] “The unease or tension that the conflict arouses in people is relieved by one of several defensive manoeuvres: they reject, explain away, or avoid the new information; persuade themselves that no conflict really exists; reconcile the differences; or resort to any other defensive means of preserving stability or order in their conceptions of the world and of themselves.”[13]

[11] I will use the term “queer” as an adjective for non-normative identity or lived experience, mainly as it regards to sex, gender, sexuality and its expressions. There is more to be said about “queerness” in theology and lived experiences of faith, and I will return to this discourse later in the research.
[12] Definition of cognitive dissonance from the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus* © Cambridge University Press.
[13] Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "cognitive dissonance". Encyclopedia Britannica, 6 Oct. 2022.

For Radical Christians, their cognitive dissonance stems from the gradual process of finding that their church community - or a wider religious structure - is not representative of their understanding of what Christianity is (or should be) about. This typically starts taking place quite early on, often during teachings in the church itself, and later as the individual begins being in contact with external influences and knowledge that validates their feelings.

These individuals find that their (or their families') religion is based on a philosophy of radical acceptance and inclusion of marginalised groups and of resistance to "empire building", which is a term that I will use, along with "empire", throughout this text to represent the unjust power structures that prevent grassroots efforts for socioeconomic and climate justice from thriving. This can refer either to religious or secular (governmental) structures, both historically and as the prevailing decision makers and keepers of the status quo contemporarily.

"Empire" and its derivative terms "empire building" and "resisting empire" were consistently used at VRC's sermons and, likely as a consequence, by its members in discussions and conversation. I add here "speaking truth to power", which was more consistently used by interviewees outside of the VRC community. These terms are traditionally used in theologies that see an overarching narrative of political liberation and resistance against power structures in the biblical texts. They can be traced back to the early Christian Church, but they had a more recent re-emergence in Liberation Theology as a whole and in theologies of the global north that focus on a sociopolitical interpretation.

Walter Brueggemann, for example, introduced these concepts in *The Prophetic Imagination* (1978). He explored situating prophetic texts within the interplay of social forces in conflict over the correct characterisation of social reality, thus bringing the texts into close contact with the social processes in which they are embedded and which the texts themselves may have contributed (Brueggemann, 1978, preface to the revised edition). He defended the idea that prophetic faith proclaims the end of both imperial religion and politics, being not only a message of social liberation but of liberation for God itself, so that a politics of justice begets a religion of God's freedom (Brueggemann, 1978, pp. 7-8).

At the same time that these individuals begin understanding Christianity as an anti-empire religion - often in their formative teenage years and as young adults - they also find that their religious community itself does not act according to the philosophy that is being taught in the Bible (understood in the above terms), and often reproduce culturally conservative morals whilst serving to maintain unjust power structures.

Andy, 27, was born in Botswana, but grew up across Kenya, Ivory Coast, the United States and the United Kingdom. They explain really well the process of realising the contradictions found in the churches they attended growing up. They said that as a child they were very inquisitive and would ask a lot of questions at Sunday School, but were quickly "shut down" by the teachers. Andy began to question their gender identity from an early age, and

recalled that no one could give them a satisfactory answer as to why they needed to live with the contradictions that were being taught. However, Andy found that some of the first Sunday School lessons they heard actually supported their identity:

> The first was that Jesus loved minorities, aligned himself with them, spent a lot of time with them. And the second was that to understand God, you had to have the faith of a child (...). And so I think I latched on to those two things as a child very strongly. (...) If anything that seemed to contradict this idea of Jesus loving minorities, being aligned with them, I would just sort of say, “well, that must be something that grown-ups have come up with. That's actually further from God, so I don't need to pay attention to that”. (...) Those are the main reasons that I identify for why I was able to hold on to this faith in the face of various contradictions as a kid but was always open to the idea that I might be wrong, there might not be a God.

The concept of “Jesus loving minorities” was not taught to Andy in those words, but they understood that as a fact from the Bible stories that were taught. They used Jesus’ relationship with Mary Magdalene as an example: “So Jesus loved Mary Magdalene, who was a sex worker. I actually can't remember how they described her to us as children, but I knew that Mary Magdalene was the sort of woman that people wouldn't want to spend time with.” That being said, the churches that they grew up in “would not necessarily align themselves actively with minorities”.

> There was a disconnect. There was Jesus and, yeah, Jesus aligns himself with minorities. This is part of who Jesus is. That didn't necessarily translate into what I saw the church doing. It would do stuff like, you know, engage in charity. We would raise money, we'd get donations and stuff for the poor. But the church didn't have a political standpoint of any kind. It didn't see its charity as political or just saw its charity as the thing the churches do.

Toby is 23 years old, he was brought up in Birmingham in a Catholic church and now works for an Anglican eco-church in South London. He also struggled with his relationship with religion and, like Andy, left his faith aside for a few years not due to questioning faith itself, but because of a distrust for the institution:

> I was super devout as a little child, I was a server and everything. Then, as I went into secondary school, I felt like the Catechesis and the teaching and theology didn't grow at the same rate as my understanding of the world. Because of that tension, that disconnection between the two, I felt that faith wasn't helpful or true or anything. So I lost my faith completely during secondary school. (...) I think I've just been taught, you know, (...) this is the way the world is, a very simplistic, moralistic, “good things happen when you do good things, bad things happen when you do bad things”.

Toby explained that he left the church for several years, and in his final year of school began studying and trying to understand the Christian faith on his own terms, also finding wisdom in Eastern philosophies, namely Hinduism and Buddhism. He began finding religion as a way to build strong relationships, and by the time he started going to university, after a gap year, he had a “much richer, more abstracted, more metaphorical understanding of faith”.

Martin, the pastor of Victoria Road Church, grew up in “a household where Christian values of honesty, justice and generosity were *lived* rather than the religious aspect of faith”. He was encouraged to go to church as a young child, “but actually didn't really understand much of the stories of it, which is quite the reverse of some Christian households”. When he was around 14 or 15 he stopped attending church altogether, and only converted to Christianity at 18 years old, via a friend from a “very strict, narrow, Brethren church”:

> I suppose I was disciplined into a very narrow worldview of what Christianity was (...), and I was innately suspicious of it. It just seemed weird, you know, women not being able to talk, women going along and having to wear a hat in a prayer meeting. Very narrow understanding of what salvation is. Having a commitment to the Bible, which, as an ancient document, was so strange to be so committed to something like that. And at the time I sort of took it on board, but actually I was both curious and suspicious that that wasn't the total of what this amazing faith that I’d encountered was meant to be. (...) And so when I got exposed to other churches, I realised that actually that was just bull… and almost angry about that. I just sort of thought, well, this is, I've been sold a little bit of a lie here.

I was told several similar stories of people feeling disappointed and frustrated with church structures not in opposition to religion, but because of their faith and the belief that there was something wrong in how things were being done. Although the Radical Christian is able to differentiate the structures of oppression they encountered and a genuine Christian faith and eventually find communities where they felt secure and supported, this process leads to a general suspicion of church hierarchy that doesn’t disappear fully over time.

Frances, 34, demonstrates this development in her faith journey. She was born and has family in South Africa, but later moved to and grew up in Salisbury, UK, where she complains that the faith that was available was highly conservative in cultural terms, which she never identified with and did not want to be a part of. However, she kept in the back of her mind a desire to live a Christ-like life and not being able to find the faith expressions she was after. At 19 years old, she found a Quaker community that resonated with her, being drawn by their historical relation to prison abolition and environmentalist movements. To Frances, “the position of the Christian sort of agitator, as an outsider was very important. (...) But coming back to faith, being able to hold institutions to account while kind of pursuing something that was very deeply felt.”

The realisation that the communities they were brought up in are not fully accepting of differing identities and are enablers of power structures is a paradigm shifting point in one's life which can, in many instances, lead to an outright rejection of religion. However, the key difference in the Radical Christian journey is their recognition of a different religious narrative altogether, which they ultimately identify with and want to pursue.

4.2 Faith deconstruction

Several participants spoke about becoming disinterested in being involved with churches because of off putting behaviour and feeling unwelcome due to a perceived hierarchy inside of the institution. This kept them from exploring their faith in collective settings for extended periods of time, until they found communities that matched their values and priorities.

Faith deconstruction is a term which was popularised in the 2010s to explain the phenomenon of new Christian narratives that were emerging from the 2000s. In the context of the United States, this is associated with the ECM, but it can be seen in a variety of international contexts. The term is normatively understood and used by religious individuals who have bridged their cognitive dissonance and reached the other side of faith. Some key works that explore these emerging narratives are *The Deconstructed Church* (2014) by Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, in both USA and United Kingdom contexts, and James Bielo's *Emerging Evangelicals* (2011), in the American context.

More broadly, Bielo identifies that the Emerging Church deconstruction is not meant to be understood as a loss of religion, but an intensification of religious identity based on an intellectual and moral critique of an existing religious faith, as the individual is eager to authentically live out their faith. Katherine Sarah Moody and Randall W. Reed identified Emerging Christianity and this shift in religious identity as a particularly Millennial phenomenon - I will later show that, as Generation Z reached adulthood in the last few years, they have followed a similar trajectory - as they seem to "feel a particularly strong affinity for Emerging Christian stories of disillusionment, disaffiliation, deconstruction, and deconversion" (Moody and Reed, 2017, p. 35).

The Emerging Christian deconstruction, however, is not necessarily away from Christianity, and it does not necessarily call for the rejection of a specific denomination. It follows from key values structuring an intensification of Christian identity around communities - which can be outside of liturgical spaces - that support said values (Moody and Reed, 2017). The Radical Christian journey continues to follow a similar pattern of the Emerging Christian narrative, but it lands on a decisively political place, as faith is reconstructed around collective progressive action in the public square. I will demonstrate in the following chapters that Radical

Christianity represents a move away from a privatised expression of Christianity that still permeates the ECM.

In this sense, the Radical Christian deconstruction process walks alongside a project of decolonisation of Christianity as they are particularly interested in a political theology. Reflecting back on Radical Christianity as an anti-empire religion, the people I spoke with are conscious of their faith having been historically used to systematically oppress marginalised communities, which goes completely against what they believe their faith to be about. Therefore, one of the aims of Radical Christians is to reflect on the damage made by religious structures and move forward as communities of faith that are focused on elevating marginalised voices and fighting against structures of oppression, whether religious or secular.

This is linked to decolonisation studies more broadly and liberation theologies, especially black theology. I explored in my literature review some of the key names in these movement, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff in Latin America, and James Cone and Delores Williams in the USA, who proceeded to inspire further international research and the application of decolonisation in theology in different contexts.

While many participants in this research did not reference these theologies directly (with the expected exception of the participants who are directly involved in academia or political action), their narratives clearly mirror the concerns of these theologies. One can see Anthony G Reddie's concern with participation of marginalised communities in practical theology and the role of black theology today (Reddie, 2008, 2010 and 2020), or Kwok Pui-lan's deconstruction of a rhetoric of empire, calling for European Christians to reflect on the history of colonisation via religion and be open to a multicultural Christianity (Kwok, 2005 and 2021), in Radical Christian discourse. It is noticeable by the references listed above that these are discourses that have been evolving since twentieth century's liberation theology, continuing analyses based on contemporary experiences of marginalised communities and recent sociopolitical shifts, where I argue that Radical Christianity sits.

Jack, a 31 year old member of Victoria Road Church, explained his process of deconstruction eloquently when I asked him about his relationship with organised religion. He converted in a Pentecostal church via an Alpha course when he was 14, around the same time he began questioning his sexuality (which was not at all encouraged in the church he was in). That meant he had to go deeper into his faith and unpack his beliefs in order to bring together the two universes he was existing in.

> So actually in the faith at that time there was a right and wrong, everything was quite sort of black and white. Really, the things that mattered were seeking revival and revival meant more people coming to know Jesus and turning away from a life of sin. It was quite heavily moral based faith. (...) I then navigated away from that to do almost what we might now call deconstruction around that. It wasn't necessarily about the experience

> of the moment or the kind of hype of this, the synth in the background. But actually there were things that mattered more, like justice, that worship was more holistic, it wasn't just at church on Sunday.

He went on to tell me that he understands that he was in a continuous process of deconstructing his faith, even if he wouldn't have called it that at the time, especially when he realised that his sexuality did not fit into a "conservative, moral narrative of what the ideal Christian should be". There was always a level of suspicion of what was being said at the pulpit, and an awareness not to take any information in without questioning it.

Each participant's deconstruction journey varied based on their personal experiences. In the case of participants who personally experienced overt exclusion or prejudice in religious spaces, they tended to speak more about their personal trauma (which most of the queer, black or female participants raised in their interviews). Consequently, the narratives surrounding their faith deconstruction and reconstruction come from holding onto belief despite their experiences and wanting to build religious spaces that would be healing not just for themselves but to others. For other participants who either did not previously belong to exclusionist churches or did not themselves experience exclusion based on their identities, interestingly the feeling remains the same. Through their interaction with others outside of the church, their observation of their sociological context and theological formation still led them to a place of wanting to protect those who might have been marginalised.

In his interview, Martin talked about how Victoria Road Church "surprisingly" started to receive a wave of people mostly in their twenties and thirties in the last five years who had been going through processes of deconstructing their faith, many of which had been previously harmed by religion, looking for a safe space to live their faith in community. This was exactly the case with Jack, who wanted to find an inclusive church after moving to London, and began emailing pastors of local churches explaining that he was a gay Christian man who wanted to find a faith community that would fully accept him without restrictions (he now regularly preaches and leads reflections in VRC).

I was able to accompany this intentional act of inclusion and establishment of a space for questioning and deconstruction becoming a focus in the church, in the way Martin dedicates most of his sermons to dismantling harmful interpretations of the Bible and turning to a message of speaking truth to power, also in the way that the leadership is decentralised and how members feel very comfortable sharing their opinions and doubts.

As people who had been harmed by previous churches and who were in the process of deconstructing their faith but still wanted to be a part of a religious community found VRC, VRC itself started to cater to and do its best to participate in healing these people. While this was an intentional process, there had always been an underlying subversive quality of deconstruction

at the core of the church. If that was not the case, these people would not have gravitated towards the church as a safe space in their journey. Martin spoke about this below:

> I think over the last five years we've had people come to church deliberately because they've read stuff online or other people have recommended us, that they're searching, they're hungry for a different way of articulating their faith. That they've been brought up in such a way, mostly within the evangelical tradition, which is not doing anything for them anymore and that there's either been trauma, there's been either injustices or theological positions which just seem strange, but they haven't been able to articulate what that is, they haven't had the resources or the teaching or access to the materials, books… that they're able to put their finger on.

This highlights the importance of the local church as a safe space and agent of change, which is an overarching theme that was quickly established. Most interviewees touched on this, especially the ones involved in collective transformative actions and community organising. I will go into further detail on the various aspects of action in the local church in a section titled "Prophetic Action".

4.3 Faith reconstruction

The final step of faith reconstruction is crucial in the journey into Radical Christianity, because this is the point in the crossroads where an individual actively decides that their faith is intrinsic to who they are and what they believe in. When religiosity is reclaimed as a transformative ideology, the individual is free to fully live out their faith as an essential part of their being in the world.

After deconstruction, understandably many people might choose to not return to religion at all, proceeding their lives as non-religious individuals. The Radical Christian, however, chooses to stay (albeit in varying degrees of institutional involvement). There are myriad reasons and factors which make these individuals fight through their cognitive dissonance and deconstruction and decide to reclaim their faith and space in a religious community. Any individual might give one of the explanations below, or a combination of them, as the reason why it was important for them to reconstruct their faith. There is also not necessarily a recognisable "why" for them - their identity as a Christian is just a given, something which has evolved with their circumstances but was never debatable as an essential part of who they are.

The first formational reason that leads an individual to insist on the reconstruction of their identity as a Christian is a personal salvific story. This relates to the aforementioned moment of "becoming a Christian". It is normally a specific moment in one's life in which they have a personal spiritual encounter with God which becomes a cornerstone for their faith, and what is understood as a conversion story. Since having had this personal encounter, this

experience becomes a formative part of a person's identity, with their reality and how they proceed in their life choices being shaped by it. This is a very personal experience that is difficult to explain to outsiders, as it touches on one's psyche and connection with the divine, and is formative to one's beliefs. This type of religious formation creates a strong bond with spirituality, and becomes a motivator for the individual to proceed in their faith, and finding the space to do so. For the Radical Christian, this means seeking (or creating) faith-based communities that they feel safe in and that reflect their beliefs, because a severance from religious community altogether would mean a painful severance from their spiritual identity.

Differing from this more intense spiritual formation, other people might choose to reclaim Christianity because they more broadly identify with the aspect of participating in a religious community for the aspect of collective integration and action. Religious communities usually have quite a unique characteristic of bringing together people from very different backgrounds, lifestyles, ages and points of view which one doesn't typically find in other types of social environments or groups that are brought together by a shared interest or activity, for example in a sports team, a social club, a university or academic group.

This aspect of Radical Christian identity interacts with the discourse on faith as social capital that has the capacity to build strong communities in their contribution to the public sphere - more so on religious groups' resistance to appropriation by neoliberal governments. As the discourse on the role of religious actors in the public sphere and as producers of space continued to develop in the last couple of decades, a particular characteristic of religious solidarity has also been co-opted into social capital (Dinham, 2006, 2012 and 2015).

Radical Christians are decisively political actors, so community building in these spaces takes on a weight of advocacy, community organising and resistance. Therefore, analysing these communities' religious gatherings solely in terms of social capital, ignoring their truth claims and religious experiences would be reductionist (Ager and Ager, 2011). Moreover, it misrepresents the motivation behind the social action that these groups perform, which is anti-establishment and demands political reform.

Relating to the above assertion, the final aspect of Radical Christians' reconstruction of faith, religious identity and collective experience is their underlying belief in Christianity as a valid and effective form of political resistance and action. The church - or more broadly the religious community - format has the potential to be a place of resistance to the pressures and injustices of an and unequal political system as a space where everyone is welcome and every person is made equal at least within the safety of that community. This is felt particularly in a city like London, where racial and economic power relations are seen and felt on a daily basis. Consequently, private citizens can feel empowered by participating in a community that levels out these differences and provides a safe haven, and by coming together with people who share their feelings about what is systematically wrong in their society creates the necessary

conditions needed to ignite outward collective action. This research will follow up on these aspects of Radical Christian formation (internal resistance and external action) more closely than the other two mentioned previously, as the unique and systematic markers of the Radical Christian identity and experience.

4.3.1 Institutional conversion

As Radical Christians reclaim their faith and religious communities, they bring with them a paradigm shift in the culture of religious communities that begins internally and is naturally expanded into outward action. There is a prevalent atmosphere of lightness and joy in how Radical Christian communities communicate and organise, both in terms of format and content, which I identify as being a conscious effort to subvert expectations of what a religious environment should look and feel like, as well as to separate themselves from their own previous experiences within the more traditional settings that they have left behind.

Rather than a formal institutional restructuring, this collective conversion process happens organically (but with constant self-reflection) as these individuals rebuild their communities around the core values of acceptance, hospitality, and centering marginalised voices. The result tends to be religious institutions that are freed from negative or exclusionist religious narratives, choosing to highlight a positive and transformational identity.

During my participation in the activities of Victoria Road Church and Climate Action Youth Group I noticed how the organisers and members of these groups tried to keep a positive language and approach, even when dealing with very serious topics. This contrasts with the intensity of their feelings towards societal injustices and eagerness to act towards change. Radical Christianity, thus, seems to keep its motivation and strength through building joyful communities that will sustain their collective action and movements through life.

Anyone who has visited VRC more than once will be used to hearing whoever is speaking on the pulpit cracking jokes about the pastor, other members of the congregation, how the sermon might be a little bit heretical, or the way that something always goes wrong during worship. Martin told me in his interview that he thinks of going to church on Sundays as going to “hang out with his mates”, and this is definitely the environment that surrounds the congregation.

Solemn moments are often brightened up with laughter, creative interpretations and subversion of expectations. For example, the communion, which happens once per month and is led by whoever is leading the worship portion of the meeting, often has a non-traditional twist. Once, the communion elements (usually bread and individual grapes) were replaced by flying saucer sweets, after a reflection of the bittersweetness of what that moment represents. During lockdown, when the sermons were done online, they would remind the members when it was

communion so everyone had something to eat and drink - a message on Whatsapp from Martin read "we are going to have communion, so you'll need to have some bread/grapes/wine/blackcurrant juice/coffee/red bull to hand".

Another example was the time VRC held two baptisms during their yearly weekend away meeting. They found a pond near the hotel where they were staying and had secured permission to have the baptisms there. We heard a deep sermon about baptism being freed from the oppressions of empire, following a trend at VRC of framing Christian doctrine as representations of physical liberation and recovering a collective framework of traditions that are often viewed in an individualised lens. However, there were also jokes about tying up the people being baptised so they wouldn't be swept away to the sea.

Similarly, CAYG's online meetings had a very light atmosphere, with small talk and jokes spread around serious conversations about their campaigns. When they were planning the launch event for their latest campaign, they were very mindful to keep the tone palatable, so as to not be intimidating for young people who may be just beginning to engage with climate action.

Both institutions were very mindful of democratising and being inclusive with both theological and political language, while participants often showed in their own lives how they used creative language to explain their faith and how they understand God and Christianity. A simple example is playing with gender and different metaphors when speaking about God that work for a more comprehensive understanding of God beyond traditional Western Christian imagery, and to further include people into conversations about the divine, inviting people to relate to God in more productive ways. Emily, a 32 year old interviewee, synthesised this well when I asked her about her personal understanding of who or what God is:

> If I were to summarise that I really think God is love and definitely a being that's beyond our comprehension of time and space and all the other little things like gender and that kind of thing. Somebody also said something interesting about the Holy Spirit being like a motherly figure, and I really like that not just because it challenges a little bit what we always think about God like "ohh, it's a *he* immediately", but it is more the fact that it's more comprehensive. When you think of a mother you think of something different than… a white male, do you know what I mean? It expands their understanding of God.

The process of faith reconstruction might start from a place of psychological confusion, as these individuals are confronted with a difference between what they personally believe in and how religion is presented to them. However, throughout this study they have shown certainty in how they choose to rebuild the structures around them. Once they reach home after their journey, they have the freedom to fully express what they believe in and how they believe in it in these Radical Christian spaces. This resolves in a creative tension instead of an overwhelming or contradictory one. People like Emily are now comfortable with the certainty of

declaring that “God is love” around a community that practises this in the same way as her, at the same time being blissfully perplexed about what this means.

There is a lot to be said still about the content and format of Radical Christianity, which will be explored in more detail in the next chapters. This section has handled the general themes of lightness and joy in how Radical Christians choose to reshape their faith after deconstruction, and the simplicity in which they understand it.

During my interviews and case studies, it became clear that these individuals are not a monolith, nor are they absolutely certain of how to reach their intended goals in practical terms, but they do show a strong sense of their own identities as Christians, and what a Christian community should feel like: a place of rest and inclusion, which encourages questioning and growing in one’s faith journey. This is deeply felt in the context of urban society, with the church becoming a place of assembly and meaning making, which will produce citizenship as Radical Christians begin building upon their foundations.

4.3.2 External action

Turning to the external side of what reconstructed Radical Christianity looks like, the participants of this research view very plainly that their actions - whether that’s community organising, policy work, activism, etc. - are the genuine expression of their faith, which is grounded in a radical love for humanity. Our conversations always came back to them understanding Christianity as a radical stance to defend the equality of all life, and Christian values as inclusion, justice and love that is transcendent of religious barriers. This outward, radical love reaches beyond the walls of the church with no expectation of bringing people in, but with the expectation of delivering hope to the wider community.

This output dialogues with David Harvey’s conception for an active and productive geography, as these Radical Christians (now gathered in clusters) start consciously organising to mitigate the injustices they see in their wider communities and contributing to ongoing efforts to tackle the root causes of these issues. This is an essential part of how Radical Christianity is formed and felt in the city. As these actors build their networks, they seek outward expansion as serious participants in the active grassroots power struggles against socio-spatial inequalities and oppressive institutional arrangements.

Radical Christians seem to occupy liminal spaces between insider and outsider, private networks and public action, speaking both religious and secular languages. Especially for the younger people, who are still finding their voice and platform, it can be difficult to fully grasp the space that they see themselves inhabiting as political actors. However, it is clear that they want to use their positionality to influence the power structures in the city. Taking on motivation from their religious beliefs and inspiration from both faith-based and secular movements, they are

able to enact their faith in direct action, making activism accessible and normative in religious structures.

