Faith communities: immanence, aesthetics and thinking through figures

Anna Hickey-Moody

Abstract

In this paper, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork to develop a conversation between Deleuze and Guattari’s geophilosophy (Deleuze and Guattari in What is philosophy?, Verso Books, London, 1994: pp. 85–113) and concepts within and findings from empirical fieldwork exploring religion, faith and everyday belief systems. This leads to some new ways of thinking about faith and draws parallels between religion as a mode of ‘thinking through figures’ (1994, p. 89), in contrast to faith as a way of ‘being connected rather than being projected’ (1994, p. 92). Through geophilosophy I develop a way to understand the changing contextual meanings people give to faith and/or religion. For example, people of the same faith or religion may often believe in such different ways that they cannot recognize the faith held by the other person as being the same as their own. They speak the same language but do not understand each other. (Deleuze and Guattari in What is Philosophy? Verso Books, London, 1994: p. 110).

Keywords Faith · Ethnography · Feminism · Geophilosophy

Introduction

This paper is a conversation between Deleuze and Guattari’s geophilosophy (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, pp. 85–113) and concepts within and findings from empirical fieldwork exploring religion, faith and everyday belief systems. This conversation leads to some new ways of thinking about faith and draws parallels between religion as a mode of ‘thinking through figures’ (1994, p. 89), in contrast to faith as a way of ‘being connected rather than being projected’ (1994, p. 92). Both approaches are de- and re-territorialised. This offers a way to understand the changing contextual meanings people give to faith and/or religion. People of the same
faith or religion may often believe in such different ways that they cannot recognize the faith held by the other person as being the same as their own. They speak the same language but do not understand each other. (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 110) In what is to follow, I explain my methodology and methods, distinguish immanent faith from transcendent religion and go on to consider the two belief systems in relation to geophilosophy.

**Methodology and methods**

This paper draws on a five-year multi-sited ethnographic project exploring systems of cultural value within religious communities in low socio-economic areas (LSES). Findings from this empirical research orient my engagement with Deleuze and Guattari’s geophilosophy and the approaches to religion, immanence and transcendence it expresses. I read Deleuze and Guattari as a feminist ethnographer. I am interested in what the empirical implications of their philosophy might be for how we understand communities. I began reading Deleuze’s work 25 years ago, inspired partly by Foucault’s suggestion that “One must not look for a “philosophy” amid the extraordinary profusion of new notions and surprise concepts … [perhaps it is] best read as an ‘art’, in the sense that is conveyed by the term ‘erotic art’, for example” (Foucault 1983, p. 12). Deleuze and Guattari’s writing on geophilosophy came after this statement was made. Their geophilosophy is as close as they come to offering a grand narrative of their work. I read geophilosophy as an aesthetics of thought, not as a doctrine that I may get ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. As a feminist ethnographer interested in lived systems of cultural value, I bring the non-philosophy to philosophy, as “Philosophy needs a nonphilosophy that comprehends it; it needs a nonphilosophical comprehension just as art needs non art and science needs non-science”. (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 218). I don’t read Deleuze and Guattari in order to become a philosopher, or to develop a ‘true’ and ‘correct’ understanding of their work, but rather to develop insights into the lived systems of cultural value I have observed in my fieldwork.

George Marcus describes multi-sited ethnography as being ‘... both in and of the world system’ (1995, p. 95). It looks for global patterns and resonances, and builds conversations across research sites. Many scholars have taken up multi-sited ethnography as a method (Burawoy 2000; Francisco-Menchavez 2018; Kenway et al. 2006). The primary difference from what might have been considered traditional ethnography is that multi-sited ethnography is a way of exploring relationships between communities across the globe. It is a way of researching global themes and patterns of experience, such as connections to religion or, in this case, faith. I explain the distinction I make between religion and faith shortly. For now, I want to suggest that we might come to understand a multi-sited ethnography as a:

...less common mode of ethnographic research self-consciously embedded in a world system, now often associated with the wave of intellectual capital labelled postmodern, [that] moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the cir-
calculation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse space–time. (Marcus 1995, p. 96, emphasis added).

As such, multi-sited ethnography is embedded in more than one place. Ethnographic research is typically concerned with understanding culture from the ‘inside’ and developing site-specific knowledge about cultural meanings. Multi-sited ethnography looks for cultural meanings that are important in more than one place. It is a conversation between places composed of issues, attachments and experiences shared between sites. For example, all my research sites featured parents who were interested in faith in unorthodox ways. Multi-sited ethnography finds resonances (and differences) across places, people, culture and things as they de- and re-territorialize religious beliefs, institutions and practices.