In line with what I covered in my literature review regarding the dialogue between faith-based and secular urban activity that has been growing in the last two decades, I believe that the way in which Radical Christians act can bridge some of the disconnect between these stances. The presence of Radical Christianity can take on many forms, which I will look into more closely in upcoming sections. Conceptually, they are taking on a collectivist understanding of what their religion is about. At this stage, the Radical Christian faith is fully constructed as a political formation that has an impact on the dynamics of the city.

5. Radical Christian Foundations

Having completed an overview of the journey taken by Radical Christians in order to get to their collective identities, I will begin interpreting in more detail the unifying traits of this expression of faith. I identified four overarching themes that are the core of Radical Christianity, thus being called "foundations": optimistic materialism, radical hospitality, prophetic action and theopraxis. I further divided these themes into specific features that encapsulate aspects that kept appearing throughout this research, or expressions that kept being referred to by participants.

5.1 Optimistic Materialism

The first theme identified from the data analysis can be described as an "optimistic materialism", a core characteristic that could be seen throughout most interviews and in both case studies. I am using this term based on Marxist concept of historical materialism. In the preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1904), Marx explains that "the mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness" (Marx, 1904, pp. 11-12). Therefore, human consciousness and being in the world derives from the material base of society. As further explained by Engels, "according to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life" (Engels, 1978, pp. 760-761).

By claiming that Radical Christianity follows an optimistic materialist structure, I mean that Radical Christians tend to hold this worldview when they expand on their values, interpretations of biblical eschatology and what they are trying to accomplish with their actions. Their concerns are with man-made economic, political and religious systems deemed oppressive. It follows that the actions needed to repair those systems are also to be resolved by humanity - the solutions already exist in the world, or are at least in the process of formation. Therefore, "evil" in their eyes is not a transcendental concept, but something that has been developed in society and therefore must be resolved socially. Their religious foundations, on the other hand, give them the optimism to seek these solutions, and the assurance that they are working towards an objective and universal good.

I explored aspects of this more broadly in my literature review, under "religion as performative praxis", highlighting social scientists like Justin Beaumont, Paul Cloke, and Andrew Williams, who have been working at the intersections between human geography, social justice, critical theory and postsecularity, exposing the relationships between welfare,

care, religion and neoliberalism. My interpretation of these interwoven relationships and the positionality of the participants in this research is that religion permeates their praxis as both a foundational reason for their political participation and the fuel that keeps them engaged in this work.

As their political philosophies tend to be influenced by historical materialism, particularly Marxist ideologies, the participants in this research naturally read the Bible and interpret Christianity in those terms. However, an interesting juxtaposition or perhaps contradiction that happens in this process is that they hang onto a religious idealism in doing so. While their theologies are centred around material interactions and often an existentialist outlook, they comfortably place their religion in this framework. Ultimately, Radical Christianity's optimistic materialism is a protest against a false division between spiritual and material in mainstream Western Christianity, which I will show through the actions and discourses of Radical Christians who participated in this research.

The term optimistic materialism was not used by the participants, and most of them did not spontaneously identify as having a materialist or existentialist worldview. Interestingly, however, interviewees with a more academic background did either identify as Marxists or mention theological traditions and Biblical interpretations that fall under this umbrella, for example a particular identification with liberation theology and universalism. The following sections will show how optimistic materialism is a pillar for the Radical Christian's interpretations of Christology, evangelism, stewardship and Creation.

5.1.1 Christocentric lens

There is a unifying Christocentric lens in the narratives I heard from participants, in the sense that their theology and actions are centred around the image of Jesus in the Gospels above anything else. This was seen in several of the participants' responses to my interview questions, but also very directly in Victoria Road Church's sermons and the members' ethos of reading and understanding the Bible through a Christological hermeneutic.

At the same time, their Christocentric lens, aligned with transformational politics, incites a focus on Jesus' life and ministry as shown in the Gospels over his death and resurrection. I believe there are two reasons for this emphasis: the Radical Christian's eagerness to act for and see political change happening in their lifetime, and a disinterest in immaterial, spiritual conversations of Christian eschatology related to individual salvation. They are passionate about the difficulties that marginalised communities face in our society and the challenges ahead of them in order to make systemic changes, so these are their priorities equally as individuals and as Christians (I will expand on the mutuality between their political and religious formations in a later section of this chapter).

Whenever we started talking about their passions and where they choose to focus their energy, the interviewees had a clear line of reasoning of "I am a Christian, therefore I am called to care about and fight for radical equity". Interestingly, for most people it was difficult or impossible to even distinguish what came about first, their faith or their politics; one is the obvious extension of the other.

Even some people who had been involved in secular activism later had the realisation that their political values and their faith were one and the same, as they tried to connect further with their faith. Andy, mentioned above, describes this process below. They had a long period of distancing from religion in their adolescence due to the complicated colonialist history of Christianity, which was a major point of issue with them as an African. During university, they were a part of several secular political organising groups, noting how they had no interest in the conservative Christian collectives that were available at the time.

> Christianity was used to dehumanise us but Christianity also tells us that we're human. And so that was how I'd kind of sit. I was sort of content with that contradiction as long as it fuelled political action. (...) Again, fundamentally, just because I believed it to be true. (...) As I, again, got older, I started to think more about on a personal level how much my political commitments might be shaped by my faith. In the sense of understanding that all these commitments to justice that I developed in secular spaces were quite strongly aligned with what I knew about Jesus' ministry. And so I started, maybe to myself, to concede that part of the reason that I'm doing this is also as a Christian, but I wouldn't say that out loud.

Andy described the process from cognitive dissonance relating to the religious structures that were manifested throughout their life to the point of reconstructing their faith around what they independently identified as the roots of Christianity. A Christocentric lens is typically at play during this journey, as these individuals look back at their religion and reflect on what *actually* matters in the mythology of Christianity. The emphasis on Jesus' ministry by participants relates to his deliberate relationships and alignment with outsiders, and his political stances against religious and civil powers of the time[14]. Radical Christians see this disposition as the core of what Jesus *did*, acted on, and as what therefore must be the most important aspect of their faith.

On the other hand, the mentions of the spiritual scope of Jesus' speeches and conversations (as well as those that follow in the book of Acts and the New Testament letters) were fewer and further apart. The insistence on a materialist interpretation of Christianity mirrors what the participants in this research view as important in their own lives. When I prompted interviewees to tell me about their conception of who or what God is, what Christianity

[14] Biblical references related to specific issues addressed in the Gospels will be added in the next chapter, when this will be explored in greater detail.

is, I received a wide range of explanations from quite traditional dogmatic views to creative interpretations based on their personal experiences - but both types of answers led back to action. It was clear that the Radical Christian either is not concerned with eschatology at all, or consciously interprets biblical passages about the Kingdom of God, salvation, the Great Commission, and sin in existential or collectivist terms.

When asked about what they think Christianity is, Andy said:

> I mean, to me, (...) a Christian is someone who believes that Jesus was the son of God, God Incarnate, who died for our sins. (...) and so a Christian is somebody who's motivated by that fact in some way, in their actions. I'd say as a Christian, I try to focus as much on Jesus's ministry as on his death. So rather than just focus on what it means for God to be Incarnate and then to be resurrected, because I know that there's Christians that also aren't convinced by the resurrection, I'd focus as much also on what he was saying while he was alive, and how we can make what he was saying while he was alive relevant today.

Radical Christian Christology is always undergoing a translation into their current situation and positionality in the world, their geographic and historical contexts. They find parallels between their ideological predispositions as political citizens in a global city to Jesus' trajectory. Frances' response to the same question went directly to the matter of political resistance:

> I think of Christianity as a kind of radical refusal of power structures or differences between people or any kind of tyranny or imperialism or any of that bad stuff. And it's a conscious choice to move from a place of love and that kind of moves through everything and informs everything. I think it's about just trying to live a Christlike life. So a life of simplicity and service and love and forgiveness. That can end up sounding quite soft and gentle, but I think that what I find compelling about Christianity is that it's *not* just soft and gentle. It's about making a stand and speaking truth to power and taking action if you need to. And so I think that that more radical element is what I think is the kind of energy behind that.

These individuals choose the figure of Jesus and the biblical scriptures that narrate what this historical figure has done as their point of departure. Moreover, their interpretation of the life of Christ is centred around his social and political stances and actions, which is key in understanding the difference between Radical Christian Christology and other analyses that focus on the spiritual aspects of the Gospels. This will be their cornerstone for any future theological analysis and practical guidelines for action. The next section will point to the specific inner workings of their Christocentrism as a liberationist life affirming theology.

5.1.2 Life affirming theology

The consequence of these individuals' Christocentric lens applied to the concern with material matters is a life affirming theology. They are not particularly concerned with a dualistic theology, nor many of the spiritual elements that are more traditionally centred in Christianity (for example: salvation, the afterlife, and spiritual elements permeating their lived experiences). On the contrary, their faith is strengthened by activism and their struggles for a fairer society.

By life affirming theology, I am referencing theologies that historically fight for collective liberation of a people or categories of marginalised communities within a given society for their right to live in dignity, as their oppression signifies their unjust and premature death (Gutiérrez, 1984, p. 40). To affirm the life of each individual is to free them from being a consumer of spirituality and opening contextually and culturally relevant paths into their own expressions of spirituality and lived experience.

Megan, who is now 27 years old, talked about how her faith grew stronger in alignment with her passion for social justice and involvement in activism for migrant rights and climate justice. She had a period of detaching herself from faith communities as she wasn't finding spaces to develop her faith in practical ways, but found strength in activist communities instead:

> But yeah, so I could have dropped off then, but then my faith kind of got stronger in the last 10 years and I think actually the reason for that was becoming involved in activism. Which I've been doing since the year when I was doing my masters, so I suppose when I was about 21 or 22. I started getting more involved in climate justice activism and other kinds of activism. And I think actually that mutually supported and strengthened my faith, and they were both feeding into each other and that helped both of them to grow. And so I think my faith has got stronger for that reason.

She now works for a charity focused on refugee rights and is a member of CAYG, which is the first faith-based activist group she has been a part of. I asked her if it was a deliberate choice to have pursued secular groups at first, but similarly to Andy and Frances, she did not have access to faith-based activism that was focused on systemic change and progressive politics. They all felt isolated from faith communities, but sure of their motivations and what needed to be done.

> I suppose it didn't really occur to me until I heard about CAYG that the two could be connected, I think, though for me my faith was informing my activism. It didn't really occur to me that this was something that could actually be done on a kind of organised level until then. I don't think at university there were any specifically kind of faith-based activist groups. And so I just joined the group that most appealed to me because it had a climate justice focus. So I suppose I didn't really have the option, but also I don't think I'd even really thought about it.

When I asked about what Christianity is, or what being a Christian means to her, she followed the Christocentric lens of saying that it is “trying to follow [Jesus’s] example. Which I think, you know, is mostly about love and kindness and justice and inclusion, kind of all the stuff that I think Jesus stands for, so I think that's what Christianity is”.

A life affirming theology is one that finds that balance between moving from a place of love and reaching a point of radical action. To affirm life is to be on the side of the oppressed, and doing so with a stance of grace. Whether participants started from an orthodox or more liberal position, the end point is taking whatever actions one is able to take (based on their means, positionality and also what can be done from a stance of non-violent direct action) for a more equitable society. Moreover, it is to be guided by the principle that life should be defended *now*.

In popular Christian language, people use the phrase “now and not yet” to describe biblical passages about the Kingdom of God, so that there are things that can and will happen in our lifetimes, but a fuller completion of the Christian mission of unification of humanity and God will only be actualised in a spiritual afterlife, or at the end of history. This tends to cause resignation in other forms of Christianity as it is generally understood and accepted that there are some injustices and inequalities which cannot possibly be rectified on Earth, due to the flawed nature of humanity. But in an optimistic materialist lens, Radical Christians understand that they must strive for ultimate justice with the belief that it is their calling to do so, and the hope that this can be achieved. The Radical Christian framework blurs the dualistic lines of the Kingdom of God as it equates to justice being done on Earth.

When speaking on this subject, Penn, a 45 year old trans-masc pastor, jokingly said that we need a new (theological) language to describe “now and not yet” in non-dualistic terms where there is a before and after death. When this separation is removed, action becomes concrete and definitely more urgent:

> So it includes things like saving species from extinction. It includes things like eradicating racism and antisemitism and anti-blackness and that sort of thing. It includes things like economic justice and not having people die in burning tower blocks for the sake of aesthetics and cost cutting. It includes things like breaking out of narrow box-thinking about gender and sexuality and just accepting people the way they are without trying to force them to be anything. It includes things like having true equal access and opportunity in all areas of life for people with disabilities, people who are non-neurotypical. All that sort of thing. It's all that is part of it, and it's that whole “now, not yet” thing that Jesus keeps implying about what he calls the Kingdom. It's now and it's not yet.

In those terms, Penn seems to interpret the “now and not yet” saying as “fight for this now, even though you might not see results of your efforts yet”, so more of a management of

expectations than a discouragement from trying at all. Penn's definition of the core of Christianity represents an immanent interpretation of the Christian concept of the "Kingdom of God". They stated that "at heart, if it's got any meaning at all, Christianity is the attempt to find truth and goodness and the divine by those who believe that Jesus showed us how to do that".

Radical Christians' historical materialist hermeneutic means that they position themselves in the same linear story that starts in the Bible, so they are still being called to act upon the same issues that Jesus fought for. Because they are not contemplating that this is a strictly spiritual calling, concepts of salvation and sin take on a material meaning as well.

The historical process of removing the immanent and concrete meaning of salvation, to a detached and ethereal spiritual meaning impoverishes the message of Christ in their view. Spiritual suffering begets spiritual solutions, but material suffering and despair must be met with material salvation, often referred to in theology as liberation. Equally, sin takes on a larger meaning of injustices against the affirmation of the fullness of humanity and Creation (translated as transgressions against nature).

Radical Christians also reject a strictly individualised interpretation of these concepts, that have more commonly been taken to mean individual salvation through conversion and sin as the intrinsic human condition. Instead, due to their lack of interest in overtly spiritual matters and the investment in Jesus as a blueprint for their activism, they tend to speak of salvation and sin in collectivist terms: salvation as collective liberation and sin as the systematic injustices brought forth by the people and structures in positions of power, who are ultimately rejecting life by preventing material liberation.

Interestingly, even though it was mostly the interviewees who were in some way directly involved in political or community organising who talked about their secular political ideology (either explicitly claiming to be Marxists or nodding to leftist ideology more broadly), the overall biblical interpretation that the participants displayed and their general understanding of their positionality in urban society essentially takes them all to a very similar place.

5.1.3 Hopeful realism

Having begun exploring the materialist element of Radical Christian theology, how do they see the strictly spiritual aspect of their faith then? What makes the religious aspect of their belief system unique in their activism? The spiritual element here is to provide hope and empower people to fight for material salvation. Their actions and the optimism that guides them are fuelled by spirituality.

The term "hopeful realism", like "optimistic materialism", is my interpretation of the stories and thoughts shared with me during this research. Terry Eagleton, interestingly, explains how this type of materialism "fosters not nihilism but realism", as our achievements must involve

acknowledging out frailty and finitude, which also promotes a respect for the otherness and integrity of the world (Eagleton, 2016, p. 6).

I'm considering that Radical Christianity follows a hopeful realism in the sense that Radical Christians understand the limitations of a material and socially developed world, but that there is a creative tension with the hope that they take from their religion. Consequently, change is dependent on human action, but their religious calling propels them with the hope that they must not fall into nihilism because change is possible.

I have been establishing that the Radical Christian hermeneutic interprets biblical mandates in a materialist and collectivist framework. Therefore, divine provision of abundant resources for those in need (Matthew 14:13-21; Luke 1:53), the elevation of the "least among you" (Luke 9:48) and the welcoming of the stranger (Matthew 25:31-40) are the doctrine itself, not a symbolic representation for spiritual hunger being satiated, nor of a transcendental justice to come. Radical Christianity offers a call to action for a more equitable society *now*, a community of like-minded people who will move towards this goal together, and the spiritual driving force that transcends the cynicism that change cannot happen or that small scale actions do not matter.

Radical Christians are hopeful realists in how they organise and what they believe they can accomplish. They do not hold a utopian view of what can be achieved nor do they take matters of social justice lightly. The participants in this research spoke sadly to me about the issues that matter to them and how difficult it is to make a difference (or feel like they are making one). However, instead of falling into a state of complacency or feeling that things cannot change, the belief that they are called to co-create the Kingdom of God on Earth becomes fuel for optimism, which propels them into action. Their "not yet", as I mentioned previously, is a mantra that tells them to keep going, knowing they are following a divine mandate and they can find rest and strength in their spiritual practices.

Martin, VRC's pastor, spoke about this from the perspective of a church leader who has held these beliefs for several decades. I asked him about the biggest challenges of leading a congregation, and he pinpointed the issue of fighting cynicism when you have been "in the game" for as long as he has. He constantly reminds himself to not be cynical to the needs of people and not to resign himself to thinking that change will not happen. As a church leader, success is often measured by how many people your congregation has, but the Radical Christian motion is outward - it is to make an impact outside of the church, as a community of hopeful people that believe a more inclusive and equal society is possible. I asked Martin how *he* measures success, and this was his reply:

> If we are living out the Kingdom we are embodying the character of God in wherever we are. So it's generosity, it is justice, it is love, it is patience, it is kindness. It is all those things, and it is humility, it is boldness, it is curiosity, it is courage. And the beauty of all

> that is all that stuff can be imitated by anybody, any place. I'm not asking them to go and tell three people about Jesus. We're not saying you've gotta stand on the door steps of 1000 homes and give out tracts, or lead a Bible study. It is empowerment of people to look like Jesus in the world where they are. How well we do that is something that won't fully be known.

Radical Christians' spirituality permeates their actions in a way that grounds them; it motivates them to live out the principles Martin mentioned above and to not lose hope. It also decentralises the individual from the action, and centres the action itself as the output of God's love, which may be a way to mitigate issues that can come up in activism and community organising such as burnout and movements losing track of where they are headed and how to get there. Naturally, these groups still have these feelings of self-doubt and burnout, but they can retreat to their safe spaces and seek hope from their faith.

Radical Christians' disposition is of a people being called out as *ekklesia*[15], a public assembly of religious citizens. The participants in this research often place themselves in a discipleship role, diving into their interpretation of the experiences of the people around Jesus as narrated in the Gospels, being taught to imagine a different reality and being encouraged to lead their community to that reality. They feel valued when they read about Jesus valuing women, poor and disabled folks, and they feel called to use their privilege when Jesus calls upon disciples in social and economic positions of power to follow him and use their means for the purpose of his kingdom of equality. As they place themselves in these narratives, Radical Christians are moved to continue the story of Christianity.

All of these elements that I have covered as being outputs of a Radical Christian materialist worldview - their Christocentric lens, life affirming theology and hopeful realism - allow creativity in their methods and encouragement for their actions, being also the basis for their ecclesiastical congregation and discipleship. More importantly, they extend the Kingdom of God to non-Christians and to people who have been historically excluded from religious spaces.

In aiming at actionable and systemic change, partnerships with interfaith and secular organisations become completely valid means of achieving their goal, which in turn works towards community cohesion as a more immediate result. Radical Christian spirituality is where these religious actors draw their hope from, but their actions don't need to go back to spirituality to mean something as they ultimately seek to affirm life in its totality, not only those lives which submit to the same spirituality as them. Their faith affirms and welcomes all forms of life and love, as I will explore further in the next section on "radical hospitality".

[15] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2018). Ecclesia. Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved September 7, 2023, from https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ecclesia-ancient-Greek-assembly

5.2 Radical Hospitality

I explained above that the term Optimistic Materialism is my interpretation of what could be gathered from my fieldwork, being a key concept to understand the disposition of these individuals and their communities. The next sections, in contrast, describe values and attitudes of Radical Christians that were consistently mentioned directly by them.

The idea of hospitality, inclusion and love as political stances permeates this research and in how its participants speak about what matters to them and how they arrived at their current belief system. These themes will also continue to appear throughout the next sections, since they consistently appeared in my fieldwork and interviews in various forms. In this section, I will go over some of the details of how this positionality develops in the Radical Christian framework, and some of the specific ways that it manifests itself within the context of religious communities.

The practice of radical hospitality will be explored below as a political action which embraces those vulnerable groups excluded by global and local economic and political systems, calling into question the prevailing political hegemony (Bretherton, 2010). It enables otherwise voiceless communities to be heard and call for systematic changes in society. This is stressed as the vocation of the church, its faith being rooted in seeking welfare and justice via practical and all-encompassing outputs. By advocating for and engaging in political acts of hospitality, the church encounters God more deeply. Moreover, their universalist interest in the welfare of the other distances faith from a standpoint of privatised proselytism and religious identity.

5.2.1 Healing religious trauma

The first thing to note in the relationship of Radical Christians with inclusion is that it often comes from a personal psychological place of healing church trauma. “Religious trauma”, and the need to heal it, has been a growing discussion in Christian spaces in the last decade, with a lot of discourse coming from American evangelical environments but resonating with British contexts as well. James Bielo, who I mentioned in the previous section on faith deconstruction, is an important voice here as well, with *Emerging Evangelicals* (2011) and later articles such as *Belief, deconversion, and authenticity among US emerging evangelicals* (2012). I also consider Marti and Ganiel’s *The Deconstructed Church* (2014) important for this discussion.

More recently, the term “exvangelical” has been used academically and in the media to define people who have left the evangelical churches they had grown up in or been long term members of due to their faith deconstruction and wanting to distance themselves from what

they perceived to be harmful environments for their mental health.[16] The phenomenon that is being documented is "Millennials and Generation Z are not leaving the church; they are reconstructing their faith and distancing themselves from fundamentalism" (Batchelder, 2020, p. x). This can be compared to the more commonly studied "religious nones" in the United Kingdom who have left their religious communities but sometimes retain individual spiritualities detached from participating in structural religion.

Initially, I believed that I would find many people within the Radical Christianity bracket that identified more closely with the religious none category. However, my fieldwork ended up showing that belonging to a religious community, whether or not in the traditional format of a church, is essential for their faith expression. Many people I spoke with have experienced religious trauma and wanting to distance themselves from the religion in their personal lives. Nonetheless, they made the decision to either remain in the church or seek alternative forms of religious community - through activism, student unions, study groups, etc -, fighting for the changes they want to see happen in Christian spaces and to the structure of the institution.

I noted before that Radical Christians who grew up in Christian households often felt a disconnect between their interpretation of the biblical scriptures as a calling to social justice and their local churches not taking action on this. Another facet of this cognitive dissonance is the concern with a lack of inclusion and acceptance inside Church as another consequence of Radical Christianity not being systematically enacted.

Interestingly, in addition to the pastors and priests I spoke with, who were in their forties and fifties, and one participant who is thirty years old and was currently in his ordination training when he was interviewed, a few of the younger participants, in their twenties, expressed interest in becoming ordained in the future or working for a religious institution more broadly, not in a clergy position. Those younger participants voiced a particular desire to work within the Church of England to shape it into a more inclusive organisation. One of them is Megan, a member of CAYG, who mentioned the possibility of becoming ordained as soon as I asked her about what her relationship with religion and the Church had been like throughout her life and how it is now. She then proceeded to speak about the role she wants to play in making the Church a safe and progressive space:

> I do feel very much like I'm involved with the church and kind of I'm tied to it [she laughed]. But at the same time, the older I get and the more I see, the more I realise the problems that there are in the church and if I'm gonna be part of the church, I feel like I can't be complicit in that. Well, I suppose I am complicit in it if I'm part of the church. But I feel like I have to try and address some of those things. So, obviously, from our climate point of view, the big part of what CAYG does is to speak to the church and try to get

[16] For more information, see: Onishi, B. (2019, April 9). The Rise of #Exvangelical. Religion and Politics.

> them to pay more attention. So there's that. Also recently I've been quite interested in trying to do what I can to work on the kind of church's issues with LGBTQ people that are not making LGBTQ people feel welcome, either in clergy positions and in congregations, so I've been talking with the vicar in a local church here about that because she's really good on those issues.

Along with Megan, Frances and Andy both expressed the exact same concern with making their voices heard in their local churches on behalf of LGBTQ+ people. With their positioning as young people who are not directly involved in the structure of the church, they see it as their responsibility to serve as advocates in their local contexts. It also seems that the Radical Christian youth does not want to stop there, and we may see these people in a near future taking up leadership roles within the Church, occupying places of influence in this institution and working towards widespread structural change.

Whether through seeking to work directly in a religious setting, or through their volunteer involvement, Radical Christians display the urge to make progress happen from within. This distinct characteristic separates these religious actors from other progressive Christians who act strictly in secular spaces, or people who have left the church altogether but retain their privatised spiritual identities. They still see the potential in the church as it stands today and envision a future for it in which it is at the forefront of social movements.