The purpose of my multi-sited ethnography is to map the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse space–time. The global sites in which my ethnography is embedded are both world systems and lived experiences of cultural meanings of faith, objects, surfaces and identities. Systems of schooling, religions, the global politics of migration and associated migration services, are trans-national structures that I have come to know through weeks and months of being embedded in their operations. The ethnographer looks to “see how each kind of society corresponds to a particular kind of machine” (Deleuze 1990, p. 175). Within and outside social and institutional systems, I paid attention to the circulation of cultural meanings of belonging as well as meanings of faith, home and of objects, such as the Virgin Mary, the headscarf, the altar, the prayer mat. These objects become vernacular monuments whose “action is not memory but fabulation” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 168). They are part of creating systems of belief or meaning that sustain people. Cultural meanings, objects and identities that led my inquiry were defined by my research participants. They are not necessarily what I was ‘looking for’ in understanding faith communities, so much as what I found. Even though these stories are told by many different voices across a variety of social contexts and places, their similarities are striking. They de- and re-territorialize religion in ways that are an expression of geographic context, and which give “form to the chaos of life” (Colebrook 2002, p. 13).

Multi-sited ethnography is an ethnographic practice that traces shared practices of fabulation across sites. It is appropriate for this project because it illustrates similarities in geographically and ethnically diverse communities. Faith, religion and belonging, community and attachment are themes that unify data from 12 sites and two countries. Multi-sited ethnography is a practice comprising “strategies of quite literally following connections, associations and putative relationships” (Marcus 1995, p. 97). More than this, Marcus (1995) notes that multi-sited ethnography looks “beyond the situated subjects of ethnography towards the system of relations which define them,” (19, emphasis added) such a system of relations can be understood as what Bogue (2010, p. 9) characterizes as “an experimentation on the real”. Within which, icons, practices, rituals can be considered as fabulative works that create “interventions in their ambient social, political, institutional, environmental and material worlds” (Bogue 2010, p. 10).
Deleuze discusses economic disparities in capitalism (1995, pp. 172–173) but does not address social and economic ‘class’ as it is conceived broadly in society. As a lived experience, social and economic class is expressed nonverbally through geography, taste and aspiration. Race articulates differently for everyone—there is no one way of being English-Bangladeshi or Palestinian-Australian. However, race is an enduring organising feature of subjectivity, religion and community life in the Australian and English communities in which I worked. This is a key concept outside of Deleuze’s thought in the respect that not only does he fail to address the politics of race, his characterization of philosophy as comprised of French, German and English thought (1994, p. 105) clearly posits a White racialization of philosophy. As a citizen of the Irish Republic, I personally delight at the suggestion that, as far as the conditions for English thought go, “a tent is all that is needed” (1994, p. 105); however, the broader project of folding non-White experience into landscapes of Deleuze and Guattari’s thought must be undertaken if it is to be of some relevance in global terms (see Braidotti and Bignall 2019). The ways that non-White and diverse perspectives are brought into Deleuze and Guattari’s thought will necessarily change how it can be configured. They suggest that ‘Thinking consists in stretching out a plane of immanence that absorbs the earth (or rather ‘adsorbs’ it). Deterritorialization of such a plane does not preclude reterritorialization but posits it as the creation of a future new earth’ (1994, p. 88). Processes of the de- and re-territorialization of thought must extend beyond landscapes of German, French and English philosophy, and bringing in superdiverse community stories is one way in which this change can start to take place.

Conceptually and practically, I differentiate between religion and faith. The former is a way of “thinking through figures” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 88), the latter an immanent expression of cultural values. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that “In both cases, imperial unity or spiritual empire, the transcendence that is projected on the place of immanence paves it or populates it with figures. It is a wisdom or a religion—it does not matter which. It is only from this point of view that Chinese hexagrams, Hindu mandalas, Jewish sephiroth, Islamic “imaginals”, and Christian icons can be considered together: thinking through figures” (1994, p. 89).

Here, we see how religion can establish both connected and distinct modes of thinking through figures, a way of valuing transcendence, of perpetuating what Lauren Berlant would have called a ‘cruel optimism’ (2011). However, as suggested above, I contend that religion is de- and re-territorialized on, or by immanent faith. Just like one cannot say whether territory or earth comes first, woven around or through systems for thinking are immanent faith systems that deterritorialize abstraction. Often people have faith in things that are not religious, but rather, relate to practices that express sets of values. Many people who I got to know through my ethnography have what they characterise as ‘non-traditional’ relationships to faith, religion, and/or spirituality, or have developed unique personal practices as part of their lived religion (Ammerman 2016; Woodhead 2011). Many believe that there is more to life and death than what we ‘know’, but they do not feel they can know what exactly this might be. Other experiences of faith that I encountered regularly were created by people who have mixed faith systems: those who, for example, were Muslim by marriage but Christian by birth and identified with both belief systems,
or those who had been part of different religions at different stages of life. Both consciously and unconsciously, many adults of Muslim faith wanted to be able to offer viable alternative stories to anti-Islamic representations that construct Islam “only in terms of terrorism, misogyny and authoritarianism” (Aly 2007, p. 244). The many versions of Islam that have been expressed through my research could also be considered a certain aesthetic of faith, “sensations: percepts and affects, landscapes and faces, visions and becomings” (1994, p. 177).

Faith is an immanent belief and practice that is contextually specific and informed by the “immanent modes of existence of people provided with rights” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 107). I will put forward alternatives to hegemonic representations of religious communities through exploring faith rather than religion. I take faith to include the belief systems of secular people. Through a range of examples, I show that faith is experienced in contextualized and messy ways in relation to religion and atheism and that faith is, more than anything, a dividuated expression of context.

**Faith as an aesthetic practice and a place of difference**

“Europeanization does not constitute a becoming but merely the history of capitalism, which prevents the becoming of subjected peoples. Art and philosophy converge at this point: the constitution of an earth and a people that are lacking as the correlate of creation” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 108).

Like art and philosophy, faith (rather than the ideology of religion) is a way people create radical alternatives to dominant belief systems. Many of my research participants tried to explain the complexity of their faith in unconventional ways, arguing that faith did not quite fit with existing religious architectures. This meta-questioning has also emerged as a trend among young people of faith in several countries (Furseth 2018; Halafoff et al. 2020). Below, Joanie, a white working-class mother from Manchester describes parenting her child in a way that develops spirituality without being didactic:

I don’t follow organised religion. I’m spiritual, and I believe there’s something bigger, and there’s a lot of similarities across 99 per cent of religions. What I have an issue with is the way people in power use religion as a tool to make us fight against each other, when actually we’ve got a lot more in common than we’ve got difference. So we’re bringing up Rose very much, if she asks, ‘Is there a God?’, we say, ‘We’ve not the arrogance to say we fully know.’ And I don’t mean that in a bad way to anybody else, but we don’t know. Look at the stars. Look at humanity at its best. Something has got to be there. And it’s up to her to make her own decision. (Manchester site 1, focus group, 2017)

Joanie is open to spirituality: she says, “Look at the stars. Look at humanity at its best. Something has got to be there”. She has spiritual “feelings” while, at the same time, she is critical of religion’s complex political histories, in a similar manner to that in which one might be critical of “the history of capitalism, which prevents the becoming of subjected peoples” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 108). Joanie also
demonstrates a disparaging perspective on religion “shutting children in”, as she put it. My conversation with her continued, with other mothers joining in:

Inaya: We are from a mixed background, so we’ve always had the two religions. We were christened, and we went to school in Pakistan, but we were in a convent, a Catholic one. So I’ve always had that diversity.

Amira: Yeah, my daughters came to me too, and said, ‘Mama, am I a Muslim? Because my friend said that since I’m white, I’m not dark enough to be a Muslim.’ And then I explained that there are so many different Muslims – like Nana. She’s white, she’s Muslim.

Emily: My son was saying, ‘I’m a Christian because I’m white.’ I explained that loads of Christians are people of colour.

Joanie: Molly’s actually been told she was a ‘non-believer’, which is a term we absolutely abhor, because it has so many negative connotations. … we explained to her, ‘You believe in things. We believe in things, as a family. Just because you, you’re not a Muslim or Christian, that doesn’t mean you don’t believe in goodness to all.’

This discussion between a diverse group of women clearly shows the reflexivity parents have regarding stereotypical relationships between race, faith and religion. Many people won’t accept stereotypical representations of religion. Here, I take religion to be a transcendent model of thought, explained by Deleuze and Guattari as a kind of projection.*** They state that:

“Hexagrams are combinations of continuous and discontinuous features deriving from one another according to the levels of a spiral that figures the set of moments through which the transcendent descends. The mandala is a projection on a surface that establishes correspondence between divine, cosmic, political, architectural, and organic levels as so many values of one and the same transcendence” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 89).