However, this is the idealised version of what might happen. There is an unresolved tension for many of the younger participants in this research between occupying a space at the edge of the church and being called to renew it. Depending on their personal background and experiences with exclusion in religious institutions, there are varying levels of suspicion and scepticism of what can actually be reformed in these structures.

The participants in this research, naturally, are more inclined to want to reform the Church than perhaps people who would not be inclined to identify themselves as Radical Christians. The priests and pastors who I interviewed share this concern with the younger interviewees, and have been working towards this goal in their ministries for decades. In broader terms, it seems to be the young religious population that is eager to resolve this tension and envision the church community as an agent of change in society. Having just come out of higher education and just starting out their careers and their path in activism, they still have a lot of space to see themselves as future leaders and shapers of their local communities and wider society.

For the time being, these young activists are beginning to sense their place as reformers of the Church, and developing the skills needed to do so. Their impact can be felt at this stage in more localised contexts, within their local church community as they initiate discussions on how to ensure that that space is inclusive and promotes outward action led by the community. While they have made the decision that they want to occupy some form of space and

leadership position within a religious structure, these individuals refuse to be complacent or to participate in religious institutions they view as problematic.

5.2.2 Safe spaces and microcosms of inclusion

The Radical Christian commitment to radical hospitality and healing religious trauma can be seen in the transformation of their local religious communities into safe spaces and microcosms of inclusion, and in further creating and providing those spaces for other Christians who want to network with people who share their faith and have not been able to find that type of inclusive space elsewhere.

As part of their life affirming theology, Radical Christians are committed to trying to create a world where everyone can feel safe, and this naturally reflects on how they envision the Church. It is apparent that with more possibilities for what a religious space can be like, these people are increasingly empowered to build a new Church that is a small-scale prospect for wider society, what I call a microcosm of inclusion. The younger participants especially showed a lot of creative intention in building this into a normative reality, perhaps because of their hopes for their own paths as shapers of space.

The development of faith-based safe spaces and microcosms of inclusion are a natural first step in the Radical Christian journey into co-creating what they understand to be the Kingdom of God. Creating these spaces is of utmost importance for these individuals because they have themselves felt excluded from religious spaces due to their ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or other aspects of their identity, or simply due to an overwhelming sense of empathy with those who have been systematically excluded.

Rachel, one of the interviewees, who is 24 and works in developing community led affordable housing, summarises the process, which is so common for young Christians, of feeling rejected by the institutional Church and leaving the faith altogether:

> I think I have quite a few friends who grew up Christian, identify as Christian, but do not go to church. And that's partly because of probably institutional racism, how churches treat the LGBT community, and just all the structural things that basically make church bad. I think [the church I go to and where my work is based out of], obviously, you know, I can see the issues that it has, but I think it's a really special example of how church is done. And I think that’s because of community organising.

Rachel’s friends exemplify the more commonly discussed category of young people who grew up in Christian households, felt frustrated with the expressions of religiosity that were available to them and excluded from religious spaces, and left the Church while still retaining a privatised faith. Rachel’s story also shows the moment of diversion for Radical Christians: she validates and recognises the structural issues that exist both within the institutional Church and

within her own local community, but she moved past that impasse towards a creative tension. She now works at and is a member of a church that, although imperfect, is willing to work to live out the core principles of Radical Christianity by serving as a centre for advocacy for the wider community and for grassroots local development.

Radical Christian microcosms of inclusion are not meant to be an end in themselves. These small local spaces and more widespread networks flow outwardly as their members begin to heal and connect with other people who have similar stories and share the same values. As a collective, they feel empowered to expand their model of community living into further action. This is a practical way in which Radical Christianity intentionally acts on a "politics of place" that Doreen Massey spoke about in *World City*. She acknowledges the need to "rethink the 'place' of the local and to explore how we can rearticulate a politics of place that both meets the challenges of a space of flows" (Massey, 2007, p. 18). These religious actors are establishing the local church and decentralised networks as places of agency and influence for meeting the challenges of the local community and addressing the responsibilities of the global city, reframing a dichotomy of "local *versus* global" (Massey, 2007).

I was able to see this in action in both institutions I observed for my case studies. VRC is a visibly intercultural community, with members and visitors from a diversity of backgrounds and abilities. Their culture of acceptance and inclusion is engrained in the community in such a way that it seamlessly accommodates people - whether old participants and newcomers - with learning and physical disabilities and encourages LGBTQ+ members who have previously been prevented from participating actively in church life to take on leadership roles for example. Interestingly, I also observed it welcoming individuals who did not share the ethos of radical inclusion of the church but were clearly seeking to be included in a community themselves - of course, with the understanding that they are not allowed to verbally harm any other participant, and need to abide by the community's principles of acceptance and kindness. It emotionally and spiritually supports members who have come from countries with severe geopolitical conflicts, often remembering their families and making space for prayer, listening to their needs and learning how they can be of service.

The language used in VRC's sermons and generally within the congregation is inclusive, and regular members are conscious of not participating in any processes of "othering". It certainly helps that a large proportion of the members who have been at the church for at least a few years work in public health care or education (including young members just starting in those professions), which I believe is something that is part of the fabric of the community.

The church is set up in tables of around 6 to 8 people instead of having the typical rows of chairs, a structure that started during the pandemic for social distancing purposes and they continued to fully embrace as they found that it facilitates conversations and moments of discussion during sermons and worship. While "worship" is usually a term used by churches to

mean strictly *sung* worship, VRC has a broader approach which is less focused on music and centres mostly around a moment of reflection, some form of collaborative activity and group discussion. The activities can be quite varied, some of the more politically inclined ones that I was a part of included creating materials for a protest, praying for specific geopolitical conflicts and educating the congregation about ongoing local policy issues that they can be involved in.

I was present on a Sunday where the worship was led by a member who is an Iranian asylum seeker, along with a young British-American couple, where he shared some of the struggles his country and compatriots were facing at the moment, as information was being censured and not reaching the international media, and how people at the church could help. Each table had a different activity that the congregation could choose to engage with, some with templates for writing letters to MPs in relation to local policies surrounding arriving asylum seekers, some with social media resources for people to follow for more information and give their support, some which were designated for quiet reflection and prayer. This mixture of practical and prophetic action represents the disposition of Radical Christianity as a method for active citizenship.

Having been founded by a woman as a charity that encouraged community development, VRC did start from a place of local politics. What I find interesting about them is that this is not the case of them advertising themselves as a young, inclusive, progressive church. This is a centenarian church founded by and led mostly by older white British people (although the leadership has become more diversified in recent years). It is just a local church trying to create a radically safe space for whoever comes through the doors, with the little resources it has, because that is what they believe Christianity to be about.

Climate Action Youth Group is naturally what one would expect a radically inclusive community to be, being a youth-focused activist group for climate justice, composed mostly of university students. With many queer members, they use language that is inclusive to different gender identities, and also make the necessary adjustments whenever needed for members with cognitive differences. Having a majority of white British members, they actively try to bring on overlooked voices from marginalised communities in their public communications out of genuinely wanting to give as much of a platform as they can to lift others up.

Throughout campaign meetings, they consistently thought of how to centre the people who suffer the most with the climate crisis, giving external activists the platform to speak out on the issues that affect their communities. Moreover, when planning their pro-veganism campaign, they were very aware of the privileged position they hold of having food security and came up with thoughtful adjustments and recommendations for people who might have sensory or dietary requirements that makes a vegan lifestyle difficult to achieve, so these people could also feel a part of the campaign.

I had previously touched on the fact that the participants in this research mainly came from privileged backgrounds and had a high level of education. As seen above, these people are self-aware of this fact and actively use the positions of power they hold to be spokespeople for, and raise the voices of, others who might not hold the same privileges in society. The Radical Christian feels a personal responsibility to act and speak up, especially as allies of marginalised individuals and communities.

5.2.3 Anti-tribalism

It is becoming clear that Radical Christians have a very well defined set of priorities and notions of what they believe matters for religious life, which for them is the core of Christianity. The church, however traditional it is, must live by the Radical Christian guidelines of radical hospitality and inclusion.

Throughout my interviews, participants who did identify with a particular faith denomination did so on a very personal level, and with a sense of responsibility. Many are members of mainline evangelical, Anglican or Catholic churches and thus operate within these denominational structures. Their denominational identities are a private aspect of how they interact with faith and religious community, but not one that should be followed by other religious actors necessarily, as they recognise that other faith expressions are equally valid. At the same time, they feel responsible for ensuring that their specific denomination is moving in the right direction, collaborating internally and externally towards an inclusive and politically active Christianity. If they identify a problematic culture or institutional barriers to collaboration, they feel a duty and entitlement to speak up and try to change those issues.

For example, as mentioned previously by Megan, a big part of what CAYG does is trying to dialogue with the Anglican Church to get their engagement and commitment towards climate action. Andy, also in the Anglican Church, is part of a working group in their parish that was started by the rector and is focused on ensuring that their community is a space where everyone feels heard - not only marginalised groups, but centering those voices.

On the external side, radical hospitality is lived through interdenominational collaboration. Because of their clear set of values and driving force to make collective and systemic impact locally and in the wider society, Radical Christian communities are eager to partner with one another in order to form a bigger presence and have the resources needed for their intended goals of ultimate equality regardless of denominational and religious differences. The overall rejection of denominational divides and dogma is one of the facets of the process of decolonising the Christian faith. I have mentioned that interfaith collaboration and dialogue is of great interest to these people, but I also heard them speak about anti-tribalism within Christianity itself. Their individual denominational identity is grounding and a home for

community action, but Radical Christians especially value reaching out and participating in wider actions with other Christians (and non-Christians) who share their worldview.

Brian, who is 39 years old, works for an established Christian charity and also is involved in community organising on a voluntary basis surrounding refugee rights and facilitating local communities to be able to sponsor refugees (Victoria Road Church being one of them). He spoke a lot about interfaith collaboration and the importance of community building going beyond the confines of one specific church. He spoke about his “built-in understanding that church is also activism, that the church should be active in the community”. On the issue of denominational divides within Christianity, he said the following:

> I would just like the Church to be completely welcoming and kind and loving. Nonexclusive in any way. And tribalism is an issue, isn't it? With empire building, that kind of stuff. I don't think that’s helpful.

In the Radical Christian mindset, any form of tribalism is rejected. This includes retaining an exclusivist atmosphere by gatekeeping who can participate in the religious community or refraining from building interdenominational relationships because of a sense of superiority or refusal to collaborate with people that do not believe in the same way as you. Brian equated this type of tribalism within Christianity to empire building, which is seen in this context on a small scale, but still as something that should be vigorously fought against. The general sentiment is that Radical Christianity should start its battle against empire at home - the Church itself must remain vigilant to not reproduce harmful power structures and exclusion.

This methodology generates more horizontal activity, instead of vertical, and allows for richer network building - both local and dispersed. There is a heavier emphasis placed on building relationships to reach radical hospitality within Christianity and radical justice in the wider society, and anti-tribalism as a mechanism opens the doors to broader conversations and collaboration. Denominational action can often be an internal effort that comes from a centralised hierarchy within the denominational structure, aimed at strengthening the group in question, but Radical Christian network building comes from local leaderships joining together to create change beyond the church. Similarly, dispersed network formations like CAYG see individuals from multiple denominations gathering to strengthen collective action and be ambassadors in their local contexts.

The participants in this research - and, through what I could observe, other typical Radical Christians - are not in a place of power individually, as they have regular occupations and work quite locally. While I saw a propensity for people to go into public policy work or hold other forms of public office, they do not have contacts in power positions that could be influenced. Given their positionality, Radical Christians act mainly through grassroots community work in order to achieve social justice in the wider society from the ground up. Naturally, these people become frustrated with a lack of collaboration between Christian

institutions in order to build momentum and develop networks to work on the issues they care about.

Another frustration pointed out by participants is that cultural and political conservatism still permeates many denominations, which makes collaboration difficult both in terms of agreeing on what needs to be done and where they need to head towards, and for women, ethnic minorities and queer people to be heard in these communities.

Jenny, a 32 year old public policy worker, talked about this based on her experiences growing up in between an Anglican and a Pentecostal church, now being a part of the Church of England again:

> [People] can hold on very tightly to their various denominations, but I feel like (...), at our core, we all have the same principle. So it's like if you're Baptist or Catholic or Pentecostal, it's just like how you choose to maybe worship or approach Christian life, but essentially we're all on the same journey together.

Interestingly, even though she assumes that they all have the same guiding principles, at a later point in the interview she also talked about wishing that there was more diversity in denominational structures. While she wants to practise anti-tribalism within Christianity, she might be prevented from doing so as she feels excluded from certain places:

> So I think I'd like to see a lot more of both embracing the diversity of denominations, but of the cultures that are also part of, that are also Christians as well. And I'd also like to see more diversity at the leadership level. Because it tends to be very male dominated. And depending on your denomination, it can be very white as well. So yeah, I'd like to see more diversity there.

This points back to the effort Radical Christians put into finding (or founding) these inclusive communities. While they might at times try to make change from within, there will be points in which they will have to decide whether that change can actually be accomplished from their positionality, or if they will just be wasting energy that could be better applied elsewhere. While these individuals do show hopefulness in regards to seeing religious structures progressing and becoming trailblazers in the struggle for socioeconomic and climate justice, they also recognise that they have limited time and influence to make systemic changes to the structure of the Church, with this time and influence perhaps being better put to use elsewhere.

Barbara, a member of Victoria Road Church, also spoke about wishing that churches made a bigger effort to work together. During my time at VRC, she led some moments of worship in which she usually held reflections on women in the Bible and in Church history, focusing on the common story of women’s voices being silenced throughout Christianity, despite them having prominent roles in the Bible. She complained about not being taken seriously herself throughout her early involvement in church life, which prevented her from wanting to

seek a closer relationship with religiosity until she found a community that enabled her questioning.

Barbara has a very particular standpoint of leading a development company which partners with charities and churches to deliver housing, community centres, refurbished churches, schools, surgeries, etc, by selling luxury flats in the same developments. She thus has a close relationship with church leaderships and how they operate. She talked about examples of projects that could be a lot more efficient if different churches communicated more and thought laterally about their properties in order to better benefit their communities, which she finds can be a struggle. She also complained about the misogyny she's encountered in churches during her professional life as well, stating that some people will have her build their churches but would not allow her to speak in them.

With all of these issues and the continued disappointment that Radical Christians face working within some religious structures, some of them end up deciding to not affiliate themselves with a denomination, and even to seek religious community in alternative settings, with like-minded individuals who have had similar experiences.

Martin, the pastor of VRC, spoke about the church's position to not join a specific denomination (while VRC has its origins in Protestantism, it was never a part of a specific denomination). In addition to the liberty of not needing to comply with certain denominational statements of faith that would go against their ethos of inclusion, he talked about the difficulty of being an agent of systemic change within the larger structure of an institutional Church:

> (...) I am a little bit sceptical as to whether some national organisations and some of the denominations are actually using their power sufficiently enough to bring about change and using their voice sufficiently. I mean, we're very different, of course, cause we're just one little individual independent church.

Martin mentioned that being in a nondenominational structure allows them the liberties of deciding where they want to invest their time and effort when it comes to social enterprise, and more importantly where they want the church to head towards theologically. He used, as an example, the fact that he officiated the first same-sex wedding from two churchgoers in recent years, after making an official announcement to the congregation that VRC was fully inclusive to same-sex couples. At the time, Martin prepared some reading material explaining the theological grounding of LGBTQ+ inclusion and held an open day where anyone could come and ask any questions. Nobody came and no questions were made, which I take to mean that the congregation already assumed that they were an inclusive church before the announcement was made. In any case, Martin mentioned that, as a church with Protestant roots, he would not have been able to officiate that initial wedding and be openly inclusive unless they belonged to one of few denominations that allow that stance.

However, Martin also pointed out the negative side of being an independent church. While they have the freedom to take action however they want, they also do not have the institutional support to do so on a larger scale. Additionally, they are not involved in the spaces where discussions about internal reform happen, where they could advocate for national systemic change within the structure of the Church. Consequently, their presence will most likely be felt locally in whatever causes they attach themselves to and the actions they choose to take up, but they won't have as much of a voice when it comes to making changes to the institutional church, which Martin sees as an issue in the long run:

> Because I think systemic change and transformation of injustice is something that needs to happen within Christianity worldwide, in all its denominations, just as much as in the world. So there needs to be as much of a renewal of the Christian faith and the Christian churches as there's a renewal of life altogether.

Martin's remarks about this subject indicate that whether one acts individually, locally or within the structure of a large religious organisation, that is a necessary part of the renewal of the Christian faith. Small independent churches like VRC do not have the structure nor the resources to tackle systemic issues, but they can work around community organising. Reversely, large church denominations have the power to put pressure on and flip the status quo, but being part of the status quo themselves, Radical Christians struggle to be heard within those institutions, often choosing to stay in smaller churches or alternative networks outside of traditional liturgical parameters.

This might be a balancing act for Radical Christians and Radical Christian communities: finding out, in the spaces they inhabit and paths they pursue, whether they can be a part of structural change, if their role is to create those microcosms of inclusion where people can find rest and be advocates for their local communities; or if they can weave through these different positionalities. With all that they choose to focus their attention on, or are able to do, radical hospitality is a core principle.

Therefore, it is important for these individuals to be inserted in a variety of institutional settings, in addition to forming Radical Christian networks that come together for a specific struggle that motivates the people joining these networks. If these individuals are also dispersed in institutions that are not themselves radical, they might be able to liaise within their networks and strengthen individual action in institutional settings, having their voices heard more broadly and thus beginning to bridge the gaps between local and global action.

5.3 Prophetic Action

The third theme, prophetic action, covers the more practical aspects of the Radical Christian framework based on what we have seen so far of how it is formed and how it begins

to manifest itself in Radical Christian individuals' lives and networks. Having done the work of identifying their core beliefs and goals, I will focus on their daily life and dive deeper into the palpable actions these people systematically take towards equality and justice, whether in terms of systemic policy reform or in their local communities.

The reason for the title "prophetic action" is that Radical Christians' political actions are tied to their religious identities and beliefs, thus being led by a collectivist prophetic voice that guides them as a religious body. The Radical Christians' optimistic materialism allows them to take up actions in their church communities, their local contexts, and even choose to dedicate their careers and further volunteer work towards systemic change at governmental levels, with the hopefulness and confidence that their faith gives them that they are on the right track. They believe - or hold on to the hope - that they are called to aid in bringing about justice on Earth, which they understand as being the ultimate message of the cross. Thus, the community of people who act on the message of Jesus's ministry should be doing what they can towards this collective calling.

It has been mentioned that Radical Christians find a basis for their beliefs in how the Christian church is supposed to be lived out in the community in the book of Acts, as well as holding the key passages of Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-34 as concrete guidelines and hope that the Kingdom of God, translated in this form of community living, is materially attainable.

Bringing this reflection further back, some participants I engaged with mentioned, alongside Acts, commandments of the Hebrew Scripture that support prophetic action towards radical socioeconomic equality. More specifically, the Year of Jubilee - which appears in Leviticus 25, where it was commanded that every fifty years there would be a systematic cancellation of debts, returning of land to their owners and freeing of slaves - and a similar commandment in Deuteronomy 15 (where debts were to be cancelled and servants to be freed every seven years).

These Hebrew Scripture passages are specifically pointed out by Radical Christians as grounds for the intrinsic concern in their religious tradition with policies of socioeconomic equality that did not stop at an individual moral code for the Christian, but were meant to be set as societal law. The process of having these passages as companion pieces for the ones in Acts is to show that the material concern with radical social justice is inseparable from and is a major point of Christianity.

Those laws established for the Hebrew people were reiterated even more radically by Jesus (I will go into more detail on this in the next section of "theopraxis") and lived out in practice by the early Christians in Acts as a direct reference to that ideology. It is understood by Radical Christians that it is a core divine mandate to defend the people who have been made destitute and ensure that structural inequality is abolished. Thus, their political engagement is a religious, even sacramental, act.

An interesting aspect that I found in this prophetic action is that there is an underlying understanding that Radical Christian justice does not necessarily require Christians to be at the forefront of related social movements for it to be achieved, which I believe is where their enthusiasm for interfaith or secular collaboration culminates. Their notion of eternity is either virtually existential, with participants taking eschatological passages in the Bible to take on immediate and material meaning, or open enough to account for the recognition of other faiths (and agnostic or atheist worldviews) as being as valid and meaningful as theirs. That means, for their action, that it does not matter who is at the forefront of change - as long as the intended outcome is life renewal.

When it comes to interfaith collaboration in particular, there is a special sense of meaningful religious experience in the mutual uplifting of each other's beliefs and finding community in people with considerably different life experiences. Radical Christians, however, long to be at the forefront - not to receive accolades, but because of a genuine understanding that that is the role that the Church is supposed to have. They want to see Christians as leaders and the Church as an advocate. I will go into further detail on how the participants articulate this longing in the last two subsections below.

5.3.1 Community organising

One of the paths that the people I spoke with found to live out their beliefs in an attainable way is to participate in community organising, either through volunteer work or paid employment, in both faith-based and secular settings. There are two main reasons for choosing community organising as their method of action:

The first relates to the practicality of this approach, considering that these individuals are often working independently within a local community or in small networks, so their physical and financial resources are limited. Moreover, it has been established that they are regular concerned citizens who do not occupy positions of political power nor have a platform, individually, to influence policy change. However, in community organising they find the strength and the structure to make an impact and make themselves be seen and heard. Even if in most cases this is a localised influence, these flourishing networks can continue to grow and ideally make an increasing impact with time.

The second reason why Radical Christians tend to follow a path of community organising, which is more related to their faith-based initiatives, is that it subverts what is understood as the traditional approach of charity. The more common form of social action within church settings is based around responding to an immediate need from people who are not part of that community, or are the people at the margins of the church’s geographic area but whom they do not typically engage with. This includes setting up a food bank, making donations to

external charities and even hosting night shelters. These are all activities that are absolutely needed in the city, especially with the rapidly increasing rates of housing and food insecurity[17] in the country as a result of central government austerity measures.

However, the Radical Christian framework is transformational; it strives for systemic change in wider society beyond immediate assistance, thus requiring advocacy and campaigning for reform to ensure that these issues are eventually resolved through policy changes. Additionally, they believe that this should be done in partnership with the people who are themselves affected by systemic injustices, based on their self-identified needs.

Radical Christians reject forms of charitable action that tend to patronise its recipients, that do not ask them what *they* need or want, or that do not attempt to resolve in some way the root causes of the issue being tackled by the charity. While expanding on their critique of faith-based charity, two separate interviewees mentioned the quote attributed to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in which he says that “we are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself”. Throughout conversations during my participant observation, I also heard a few times the very similar phrase attributed to Desmond Tutu: “there comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they are falling in.”

Both quotes have dubious origins, but are formative in Radical Christians’ understanding of justice. Clearly, reaching out beyond immediate assistance is essential in their religious morality. With community organising, Radical Christian networks can be a tool to empower and unify the local community in speaking up and fighting for what matters to them. This methodology shifts the power structure of churchgoes providing a service to people who are recipients of charity to a unified effort of a community advocating for themselves.

Rachel, mentioned in the previous section, is one of the participants who spoke in depth about this divergence from a consumer/provider type of charity. She demonstrated her passion for the local church and its potential to serve as a hub for local activism through involvement in community organising:

> Because I think a lot of churches don't really listen to their congregation and they don't listen to their community. They decide “we need a food bank, let's do some charity” as opposed to “how do we build relationships and what will those relationships lead to and should we get involved in systemic change? Oh yeah, we probably should because this is a world we live in and we can't ignore it”.

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[17] Office for National Statistics (ONS). (2023). "Hidden" homelessness in the UK: evidence review. London: Office for National Statistics.
Shelter. (2021). Denied the right to a safe home - Report. Shelter.
Francis-Devine, B., Malik, X., & Danechi, S. (2023). Food poverty: Households, food banks and free school meals. House of Commons Library.

Rachel started her career via a leadership program in which she spent two days per week at a church in East London learning about community organising and another three days working in Parliament. During this time, she was in a unique position of balancing localised community building and seeing the processes involved in trying to change policies on a major scale. Rachel talked about quickly becoming disillusioned with the work of public policy. Despite being enjoyable and interesting, it did not seem to generate much actionable change in her eyes. She then chose to migrate fully to community organising work:

> [T]he other side of it was I'm quite interested in, as many young people are, “I wanna make a difference”, and often, particularly our current political climate, I saw a lot of people spending a lot of time on a report and the report having very little impact on policy. And I found that quite frustrating. And a lot of people being in echo chambers, our current politics is massively echo chamberish. And the people who worked in Parliament were pretty much people like me. They were fairly well educated, came from a fairly middle class background, talked in a certain way.