While some of my research participants connect to religious figures that value transcendence, many are sustained by an immanent faith that deterritorializes religion, they are making their own systems, they are “the race summoned forth by art or philosophy … an oppressed, bastard, lower anarchical, nomadic, and irremediably minor race” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 109). A rhizomatic assemblage of people de- and re-territorializing belief systems through living their faith in creative ways. For example, Joanie’s defence of spirituality and a belief “in goodness to all”, outside religion shows that faith is very much alive in people’s worlds in ways that extend beyond religion. Becoming a parent is a life event that causes many people to re-evaluate the religious or spiritual traditions they grew up with and think anew about wanting to communicate these to their children (Berghammer and Fliegenschnee 2014; Hu et al. 2009). Listening back across my conversations with parents, I became increasingly aware of the plasticity of not just faith, but also of religion: the fact that it is always being de- and re-territorialized in ways that explode cliche. Religion is often a way of thinking through figures, but not always. In contrast, faith is an aesthetic practice that “undoes the triple organization of perceptions, affections and opinions in order to substitute a monument composed of percepts, affects and blocs of sensation that
take the place of language” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 176). As a way of living both religion and secularism, faith is an aesthetics of practice that is de- and re-territorialized on religion, in response to life events. It is both more and less than an ‘essential’ part of geography and heritage. Meera from Manchester exemplified such reflexivity when she described how her Christian mother negotiated her father’s Muslim religious background:

I think with us being from a mix – my mum being Catholic and my father being Muslim – but obviously he left his country to explore and no one else from his family came to the UK. [His other family members] all went elsewhere, but only he came to Europe … but the guidelines and the similarities between Christianity and Islam were the same. Very much the same, so I think that’s how my mum adapted. Like, they related to each other’s religion. My mum then became really Catholic trying to fit in with my dad’s background, then became Buddhist later on. And I think it’s the religious structure that keeps Mum going a lot. (Manchester 1st focus group 2017)

Meera’s mother reterritorialized Abrahamic faith systems as a way of keeping on existing, before moving to become Buddhist. Her identification of the fact that it is the structure of the religion—the rituals, practices, beliefs and communities—that keeps her mother “going” resonates with insights offered by many other parents who have also developed reflexive approaches to their spirituality. The genuine investment in the similarity between religious and non-religious people highlights a key theme emerging from the stories I collected: non-religious and religious faiths are a vehicle to express ethics and values (Woodhead 2011). Faith is a means of reconciling the “shameful compromises” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 108) to which human life calls us to bear witness on a day-to-day basis.

Rhys, a member of a church, explained that, for him, the draw towards religion was not a relationship with God, but a framework that could support the education and development of his children:

Religion, for me, is really more about having values and morality – a morality that’s not necessarily connected to a God, but we all try and be connected to each other, and care about each other and there’s a community that loves each other and has similar sort of beliefs. And we can talk openly about it. (Adelaide church focus group 1, October 2018)

Rhys is looking for a place where thinking is “to experiment, but experimentation is always that which is in the process of coming about—the new, remarkable, and interesting that replace the appearance of truth and are more demanding than it is. What is in the process of coming about is no more what ends than what begins” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 111). While Rhys uses the word religion to explain what he believes, his lack of attachment to a transcendental figure and his investment in values demonstrates an embodied and immanent faith. Indeed, many parents argued that ethics, values, and connectedness were the reasons why they are part of communities that are invested in thinking about existence in ways that extend beyond the visible and immediate ‘truths’ of life.
The other theme that runs through these discussions is the importance of conceptual and physical community when raising children. “Thinking takes place in the relationship of territory and earth … the earth constantly carries out a movement of deterritorialization on the spot, by which it goes beyond any territory: it is deterritorializing and deterritorialized” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 85) Alayah, Rhys and Jayne were explicitly interested in storytelling, song and creativity for children in learning physical communities. Martha, Jennifer, Meers, Sandy, Emily, Amina and Inaya were all committed to building place based and virtual community relationships, and saw discussions of faith as a way of strengthening and better understanding community. In the following section, I explore territories in which faith constitutes a form of community.

**Territories of community and culture**

During focus group discussions and individual interviews, people in all my research sites acknowledged the ongoing de- and re-territorializations effected between religion, ethnicity and culture. This observation has also emerged as a pattern in the academic literature in the recent years, in particular among younger people (Halafoff et al. 2020; McGuire 2008; Woodhead 2011). Participants repeatedly commented that culture transforms, or has a significant impact on how religion is practiced, including on the way that they felt towards specific religious communities. Two participants, whom I discuss below, suggested that culture rather than religion was what drew them to religious communities, because they wanted to pass specific kinds of culture on to their children. These cultural values included kindness, being helpful and generous, and being convivial and sociable. Alayah from Adelaide said she misses the educational aspects of the Muslim culture in which she was raised, and explained she worries that her daughter does not always behave in ways she would like. She is trying to teach her daughter to be more helpful towards others. Alayah felt that what she calls the “sense of village” is often lacking in her experience of community in Australia. For Alayah, being part of a church is a way of bringing children into a “village”. She explains:

> My dad’s Ahmadi Muslim community are hugely community-centred. So that is one of its strengths. There is this absolute, because it is largely Pakistani-dominated. I mean there are lots of converts from all around the world, the Ahmadi community is growing very fast. They have a really, really, really strong sense of community, giving and service. And service is really important, as it is drilled into those kids right from a really young age. … I’m very lucky my parents are hugely involved in her life, but they get driven mad by her as well, because they are very service and village-oriented as well. So what I’m hoping is that she’s gonna learn some of those things. (Church focus group, October 2018)

Many parents wanted their children to experience specific character qualities (being friendly, caring, selfless) that were in many ways inseparable from religious communities. Alayah is drawn to her church because it provides a sense of village life. It is
a means through which she is able to “rediscover the house and the body” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 182). In regard to raising her daughter, she also draws on the ethical orientations of the Islamic religion in which she was raised.

The reasons why participants choose faith communities are a complex enmeshment of history, lived experience and culture. Seeking a sense of community, or trying to replicate their own childhood experiences for their children were among the main reasons parents gave for belonging to faith-based communities. For some participants, the attraction to religion was the feeling of ‘fitting in’, that fostered senses of belonging, familiarity and tradition. The reterritorialization of religion over faith communities and vice versa is an ongoing process, in which the figure or the hope of a better life after death can overcode immanent ethics. Then again, at times immanent ethics lead to a deterritorialization of structures of religious transcendence. Physical territory matters, as do particular patches of earth. Philomena explains that her family still attends the church in which her parents were married, even though this is now a significant distance from their current home. Whenever possible, her family makes the journey from their home in the outer-western suburbs of Sydney to the inner-western location of the church, because they still derive a sense of belonging from this particular community:

My parents still like to go, so I sometimes drive them to Leichhardt church, which is where they got married. All my kids were baptised there. My brother and my sister got married there, so there’s a big history at that church. And I – I know my parents’ funerals will be there … maybe even mine. So, there is a – a calling there, a belonging there, a family there, a community there. So, when there is a – a festival there or a commemoration of some sort we’re drawn to that. (Sydney focus group 3, January 2018)

This narrative showing how memory lives on in place suggests continuity, a territory in which community is built through years and years of living with (and interacting with) each other—what Alayah calls the “sense of village”.

For others, belonging was more complicated, as it was not necessarily fitting in with people who share the same socio-cultural background or upbringing, but at times was more aspirational. In its transcendent form, religion can be a ‘way to be a better person’, or a way to belong with ‘desirable’ people. One Australian participant, Marge, explains the educational value she gets from her Buddhist religious group, whose members are predominantly of Vietnamese origin:

I’ve got a few communities that I currently belong to. … my Buddhist group, which is run by a fellow psychologist, it’s actually at the moment all Vietnamese people who kindly translate. We are working on Sunyata Emptiness Meditation. So, when I go to that group, with such a wonderful bunch of people who are essentially non-judgmental and really supportive, I feel at home and really part of, I’m part of their community, I feel part of their community, even though at the moment I’m the only English-speaking person, or some of them speak English and Vietnamese. So I feel like I’m coming home when I’m there, and yet I’m not Vietnamese, I’m Russian Orthodox from early on. (Adelaide Church focus group 3, October 2018)
Not only does Marge feel most at home in a group that is totally different from the culture in which she was raised, amongst members who do not speak the same language as her, but the group itself is also fairly far removed from any mainstream religious school of thought, or as she puts it, operates without “all the dogma and stuff in the way”. Her group creates its own “milieu of immanence” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 87) based on the priorities and aspirations of its members and their personal spiritual philosophies. This theme of faith as way of making territories of community and culture is an attraction for people who want to ‘belong’, as well as those who never chose to belong, but want to define themselves against religion (Woodhead 2011). Martha from South East London made a huge effort to find a church where she could belong:

So now for me the Church of England church I go to is part of Inclusive Church, which is a church that accepts everybody on grounds that it doesn’t matter what your gender is, financial situation, disability, sexuality. Basically, it’s very clear that this is a church for everybody. Normal people, basically ... The church will not discriminate on any of those grounds: you know, things like addiction, debt, blah blah. All those things. Whereas a lot of churches would say they are welcoming, but really, you might come through the door and people might tut or say, ‘well, that’s okay for you but we don’t want your type’. (East London focus group 2, 2018)

As a politically progressive White lesbian mother of two black children, Martha sought out her inclusive church in London, and in so doing she de-territorialized conservative church ideals about family, sexuality and community. Simone also de-territorialized church ideals, although she experienced a very different version of an inclusive church as a result of the rural location of her childhood home. The state of Queensland in Australia has an area of 1.853 million km². It is seven times the size of England. Simone’s experience of church community is set in North Queensland, and is a simultaneous deterritorialization of church ideals and reterritorialization of new forms of community, belonging and faith:

My father grew up in a very small town in North Queensland, and there was no church, and his mother owned the only pub in town. And because they weren’t open Sunday mornings, the pub would alternate between housing the different religions in town – everyone would have their church service in the pub. Every Sunday, everyone would go, whether they were a Protestant or a Catholic or something else, and each preacher would have a turn once a month giving a sermon. And the whole town would just rock up and listen. Same, same but different. Like close enough. Remembering that from my Dad cracks me up, the idea of that’s how community came together. The rabbi, the priest, and the minister walked into a pub and gave a sermon. They took turns. That’s how he grew up, at his mum’s pub which was also the local church. And it was everyone’s religion. The alcoholics and the religious folk, they all come together and like, people work like that (Melbourne focus group 1, August 2018)
The idea that different faith systems have more in common than they have separating them again runs through Simone’s story, which positions alcoholics and religious folk as the two halves of the same geographical community. Bringing out people’s similarities rather than their differences was the primary value Simone identified in her father’s experience of pub churches, identifying that celebrating some kind of togetherness across cultural and religious differences as a skill her father learnt through the experience of Sunday pub sermons. As Deleuze and Guattari remind us “movements of deterritorialization are inseparable from territories that open onto an elsewhere; and the process of reterritorialization is inseparable from the earth” (1994, p. 86). In this instance, the process of reterritorialization was shaped by the tropical isolation of North Queensland.

Participants in my research came from a variety of backgrounds. Cultural and ethnic traditions varied widely, and many participants had grown up in more than one cultural environment. There were also sizeable differences in age groups, education levels and political attitudes. In focus group discussions, these different sub-groups of education standards, political attitudes and age often showed much greater similarities in attitude and opinion than those based on religious beliefs.1

While themes of moral and ethical education run across all religions, Muslim participants often suggested their religion was misunderstood in some way or they were persecuted as a result of their faith. The practice of de- and re-territorializing popular depictions and misrepresentations of Islam is a unifying feature of many statements made by members of the Islamic community across all my research sites. Participants were adamant that Muslims are a diverse community, and that on an individual and a community level, they have as much in common with non-Muslims as they have with other Muslims. In the next section, I explore some of these conversations as examples of what I call contemporary geophilosophies and aesthetics of Islam. As a concept, geophilosophies of Islam could be the focus of an entire monograph, and consequently my discussion below is representative of key findings but is not exhaustive.

Reterritorializing Islam: geophilosophies and aesthetics of praxis

“The territorial assemblage is inseparable from lines or coefficients of deterritorialization, passages, and relays towards other assemblies ... a machine plugs into the territorial assemblage of a species and opens it up to other assemblages” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 333). During focus groups and interviews, several Muslim participants suggested they were constantly reterritorializing popular

1 For example, my survey respondents agreed that the idea of multiculturalism was important and that different cultures should be valued and celebrated. 90% of respondents agreed ‘it is important for Australians to celebrate and support different cultural and ethnic practices’. Differences emerged mainly among various age groups: respondents aged 18 to 34 years were more likely to agree with this statement (97%), compared to respondents aged 35 to 64 years (89%), and those aged 65 years and over (79%). In this, as in many other questions regarding values and beliefs, the gap between groups with different religious beliefs, mainly between Christians and Muslims, was much smaller than the gap between different age groups.
media representations of their religion. This included educating non-Muslims on knowledge of Muslim practices and traditions, explaining distinctions between moderate and fundamentalist beliefs, and the different Muslim schools of thought. Many felt that they were unjustly perceived as the same kinds of people who would carry out atrocities (such as Islamic State, also known as ISIS or Daesh), even though they had themselves suffered from fundamentalist groups, and in some cases had become refugees because of it. One participant, Rahmatollah, explained:

When I am asked about what’s your religion, I’m Muslim, the first thing people are thinking about is I belonging to those people as well. To Daesh, to Al Qaeda, to the Taliban. … The public in Australia don’t know that the Taliban, Daesh, Al Qaeda don’t love us. Those fundamentalist organisations are saying to us ‘You are not Muslim’… That’s why we become refugees. That’s why my wife’s parents, it’s been two years and still I don’t know what’s happening to them in the siege. They couldn’t go out. The last time when I, the last phone call yesterday, I make a call and talk with them and we can still hear the explosion noise and they are crying and we can’t help them. They are twelve people just hiding underground, hiding. (FF focus group, August 2018)