Instead of being energised by the prospect of working in Parliament, being at the centre of political action, Rachel found that environment to be far too removed from the communities she was supposed to be serving. Both public policy and charity, in her experience, do not centre the needs and wants of actual communities. While in Parliament she felt that she was in an echo chamber of privileged people, her work of community organising allowed her to use her own privilege in a way that is not patronising and ultimately aligned more with her faith:

> I knew that I was quite privileged and felt weird to be speaking about people. So I love the fact that community organising is about how do you use your skills to enable somebody else to essentially speak for themselves and to make change and so on.

Rachel’s Radical Christian formation comes largely from having spent her teenage years in Atlanta, where she was encouraged to think critically about religion by her father, who worked with public theology at a Methodist university focusing on helping young people to engage with what it looks like to live out their faith. From an early age, Rachel was influenced by her involvement in nonviolent direct action through her father’s initiatives and additionally through learning about the civil rights movement in the USA and seeing faith have a real impact in the world.

Rachel’s sentiments were echoed by other participants who have also previously worked with public policy - both in government and in Christian NGOs - and later chose to focus on more grassroots projects. Jim, a 33 year old priest of a workers’ church, had a very similar experience to Rachel’s, having worked in Westminster full time and eventually migrating to his current position in the clergy and facilitating community building in his community:

> [F]or a period I went fully in Westminster, worked in think tanks and civil service, but I realised there’s some vocational angst a couple of years into that. (...) Politics and faith

> were the two big things for me in my teenage years and as a student, and I opted for the politics one career wise, but the distance was becoming more and more abstract. I was doing these more and more, on paper, exciting roles around migration or whatever, but actually was a long way from people who are actually affected by policy (...).

When Jim took over his current parish, he wanted to recover its historical roots of being a church for city workers - particularly hidden workers - and reestablish this workplace ministry among those in precarious and low paid work. Jim's job, according to him, is to create the space for all people to be nurtured, encouraged and strengthened in their faith, but being mindful that discipleship should not be a "comfortable middle class preserve, but actually it's something that the church is resourcing among those who are in poorly paid or precarious jobs or have chaotic lives, or whatever else, that actually there is a context where they are invited to come together and go deeper in their faith as well as to take action."

Taking action is key here. Jim stressed the importance of having a weekly rhythm of prayer, eucharist, worship and partnerships for advocacy and capacity building. They are currently involved with the Living Wage Campaign, and also provide resources for the church's parishioners like English classes and having a union representative on site once per week offering employment advice. Jim also made clear that his role is not to be a leader *for* the workers, but to listen to what the community's needs are and developing agency and encouraging grassroots leaderships in people who society overlooks.

Radical Christian action spreads through a variety of approaches and through the wide spectrum of this research's participants' occupations, ranging from clergy members, community and political organisers, NGO employees and public policy officers. Within those, there are varying opinions on how much actionable change can be accomplished through policy and advocacy work. Naturally, individuals who are inserted in governmental bodies believe that they are making or can make a difference with their research work, while others found that they are more needed and can make a more palpable impact working with local communities. Some participants also find themselves in positions that bridge that divide, working in NGOs that maintain dialogues between local communities or grassroots social work and the government.

Moreover, community organising transcends a choice of employment or volunteering opportunities for Radical Christians. It is a way in which they communicate their beliefs, and how the radical church manifests itself in its mission. An integral part of the Radical Christian identity, community organising alludes to Jesus and his disciples as organisers in their time. As I've covered in the "Christology" section earlier, these religious actors model their approach to political action on their biblical interpretation of Jesus' actions. Mobilising communities, empowering local leaderships and speaking truth to power is at the core of this, independent of which paths these individuals choose to follow in how they perform these actions or what tools they have at their disposal for doing so.

Alan, who is currently 65 years old, has worked his whole life with homelessness, from running shelters to leading teams of policymakers in both religious and secular contexts. He spoke a lot about his experiences working with churches on this particular problem and the issues surrounding non-transformational charity. With decades of experience in this field, he has a particularly broad understanding of the role of Christians as community organisers:

> [I]n one sense, our vision [as Christians] is of a better world, and we want to work toward that. (...) That's where we have to put a lot of our focus and our prayer and efforts. And in that little world we include everybody (...). We give priority to the poor, to the needy, to the orphan, to the widow, those are the top priorities. The scriptures tell us this and that's a sound bit of teaching. Then, following on from those actions (...), we might have things to say to local authorities, to governments, about shortcomings. And that then becomes sort of politics, it might just be “please, can we find a way of creating more affordable housing, Mr Local Authority Councillor or Mr Local MP, or Misses Local MP”. That is the right role of the church. To be deeply connected in the local community, to be deeply aware of the issues. It almost automatically leads on to speaking truth to power, challenging the shortcomings of the safety net.

Alan’s personal and professional experiences in the church, in light of his Christology, lead him to understand that the ultimate role of the church is to be completely entrenched in the community that it serves, to feel its suffering so deeply that it is propelled into political action - whether that is collectively putting pressure onto the local government to resolve the problems that their community is facing, or individually being agents of change in positions of power. Political reform and collective renewal must always be at the centre of those actions.

Regardless of how they choose to organise and act, the participants in this research all regard collective and transformative action as the output of their faith. Radical Christianity necessarily involves some form of community organising and grassroots action, with the church serving as a nucleus for this type of political engagement.

5.3.2 The Church as an agent of change

It becomes increasingly clear throughout the collectivist efforts of Radical Christians - externally through community organising and internally through radical hospitality - that they are building a movement that envisions the Church as a key player and agent of change. The physical building of the church is transformed into a space that doesn’t stop at welcoming and embracing marginalised people and anyone in material and spiritual need, but is active in systematically dismantling the systems that keep those people marginalised and needy.

Historically, there have always been movements within Christian denominations and groups in the margins of the Church who have sought to do just that, participating in the wider

political struggles of their time. Interviewees mentioned several past leaders (such as Leonardo Boff, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, Stewart Headlam and Martin Luther King) and movements (such as different Christian socialist groups, the civil rights movement and liberation theologies of Latin America) in their answers to my questions on how and why they act. Often taking inspiration from these, or having reached a similar framework independently, Radical Christians want to establish their communities today as agents of change in their personal context of a global city of the twenty-first century.

Within the framework of postsecularity in urban society, these groups should be able to find optimal conditions for the introduction of religious leaderships in political engagement. Radical Christianity is a prime example of a religiously motivated collective that wants to be recognised as a serious player in the arena of civil society, and that is extending invitations to work for rapprochement with secular actors towards reshaping their communities.

The conditions of postsecular are crucial for the individual Radical Christians' journey of faith deconstruction and reconstruction, as their religious and political identities are indivisible and they flow between secular and religious environments throughout their lives speaking both political languages with fluency. The rapprochement between the religious and the secular facilitates Christian collectives rising up as progressive political actors with full backing of their religious communities. For Radical Christians, this is already established - at least in their lives and communities. However, the way in which they speak passionately about the Church as an agent of change and crave to see this as a recognisable reality shows that there is still a long road ahead of them.

The manner in which the participants described their ideal church, or the church that they are trying to build, reflects this desire to have it as a source of hope and resources for progressive social movements happening now. For this to happen, there are still gaps that need to be filled, both in terms of internal work that they need to do within the church itself, and with building the partnerships in civil society that they want to have in order to extend their possibilities of action.

I previously mentioned that several participants spoke about how they believe that the church needs to go beyond philanthropy as it only pertains to immediate needs. It is also fair to note that this critique was often followed by recognising that the church, even when its social work is based solely around the typical charitable initiatives such as food banks and night shelters, is very good at doing something, and sometimes meeting immediate social needs is all that a congregation is equipped to do.

I will add below two perspectives on the role of the church as an agent of change from two Anglican priests, whose churches both have a focus on community organising and empowering their members to be political actors in whatever capacity they can. The following quote is from Jim, who I have mentioned previously:

> I think the Church has two horizons, we're a utopian institution that's always looking to the eschatological future. But we also respond to the need right in front of us. And often social action by secular organisations becomes one or the other. It's about abstract campaigning by idealists, (...) or it's running a food bank with no interest in why people are hungry, it is meeting an immediate need. (...) And I think that the church is at its best when it's holding together both. We see this in the ministry of Jesus: that he has both eyes fixed on Jerusalem, but also responds to the person right in front of him. That the two horizons of social action that correspond to the two horizons that eschatology gives us in church.

Jim has quite a practical outlook for the church, which does not prevent him from facilitating all of the community empowering programs that his parish runs. As a contrast, Patrick, a 55 year old Anglican priest, is very intentional with the work he does at his parish as an enactment of his political theology. He talked a lot during our interview about his political background, having grown up in socialist and anarchist circles and now translating that into the clergy as a reordering of power "where the last are first and the first are last":

> So if that's the operating principle that Jesus seems to constantly talk about, that just changes every kind of relationship. (...) What is there to stop any of us from sharing with our neighbours and building those alternative economies in our neighbourhoods, mutual aid and all that can go with it in different ways. Can begin to make people realise that we don't have to always rely on somebody else making the changes. And if enough people start living like that, maybe power shifts.

Both of these priests come from the same position of understanding the Church as a radical reordering of things. When Radical Christians talk about the church, they often end up on a balancing act between recognising what it can reasonably do with the resources it has, and passionately wanting it to be much more than a service provider. Ultimately, when it comes to the desired church for Radical Christians, there is always the element of speaking out against the systems that allow for these injustices to continue happening, and empowering their fellow Christians to advocate for change.

In the last section, I briefly touched on Radical Christians' understanding that they are called into collective religious action, which can be seen as a reflection of *ekklesia* in its roots. Considering the aforementioned definition from the ancient Greek of an assembly of citizens in a city-state, there are significant analyses to be made in the triangulation between the Roman context, the use of this word in the early Christian communities and how Radical Christianity reaches back to the roots of the religion - to *ekklesia*. Young-Ho Park brings the first two points of this discourse in *Paul's Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly* (2015). Park points out that for Greek intellectuals, public participation was not a matter of democracy, but of *liberation* (Park, 2015, p.

15). Furthermore, in the Roman context, the two main concerns of *ekklesia* were foreign and military policy, or matters of keeping the peace (Park, 2015, p. 10).

Park then argues that by adopting this civic term in his letters to local Gentile congregations in a context where it would have only been used to designate the one, worldwide Church in Jerusalem, Paul created a symbolic universe in which these early Christians saw themselves as the honourable citizens who represented the city before God. Moreover, it reimagined social dynamics and shattered the divide between public and private, as these Gentile worshippers would often be gathering in their homes (Park, 2015, p. 3).

This origin brings us back to the Radical Christian rejection of a spiritual/material divide that I mentioned earlier. In contemporary Christian contexts, *ekklesia* is normally translated as "church", which brings to it a separation between sacred and secular definitions. This translation, however, misses the significance and nuance of the term for Christians. When we consider the depth of this concept, *ekklesia* is an assembly of those who have been called by God for a spiritual, relational, geographical, and universal existence towards the common good (Caudle, 2020). The participants in this research seemingly feel this calling and respond to it by being active members of this divine assembly and keeping their eye on their civic duty as Christians.

It is interesting to hear the different perspectives that radical priests and pastors have on the role of the church, as they are in the unique position of being at the forefront of one. Regardless of how much they spoke about the possibilities of the Church being at the forefront in today's civil movements, they all expressed the desire to see this happening. Hopeful realism must come into play here, as these leaders suspend their own disbeliefs and choose to try to make this into a reality.

Younger participants in this research, who are just starting out in their activist paths, are naturally more optimistic about the transformation of the Church than other participants who have been on this path for decades. I do not believe this should be taken for granted as youthful naivety, instead there might be more opportunities for the Church to grow as a key participant in civil society as these young Radical Christians develop themselves. I will expand on this in the next chapter, in the section on generational specificities within Radical Christianity.

Regardless of individual positioning, in Radical Christianity the Church as it was established through Jesus' ministry and in Acts is to be the blueprint for the ideal society, but being that this is not the case either in the church or in the wider society today, its role is to fight for the conditions that will make this possible. Thus, the church as it exists today needs to be at the forefront of this fight for equality and justice.

5.3.3 Speaking truth to power

The term “speak truth to power” was mentioned by several interviewees when we spoke about the participants’ vision for Christianity and the role of the Church (for example, in Alan’s observation about churches taking on a political stance as a natural consequence of their pursuit of a better world). To speak truth to power, to confront those who hold important positions, whether in government, business or religious institutions, is generally a staple of discussions surrounding activism and social justice movements, which is likely where most Radical Christians get this particular vernacular from. Moreover, I later found that the phrase is originally credited to Bayard Rustin, the Quaker civil rights leader, who wrote in 1942 that this was the role of a religious group. In 1955, “Speak Truth to Power” was also the title of a Quaker pamphlet advocating for nonviolence (Lowenthal, 2021, p. 795). In the context of Radical Christianity, speaking truth to power is notably manifested both outwardly - towards policy makers and to the wider community, including religious leaders - and inwardly - towards the Church itself.

In this section, I want to explore the ways in which Radical Christians advocate for their beliefs within the context of their local religious communities. I previously included quotes from interviewees who have chosen to not be a part of a church if the available communities did not align with their values, which is a common story for many participants. However, finding such a community would still be the ideal outcome for these people, and while they may be frustrated with the churches that they find available, they recognised the potential that a Radical Christian church has to be an agent of change.

Notably, even when one encounters a faith community where they feel safe and whose teachings they can endorse, the process of decolonisation and political organising within the church is constant in order for it to not fall into a place of complacency. This can take the form of holding leaders accountable, questioning decisions, lack of transparency or failure to act on a specific issue. The participants of this research who are more sceptical towards institutional religion and leaderships, but who were still willing to try to find a community in traditional church settings, were very aware of the issues listed above, and their role in ensuring that they were part of reforming and reshaping their communities whenever needed.

This is a very characteristic tension in Radical Christians. They are often suspended between two gravitational pulls, both with their own sense of urgency alongside. On one side, these individuals desire to be a part of wider movements for socioeconomic and climate justice, eager to see systemic change happening around them and playing at least a small role in this struggle. On the other side, they feel the responsibility to reform the Church because of their entrenched belief that it has incredible potential to be a driving force for these movements, more so, that this is its divine role. In the end, these people try to find a niche where they feel they can make a difference, and this often involves the work of dismantling injustices and power structures within their local church itself and the wider institutional Church.

Throughout the interviews, many people were internally conflicted and had differing opinions on how much they can change the institution of the Church and also their local churches. Many participants were sceptical about how much structural change will happen in the near future, and even felt complicit about participating in the Church, when it inevitably has been a part of the systematic oppression of several groups of people throughout history. However, one thing that was essentially unanimous was the hope and desire to make structural change in their local communities.

Frances, for example, spoke a lot about this. Early in her interview, she was talking about the process of finding a church that she connected with in London when she decided to re-engage with her faith. She mentioned finding a church in South London, but once she found that it was not LGBTQ+ inclusive she could not continue going. She is now a member of an inclusive Anglican church in Central London, where the sermons follow the Christological lens identified earlier. They have a strong focus on ecology in sermons, practical uses for the church building that engage the local and wider community, positioning the church as a political space; additionally, they regularly host a range of cultural and political events. However, this hasn't been a permission to take on a more relaxed, passive role for Frances:

> I've been trying to nudge the needle a bit, politicise [the church] and try to have a bit more political discussions. And be of service in the way that I can with other organising projects.

A specific church can be very active on advocacy and building partnerships with climate justice activists, for example, but not have a good grasp on race relations and thus not be engaged in fighting their internalised racism. Or you might have a Christian activist group that is focused on LGBT+ inclusion in religious organisations but that lacks dialogue about intersectionality. In all of these cases, being mindful of intersectionality is essential for a constant process of conversation and growth if these Radical Christian institutions are to fulfil their role of flipping the tables of power imbalance in society.

Despite the errors they might make along the way, the concept of an ideal Radical Christian church was quite clear and similar throughout my interviewees accounts. It was obvious for interviewees that Radical Christian collectives should be as non-hierarchical as possible, giving equal space and voice to members. Penn offered the perspective of a pastor who tries to live by these principles throughout their interview, which is exemplified in the quote below:

> My own personal view is going to be necessarily limited by my experience, my culture. Amongst things that my congregation have taught me is what's appropriation and cultural appropriation (...), because it wasn't a concept I would have come up with by myself. But I knew it when I saw it. When it was said to me I was like, "oh yes, that makes perfect sense". That's why in [the congregation] it's not just the pastors who

> preach and lead worship and celebrate. We want as many people's voices up there as possible.

There is a clear preference within Radical Christians to act within communities that have already undergone at least an initial process of deconstruction, that feel like safe spaces to have discussions in and that have a leadership that is open to listen and make changes. They then use these communities as bases for their external actions and also try to act within the communities themselves to keep building more engaged and inclusive spaces.

The issue with this might be that fewer people are willing to start this process up in religious communities that do not seem to be open to initial changes. It can be argued that if an institution is set on a specific set of dogmas that is rejected by progressive Christians, or it is not open at all to a materialistic theology, an attempt to change their ideology from within would be futile, and then it would just become the case of speaking truth to power as an outsider.

5.4 Theopraxis

The last theme that I identified as foundational for Radical Christianity is theopraxis. As this chapter comes to a close, with the Radical Christian journey and foundations having been covered, a comprehensive picture of Radical Christianity is already formed. When we understand where these people are coming from, their worldviews and their lived practices, we come to an understanding that their theology, their political formation and their methodologies are weaved together into the fabric that makes up the whole of Radical Christianity.

Theopraxis, or theological praxis, relates to Christians' lived practices, rather than systematic knowledge, as they interpret the Christian scriptures and Christology and apply this to their daily lives. Historically in liberation theologies, this has meant systematically establishing life affirming actions in a given community and for its liberation, with the act of theologising following from that praxis (Gutierrez, 1984).

Marcella Althaus-Reid has critiqued liberation theology for often oversimplifying or romanticising the act of "siding with the marginalised" without taking into account the nuances of the lives of those at the margins and thus being ill-equipped to properly deconstruct the logic of the centre that dictates the very norm of who is at the margins (Althaus-Reid, 2004). Thus, there is a need to reimagine practical theology not on the basis of need, but of the self-actualisation of the people in these spaces as they shape a theology that is life affirming to *them*.

This is where I want to centre theopraxis, so that "the church will not need theology, nor vice versa, but the people defining needs and relationships in their own terms from the margins" (Althaus-Reid, 2004, p. 112). I will be using this term as I believe it summarises what matters the most for this research's participants when it comes to their lived experience of religiosity.

With this in mind, different aspects of theopraxis have been touched on in different points earlier in this research, as they are, necessarily, an integral part of participants' worldviews - influencing how they interpret society as a whole and their individual experiences as religious and political actors. Theopraxis is also largely unbothered by systematic theology for its own sake, which the participants in this research have already demonstrated through what they communicated as mattering to them, and their disinterest in discussing theory unless it will lead to a conversation about political implications and actions.

To finalise this chapter, I will elucidate the disposition of Radical Christians' spiritual and political ideology, which ultimately guides their theopraxis.

5.4.1 Religiopolitical ideology

The participants in this research largely demonstrated that their political and religious formation are inseparable, with one informing the other and leading to the characteristically Radical Christian lived practices. Interestingly, there was a variation in terms of what came first for them.

There were people who said they were first awakened to the systemic injustices of society and the need to speak out and try to do something about it through their Christology alone. Only later would they become politically informed and find that their faith aligned with progressive politics that target policy change for economic equality and the protection of marginalised populations, and grassroots movements for social issues such as racial, gender and climate justice. Others first developed political ideologies around these concerns, forming secular political ties, and later reconnecting with their faith and developing their identity as Christians.

There was also a third group of people whose faith and politics grew instinctively together through their formative years, whether they were active in church life or held a more private expression of faith in lieu of finding a community that aligned with their values. Based on my interviews and the conversations I had during my participant observation, this seems to be most common within Radical Christians. Regardless of how they get to a stage of being called to act, when it comes to how their religious and political ideologies translate into practice they are forged together into one in these individuals' thought process.

Frances explained this positioning as feeling like her political grounding in anarchic communism and Christianity are one and the same, that "it feels like we are all speaking the same language". Patrick is another participant whose politics and beliefs are one and the same. At one moment during our interview he mentioned that in his teenage years someone jokingly said to him that he would either become a priest or a politician. As a priest, he lives out theopraxis in his congregation, where he tries to encourage an unapologetically political space:

> So, I've never been attracted to the kind of religion that is miserable and judgmental, or the kind of politics that thinks that only its particular sect has the answer. I'm a little bit influenced by anarchist communism. (...) I largely believe that at Holy Communion we learn how to share and we are incorporated into a community where there's a place for everyone at the table. (...) Whether they be LGBTQI+, whether they be people who don't like those logos or slogans, wherever they fall on any spectrum really. I believe that that sense of hospitality, which some people might call a kind of a radical hospitality, a place for people, is pretty close to where I try to practise faith and politics.

We can see above a combination of several foundations of Radical Christianity in action - a Christocentric lens, life-affirming theology, anti-tribalism, the church as an agent for change, and creating microcosms of inclusion. When I asked Patrick about his work in daily life and what he was trying to accomplish at the parish, he began by giving me a list of the sacraments, saying that his life was pretty normal in terms of celebrating mass, saying the morning and evening prayers, etc. He proceeded to talk about, in practical terms, how this community is organised and run on the basis of what I consider to be Radical Christian theopraxis and how this can be exported to the wider community surrounding the church:

> I always try to work with as many other people as possible. I have no paid staff here, but I believe always in transparency and working with other people, teamwork for me is at the heart of things, collegiality, on the common life, koinonia, as one might say. And I also try my best to practise those things and encourage others. (...) So I try to practise anti-sectarianism in everything that I do. And throughout what I try to teach and model in terms of practice, I try to show that we want a better world, that Christian socialism is a way of life rather than a slogan on a T-shirt or a banner, simply to hold up.

This second account shows a process of taking the local church from a place of internal hospitality to moving outwards, trying to form partnerships and live out a Radical Christian practice. Patrick went on to talk more about the practicalities of this religiopolitical ideology when I asked him about what were some of his challenges as a priest. He immediately mentioned neoliberal capitalism as a “massive challenge for us all”, and that he thinks that “there's something about the importance of seeking in our resistance to neo capitalism also a prefiguration of a better way”.

Patrick spoke of trying to support people facing problems, whether those are psychological matters like depression and loneliness, or systemic oppressions like unemployment, housing or financial problems. In the latter cases, for a long time his work revolved around signposting to people in other agencies who could help in a better way. Unfortunately, he explained that over the past fifteen years many of the people and organisations that his community relied on have either closed, have had to reduce their capacity

or are less reliable due to hostile environments created by government actions, which makes advocating on behalf of these people much harder.

> Whilst as a priest my Bishop's gonna support me to work with somebody without any documents or any situation, many other people are having to work within a legal framework which means that if they do something against the law they can be either prosecuted or lose their job. So trying to work creatively to help people who have faced torture, war, violence, neo capitalism, which has to do with Western foreign policy, or whatever else it might be, sometimes we face these things together as human beings and try to find a way through to make sure that sometimes a person can at least have somewhere to sleep for the night, or make sure there's at least tonight they're going to be safer than they would have been.

As the conditions for social support from governmental agencies and NGOs worsen, Patrick's role (as surely is the case with many religious leaders who work on a framework of theopraxis) increasingly becomes one of creating microcosms of inclusion and doing advocacy work for change to happen on behalf of the marginalised people that are at most risk in our society, both via community organising and trying to advocate for them within the Church and in Parliament.

Despite his frustration with looking back and seeing that he has been working for the same things all this time, to stop the rise and mitigate the effects of racism and fascism in real people's lives, Patrick also spoke with passion about the hope that his faith brings him, bringing back the idea of a hopeful realism:

> For me, there's always theology, there's always a little bit of political analysis, there's always a little bit of art and culture and there's always a shared solidarity at times just realising the world, as obviously - probably - to all of us Christians, the world has been saved. We can't be messiahs, but that doesn't mean that we can't do a little bit that then makes a difference.

The extract above shows how Patrick's political and religious identities are fully integrated, and throughout his interview he continued to be direct about this fact. In the Radical Christian's process of political and religious formation, political action can be taken via two avenues: either in their external affiliations - whether those are religious or secular - or as a subversive act of building the society they want on a small scale, with the creation of radically hospitable spaces. This may also be read as a path of advocacy and a path of community organising. Within this paradigm, we can see these people's ideal world in how their communities are run, which continuously serves as inspiration and motivation to advocate for structural changes outside of the church.

As Radical Christians' faith matures and they become more aware of their positionality and the injustices around them, a religiopolitical ideology and subsequent action are inevitable

for them. Regardless of *how* they arrived at Radical Christianity, and their varying doctrinal backgrounds and political formations, the participants hold as their core beliefs optimistic materialism, radical hospitality and prophetic action, with all of the intricacies that these practices entail.

5.4.2 Dissident Discipleship

It became increasingly clear in my interviews and participant observation that Radical Christianity as a form of religious life can be described as a faithfully dissident discipleship. Having spoken with a variety of these individuals and observing them in their communities, they are proud of being Christians in what this means to them (as seen in the sections above) and living out this religious identity as collectives driven by learning, mutual encouragement and public action. I covered before how some participants choose to act within traditional church communities, while others opt for alternative forms of community living. In either case, the form of discipleship that best reflects their lived experiences as progressive Christian political citizens is a dissident one, as they are foundationally focused on reforming the religion and recentering silenced voices in it.

Interestingly, the Radical Christians who I came into contact with have very distinct systematic theologies and denominational backgrounds. Some still hold close to a very structured set of doctrines, while others are more open to non-traditional biblical interpretations that diverge from denominational dogma. What unifies these people is their Christological lens which supports a life affirming theology and their sense of urgency in developing active theopraxis.

I mentioned that some participants fall into a universalist bracket, or even have a strict existentialist worldview in which “eternity” is something played out in our lifetimes. Meanwhile, other participants had quite a more traditional Christian of the existence of a “now and not yet”, of a transcendental existence that is outside of our grasp. However, in those cases, where they might have a traditional understanding of some divine justices being reserved for that otherworldly plain, these Christians still believe in a divine mission to do everything that is in one’s power to have justice on Earth.

In Radical Christianity, faith is the motivator, the hope that fuels each individual towards collective action towards a life affirming theology. The individuals in Radical Christian institutions and networks can come from a wide variety of backgrounds and still hold quite different secondary theological views. However, they find each other in their condition of being dissidents longing for discipleship, being called towards a public manifestation of *ekklesia*. This differentiates the Radical Christian framework from more traditional forms of discipleship and revival, in which the end goal is to engage (mostly in individualistic terms) with people with the

intent to bring them into the structure of private religious life. Radical Christianity flips this script when it interprets revival as an all-encompassing defence of life itself.

The Radical Christian journey ends with understanding their positionality as both religious and political actors, who are concerned with liberation from all forms of oppression that permeate an unjust society. It follows that their role in the story of salvation is forming bonds with the universal community of believers to strengthen themselves and join the efforts in civil society to ensure the material and spiritual conditions for all life to thrive, understanding in their faith that all forms of life are sacred. Thus, it is frustrating for them when people within the faith itself do not recognise this calling and get caught in internal power struggles and division, or limit their action to mere evangelism and charity.

Alan, who I mentioned has a long history of working with homelessness both towards immediate faith-based action and longer term policy work, was of the opinion that churchgoers providing support are often "well-meaning amateurs", in the sense that their hearts are in the right place, but they lack an understanding of the core issues at hand. Throughout his religious life, he has been an active dissident in his church communities, often bringing new forms of social action through resistance and activism within fairly traditional churches:

> Faith has certainly been a motivation for me and for all the people I used to work with in different churches, (...) but for many people, they would be doing it in order to try and win converts for Christ. And that to me is a worthy motivation, but it shouldn't be the primary motivation in reaching out to people in need because it's a kind of an unequal relationship. When you're at church, you're settled, you're reasonably secure, and you're dealing with people who might have major life issues, trauma, addiction, broken relationships, mental health issues, etcetera. I think the church is at its best when it leaves aside its own evangelical motivations and looks at the issues in front of it and says "what are those issues and what can we do about them?" And it has to be an honest conversation.

The distinction I want to bring here is that evangelism and renewal in Radical Christianity is all-encompassing, it is a renewal of all things, not just (or even necessarily at all) in the context of people being converted into Christianity. I understand, from this research, that Radical Christian discipleship is subversive in the sense that it starts in the church and moves outwardly, not outwardly in the hopes of pulling people into the church.

Patrick is another example of leading dissident discipleship in his church. When I asked him about the importance of being part of a Christian community and of Christians being involved in political action, he started off saying that he is not in competition with anyone else, that the fundamental Christian theology is asserted in the creeds and in the outworkings of the fundamental doctrines and dogmas of the church, which he tries to practise in his life. For him,

being a Christian is believing that grace is in our midst, perfecting the world around us, and being in Christ is to understand what it is to be a human being living in community.

At face value, this is not different from what most Anglicans who follow the sacraments and go to church on occasion would have to say. However, Patrick is also a universalist priest (although he mentioned that he does not disclose this theological interpretation so openly) who is deeply concerned with the politics of Christianity. For him, and for the Radical Christians as a whole, being a Christian is not enough. Participation in the sacraments and church life does not grant the Christian with ownership of morality:

> To be a Christian is to be anti-racist, is to be a person who seeks mercy and forgiveness and the best options for people's lives, to live in a world without war and violence, to live in a world without fear, to see one's hopes and dreams fulfilled. These are not sort of, like, you know, as if somehow there are some implications and you can choose to follow them or not. (...) You know, you mean your religion is about everything of life? Well, yes it is about everything of life. Living life, seeing everything as blessed, and trying to bring blessing rather than curse into human society and into every interaction of our lives? Yes.

This reflection was echoed in virtually all of the interviews I led, with different thought processes and words, but with the same final understanding that Christianity is the affirmation of the sacredness of life and a commitment to living for the renewal of God's sacred Creation. So, naturally, it follows that Radical Christianity's dissident discipleship is a constant movement towards recentering oneself and one's community, towards building a working *ekklesia* that enacts a different way of life.

I saw this in the narratives of the young people I interviewed who volunteer in Radical Christian spaces or work with activism, such as Frances, Sarah, Emily, Megan, Stevie, and others. Also with the church leaders, like Martin, Penn and Jim, in addition to Patrick above, who consistently try to ensure their congregations are speaking truth to power and participate in anti-empire building actions as much as their positionality allows them. All the stories that I have been highlighting so far show individuals who are seriously engaged in their religious communities in various forms of capacity building and activism. Their involvement with the religion is marked by collective praxis, as their interpretations of the faith revolve around action.

The concept of theopraxis and its output of a dissident discipleship invokes John D. Caputo's "weak theology". In *The weakness of God* (2006), Caputo argues that by untying God from a constrictive order of *being*, the provocation of their name is set free to be disseminated in every direction as a vocative force rather than confining its force to the strictures of naming a present entity (Caputo, 2006). I touched on this in the early stages of this research, but the concept of a weak theology is now seen exemplified through the lived practices of Radical Christianity.

Caputo's suggestion, which I believe that is lived out in the Radical Christian framework, is that God is not interpreted as an omnipotent "onto-theo-cosmo-logical" power source for the universe, but as the unconditional demand for beneficence, the heart of a heartless world and the call that summons us to rise beyond ourselves (Caputo, 2006). Calling this a "weak" theology and interpreting God as a calling rather than an entity serves to emphasise the responsibility of humans to act in this world.

The Radical Christian God is manifested through act, it is named through the lived practices of people who affirm life. Whether or not they are Christians themselves, they are living out Radical Christianity because they are working towards life renewal, which is in itself Christianity. Faith is lived out rather than named. According to Caputo, in a weak theology God is a provocation (or, as I would put it, a language) rather than a determinate entity. I believe this is what Radical Christians express when they enact their faith in outward action. Moreover, this theological language serves as a protest against idolatry and misconceptions based on fundamentalist and culturally conservative readings of the Bible, which typically regard a "strong" God and theology, one that is solipsistic, revolving around tradition for tradition's sake.

To live out a faithfully dissident discipleship empties the space that would be normally occupied by a normative religion founded on strong theology. It leaves the religious actor more mobile and adaptable, which is essential if they want to be challenged into new perspectives and directions, given their concern with taking action and truly opting for the margins. The Radical Christian is free to find faith in direct action, community organising, advocacy work and generally building spaces of resistance. It is an exercise in emptying oneself and working within a universalist, collectivist worldview.

5.4.3 Political Theology

The foundations of Radical Christianity come to a close here, with the understanding of the full implications of Radical Christian political theology. It has become clear that what matters in this worldview is taking up hopeful and life affirming action for the renewal of humanity.

James K. A. Smith explored the concept of a why/how divide in Christian thought and practice in his book *You Are What You Love*, as I have covered in the literature review for this research. I found this logic to be extremely important in Radical Christian praxis. My participants tended to base their theology on *how* they can enact the core commandments and teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, and often do not care as much about systematic theology (the *what*) after the point of identifying the practices they are called to live by. One participant called this "unhelpful theology", as she did not find that it had a practical role in her lived practices.

Given its distinguishing characteristics of a materialist and universalist-oriented religion, Radical Christianity is primarily a religion of action. More specifically, collective political action in

the public square. This is where the relevance of the why/how discourse lies for this expression of faith. Radical Christian systematic theology and spiritual practices are the things that bring action into being, but their God *is* (or at least they are named) through action. Therefore, the Radical Christian God may be brought into being and their faith may be enacted outside of religion altogether, if the action of creating the Kingdom of God is done by other means, other religious or secular groups. Ultimately, what they care about is that this is achieved.

When it comes to sermons, a Radical Christian church understands part of their mission to make this vision seen and encourage its congregants to live out this radical truth. VRC and its preachers, in particular Martin, consistently went back to this message during the Sundays I attended. There was a permeating emphasis applying this hermeneutic to new biblical texts. They focused on the practice of being interrupted, of breaking the status quo with a constant exercise of looking around for opportunities to be disrupted by the powerless and to disrupt the powerful. One of the last sermons I listened to was centred around Luke 8:40-56, where Jairus, a synagogue leader, asks Jesus to heal his daughter. On the way to their house, where she would be, an unnamed woman who had been bleeding for many years touches the edge of Jesus' cloak and is healed. He then proceeds to stop and look for whomever interrupted him. Once the woman comes forward, he confirms that her faith had cured her. Only then does Jesus continue on his way.

The importance of this passage in a Radical Christian framework comes from the dichotomy between a man of religious and social status and an unnamed woman, and Jesus' immediate attitude of letting this powerful person wait while he attended to someone who traditionally would have been disregarded. From a Radical Christian perspective, political theology involves a constant exercise in reshaping, subverting and improvising theology to find its political message for how to live out faith in one's context. It is interested in disrupting traditions and boundaries that surround the roots of Christian philosophy, which prevent it from growing and being aired out. It always goes back to the Christian scriptures and finds its most radical meaning to guide Christian practice.

This methodology on political theology continued to be seen throughout my involvement with Radical Christian groups and individuals in how radically they read the Bible.[18] The gospel of Luke in particular is typically elevated as the gospel of social justice, with passages such as Mary's Song in Luke 1:46-55 and Jesus reciting Hebrew Scripture at a synagogue in Luke 4:16-21. Both of these passages focus on the proclamation of liberation for the oppressed, good news for the poor, condemnation of excessive wealth and threat to those in positions of power.

[18] There is a biblical lexicon included in the end of this section with the key scriptural passages that were referenced by participants in explaining their theological formation, both during interviews and in the two case studies, which will also be useful for the next chapter.

Perhaps the biggest example of their exercise in political theology is how Radical Christians collectively read the Sermon on the Mount, which is present in Matthew 5-7 and also in Luke (I will make a note on the differences in interpretation between the two gospels shortly). In this famous text, Jesus gives a sermon that subverts the social order and status quo of the people of that time. It starts with a dense passage elevating the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who are hungry for righteousness, the merciful, etc. Shortly after, Jesus claims that he came not to abolish the (religious) law or the Prophets, but to fulfil them. He then proceeds with a series of recommendations that follow the structure "you've heard it said… but I tell you…". Immediately after saying that he did not come to abolish the law, Jesus deconstructs the prevailing cultural interpretation of the religious law that was prevalent in his religious community and shows a completely different way to live out their faith.

This passage has been interpreted in many ways. It has both been weaponised to control religious communities and relegated to a privatised and overtly spiritual interpretation. The former will have religious communities misinterpret those commandments in a way that is still legalistic and culturally conservative, while the latter removes the political core of the passage. Conversely, in the Radical Christian exercise in theopraxis, this passage is a radical reordering of power. It is meant to encourage the followers of Christ to aim for higher levels of justice on Earth, to lift up marginalised voices and to believe in the transformative power of collective action. It gives them a blueprint for what the Kingdom of God looks like, "on Earth as it is in Heaven".

The Sermon on the Mount is also present in Luke 6:17-49 in a more concise version that is less commonly used in religious spaces. Coincidently or not, Luke's version also touches more directly on the material aspects of the message. For example, religious leaders may prefer Matthew's version of "blessed are the poor in spirit" rather than Luke's more direct "blessed are the poor" because it implies a spiritual lack rather than a material one. However, one interpretation should not negate the other - this is a material message as well as a spiritual one. The issue arises when the implications of Luke's version are removed from this narrative.

The Sermon on the Mount is almost contradictory, firstly because it involves careful wording to ensure that its subversive message can be heard without being too overt, and secondly because it calls for a reordering of power that seems humanly impossible. This is where many Christian traditions will say that "now and not yet" comes into play, but perhaps that is where an optimistic materialism should be instead. I want to bring Caputo back, as he has described the "Kingdom of God" as the experience of the impossible that drives a "mad economy" or "sacred anarchy" of justice beyond law, hospitality beyond proprietorship, forgiveness beyond getting even (Caputo, 2006).

Radical Christianity, choosing to believe in the Kingdom of God as an attainable material reality, launches itself into what this means in practice. Their kingdom is open to anyone,

because salvation is already materialised. The “provocation” of God begets unconditional hospitality, and in accordance with the Christian scriptures, it is poetically directed to the poor, the weak, and those excluded from civil society. Caputo argues that *doing* hospitality is what constitutes *being in* the kingdom. The name of God is the name of an event that comes calling at our door, which can and must be translated into the event of hospitality (Caputo, 2006).

The call for the Kingdom of God is to push the limits of the world towards radical hospitality, where the poor are blessed and where religious leaders are told to wait while the needs of the nameless are tended to. Radical Christianity is universalist not necessarily in the strict theological sense of believing in the doctrine that all individuals will eventually be saved, because not all participants were even familiar with this, but in the sense that it opens the possibility for religious action to be fully integrated into civil life without the confines of institutional religion. After all, these people feel they are being called for the collective liberation of humanity. They live within a nuanced understanding of faith. Patrick explained that “we all live contextually”:

> I would describe (...) that the outworkings of those beliefs [the creeds and the practice of Orthodox Christianity] are found in social movements across religion and faith and non-faith and that are about building up fullness of life, solidarity, justice, peace. That are about bringing an end to the idols of death, one might say, to use a kind of a prophetic sounding language.

Radical Christianity’s political theology is a commitment to the fullness of life and understanding evangelism as an all-encompassing renewal. Radical Christians go through a meaningful process of faith deconstruction in order to get to this stage. After removing all of the rigidness that can surround religious tradition, separating what is not Christocentric from what is, shedding the remains of tribalism, they find the easiness and clarity of theopraxis and revival.

Below, we have Jack explaining his current understanding of what Christian revival is:

> Revival today is not about people becoming Christian. I suppose that maybe it is a small bit of it, but for me it's more the thriving and the fullness of life in all areas. So actually it’s, for example, a thriving welfare state and seeing a renewal of that is part of what I would call revival now because it's part of the restoration and renewal of all things, and seeing an outpouring of that. So social justice initiatives of the poor being fed. When Jesus talks in Luke 6, if I've come to set the oppressed free, declare the year of the Lord's favour, that in its fullness and seeing glimpses of that to me is probably more what revival is than seeing 50 people become Christian.

Based on what I was able to observe in the lived practices of the participants of this research, Radical Christians’ political theology (manifested in their praxis) has the potential to strengthen communities to be radical in their own ways, however small or large their impact can be - whether it is a community of policymakers or a microcosm of inclusion. There is a

misconception that this is a diluted interpretation of secular ideology that is adapted for progressive religious actors to be able to keep the faith, but it is its own political ideology rooted in the Christian scriptures themselves.

This interpretation has always been present in the history of Christianity, as I have mentioned before, but perhaps this moment in time could present the opportunity for these communities to get more widespread recognition. There are two factors that I believe support this view: a growing understanding that we live in a postsecular age of religious and secular rapprochement, and social media as a way of connecting with like minded people and finding resources that support one's worldview. The next chapter focuses on how Radical Christianity is present today both in London as an example of a postsecular global city, and in network settings that are facilitated by the new possibilities for connection brought by social media.

Table 4: Biblical Lexicon

Biblical Reference	Importance for Radical Christianity
Hebrew Scriptures	In a Christocentric hermeneutic, the Hebrew Scriptures show a glimpse of what was to come and be concluded in the Gospels. Through this interpretation, the Hebrew Scriptures are read as a collection of stories about marginalised communities fighting against a representation of an oppressive empire, and how God has always been on the side of the oppressed. The conclusion that Radical Christians take from this is that the biblical texts - and the ultimate meaning of the Bible - are an anti-empire manifesto. This narrative was consistently explored in sermons at VRC.
Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15	These passages include the Year of Jubilee and a general commandment to release people from their debts, release slaves, and return property to those who owned it. This biblical ruling was referenced by participants and appears in Radical Christian literature as an argument for Christianity being an anti-capitalist philosophy that demands economic, cultural, environmental and communal release against the forces of empire.
Luke 1:46-55; Luke 4:16-21	I noticed in conversations and observing internal materials that the gospel of Luke more broadly is elevated as the gospel of social justice in Radical Christian defence of the religion as a mandate for secular

	political action. Passages such as Mary's Song in Luke 1:46-55 and Jesus reciting Hebrew Scripture at a synagogue in Luke 4:16-21, emphasise Jesus' mission of bringing liberation that is collective and focused on material conditions.
Matthew 4:24; Matthew 9:35; Matthew 14:13-21; Luke 4:40	Examples of Jesus providing free cures for illnesses and feeding the poor. The significance that participants point to in these instances is twofold: the lack of any requirement that is requested of the person being cured or fed in exchange for this action, and the importance of caring about people's material or physical condition or situation.
Matthew 5-7; Luke 6:17-49	The Sermon on the Mount is commonly used in Radical Christian spaces with a focus on reading it as a blessing for the poor and marginalised that subverts the social order and status quo of the time.
Matthew 5:43-44; Matthew 25:35; Luke 10:25-37	Examples of Jesus exhorting his community to welcome immigrants. Radical Christians often note the significance of Jesus himself having been a refugee, as his family had to flee their country from political persecution when he was a child (Matthew 2:12-15).
Matthew 6:19-24; Mark 10:17-23; Luke 12:13-21	Examples of Jesus' critique of the hoarding of wealth.
Matthew 12:9-14; Matthew 21:12-13	The first passage has Jesus performing a healing on the Sabbath, and the second has him turning tables of sellers in the temple. Both instances are used as examples of Jesus using strategies of civil disobedience and, in the first instance, effectively breaking a religious law because he saw it as unjust. The turning of tables in the temple is also regarded as a permission to be angry with injustices and an endorsement of non-violent disruption as a strategy for direct action.
Matthew 23:1-12; Luke 11:37-54	Examples of Jesus pointing to the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his time.
John 4:6-28; John 8:3-11; Luke 7:36-50	Examples of Jesus speaking up for women.

Acts 2:42-47; Acts 4:32-34	The passages describing the first communities of followers of Jesus after his death are consistently read by Radical Christians not as a utopian commune that represents eternity, but what they aspire to accomplish and how Christianity should be lived out in practice.

Throughout this research, I found that there is a collection of foundational biblical passages for Radical Christianity. Some of them have been mentioned so far either in interviewee quotes or in the text as I interpret the data I gathered. I will continue to reference key biblical passages in the coming chapters as relevant, and the table above will serve as a lexicon and resource for easy referencing - especially as these themes appear in several areas of the Radical Christian experience that is being narrated and analysed here.

The passages I identified above came primarily from three sources: they were mentioned by participants in interviews or informal conversations during my participant observation; they appeared in Radical Christian literature, whether that is literature disseminated by the institutions I observed or books and other materials that are important for these individuals or reflect their values; and they were sourced by me in reference to the core values that participants mentioned in our interviews as Christians, but where they did not make a direct biblical reference.

For biblical passages that are recorded in two or more Gospels, I only added one of the available references for clarity. Similarly, for events that happen with frequency in the Gospels, I selected a few passages as examples (most notably, there is a multitude of instances where Jesus cures illnesses, so I included three passages referencing this).

6. Radical Christian Networks

In the previous chapter I sought to lay out who Radical Christians are, based on my observations of community settings and conversations with individuals who felt they somehow identified with the "label" I was proposing. I started mapping the common journeys that these people go through individually in their lives until finding (or consolidating) their faith in Radical Christianity. Afterwards, I synthesised the foundational concepts and themes that came up during this research relating to their worldview, belief systems, motivations and goals, painting portraits of individual Christians as they navigate their lives through belief and action in the city of London.

I now want to use this chapter to provide a wide landscape of Radical Christianity as it stands today in a global city, giving more details on its collective formation and how it intersects with other forms of community living and advocacy groups in their midst. Previous chapters took a more narrative approach, starting from the perspective and experiences of individuals who I engaged with throughout this research and ending with a blueprint of the journey and foundations of Radical Christians. The next sections will culminate on how Radical Christianity exists in the world as religious networks.

I have mentioned before that radical expressions of Christianity - that have similar motivations, interpretations and goals as our subject - have always been present throughout the history of the religion, taking various shapes and forms. The Radical Christianity explored here has a particular historical and cultural context, it culminates in a generational movement that arguably will continue to grow and shape itself. One aspect of this relates back to the opportunities of religious rapprochement of a postsecular society which I have mentioned in different moments previously.

The increasing openness between secular and religious actors to dialogue and collaborate on the public square has been widely studied in the last couple of decades (as referenced in my literature review). While much of this discourse revolves around religious actors using secular language to explain or contextualise their faith, incorporating a secular lived experience with their religious positionality, I believe that there is a much more interesting conversation to be had about a genuine exploration of re-enchantment and suspension of disbelief.

The lived experiences of Radical Christianity in a global city in the 2020s offers a case study for the re-enchantment of the world and suspending disbelief, especially for a young Christian cohort who is growing up with the possibility of religion in political discourse. Their exercise in re-enchantment happens via their optimism, the imagination and mythos rooted in Christianity. They re-enchant the world around them by placing themselves in a grand narrative of good versus evil, where they are called to a mission of liberation of the oppressed, ensuring

that a divine order of equality is established. Much as in a magic realism story, there are elements of the supernatural that permeate their journeys, but ultimately it is a journey of grassroots political advocacy and action. Moreover, a suspension of disbelief is a useful tool for these people to form partnerships outside of their communities. As participants have unanimously said, they do not need other community organisers or advocates to share in their beliefs, but to understand where they are coming from and that they are walking the same path.

Another characteristic aspect of Radical Christianity, which opens a door for a range of future discourse and analysis, is their characteristic niche belonging. Radical Christian networks tend to form around specialised interests, being consequently geographically dispersed and homogeneous in their presentation and ideology. The collective experience of Radical Christianity is predominantly lived out in gathered or dispersed settings, which often also dialogue with aspects of analogue versus digital and intergenerational versus youth-focused approaches.

The participants in this research showed that their faith is uniquely bound to the production of space and meaning in a given locality as forms of resistance to ruling power structures and as a creative effort to build spaces of hope, especially in urban society. Writing about movements for social justice in the city, David Harvey argued that “an understanding of how local solidarities and political cohesions are or can be constructed (particularly in today's unruly urban settings) is essential for thinking through how proposals for social change (particularly those emanating from ideological, political and intellectual circles) might become a reality” (Harvey, 2001, p. 191).

This research has shown that Radical Christianity is organically formed as a community based political movement of individuals coming together in local patterns of solidarity within a broader frame of power relations. Their networks are not static institutions, but instead are a process of being called to *ekklesia*. This directly correlates to Harvey’s discourse on community as a *process* in the context of the struggle to create and maintain belonging through social networks and collective powers (such as churches and other religious institutions, unions, neighbourhood organisations, local governments, and the like). These are the struggles, according to Harvey, that shape community, the sense of a proper way to live and the identities of those within its sphere of influence. Moreover, it is within such struggles “that we must look for hints and possibilities of insurgent forms of change and the quest for social and environmental justice” (Harvey, 2001, p. 192).