This story of alienation, loss and fear is extreme, but is also similar to many stories told by Muslim refugee participants. The key piece of information that seems to be missing from the popular consciousness in both Australia and the UK is the fact that, in most cases, Muslim refugees and migrants have left their home countries because of war and/or persecution by extremist Muslim groups (Kabir 2007). Rahmatollah was not only forced to leave his home by extremist Muslim groups, he was then forced to live through some negative experiences with racism in Australia, in which he was made out to be the same as the extremists that had forced him out of his home in Afghanistan. Rahmatollah said this was particularly painful because he had already been forced to leave his home country because of the danger from fundamentalist groups:

We are affected by fundamentalist groups because we are always persecuted by Taliban and Al Qaeda, Daesh. As you know in the media, because they are Sunni Muslim, and you are Shia, they don’t believe in the Shia, because they are saying, they believe that Shia are not Muslim. They are saying ‘You have to change your religion if you want to stay in Afghanistan, you have to change your religion. Or if you don’t change it, you have to leave Afghanistan – your country’. (FF focus group, August 2018)

As Rahmatollah points out, several subgroups have developed in Islam that follow quite different traditions and schools of thought. As he makes plain, more-conservative or fundamentalist groups are often highly critical of more-permissive or liberal Muslims, but this is not often discussed in the mainstream Australian media (Aly 2007). Several participants in focus groups and interviews commented on the negative way Islam was represented in mainstream media. Aquid
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also spoke of his family being persecuted for their religious beliefs by fundamentalist groups. He felt that ignorance rather than malice had been the cause for his experience of racism in Australia, but he also thought that the media was responsible for negative and stereotypical representations of Islam:

The person in Australia who talked to me when asking what my belief is, the person doesn’t recognise they are learning from the media. They are watching the media and don’t know exactly what’s the difference between this people and that people. We don’t belong to that people. Because they only thinking about the religion, Muslim. All Muslims are the same to them. (FF focus group, August 2018)

Aquid was confronted in the park by angry white Australians who are led by media representations of terrorism. They have been taught to conflate being Muslim with being a terrorist (see Kabir 2007). Understandably, Aquid was disappointed by the inaccurate public understanding and the way that media focus on Islamic extremism has led to open hostility and aggression.

As is the case with all religions, being a Muslim is not an exclusive identity: “linneal groups may change territory, and they are only really determined by embracing a territory or residence in a ‘local lineage’”. (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 86). People also form practices of belonging and identity around aspects of their lives other than religion (Jeldtoft 2011). Elements of individual identity, such as ethnicity and culture, age, gender, sexuality, tastes, and hobbies, all influence modes of belonging. Some assemblages of Islam are geographically organised, such as physical communities that share a mosque, while others are more casual, such as followers of Instagram pages on modest fashion. Besides the main formalised groups, more informal, non-organised practices also exist (Ammerman 2016; Jeldtoft 2011). These include Muslims who adhere less closely to rituals, or who make up their own rituals or practices based on traditional culture or on their own values and needs, and also Muslims who are at odds with mainstream ideologies for a range of reasons. For example, LGBTQI+ Muslims often struggle for recognition, rights, or acceptance within mainstream society (Rasmussen 2016) and within the Islamic legal system. Religious identity can be often only a minor part of individual identity, but it is one that allows or prohibits the formation of a range of affiliations and solidarities with individuals and groups. This diversity within Islam is my departure point for discussing Muslim culture. It is always a rich hybrid. This broad terrain of ways of de-and re-territorializing religion comprised countless examples of personal religious identities, many of which are omitted from popular representations.

I have suggested that often individuals have more in common with others who do not follow the same religious beliefs. During the focus group discussions and interviews, it became clear that participants’ lived experiences of being Muslim did not generally coincide with what they saw as public perceptions of Islam (see Brown and Richards 2016). Most felt that the general public did not understand the diversity within Islam or the fact that religious identities only make up a small part of individual systems of belonging, alongside other factors such as being a mother or a father, a student, a professional, an amateur photographer, a cricket enthusiast, and so on. Some participants had experienced discrimination—including discrimination
on religious grounds—but many also had experiences where people in the workplace went out of their way to respect their need to pray, or where others in public had been accepting of religious, ethnic, or cultural minorities. Even still, most participants were critical of the media’s role in representing their religion.