I have been developing the argument that Radical Christianity is deeply embedded within this framework as a community that is in constant movement of challenging the status quo, simultaneously offering an alternative vision of religious citizenship and belonging. Interestingly, when I first began this research, I expected there to be a higher concentration of these networks in the capital city, hence the spatial framing within London. However, as I began

making connections and building relationships, I found that while the city is an important space for activism due to its political importance, Radical Christians find themselves spread around the country, building spaces of safety and hope in their local settings.

While there are significant Radical Christian communities in London, the same can be said for any other large city where aspects of community organising and creating intersectional spaces of political resistance can be developed. What became apparent during my fieldwork is that the capital in particular is a place of pilgrimage for dispersed networks when it comes to organising specific gatherings and political actions designed to be more visible.

Based on my primary research and the analysis of the data collected through interviews and case studies, Radical Christianity's presence today revolves around the formation of networks, reflecting on Manuel Castells's understanding of the word as a set of interconnected nodes intersecting mutually with no defined centre. Some of these nodes may have more relevance or prominence, but are all part of the wider network of Radical Christianity. We can understand Radical Christian networks as the organisational arrangement of a group of individuals in their relationships of production, consumption, reproduction, experience, and power expressed in meaningful communication coded by culture (Castells, 2004).

Within this framework, we encounter foci of global and local action, where there is production of meaning, citizenship, resistance and community organising. Thus far, we have observed that Radical Christians often start from an individual place of faith deconstruction, followed by a reconstruction of their beliefs alongside their political formation. They then set out on a search for environments that will encourage these religious practices, where they can build community with individuals who share their values and are eager to enact them in the form of discipleship and political acts of resistance against empire building and advocacy for policy change.

Noticeably, this story does not include the systematic formation of a new theology that does not already exist within the Christian tradition. Rather, these Radical Christians begin from a place of understanding Christianity as a calling to side with the marginalised and they eventually find resources that support this interpretation. Similarly, their collectives do an exercise in extracting this hermeneutic and acting it out in their contexts. Radical Christianity also does not seek to form a centralised base where knowledge or strategies come from. While they do rely on the work that has already been done by other networks to inform their possible paths forward, their suspicion of leadership and understanding that theology must walk with people prevents them from even seeking this type of structured formation. Therefore, there can be several different approaches to Radical Christianity and diverging theological interpretations within it.

The negative side of this decentralised network formation can be a lack of external recognition of Radical Christian efforts in the public square. It can also make it more difficult for

coalitions or partnerships to form if Radical Christian foci are not aware of one another. Therefore, one node in the broader network can be doing focused work in the community they are active in, while another node is acting in a neighbouring area and both being unaware of one another, which will prevent the possibility of a stronger joint commitment for action. This speaks more to the context of local churches, since newer activist networks come from a place of widespread advocacy that facilitates this type of collective engagement. I will speak more about the differences between these two types of networks shortly.

Nevertheless, as it stands today, Radical Christianity can be felt in its decentralised and decisively political action, whether in particular local communities where they are inserted or via advocacy on a national level. I noticed that the individuals in this tradition have been shy in advocating for themselves and speaking out about their collective actions due to a hesitance in being perceived as proselytising. This also comes from a place of believing that the actions they take up in their faith are the minimum they could do in order to participate in their calling to co-create the Kingdom of God.

However, this landscape is changing with the formation of networks that are specifically guided towards widespread advocacy, whether that is Christians showing their support and campaigning for global change (for example, networks focused on climate action or socioeconomic reform) or Christians fighting for equality within the Church itself (for example, for LGBTQ+ or women's rights in the Church, and denouncing harmful practices in the institution). These advocacy groups help to give more weight to Radical Christianity as they seek to be taken seriously as political actors.

6.1 The roots of Radical Christian networks

Going back to the roots of these networks will help to understand where they come from and what is their value within the religion itself. We know from census data[19] that there has been a decrease in people who identify as Christians in the United Kingdom, which directly correlates to an increase in people who identify as not religious. The referenced census data from 2021 also shows, unsurprisingly, London as the most religiously diverse region in England (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

In general, Radical Christians today represent a variation - or evolution - of "believing without belonging" (Davie, 1994). Davie's "believing without belonging" concept refers to the portion of people becoming detached from organised religion while still retaining an

[19] Office for National Statistics (ONS). (2022). Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021 [Statistical bulletin]. ONS website;
Curtice, J., Clery, E., Perry, J., Phillips, M., & Rahim, N. (Eds.). (2019). British Social Attitudes: The 36th Report. London: The National Centre for Social Research.

individualised faith, which ties to the rise of “religious nones”, of which 42% claim to believe in some form of the supernatural.[20]

There is an interesting intersection in the reported increase in religious nones, particularly those who have been brought up with no religion or have lost their childhood faith, with the increase in distrust of religious institutions but respect for religious individuals (British Social Attitudes: The 36th Report, 2019). It appears that a portion of Radical Christians sit somewhere between these categories, with their faith deconstruction leading to an uncertainty of whether the institutional Church can be sufficiently reformed but assured belief in the positive potential of religious action in political life.

Additionally, the same report reflects the experience of several Radical Christians who are leaving the Church of England but moving to nondenominational Christian communities, to the point where these two Christian identifications became proportionally equivalent in the British population in 2018 at 12% and 13% respectively.[21]

Radical Christians were raised by “believing without belonging” parents, or parents who are still present in mainline Protestant denominations or the Anglican church - some of those only being present in church life while raising their children, as they felt they should have a religious education. Some of these children were also raised with both perspectives, as they reported having one family member (either a parent or a grandparent) who was active in church life and encouraged their religious formation, and another who was not and did not. Thus, Radical Christians are well educated in the history, traditions and dogmas of the Church and they choose to stay. They subvert the commonplace cultural “non-practicing” religious identity that is supplemented by an individualised faith because they long for a religious community and understand the Christian praxis as a collectivist one.

I believe that it is difficult to place Radical Christianity in census data because of their attitude towards religious participation. Previous works analysing the perseverance of faith in recent times in Britain have focused mainly on the window to spirituality that statistics on the non-religious people who somewhat believe in God, or even “non-religious Christians” (Abby Day, 2012). This type of study argues that there are people who would self-identify as somewhat spiritual, wanting to retain a connection with God or a divine presence without the involvement with organised religion. However, this is opposite to the Radical Christian experience of community organising and religious action.

On the contrary, the present research has found that Radical Christianity sits within a performative religious experience, where there is a shared commitment and mutual encouragement via the religious community. It is unlikely that a politically engaged “religious

[20] Waite, H. (2022). The Nones: Who Are They and What Do They Believe? London: Theos. p. 6.
[21] Curtice, J., Clery, E., Perry, J., Phillips, M., & Rahim, N. (Eds.). (2019). British Social Attitudes: The 36th Report. London: The National Centre for Social Research. p. 6.

none" would like to be identified as a Christian, even if they hold a private spirituality rooted in Christianity (likely a trace left by their upbringing in the Church). Radical Christians, even with their internal conflicts and varying sentiments when it comes to organised religion, come from a place of hope and optimism that there is space for religion in political life. They also choose to be a part of a religious community, whether this is a church, a non-traditional network setting, or if they still have not found a suitable community that will support their vision for the Church.

My argument is that Radical Christian networks appear within the landscape described above as a niche belonging - albeit an important one - of religious actors who, on paper, were likely to give up religion altogether and find community in secular spaces. However, at the end of their faith deconstruction journey, they find themselves refusing to leave and instead carving a space for themselves within the religion that is not based on an acceptance of status quo, but in a faithful dissidence.

As I covered in the previous chapters, the Radical Christian faith is intrinsically political and collective, hence the importance of it manifesting in communal settings. It expresses itself in an outward motion, where action takes the meaning of a religious sacrament. Moreover, if they cannot find this kind of activist faith community, Radical Christians will soon create it. Having grown up in the Church, these individuals are aware of what the Church can do and what it has been doing. Many of them have confronted their local religious leaders requesting that they create the space for conversations about the role of the Church in systemic injustices and exclusion and trying to organise collective responses. However, they often become frustrated with the lack of engagement in these environments and willingness to take political stances.

This is the point where Radical Christianity separates from the path taken by groups such as exvangelicals, non-religious Christians and other groups who have retained somewhat of a non-religious spirituality after leaving Christianity. Radical Christians are equally concerned that the Church does not go far enough when it comes to outward social action and inward inclusion, but they differ in that they see a future in the structure of religion.

As a result, Radical Christians tend to leave traditional church settings where they feel they have no space for dialogue and find community elsewhere, typically in the form of cooperative networks with more lateral leadership. There are, of course, instances where they can find a church community that is already engaged in the type of community organising and activism they value, or a church that is willing to change in that direction. In either case, there remains a suspicion of authority and continuous questioning of leadership.

With ever growing access to information about religious networks that meet the Radical Christian criteria, these individuals who might otherwise choose a path of non-religion may be persuaded to join an inclusive local church, a faith-based activist group, or other group settings where they can live out their faith collectively.

6.2 Radical Christian queerness

Dispersed Radical Christian networks are typically formed around a common concern, either one that its members are particularly passionate about but does not directly affect them (such as refugee or migrant rights) or one that comes from a direct experience of marginalisation (such as racial justice or LGBTQ+ rights). Naturally, there is a lot of intersectionality in these networks and issues. Moreover, especially in local churches or in settings that are focused on community organising, several different advocacy streams can form based on the concerns that the community itself faces or that happens around them (such as homelessness and affordable housing, the cost of living, or religious discrimination).

All of the examples listed above, as well as others, have been mentioned by participants in this research as the starting point for their political activity, or what they are the most passionate about as Christians. Interestingly, a catalyst for a journey into Radical Christianity that was brought forth by several participants, especially by the younger ones, was the issue of LGBTQ+ rights within the Church. I have begun showing this in the several quotes from Jack, Andy, Megan, Rachel, Martin (speaking about VRC members and visitors), Frances and Patrick, where they centred their own sexualities and gender identities in their Radical Christian journey and showed a deep concern about other queer Christians' space in religious environments. Other participants, such as Sarah, Penn and Stevie, also spoke about the importance of their queerness as Christians during our interviews. When it came to the two institutions I observed, I noticed that sermons at VRC were intentional in including queer people in discourses about marginalisation, and both places had queer members in their leadership.

Considering that a majority of the participants in this research were white, middle class and British, being queer may be the only or one of the few ways in which many of them have or will face marginalisation on a personal level. Consequently, it is understandable that this would have been what awakened them to the injustices inherent in their midst. Queerness and LGBTQ+ identity, thus, is a common motivator for young Christians finding their place in religion and entering into activism.

A lot of young Radical Christians point to identifying their own queerness as a defining moment in their path toward wider political engagement and questioning their position in both the institution of the Church and also the local religious communities where they grew up or where they converted to Christianity. Additionally, this is one of the main concerns they show regarding questioning whether reform can be done within the structure of the Church and if they can endure in a mainline denomination or the Anglican Church, the alternative being to move towards more inclusive denominations or stay active solely in dispersed Radical Christian networks.

This is still an issue that is widely debated and deeply worries these young Christians, despite the fact that inclusive churches are becoming increasingly common, especially in large urban centres. A quick internet search will show several results from the network Inclusive Church,[22] which holds a comprehensive inventory of LGBTQ+ inclusive churches throughout the United Kingdom, with 206 churches associated with the network within London. Even with the movement towards more inclusive churches, radical inclusion is still not close to being a reality throughout all denominations. The participants who talked about this continue to observe or experience LGBTQ+ exclusion and homophobia in their involvement in church life, and recognise that there is still a lot that needs to be done in this regard.

The Radical Christian's relationship with organised religion is especially strained when it comes to the Anglican church and most mainline Protestant denominations that do not accept same-sex marriage. This is a sore issue that often prevents them from being more involved with church life, as they regard the steps that the Church is taking towards full inclusion to be frustratingly slow. Additionally, church communities that want to explicitly be LGBTQ+ inclusive will likely be set up under a denomination that is open, or reject denominations altogether, making internal reform more difficult for traditional denominations.

Beyond being engaged in sexual or gender identities, Radical Christians' queerness is political in the same way that their faith is political and cannot be privatised. Given how their religious and political identities have been knitted together, Radical Christians typically use secular political language in their religiopolitical organisation, and the same can be said of their relationship with queerness. Just as with everything else in Radical Christianity, these individuals would not stop at their own safety and inclusion in a local community, but want to see systematic change. When I was researching online networks for this study, I noticed that many national Radical Christian networks are directly related to LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church, and when individuals are looking for local communities they will likely only consider joining a church that already is inclusive.

Linn Marie Tonstad rightfully mentions in *God and Difference* (2016) that Christians do not need queer thought to discover that God loves everyone and that Christianity has always been driven by debates over insider and outsider and hierarchies of value. However, queer theory can help as "a reading strategy, a diagnostic for cultural and theological imaginaries, associative relationships" and so on (Tonstad, 2016, p. 4).

When diving deeper into queer theology, one starts to have a better grasp of intersectionality and other forms of liberation theology. Queer theology does not limit itself to intellectual advocacy work for LGBTQ+ people in the church, it's a transformative theology that must be read and practised in solidarity with others excluded due to "differences" and

[22] https://www.inclusive-church.org/

marginalised conditions (whether relating to gender, sexual, racial or class roles). It should be incarnated, practised by speaking truth to power and fighting for social and political transformation not only for inclusion, but for legitimacy.

One of the first people to embrace the term “queer theology” in the 1990s, Robert E. Goss, explores the theme of Jesus’ social practices modelling a new “network of social relations that were nonexploitative, nonhierarchical, and nonoppressive” (Goss, 2002, p. 166), where people found hope in the form of *basileia* relating - meaning a kingdom, or realm, where those values are upheld. Goss holds the view that Jesus’ death was political, due to his radical solidarity with oppressed men and women, and that the cross is God’s invasive identification with the oppressed - which, now, includes those oppressed because of their sexual preference or identity. He concludes that, as Jesus the Christ belongs to the queer practice of liberation, we need a Christology that is rooted in queer liberative practice (Goss, 2002, p. 166). As a political martyr for the marginalised, Jesus’ political death opens space for a theology that is positive to difference, to sexuality, to life.

Similarly, Marcella Althaus-Reid explores this at length in *The Queer God* (2003), where she defines “queer as a site of struggle where people’s oppressed sexualities have become a locus for the struggle for justice in their communities, that is, of denunciation and/or annunciation of alternative ways of being communities and societies” (Althaus-Reid, 2003, p. 114). This trajectory offers a lot of opportunities for transformation in the Church, as it frees people to envision what a religion of liberation can look like in their cultural and historical contexts.

The people I interviewed had queer theology as something inherent in their religious formation, and this exploration of liberation theology is becoming increasingly normative in Radical Christian spaces - as seen in the groups I observed and in how interviewees operate within their communities. There is a number of recent works that offer palatable introductions to this theme beyond apologetics and are resources for inclusive churches and individuals in their journeys, like Linn Marie Tonstad’s *Queer Theology* (2018), Chris Greenough’s *Queer Theologies* (2020), Keegan Osinski’s *Queering Wesley, Queering the Church* (2021) and Jarel Robinson-Brown’s intersectional *Black, Gay, British, Christian, Queer: The Church and The Famine of Grace* (2021). These are notable examples amongst a growing need for a transformative theology that is relevant for the people at the forefront of Radical Christianity.

Queer theology is about otherness, it offers an exercise on how otherness can teach us something new about life that we have lost due to patriarchal and colonialist dominance over Christianity. In Marcella Althaus-Reid’s words, “queer theory celebrates diversity, the crossing of borders and imprecise frontiers. It liberates the assumed reference of theology and therefore liberates Godself from assumptions and ideological justifications” (Althaus-Reid, 2003, p. 143). She proposes a theology that does not seek “artificially united identities, homogenous

understandings or common-sense definitions", but instead seeks "diversity, possibility and the sense of irreducibility which comes from the experiences of people at the margins and the margins of theology itself" (Althaus-Reid, 2003, p. 143).

LGBTQ+ inclusiveness and allyship within Christianity has become an important marker. It implicitly signifies a general openness and willingness to learn, a welcoming environment not only to LGBTQ+ people but to queerness in the sense of otherness. Notably in this context there is a focus on cultural and racial differences and neurodivergence.

Moreover, when it comes to Radical Christians who are interested in theological discourse, queer theology gives them the methodology to envision a future outside of a reformed church, one with a transformed church that moves with the other and is shaped out of the ever changing lived experiences of marginalised communities. Embracing queer theory, Radical Christians advocate for a Church that truly is at the forefront of change and is an advocate for the marginalised and cannot be static, continuing to walk alongside and to radically love the people who are excluded from civil and religious life.

6.3 Generational specificities

Radical Christianity is not a phenomenon specific to one generation. Nevertheless, there are noticeable generational differences to consider. While there are older Radical Christian leaders who share similar stories and discourses, the younger generations (Millennials and Generation Z) are changing this field and are largely responsible for structuring the new network settings that are becoming prevalent in the way Radical Christians organise.

Older Radical Christians (from their early forties onwards) tend to have life experiences and paths to their religiopolitical formations that are quite different from those of younger individuals. First, they often were seen as more divergent in their local communities in their formative years, even as "troublemakers". The participants in this research generally spoke about the social and political issues that concern them as Christians as something they take for granted regardless of age bracket, but the older participants recalled being met with concern, pushback, and criticism a lot more than the younger ones. While all of these people instinctively understood their religion as a movement for the margins and a collective call for sociopolitical reform, acting on this decades ago was seen as more subversive than it is today. There was more of a rebellious connotation to it, as opposed to now where the intersections of religion and politics are more openly discussed and accepted.

These elders of Radical Christianity acted as pioneers in many ways. They took what they learned in their secular activism, policy work and experience as marginalised people themselves, bringing new ideas into the church and implementing positive changes to their social programs and how their local communities engaged with wider political struggles. It is

also important to note that amongst these are the first openly queer Christians taking up leadership positions in the church and fighting for inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in church life.

Additionally, their political formation comes more directly from civil rights and secular political movements of the second half of the twentieth century - whether as children hearing about them and being in contact with older people who were involved in those, or directly as activists in their teenage years and early twenties. Thus, a "network" setting was already at play, although in a much different way as this was pre-social media - which I will discuss further shortly. While these elders might not be as present in newer networks, they are certainly present in institutional settings, whether as leaders in radical churches or as lone voices fighting for reform in their local communities. Another thing to note is that Radical Christian networks are typically inspired by the same social movements that the older generations participated in, so they still influence how these networks "do" Christianity and activism.

Relating to that shared history, the intellectual and spiritual formation of older Radical Christians is very similar to that of younger ones. Both have equivalent journeys of experiencing cognitive dissonance at church growing up, a natural inclination towards leftist politics and anti-establishment and being suspicious of structured religion. This aligned with their deep personal faith and understanding that Christianity amounts to radical equality and the defence of the marginalised - whoever that might be at their given time. What we find is that despite very different cultural contexts, the generational divide in Radical Christianity is mostly one of format, not content.

Younger Millennials and Generation Z, for their part, might have been brought up in conservative environments, but they had easy access to different perspectives and voices that could allow them the confidence to know they were not alone. If the necessary references for their political formation were not directly available in their religious or family environments, these individuals could still find points of contact or communities living out Radical Christianity via social media, with much closer proximity with other ways of life at university and in an increasingly diverse city.

Here I want to note that this is speaking strictly of the British context, especially of people who currently live in the capital. Although they might have grown up in smaller towns which tend to be more homogenous and where access to alternative worldviews and communities is not as common, these individuals still were able to find this in their formative years via national networks and through attending higher education and moving to urban centres. This is especially true for the younger generations, due to the development of social media and individual online presence at an early age.

Generation Z can seamlessly blend their online and offline worlds, which they have learned to do without the guidance of their elders. This has led to daily practices that are specific to them - albeit being increasingly adopted by others (Katz, Ogilvie, Shaw and

Woodhead, 2021). Generation Z was shown to have been the cohort that felt the most lonely at the start of the pandemic,[23] which added to the need for more online spaces throughout all areas of society with the subsequent lockdowns, making the process above expand quicker. Naturally, this also applied to postmillennials' political involvement, and can be seen in how Radical Christian networks are formed as well.

These younger individuals' way of doing things is profoundly shaped by digital technology, which in turn leads to new forms of working, connecting with others, activism, and so on. More importantly, they have an idea of the world they want to bring into being, one that centres authenticity and solidarity (Katz, Ogilvie, Shaw and Woodhead, 2021). These online and dispersed political gatherings also allow for further collaboration and intersectionality with people from different cultural backgrounds, social status, geographic locations, and abilities/disabilities.

When I was researching on the internet for potentially Radical Christian networks to be involved in this research, there were two results I continuously came across based on my initial guidelines for what constituted Radical Christianity: the first are networks who had been formed many years prior around church denominations, made up mostly of older Christians who have been involved in advocacy for a specific cause alongside their involvement in their local church communities. These networks still have some form of offline structure via their affiliations with a denomination. It is also important to note that these results mostly came from direct Google searches. The second are dispersed online networks mostly made up of Millennials and Generation Z, typically formed in the last few years and focused on young Christians coming together to seek community and advocate for the causes that they are passionate about. These communities typically have their start on social media, and remain as mostly online communities. Naturally, I found these networks while researching on social media platforms, mainly Instagram.

Initially, one notices the generational contrasts between these two dispersed network models, both in age and how members choose to organise around social media. However, there is a more interesting point of departure on how much they *rely* on social media at all. The first model relates to a more traditional organisation, there is still a centralised structure around institutional religion and members seem to be more involved in their local church communities. Whereas I believe that the second model is where young Radical Christians who do not identify with their local churches end up finding a radical community that speaks to them.

Back in my search for radical communities, other than researching online, I also asked for suggestions directly to people I had already connected with in London. These inquiries mostly pointed me in the direction of local churches that I would not have found online, because

[23] The Policy Institute at King's College London. (September 2021). Covid Cohorts: Pandemic Impacts and Attitudes Across the Generations.

- as I mentioned when I went into detail about the local Radical Christian church - they typically don't advertise themselves as an activist centre or as particularly politically inclined, even though they are the collectives doing most of the work in local community organising. However, if I was not able to find these places online, neither would a local young Christian seeking to engage in this type of community, unless they were to visit all of their local churches or receive a recommendation from a friend who can vouch for their church's religiopolitical positionality.

When it comes to the generational specificities in Radical Christianity, the most common narrative is of an initial clustering stemming from the late 20th century social and political movements. Today, those original Radical Christians are found mainly in the local church and in dispersed networks with institutional bases, but their main religious involvement is still in the local church. For younger individuals, it is easier to find connection with fellow Radical Christians online, via advocacy groups that organise and share community mainly in online spaces.

Due to the benefits of finding community and information online - especially on social media - and an increased openness in the global city to talk about spirituality and religious involvement in one's civil life, the path to Radical Christianity is a smoother one, albeit they still sometimes struggle with lack of support and openness from their local communities. The role that younger Radical Christians assume, then, is to set out and create their own spaces, which often take the form of nationwide networks and online communities. This model allows these individuals to find clusters of people with similar identities, interested in the same issues and eager to tackle, with focused action, one specific topic - for example, climate justice or queer representation in the Church.

With regards to the global city as the setting for Radical Christian action, during my interaction with these dispersed networks I noticed that most of their members are usually based in urban centres, whether for university, work, or having been brought up there. From my interviews, I noticed a natural inclination to wanting to be in these spaces for the opportunities they offer for young people wanting to develop their careers, but also for the opportunity to make connections and be in more multicultural environments. Therefore, young Radical Christians show that despite the ease of building online communities, there is an aspect of physical interaction and being based in politically significant areas that is important to them.

6.4 Spatially grounded and dispersed models

Throughout the last chapters, I have alluded to the natural formation of *dispersed* Radical Christian networks alongside a more traditional activity in church life, which I will explain in more detail now. In my data analysis, I noticed that Radical Christianity can be systematically

found in two models of community: a more traditional spatially grounded (or institutional) model; and a dispersed model.

Spatially grounded models will typically be a local church that is, as a collective, actively committed to the Radical Christian agenda and way of living. This will often take place in the form of creating a safe and inclusive space for the local community, community organising and capacity development, and participation in direct action efforts for wider policy change. Spatially grounded Radical Christian spaces can also be study groups and alternative collectives other than churches, but that have regular meetings in a physical base and whose members live in proximity to each other.

Based on conversations I had with interviewees, as well as observation of VRC and other local churches I visited or heard about from participants, the institutional model is generally more intergenerational and can have a wider range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds amongst its members, as a reflection of the local community around it. This offers many opportunities for individual growth for members as they engage with people who they might not have otherwise, despite inhabiting the same neighbourhoods. There is more intersectionality because of this, and the focus of their action usually turns to the concerns of the local community, typically in terms of more immediate assistance but also developing local leaderships inside and outside of the institution.

When it comes to a dispersed model, these are networks of people who have come together looking to act for a specific cause of their choosing. Because they do not have a central base, these networks will be formed by people who live across the country and typically have regular online meetings and keep in touch via social media.

From what I could observe, and what seems to be the current trend, there has been an increase in these smaller, dispersed networks in recent years (some examples are listed below). Due to them being more visible precisely as they exist online and are very direct with their purpose, Radical Christianity naturally becomes more identifiable in network settings. Consequently, individuals who are seeking community will likely find these dispersed groups more easily than finding local institutions that happen to live out Radical Christianity. This is especially true of younger people, who will do online research to find like-minded individuals and might even be more comfortable with the language of social media (Katz, Ogilvie, Shaw and Woodhead, 2021).

The dispersed model is not limited by a spatial radius, thus becoming a popular alternative for younger people who are seeking out a community based on their interests and wanting to engage with wider scale direct action for the issues they are concerned with. These networks, while dispersed for the most part, can also gather physically sporadically to be together in community and political action (joining a protest, for example). These physical gatherings serve as a contemporary form of pilgrimage, of Christians leaving their homes to

gather with their siblings in faith for worship, communion and revival. This is the case of CAYG, which holds weekly online meetings to discuss their ongoing campaigns and next steps, but has members coming together physically for protests happening around the country (with some members being based in those areas and others travelling for the purpose of that gathering), campaign related events and a yearly group meeting that happens in London.

These dispersed networks can target a particular niche of Christians seeking faith-based belonging and also be centred around a path of specialisation surrounding the issues they are passionate about. They can include LGBTQ+ communities, groups for progressive Christians in full time higher education, women's groups or Christians involved in party politics, and focused networks targeting climate justice, refugee rights, or other specific political campaigns. Some examples of this type of formation in the United Kingdom currently are the Student Christian Movement, Christians on the Left, House of Rainbow, Christian Climate Action, Red Letter Christians, FaithJustice, Hopeful Activists. These communities have varying degrees of online and offline involvement, with some of them focusing more on advocacy and activism, and others on discipleship and community building.

The dispersed model offers a view into what might be the future of Radical Christianity moving forward when it comes to the production of meaning and alternative forms of discipleship. The continuous development of these dispersed networks offer new and innovative ways of living out Christianity that perhaps speak to people who either feel broadly disconnected from a more traditional church format, as the church going habits of the British population rapidly decreases, or who do not yet find a local community where they feel comfortable in (as is the case of many of my interviewees according to them).

There are, however, opportunities to consider if these dispersed communities continue to proliferate themselves and if Radical Christians continue to reshape their local churches. Radical Christians in a given city might not be in an overtly radical church, positioning themselves instead as the aforementioned lone voice leading the action in their church or even using the church as a place for meditation and rest from the work that they are involved with elsewhere. They will, however, attach themselves to multiple networks instead in order to find that radical community where they can have communion and discipleship with other Radical Christians.

This was the case of some of my interviewees, who are not very active (or active at all) in local churches, but are often members of a couple of different networks. I met Sarah through a student network, for example, and only during our interview found out that she is also an active member of CAYG. Other participants chose to have an institution they are actively involved in but also engage with a separate network where they can focus on Radical Christian discipleship, which is the case of Frances, who is a member of an Anglican church but also organises a Christian book club called "Radical Readings". Alan, in addition to his active

involvement at VRC, also was part of a longstanding dispersed community of Catholics and had connections with a climate activism group.

With all of that considered, there are several ways in which these networks can continue to develop in the future based on the shifts that are happening in the United Kingdom more broadly and also in London when it comes to religious involvement and generational attitudes towards online spaces. During my interviews with regular churchgoers and participant observation at VCR I noticed a conscious effort in building more organic relationships between churches and other Radical Christian collectives in order to generate a bigger impact in their communities. The continued growth and dissemination of nationwide networks, especially as more young Christians start becoming involved in political life, is also essential in their increased presence. On the other hand, some interviewees from CAYG showed a longing for involvement with a local church, which attests to the importance of a physical place of worship where these young activists can rest and experience community living.

6.5 Radical reimagining of things

An overarching theme that appeared as I analysed the data from this research and interpreted the motivations and goals of my interviewees is of a "radical reimagining of things" in their journey and actions. Radical Christianity amounts to the radical reimagining of the human condition that considers the fullness of life. In practical terms, this leads to a commitment to creating actionable change towards radical equality and inclusion whether in local or global contexts (depending on the area of action of a specific network or individual).

Radical Christians see Jesus' ministry as a literal calling for the restructuring of power in society and imagining a just way of life, meaning that the aim of Christianity must be to tear down power structures and imbalances, giving voice to the voiceless and space for human life and individuality to flourish. This interpretation often points to the book of Acts as the start of this process and particularly the culmination of Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-34 not as a utopian commune that represents eternity, but how Christianity should be lived out in practice. This foundational story represents for these groups a break in status quo, the understanding that they cannot allow empire building to continue, whether inside the church or in the wider structures of society, to the detriment of human flourishing. At the same time, the unification between humanity and God being consummated in Jesus and the collective interpretation of salvation (as in salvation of humanity rather than of the individual) is of extreme significance because this completely changes the meaning of the established outputs that they had been taught to seek in Christianity: discipleship, revival and evangelism.

As the Radical Christian proceeds in their journey of deconstruction and reconstruction, coming to the realisation that this subversive, political gospel also includes the renunciation of

an overtly dualistic worldview, which in Christian tradition - especially in evangelical Protestantism - tends to also be translated as a privatised faith, devoid of collective and material meaning. Therefore, this process must include reinterpreting what discipleship, revival and evangelism can mean in practice in Radical Christianity.

The Great Commission, which is introduced in Matthew 28:18-20, is the final commandment given by an already resurrected Jesus, for his followers to make disciples of all nations, baptising them in his name and teaching them his commandments. Traditionally, this has been understood as a mandatory call to evangelise in order to convert non-believers to Christianity, as this will guarantee their spiritual salvation. This passage has also notably been historically weaponised by the Church to justify violent acts of colonialism, and in smaller ways to validate harmful leadership practices within churches under the guise of disciplining its members. Knowing this history, Radical Christians are typically made uneasy by this commandment, having two main issues with how it has been followed. The first pertains to the harmful logic and consequences of evangelism, while the second relates back to their materialism and life-affirming theology.

First, there is an implicit understanding in the interpretation above that non-Christians intrinsically lack something that only converting into the religion can resolve. However, as society becomes more diverse, some Christians are able to choose to build relationships with people of other faiths or no faith. With more access to a range of lived experiences, a wider sense of respect for other culturally developed worldviews is strengthened. Several participants in this research expressed that the thought of interrupting these relationships in order to proselytise becomes unthinkable. They are proud of their faith, and eager to build interfaith and secular relationships and partnerships, but evangelising begins to seem like an outdated and patronising ideology that they do not want to participate in.

A general consensus seems to be that if someone shows interest in visiting and ultimately joining their faith community, they will be more than happy to facilitate this encounter, and Radical Christians do believe that a relationship with Christ is a unique, fruitful and overall great way to live one's life. However, they also recognise that not everyone wants or needs to effectively build this relationship in a traditional sense in order to live out a Christian life based on the principles of seeking radical equality and inclusion through non-violent direct action. Not only do they understand that many people are decidedly non-religious, but they also appreciate and find beauty and Godliness in other faiths that also value inclusivity, hospitality and justice. Following this rejection of evangelising as proselytising, "making disciples" effectively takes on a political meaning of lifting people up and developing partnerships to build the Kingdom of God.

As Radical Christians come together in networks, their shared worldview allows them to communicate and organise, breaking several barriers that might be put in place when it comes to denominational, cultural or socioeconomic divides. One point that I believe is essential for

these relationships to work is that implicitly these individuals understand, as they come together, that individual observance of religious tradition or dogma is not what is at stake, much less proselytising. They understand that their shared goal is much more important than those matters, as it pertains to the renewal of *all* life, not spiritual life nor religiously observant life.

This leads to the second point about evangelising. Since Radical Christians have very different doctrinal and denominational backgrounds, this specifically is a point of contention, as some of them will hold more traditional views of spiritual and individual salvation. However, there is a strong movement towards varying levels of universalism in their biblical interpretation of salvation. For adepts of the interpretation that salvation has already been achieved on the cross, evangelising becomes even more about ensuring that all of humanity has the material means of living a peaceful life in unity with a healthy creation. It is about speaking up for civil rights, about advocating for the marginalised and for the Earth, and encouraging others to join them in their struggle. Ultimately, the urgency and hope that leads them to advocacy is the same that leads others to evangelising: that God will change the hearts of people so that they might be awakened to the evil in the world (sin/oppression) and will be led to freedom (salvation/liberation).

Like with the reinterpretation of evangelising and making disciples, revival also takes on a new meaning in Radical Christianity. Traditionally, religious revival is seen as an inbound movement that seeks and expects congregational growth. Historical periods of revival refer to moments of increased spiritual interest and church expansion, with markings of this being more converts coming into the church and more churches being planted. Particularly in evangelical Protestantism, it has also historically referred to an overflowing of spiritual gifts such as healing, speaking in tongues and prophesying. However, Radical Christianity flips the logic of revival into an outbound motion.

Radical Christian revival relates to changes happening outside of the church in the form of rights being ensured, growth of social movements, achievements towards climate justice, etc. It is the ideal outcome and consequence of their advocacy/evangelising. As Christians and non-Christians are called to participate in and lead civil and social rights movements, slowly "converting" other advocates and activists for their cause, turning the wheels of injustice and shifting the power imbalances in top-down policy, life is being renewed. Ultimately, this is the renewal that Radical Christianity cares about. To them, spiritual or religious renewal is an important part of that, but it would be far too reductive and it would miss the radicalness of the message of the cross to stop at that.

What I observed in my fieldwork is that Radical Christians are called first by a deep love for humanity and the overwhelming feelings that come with seeing suffering and injustice happening around them. As residents of the capital of a wealthy nation of the global north, one with a deep rooted Christian tradition, these individuals abhor the many ways in which their

representatives have not upheld what they perceive to be the base principles of Christianity, and the ways in which their religion has been used to cause systemic oppression. These strong feelings take precedence over theology, but their theological formation nevertheless gives them the structure to validate these feelings and the outlet to form collective spaces of resistance.

The calling of the Radical Christian culminates into an all-encompassing renewal of all life forms, so creation is made whole and humans can flourish as fully loved and fully equal beings. This calling reimagines discipleship as building networks for activism and community development and organising, evangelism as igniting the passion for social justice in more people and revival as the growth and achievement of these efforts, regardless of whether these are solely guided by Christians or part of wider partnerships.

6.6 Radical Christian Presence

The data analysis for this research has shown that community organising, political affiliation and action, and other means of direct action that have been mentioned so far are the main outputs of Radical Christianity, given their emphasis on theopraxis and understanding that Christianity is an active calling for the all-encompassing renewal of our way of life that demands a reordering of power structures.

I have demonstrated that Radical Christianity naturally flows towards network-building combined with a place-based political existence. As it stands, these radical networks (whether spatially grounded or dispersed) are introducing new actors and contents in the process of social organisation, consistently aiming for independence from power centres (Castells, 2004).

Referring back to Castells' *The Network Society*, these Radical Christian networks benefit mainly from their flexibility and survivability. They are flexible to adapt according to changing environments while keeping their goals, especially given their propensity for a weak theology, which allows them to move according to the needs of their given sociological contexts. They can also survive changing conditions and configurations, due to their decentralised nature. I've mentioned that several participants in this research are connected with at least two Radical Christian networks. These individuals are led by their deep-set sense of calling to continue to participate in these types of religiopolitical formations, so that if one specific organisation is dissolved, as nodes in a larger Radical Christian network, they keep the movement active.

This Radical Christian positioning and presence can be understood in line with what Doreen Massey calls "geographies of responsibility", which I talked about in my literature review. The Radical Christian identity is heavily relational, it is conceptually defined and redefined through the engagements and practices of interaction of the individuals in this religious expression. Their presence is shaped by context and encounter as they refuse to

settle into both a static idea of God and, consequently, a rigid institution. Therefore, their identities are conceptualised under an understanding of the deeply relational nature of space.

According to Massey, "if space is a product of practices, trajectories, interrelations, if we make space through interactions at all levels, from the (so-called) local to the (so-called) global, then those spatial identities such as places, regions, nations, and the local and the global, must be forged in this relational way too, as internally complex, essentially unboundable in any absolute sense, and inevitably historically changing" (Massey, 2004, p. 4).

These groups offer a look into a networked/local internationalism that transcends the binary of local versus global, producing their own ethics of place and agency. Thinking of place relationally is designed to intervene in a charged political arena that tries to essentialise localism or nationalism claims to place, appreciating the specific and distinctive while refusing the parochial (Massey, 2004). A Radical Christian structure of place works within this logic as it empowers grassroots political action from individuals who might otherwise not see themselves as political actors. They are constructing place-based microcosms of inclusion that challenge dominant narratives of power and envision the local community as a place of actionable change. They are determined to shape the world that is currently under construction, holding onto confidence that they play a part in co-creating the Kingdom of God with how they enact civil life. Simultaneously, they are producing new opportunities for collaboration and geo-spatialisation that play with traditional locality and re-envision what the local can mean.

Radical Christianity is formed on the core belief in a religion of grassroots social movements against empire building, and that their actions for revival will eventually shift the power structures in their societies so that they come closer to a global reality of inclusion and equity. Local and global are thus intertwined in their philosophy. This core belief takes local agency very seriously as they seek to alter the mechanisms of the global itself. The collective and transformational nature of Radical Christianity leads them to a local politics with global stakes, which in turn places them as potentially key players in the production of civil activity.

When we consider Radical Christian networks and action based in London specifically, we encounter more possibilities of space-based agency, as the city is a globally constructed place where the demands of responsibility are strongly felt by its residents. There might be more opportunities for civic action and imagination in local networks due to the well-established sociopolitical relationships and struggles that can be directly seen in the capital, when one believes that power imbalances are not inevitable and feels a calling to intervene in them.

Back in 2004, Massey spoke about the positioning of "Londoners" specifically (but this can be translated to other global cities) as located in a radically contrasting and unequal position in relation to globalisation. Thus, "the political argument should be about how those small and highly differentiated bits of all of us which position us as 'Londoners' give rise to responsibility towards the wider relations on which we depend" (Massey, 2004, p. 17). Massey

commented following from the above quote that in the past the Londoner's voice has been a subversive one, and it could be again (Massey, 2004). Unfortunately, the political circumstances between 2004 and now have worsened, with (to condense several issues into a short summary) the continued solidification of neoliberal policies that have further marginalised impoverished communities and an increase in public displays of prejudice against various minority and vulnerable populations.

Within this context, Radical Christians show active citizenship and resistance, offering a glimpse into what the city and the global could look like through their creative production of space. The next two sections will conclude this final analysis chapter by showing the two main areas of action of these networks, which are how their presence is felt in the global city and in national networks.

6.6.1 Church life

When it comes to church life, Radical Christianity is enacted in the structure and content of the service itself and in how the church is led (and, as a result, how the congregants behave throughout their interactions in civil society). How church life is led is of extreme importance, because the church community should be the blueprint for what the Kingdom of God looks like.

Church reform has been a continued process in the history of Christianity. We have seen this in how dogmas and sacraments have been established and even how the official books of the Bible were decided upon. We saw this with the Church councils, with the Protestant reform, with the rise of Pentecostalism and with the various ways in which denominations have adapted to evolve with the times. However, while Christian activists have been historically in the frontlines of civil rights movements, Radical Christians critique the Church for ultimately being "dragged" into progress, ultimately in order to survive, when the status quo can no longer be upheld. Radical Christians, thus, have a deep desire to not be seen as the "troublemakers", but as the standard that needs to be followed by the Christian community. They want to see a Church that is consistently at the frontlines of social movements, fighting for the equality and inclusion that exists within to be an example and exhortation for that type of community to be widespread.

The church needs to be a prophetic voice speaking out against empire and empire building. This means for church life that a congregation should regularly ensure that they are not being complicit, or even enforcing the interests of the ruling order. An exercise is employed of continuously reflecting on whether a given community is doing everything in their power to shift power imbalances. This can take various forms, for instance utilising their physical space for the benefit of the wider community (as warm spaces, night shelters, etc.), opening their doors for other networks that do not have their own space (for example climate justice activists

that will come to the capital for protests from other areas in the country), using the pulpit to remind the congregants of their position as political actors to encourage action, elevating traditionally silenced groups within church settings (for example queer, ethnic minority and women's voices), and supporting them to become leaders within the community.

When it comes to sermons, these should reflect Radical Christianity's political theology. Therefore, Radical Christian sermons tend to focus on interpreting stories of the Bible in light of contemporary struggles of power, taking inspiration and encouragement from biblical figures who have stood up to their own empires. Radical Christian preachers and priests understand that the Bible is a subversive political text, written by and about marginalised people fighting for justice, and resent common biblical interpretations that miss that point altogether, focusing on an individualised reading that centres the reader and whichever struggles they might be facing in their lives.

These speakers seldom stop at a message for self-help or individual development, as when they speak of bettering oneself and try to encourage their congregants, it is towards strengthening their communities so they may be capacitated to work for the development of the Kingdom of God, towards showing radical love and moving one's life in accordance with Radical Christian principles. Marginalised voices are centred in these sermons, and attention is brought to the systematic prophetic interruption of the status quo, profound disruption of dominating powers and suspension of injustices that are narrated in the Bible.

The Radical Christian church offers third spaces where citizens are called to act on the injustices around them, and stillness for the weary who need a place of rest. Positioned as a third space in the city, the radical church allows fluidity and hybridity in how religious and secular beliefs, worldviews, and practices are discussed and enacted into a space of emergent postsecularity that can challenge settled binaries of analysis (Baker, 2017, p. 226). Its simultaneous foundation in religiosity and political action make this a space that cries out with anger but points to a place of hope through collective action. It has a calming and encouraging presence for those who need it, and I believe that its relevance lies in this unique positioning.

6.6.2 Direct action

A defining characteristic of Radical Christian action is that it is outbound, as I have previously touched on, due to its interpretation of evangelism and revival as all-encompassing life renewal. The key distinctive feature of their presence as a religious groups when it comes to direct action is that it is targeted towards systemic social change, as opposed to what is traditionally understood as evangelism, which is focused on directing their actions towards non-Christians with the ultimate goal of bringing them into the church structure for individual life renewal.

Thus, for Radical Christianity, the church cannot be the final destination. The actions undertaken as a witness to their belief in radical love do not move in a circular motion of leaving the religious environment in order to return to it. There is a shift here from the church being the end destination, to it being the means. Radical Christians will, instead, use the church structure as a physical base and source of material support for the actions being undertaken within and outside of it. It also serves as a place of rest, of gathering oneself, meditating and reflecting upon one's goals and motivations, ensuring that they still align with one's core faith, ensuring that priorities are set straight. Moreover, both institutional and network settings serve for Radical Christians to encourage one another in their actions, similarly debating and growing mutually in their beliefs and methods.

Radical Christians' presence in direct action is directly linked to prophetic action. It is how these individuals and networks will take their beliefs in a radical, political message of inclusion and equality and translate them into whichever actions are needed and available to them to do their part in ensuring the Kingdom of God (the realigning of powers in which the marginalised are lifted up) is made into a material reality.

This can take many forms in practical terms. In London, you can see prophetic action in a group of Catholics holding regular vigils outside of the Home Office, remembering the lives and names of people who have died trying to reach the United Kingdom in search of asylum, praying for refugees who are on their way here, and for the government officials and policy makers who have the power to change their circumstances. It is elderly priests being arrested for disruption during protests for climate justice, because they have decided to serve as examples and be spokespeople for that cause. It is young people forming LGBTQ+ networks that apply pressure on the Church to be a fully inclusive place for that community. It is churches that come together to sponsor refugees to come and find community in their neighbourhoods. All of these actions are motivated by a deep faith-based radical love that takes action.

For both institutional and network settings, as the body of Radical Christians, their prophetic role is to continue to use whichever privilege and power they have to empower and lift up marginalised and silenced peoples' voices. As a community of Christians, they understand that they need to be interrupted, disrupted by those who have less space in society to bring up their struggles and be a part of solutions. A structured Radical Christian theopraxis engages with and propels the work of the people who are disrupting unjust systems of oppression - whether they are within the church or not, because what is at stake is the same for both groups.

This is true especially for Radical Christian communities in London or other global centres, and of Radical Christian networks formed of people that hold spaces of privilege in their communities and can be listened to more easily or have the relationships and means to make systemic impact.

To conclude, Radical Christianity offers a methodology of identifying the issues that need to be addressed in one's surroundings in order to achieve the God-given commandment to fight against injustices, meditating and finding the strength in God and their community of people to make moves towards these changes, and using one's privilege to amplify the voices of those who need to be listened to.

7. Limitations and questions for further research

This chapter is meant to highlight some additional attributes and areas of interest which I noticed during my fieldwork that did not fit the scope of this research, but should be explored in depth in future research on Radical Christianity, especially in research focused on urban centres and comparative analyses.

7.1 Potential for development in Millennials and Generation Z

I have mentioned some particularities of Millennials and Generation Z when it comes to how they engage with their religiosity. I believe there is potential for further research on these demographics, specifically on how they are rebuilding Christianity post-deconstruction and what that means for the wider Church, including when it comes to external perception. It would be interesting to see quantitative studies and analyses over longer periods of time being conducted to understand how these changes are structurally occurring in the United Kingdom.

The most recent census information we have on religious tendencies[24] in the country shows that religious decline in Britain is generational, with people becoming increasingly less religious than their parents, and their children being even less religious than they are (Voas and Chaves, 2016). What does this mean for young Radical Christians, is this expression of faith a stepping stone into non-religion for future generations to come? While it seems unlikely that Radical Christian networks will lead to a religious revival in terms of the number of converts, it represents a future for young Christians who want to keep their faith and mobilise for progressive political causes, or even for non-religious youth who see the value in their vision and methods and choose to affiliate themselves with these networks.

This leads me to the second particularity of the younger sectors of Radical Christianity: the way in which younger generations tend to cluster into networks for a variety of reasons. These include wanting to make connections with similar people, even if there is a significant distance between them; the convenience of setting up online communities, particularly in a post-lockdown world after the Covid-19 pandemic; their eagerness to advocate and act for specific issues that are close to them.

7.2 Analysis of Radical Christians' socioeconomic backgrounds

Another area of inquiry that would be interesting is delving more deeply into Radical Christians' socioeconomic background. As I mentioned previously, most of the people who

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[24] Curtice, J., Clery, E., Perry, J., Phillips M. and Rahim, N. (eds.) (2019), British Social Attitudes: The 36th Report, London: The National Centre for Social Research.

agreed to be interviewed for this research (and generally most of the people who I was able to identify as being highly or publicly engaged with direct action in Radical Christianity) come from relatively privileged backgrounds, having had middle class upbringings and high levels of education, especially when it comes to the younger participants.

Additionally, I would have liked to have more perspectives from ethnic minorities, as a majority of the interviewees and members of the activist network analysed were ethnically white and most of them British. It would be very valuable to have a numerically larger study to understand why this happened. Is it that networks structurally formed by ethnic minorities are disinterested or cautious of bringing in an external researcher into their community to conduct ethnographic research? Do those individuals who are inserted into mainstream institutional settings not want to be involved for the same reasons? Or is this a reflection of people with more resources and opportunities being able to focus more time on activism and professional work in public policy and advocacy, and being more trusting of an academic wanting to speak with them about their beliefs?

A study could be conducted focusing on people and communities of BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) backgrounds and more specifically working class communities, perhaps trying to work with Christian networks that support and advocate for precarious workers in London (similar to what Jim's parish is focused on). I expect that, if access is granted to these spaces, there would be a valuable comparative analysis to be done with regards to the specificities of how Radical Christianity is expressed in different socioeconomic and ethnic contexts.

7.3 Cooperation between grassroots religious and secular networks

The third area that could be explored in a separate research project is of the relationships that exist (or do not exist) between Radical Christian and secular networks, more specifically when it comes to activism and advocacy for individual causes. During my fieldwork in London, I mostly encountered religious networks acting within their framework, targeting other Christians to act. However, there might be a lack of communication between those and secular networks in how they coordinate their direct action. There is a lot of opportunity in those circles for cooperation and mutuality, which the participants in this research were eager to explore but perhaps deeper relationships need to be formed in the future.