Other participants observed how media representations and public opinion had conflated Islam with fundamentalism (Ahmed and Matthes 2017). Bilal, who took part in a one-on-one interview in Manchester in 2018, had experienced people’s fear of extremism, but also developed some clear strategies to counter the broad lack of public awareness. Above all, he felt that the role of the media in guiding people’s perception of Islam was important because it could be leveraged to either improve community understanding or foster negative stereotypes. Bilal specifically referred to the taxi drivers who helped victims and witnesses to the 2017 Manchester Arena attacks. As Bilal points out, narratives of predominantly Muslim taxi drivers helping their fellow Mancunians were also included in media coverage:

I cannot blame Islam or Islamophobia in any way, it’s natural. People fear about terrorism. So I guess what’s the important point is communication among and between key actors of each religion. Of course, we can learn from the Manchester Arena attack where the bomb happened. I’ve heard that these taxi drivers were Muslim in the majority. They, how do you say? They volunteered to take the victims home, free of charge. I mean, this is the most effective way to, how do you say – promote that Islam does not have anything to do with that terrorist attack. These perpetrators are extreme. People don’t understand that. We actually practice the real Islam here. So it’s action and communication that is important. But the most important is action. Because that’s what the media catches, that’s what is in the media. The media covers a story about these taxi drivers helping people to get home. That the point where people start to respect Islam as a peaceful religion. (Individual interview, Manchester, June 2018)

Bilal, like many participants, felt that a lack of differentiation between extremist and everyday Muslims in the mainstream media, alongside a failure to represent the complexities of religious affiliation and the diversity of subgroups within Islam, has led to negative public perceptions of Muslims and Islam. These stereotypes result in racist and discriminatory attitudes that are expressed in frightening and confrontational ways, such as one of Aquid’s friends being attacked with an egg in the street.

Other participants had strategies to deal with, and try to alter, negative stereotypes. Like Bilal, some participants argued that it was important to engage in personal conversations with people in the community and to establish relationships in order to create trust and understanding. These strategies reterritorialize those of the mainstream media, but also tie in closely with faith as a means of belonging and togetherness. More than anything, religion was seen as an ethical and moral guide in focus groups and interviews, and this is partly how people understand the work of reterritorializing inaccurate representations of Muslim culture.

Also writing against constructions of homogenous Muslim communities, Hussain (2014) argues that scholars need to develop a more “a more complicated picture of community as contested and created through space and in dialogue with notions of
race, ethnicity and nation, and not determined by them” (623). What binds people together is not an assumed idea of culture derived from ethnicity, but an assemblage of social, cultural and affective practices that produce relations between different ethnicities, generations and collectivity in constant processes of de- and re-territorialisation in which the familiar may become strange. The social, cultural and affective practices to which Hussain refers are complex mixtures that are configured differently across space, time and experience. Being Muslim is different for every Muslim person, but regardless of these differences, it means connecting to range of diverse global and globalising flows.

**Conclusion**

Geophilosophies of faith run across secular and religious communities in ways that complicate divides between religious and non-religious communities. Faith is not just a singular belief system; it is a complex assemblage of memory, belonging and family, and is interwoven with community, place and aesthetics. The religious and non-religious community members that participated in my research were united by shared investments in community and their experiences of faith. Through discussing practices of reterritorializing and deterritorializing faith, I have shown some ways people are sustained by forms of faith which they simultaneously change as they experience. They may be simply sustained by faith in the fact that our children’s lives will be better than ours, that life after death will be better than it is now, faith in the ‘truth’ of science and the Enlightenment, or in the fact that humans will never know all there is to this world.

As Deleuze and Guattari’s geophilosophy illustrates, people are both born into and also explicitly choose belief systems. Capitalism, Christianity and Islam are the three most popular global belief systems and they are largely a result of where people are born and raised. Belief systems are not exclusive: religion and capitalism are entwined, and these relationships shape our imaginaries and community cultures. Faith mixtures are material, just as much as they are emotional and conceptual. They are smells of home, the way we organise memories and icons, community places and gatherings, words and sounds. We are part of mixtures that have been made through biography, geography, race and class. While we can modify these, we cannot completely change them. This said, the making of meaning as a geophilosophy of faith is a present form of reterritorializing thought (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 102) undertaken by everyday people who simultaneously make and remake their place and faith. Thinking about geophilosophies of faith as part of everyday life offers a non-essentializing, fluid and empirical way of understanding the human drive to believe.

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Florence. The RMIT ethics committee approved this research with the Project Number of 21071. I have anonymized participants’ names in ways that express their gender and ethnic identity.

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Anna Hickey-Moody is Professor of Media and Communication at RMIT University in Melbourne. She co-edited 'Deleuzian Encounters: Studies in Contemporary Social Issues' with Peta Malins (Palgrave) in 2007 and her first sole authored book, *Unimaginable Bodies* (Brill/Sense 2009), develops a Deleuzian-Spinozist affective reading of dance as a public pedagogy of disability. Since then, she has engaged with Deleuze's work in her books 'Youth, Arts and Education' (Routledge, 2013), 'Deleuze and Masculinity' (Palgrave 2019) and in her forthcoming book 'Faith Stories: Sustaining Meaning in Troubling Times' (Manchester University Press 2023).