A point to explore is whether there is a "language barrier" when it comes to partnerships between religious and secular networks. There could be a focused study on how secular activists view religious actors in their spaces, if there is any form of misunderstanding regarding their motivations or confusion as to what they believe in. The same participants who explained that they did not find religious spaces where they could explore their interests in activism for a

long time also talked about colleagues in their secular networks being prejudiced against religion in general, which made them uncomfortable in sharing about their faith (although they did mention that younger people tend to be losing this resistance and being more open to people's various expressions of faith in activist circles).

Are there productive ways to form these relationships by promoting spaces for an initial dialogue and discussion? I believe this is worth exploring, especially in the context of youth movements.

7.4 Lack of outwardly radical local communities

The final point I want to raise that could lead to a separate line of inquiry is the - apparent - lack of outwardly radical local Christian communities. The term "outwardly" is key here, because as one begins to make connections with individual Radical Christian actors, one finds that the institutional settings they are a part of are quite engaged in their local communities, with several streams of action that I've mentioned throughout this text. However, an external person might not be aware of these actions, or even of these spaces, if they are not introduced by someone they met via an alternative network.

For regular local churches, often their actions are understood internally as normative in such a way that they do not actively recognise their role as advocates and community organisers, and thus do not advertise themselves as such. There is also a hesitation in these individuals to consider themselves as particularly radical, with them feeling that there is so much more they could be doing. However, there is importance in assigning meaning to those small scale local engagements, and it would certainly be beneficial for these communities to be more decisive in presenting themselves as spaces for radical inclusivity and community organising. Is humility in Radical Christian communities limiting their effectiveness? Does it prevent them from having a larger influence, and are there communities that are navigating this effectively in order to remain faithfully radical and build a larger platform?

8. Conclusion

8.1 Initial thoughts

This research emerged from my real-life observation of religiously motivated individuals based in London who were passionately engaged in various forms of direct action for socioeconomic and climate justice, having their Christian faith as the inspiration and justification for their lived practices. I began noticing this expression of faith in two settings: local churches and widespread activist networks which often hold actions in the capital, despite its members not being necessarily located there during their daily lives. While initially this was an inquiry into London-based activity, further investigation showed that these networks are often connected nationally, with members acting within their own local communities around the United Kingdom in addition to their more large-scale activity in dispersed networks.

From this initial observation, I began seeing patterns emerge that I had not previously seen being systematically analysed when it comes to social movements and theologies that are focused on theopraxis and political forms of collectivism in the Bible. I then became interested in doing a deep-dive into these religious actors, finding what unites them and what makes them unique as a community of Christians.

I wanted this research to be a collaborative endeavour to truly capture the experiences and worldviews of Christians living in a global city at this time period. Since these people are themselves advocates, it was important to give them agency and amplify their voices in their own terms. Therefore, an inductive, activist research was the ideal path to follow. The fieldwork conducted for this research generated several concepts based on Radical Christian's own speech (how they describe what matters to them in their own words) and actions (what I was able to observe that might not have been captured by interviews alone). In addition to this primary data, the websites, chat groups and literature recommended and mentioned by participants was also very helpful in understanding these groups' attitudes, how they engage with each other and what they intentionally put out when it comes to their values, worldviews, and how they want to be perceived. This helped me in constructing a narrative that is authentic to these people's lived practices.

8.2 Genealogy of Radical Christianity

The initial hypotheses I had surrounding Radical Christianity and Radical Christians were informed by prior literature on theology, human geography, and sociology of religion. Looking back at the literature review that was done prior to the beginning of the fieldwork for

this research, there are threads that weave through the final understanding of who and where these individuals and their networks are.

The categories I explored represent a genealogy of Radical Christianity as an observable phenomenon. However, as the research evolved, some of these categories appeared more vibrantly in the data observation, some were not as significant as I originally thought they would be, and other new themes emerged that I had not considered previously.

Interestingly, the assumption that the global city would play a major role for Radical Christian network formations was somewhat incorrect. I explained how the city appears as a backdrop for many of the institutional settings of Radical Christianity and as a place of pilgrimage in dispersed networks. What I found, instead, is a new focus on small local communities and dispersed networks throughout the country that offer a model of dissident discipleship for people who share the vision of a radically inclusive, political and collectivist Christianity. Nevertheless, grounding this research in urban critical theory was important in order to understand the Radical Christian network formation and local positioning, and the structure of influence and political action that they are inserted into.

I maintain that Radical Christianity's as a form of religiosity has its origins in a long history of dissident and marginal Christian movements that have understood their religion as a calling to liberation. Moreover, one can see the progression from theologies of religionless Christianity, "religion without religion", a "beingless" God and other insights into the rapprochement of religion and politics in the public square. In this milieu, Radical Christians today have moved away from overtly spiritualised interpretations of their faith and overtly individualised perceptions of a God that is mirrored on the human *being*. In its place, they found a historical movement that is centred around the liberation of marginalised communities, one which is free to reinterpret who those communities are in their particular cultural and historical contexts.

While the specific philosophies mentioned above do not necessarily appear in the language used by Radical Christians, it became clear that a weak theology and the political ideology of liberation theologians converge into Radical Christianity's theopraxis (I will go into more detail about this in another section). As Radical Christians understand themselves as political beings, they necessarily engage in a dialogue between religion and civil society which social scientists have been pointing to for the last decades.

I intentionally set out to reach as wide a net as I could in order to find how Radical Christianity is embodied in a variety of spaces and what are the motivations that different people would have for their religious engagements. I wanted to gather as many different perspectives within these radical spaces, setting out to centre the case studies in the more traditional setting of a church and a more alternative environment of an activist network and

reaching out to people in various different denominations within Catholic, Protestant and Anglican traditions (as well as non-denominational spaces).

I initially highlighted key theologians and traditions within modern and postmodern Western philosophy which I argued show the shifts in theological thought in the global north that later would translate into movements like the ECM and the groups I identified as Radical Christian. However, given the variety of backgrounds included in this research, naturally participants - and even networks - had different philosophical and theological references while ending up in a similar playing field when it comes to praxis.

Looking back to Timothy Stacey's imagining of solidarity in the twenty-first century, Radical Christianity appears to show a way of performative religious action that allows for a productive convergence through practice, especially in the urban sphere. Radical Christianity, thus, confirms the possibility and encourages further emphasis on a performative postsecularity (Stacey, 2017). Radical Christians are the embodiment of what liberation theologies and the creative formation of alternative forms of discipleship focused on theopraxis can look like in the context of London in the 2020s. It gives us a glimpse into the different directions the dialogues of postsecular rapprochement can take.

8.3 Arriving at a Radical Christianity

This research has shown a group of decisively religious people who, despite having serious issues with the Church and with many of them deconstructing much of what it means to be a Christian, all have confidence in their beliefs and in their identity as Christians. This is interesting coming from a context where census data has been widely showing a decline in Christian identification in the United Kingdom, particularly in the younger generations. In the wake of religion no longer being a significant part of many people's lives - especially in the demographics included in this research -, this is a group of people who do not subscribe to the ethos of believing without belonging. They have a strong faith-based worldview, and they are eager to belong in religious communities that share their beliefs.

Throughout this research I have shown that Radical Christians typically describe their faith journey in a very similar linear pattern: from noticing that what they understood from an overarching biblical narrative was not congruent with what they were taught in church, deciding to analyse the root issues for this cognitive dissonance and allowing themselves to deconstruct their faith. At this stage, they find themselves rejecting several aspects of cultural Christianity, and holding on to an idealised proto-Christianity as a community of followers of Jesus who see a political message in the Gospels of radical love and hospitality, and a calling to stand for the marginalised against forms of empire building. Finally, they reconstruct their faith around those values. I can speculate that this narrative is somewhat formed as these individuals look back at

their experiences with religion as they recreate the steps they took to reach their current belief systems. Radical Christianity, then, appears for these people as a final destination where their identity is justified, a place of authentic belonging and performativity.

As they begin to reconstruct their faith in Radical Christian terms, these individuals typically seek out religious communities where they can explore this expression of faith and act on it in collective and political settings. This brings them to network formations centred either on local communities of faith or in dispersed discipleship groups that tend to be focused on faith-based advocacy and activism. The development of these communities and activist networks - albeit still marginal in the wider landscape of political activism - demonstrates the possibility for Radical Christianity to be perceived as a normalised form of religious citizenship in the local and global contexts.

The participants in this research indicated that their journey often started from a place of trauma. This can be related either to personal or collective trauma. On a personal level, this stems from feeling excluded from or hurt by religious environments due to their identities. Alternatively, or in addition to this, participants spoke about having the traumatic realisation that their religious communities are not inclusive to specific cohorts, fail to centre marginalised communities or disregard global issues that they view as urgent, such as the climate crisis or social inequalities brought about by governmental shifts in the country. The latter especially continues to mark their faith identities, as they feel that they are called, as Christians, to respond to the social and environmental trauma that permeates their surrounding communities and the wider society.

By the time that these individuals reach this crossroads when it comes to the institutions surrounding Christianity, their religious beliefs have developed and become ingrained as part of their identity. Moreover, my interviews have shown that these religious beliefs grow in a symbiotic relationship with their political formation. At this stage there is an interesting diversion for Radical Christians where instead of severing themselves from the religious institution and either fully renouncing their faith or maintaining a privatised spirituality away from community settings, these people choose to find a space for themselves within the religion, albeit an often liminal one.

This process was described by participants of several denominational backgrounds including non-denominational communities, Anglican, Catholic and mainline Protestant churches. These individuals mentioned different theological references and ways of coming into a radical expression of Christianity depending on where they started from. For example, a participant who grew up between Methodist and Catholic traditions both in the United Kingdom and in the United States of America mentioned being inspired by the civil rights movement. A Catholic participant mentioned liberation theologies. A participant who is still at the margins of the Anglican Church mentioned the Quakers, while other Anglicans and Catholics mentioned

different forms of Christian socialism. Other instances of efforts by the institutional Church itself to push for a progressive agenda are the Faith in the City report of 1985 and the Laudato Si movement launched within the Catholic church as a response to Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical letter on the climate crisis as a consequence of dysfunctional human action. Although participants within these traditions expressed their feelings of frustration that the Church has not pushed enough, and has not been sufficiently intersectional when doing so - in the sense that the institutional discourse on climate and social justice rarely includes mentions of the marginalisation of queer people and ethnic minorities, and often fail to recognise the oppression that the Church has historically been complicit in regarding former colonial states.

Considering this research was done in the United Kingdom, with mainly British participants, there was a natural emphasis on the history of the Church in this country and the ways in which participants feel conflicted with their positioning in the institution. However, they continuously come back to the marginal traditions of dissident discipleship within the Church. Other participants might not have had these or other theological and historical references early on, being inserted into very culturally conservative environments, but still were able to find the references they needed to move towards a Radical Christianity in the Bible itself, later finding a shared history in these movements and community in other networks.

This is to illustrate that there are several threads connecting individuals and communities historically to a Christian identity and praxis that is radically marked by ideals of not only living a just life but demanding social justice in the name of God. Radical Christianity, as I explored in this research, represents an ecumenical gathering of the people who followed these threads in their search for authenticity and community. While they might individually hold different theologies and value different traditions, what matters ultimately is the praxis. This, in turn, leads to an eagerness for interdenominational, interfaith and religious-secular partnerships, as well as a lack of emphasis on evangelism, rather understanding mission as a calling to participate in the struggles for collective justice. Radical Christians, thus, build their form of dissident discipleship, inhabiting a liminal space within Christianity.

8.4 Liminality and creative tension in Radical Christianity

Victor Turner's use of the concept of liminality (Turner, 1969) explains the positioning that is found in Radical Christianity: the transitional space that the individual inhabits as they no longer belong to the society (or, in this case, the religion) that they were previously inserted in, but have also not yet been fully reincorporated into it. Turner identified a blend in this liminal space of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship, that fragments a social structure but reveals the possibility for unstructured or rudimentary structured communities of equal individuals (Turner, 1969).

Similarly, Radical Christians finding themselves in this liminal space begin to create new forms of community for themselves which allow them to authentically live out their beliefs without exiting the religious community nor conforming to an institution they do not want to take part of. Martin, the pastor of VRC, expresses the tension of Radical Christians of choosing to stay. Whenever someone asks him why he is a pastor despite all of the issues with the institution, or despite his own journey of deconstruction, his reply is “where else am I going to go?”.

While this tension is palpable, it is a creative one. There is a reimagining within Radical Christianity of what religious community and religious action can be. The people I spoke and interacted with, and the communities they built, are present in ways that are not easily defined precisely due to their faith identities being rooted in questioning, inhabiting a liminal space within the religion and continuously adapting to new external sociopolitical and cultural circumstances.

It quickly became clear that this lived expression of faith is nonconformist at its core, formed by people who envision themselves as keepers of the faith, meanwhile being ready to shave off any aspects of the institution that don’t align with their theopraxis. Radical Christians tend to take on a role of change makers, whether or not they would define themselves as such. The scales of action that they work with can be very different, from building microcosms of inclusion in their local communities to widespread activism. In this sense, their religious communities can be either a homebase, a place of stillness and meditation, or the space where change is enacted.

In either case, religion is at the base of their vocation. I felt across all of my interactions with the participants in this research a sense of agency, empowerment and calling surrounding their relationship with their faith. These people each individually started feeling the need to fix the systemic issues that they found both within the Christian religion and in the wider society, and their faith - in addition to often being pointed to as the initial motivator for that agency - empowered and continue to empower them to take agency. Given this journey and the symbiotic relationship between Radical Christians’ faith and political action, the Radical Christian community is never one of sole contemplation. There is always an essential element of discipleship into Radical Christian action.

Especially for Radical Christians who have the personal experience of religious trauma, Radical Christianity involves a deconversion from harmful religious practices and into this new liminal community. Moreover, Radical Christianity asks for the conversion of the institution itself and of society, not into the religion, but into their ideals of equity and inclusion. Once they begin unpacking and healing their trauma, this quickly escalates to a sense of urgency to act, as a Christian, towards healing other people, society, and the planet.

8.5 Weak theology in Radical Christianity

The Radical Christian ecclesiastical formation is also interesting because of the ephemerality of their "weak theology", since it is not built upon rigid cultural or theological foundations but rather in the fragility of coping with personal and collective trauma and learning to live in the liminality of their expression of faith. Thus, Radical Christians need to be open to new conversions at all times in the form of new understandings and being in contact with other lived experiences. Therefore, their "being called out" is a perpetual motion, which also explains why many of the aspects of their faith start from the roots of Christianity or in the institution, but take on an outward motion.

I noticed that the process of rebuilding their faith in these liminal spaces and the active Radical Christian calling can be a big strain for these individuals. While the people included in this research clearly feel liberated by affirming their beliefs in an authentic and empowering way, in genuine communities of equals, they continue to be followed by the tension of this liminality. There are several aspects of this that can be stressful for different people. Some participants mentioned the exhaustion of having to justify their beliefs to secular counterparts in political activist circles and having to justify their political ideology and fight for reform inside of the Church. This can also be seen in the loneliness that some participants felt in trying to find a local Radical Christian community to belong to, in their feelings of burnout from having to constantly push for changes and not feeling that their efforts are recognised or good enough.

Naturally, a faith that is centred around political action and that sees the formation of equalitarian social structures as their goal is one that will often lead to disappointment, with its proponents feeling powerless in the face of their challenges. This being a niche belonging is a mitigating factor, as these individuals often find themselves fighting for their very place in civil life.

8.6 Radical Christianity as religio-political citizenship

This research has contributed to an understanding about public religion in the United Kingdom that challenges dominant narratives focused on conservative religious movements, typically associated with Islamism and Protestant evangelicals. While the mainstream view in sociology has been that of declining participation in churches and intensified discourses on the public presence of religion in light of politically and culturally conservative movements (Davie, 2014), Radical Christians present an opposite position.

Considering Grace Davie's reflections on the persistent paradox of religion in the United Kingdom, the participants in this research have shown that they are quite aware of the common understanding that we have been experiencing a shift from a culture of obligation or duty to a

culture of consumption or choice (Davie, 2014, p. 7) and what that means for religion. Given that the general population has become increasingly illiterate regarding religion and that the media has a lot to gain from exploiting controversies surrounding religious movements, the media has become an important source of information about religious issues and the prevailing narrative is not a flattering one (Davie, 2014, p. 65).

However, Radical Christians actively resist the infiltration of consumerism and individualism within their religious spaces. They have shown that for them their faith and praxis is not a choice. Rather it is the most authentic way that they have found to make sense of the world and stay true to their beliefs. Radical Christians' justice and faith-driven activism shows alternative ways in which sociological and political analyses can interact with religion. Further mapping out these networks and their innerworkings also help to provide a language for dialogue in community and political organising.

My understanding is that these communities want to be legitimised as serious players in the space of progressive sociopolitical action in the country, which would not only be beneficial for their own efforts but also in forming secular-religious or interfaith partnerships. Through exploring and analysing the lived experiences of Radical Christians in London, this research has shown that Radical Christianity should be normalised as a form of urban religious citizenship which in turn provides new opportunities for dispersed religious and political discipleship.

If Radical Christian groups continue to establish themselves in the public square and take up space in the religious institution, they have the potential of strengthening and leading grassroots movements in the local communities they are immersed in and of forming compelling advocacy groups. Based on what this research has shown, what is attracting people into this form of religiosity, beyond aspects of authenticity and belonging, is being able to perform their faith in community in view of palpable changes in society. The hope that moves them is not for an otherworldly utopia, instead it imagines a world where solidarity and hospitality are the core values. Radical Christianity, then, seeks to change a culture by being an egalitarian community of citizens that are vocal about the need for global reform. Political citizenship is established as their religious ritual and performative prayer.

This research has shown that Radical Christianity can be understood as a practical example of what Elaine Graham considers to be the practice of public theology as Christian apologetics in *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (2013). Writing about "classically evangelical but world-affirming" groups that have been growing in the twenty-first century, Graham describes a turn from an individualistic faith to a more corporate understanding; from a word or logic-centred faith to one that is liturgical and sacramental; from a pragmatic, methodological faith to one based on mystery and process; one that is focused on networking, on "doing" and "being" rather than "believing" and "belonging" (Graham, 2014, pp. 166-167).

These new expressions of Christianity, in embracing a postmodern, postcolonial discourse, and consequently also being more open to interfaith and religious-secular collaboration, reframe Christianity as a “way of believing” rather than a “system of belief” (Graham, 2014, p. 168). Just as the journeys of Radical Christians have shown, Graham speaks of a distancing from a conservative evangelical political identity towards a visionary dimension of transformation, a theology of hope, that does not give up on the possibility of social justice in this world. This leads to a cultural shift from lamenting society’s indifference to Christianity or “biblical values” to Christians themselves emphasising their role in making a positive contribution to public life based on “virtues of citizenship premised on justice, conviction and concern for the common good” (Graham, 2014, p. 174-175).

The articulation of this public theology means that Christians must foster their influencing skills and articulation in public life to be taken seriously and to be able to justify their moral, social and political convictions in terms that speak intelligibly into the public square. Graham considers this task to be the nurturing of effective “ambassadors for Christ” who are capable of engaging in Christian apologetics.

The concerns of Radical Christianity that I have highlighted previously speak to the return of public theology in postsecularity, referring to the ways in which religion interacts with questions of economics, media, politics, law, globalisation, social justice, and environment (Graham, 2013). Radical Christianity, as it has been defined in this research, correlates intensely with Graham’s exploration of the relationships between “Christ” and “culture” in postmodernity.

Graham points towards a public theology that concerns itself with the Christian responsibility to not only seek social justice and the common good, but to form, inform and sustain the structure of civil society so that values of truth, justice and mercy guide the common life, which in itself is a vocational role. She calls for public theology to retrieve an understanding of itself as Christian apologetics, sharing the motivations behind the practices of citizenship and discipleship. Ultimately, this is the output of the biblical command to “give an account of the hope that is within you” (1 Peter 3:15-17), which is a guiding principle for how Christianity interacts with its cultural surroundings. Graham’s calling for public theology is that Christian apologetics “must continue to underpin the vocation of the public Church as it is called to speak truth to power and seek the welfare of the city” (Graham, 2014, p. 233).

There is, however, a difference that can be felt between Radical Christianity and other faith expressions that are more commonly analysed by Graham and other theorists when it comes to the adaptation of Christian traditions in a postsecular age. These works emphasise a process of negotiation with modernity that has had to happen in Christian traditions for these postmodern expressions of faith to emerge and be legitimised. This implies that the internal

change in the religion has been at least on some level a reaction to modernity, not something that has organically developed.

With Radical Christians, their relationship - and consequently the relationship of their communities - to the wider culture is not reactive, but creative. The narratives of my participants were of finding their individual positioning and political stances through their religious foundation and developing these identities in alignment, as opposed to struggling to reshape their faith in line with a new found secular identity. Radical Christianity (and, I believe, more recent expressions of faith) distinctly embraces and is organically identified with the postmodern culture and, more importantly, with the positioning of resistance to conservative and individualistic tendencies both in secular and religious life.

Given that *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, and other works on the shifts of postsecular thought that have already been mentioned in this work, was written almost ten years ago, there seems to have been new changes in the development of these types of religious experiences and movements. These new identities are formed not as a reaction to postsecular modernity that will eventually lead to the acceptance of it, but a reaction to neoliberal individualism. They embrace their liminality as dissident disciples that feel called to action, uncovering the roots of a historical religion of marginalised peoples as a protest and resistance to empire.

Some recent works that I believe are tapping into these new identities in the UK are *Reimagining Mission From Urban Places* (2020), mentioned before, and *Young, Woke and Christian* (2022). The latter especially gives space for young people to say in their own words what matters to them as Christians, and presents very similar narratives to the ones I heard from my participants. Therefore, the continued analysis of emerging forms of Christianity is essential to understanding how these groups continue to interact with and shape culture and civil life.

8.7 Final thoughts

Ultimately, this research has identified and analysed Radical Christianity as a form of religious citizenship that is rooted in the historical traditions within the religion of marginal movements that understand that being a Christian is to be called to respond to the structural injustices of their time, denouncing empire building and centering those at the margins of society. These Radical Christians concern themselves with a *performative* apologetic, where political citizenship is an essential religious ritual.

Having a close and careful look at several of these individuals' experiences has revealed a journey that often starts from a place of dissociation from mainstream religion and religious trauma, followed by a reconversion into Christianity once they are called to a

collectivist and politicised interpretation of their faith that reimagines the world in terms of bringing the Kingdom of God here. These individuals then find themselves in a liminal space, where they are no longer accepted by the mainstream Church but refuse to leave the faith. In finding community with like minded brethren, they begin to shape dissident forms of discipleship and, ultimately, a Radical Christian *ekklesia*.

Initially, I also set out to discover the role that London as a global city plays in the formation and presence of Radical Christianity. What I quickly found was that Radical Christianity is concerned with a “politics of place beyond place” (Massey, 2007, p. 10), understanding the importance of grassroots political action and seeking to impact the global through shaping the ethics of locality. Interestingly, I also noted that dispersed Radical Christian networks are key in these groups’ formation, in how they communicate and find community.

In those instances, the global city seems to take on more of a centralised power role in their narrative, as these networks meet in person for larger events, protests or gatherings. These dispersed networks show the increased possibilities for social and spatial relationships that social media brings, and allow us to reimagine what locality and belonging can be like in online communities. Especially as younger generations migrate to online spaces in their search for religious communities that feel authentic to their faith, there are immense possibilities for developments in how Radical Christianity is enacted.

The construction of a spatialised performative expression of faith, that speaks to the desire for authenticity and search for identity of its proponents, is demonstrably at the core of Radical Christianity. It offers a creative third space for people who want to imagine Christianity in a postsecular, postmodern framework not at a reactive measure, but because they genuinely want a liberated Church that stands in the vanguard of collective efforts for achieving justice “on Earth as it is in Heaven”.

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Appendix

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Social Therapeutic and Community Studies
New Cross
London SE14 6NW

Elaine Cortes Pasqual
PGR Student
STaCS Department

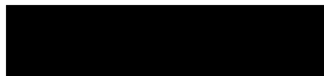
17 March 2022

Dear Elaine

RE: Radical Grace: Lived practices of radical Christianity in a global city

The Departmental Research Ethics Sub-Committee has considered your application for ethical approval for your research into your proposed research topic as above, I am pleased to inform you that ethical approval has been granted.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Kalbir Shukra
Chair Postgraduate Research Committee

1