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ABSTRACT:

In the context of contemporary Britain, 'Christmas' has become synonymous with a distinctively hope-saturated world of utopian enchantment and vitality. It is the contention of this thesis that the set of ritual practices and corresponding moods wrapped up in the annual performance of this festive occasion have come to hold an 'active mirror' (Turner 1982) up to the very root of our hopes, fears, values, desires, disappointments, ideals, and beliefs. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the North East of England from 2016-2019, this study seeks to delve into the complexity of this emotional matrix to explore what the world of Christmas might reveal about the nature of religion, culture, value, and belief in Britain today. Observing the ways in which Christmas comes to be performed across a range of public settings and lives, I seek to crosscut the go-to debates which have tended to dominate both colloquial and scholarly discourse around the more classically conceived 'religious' vs. 'secular' associations of Christmas to cast a broader anthropological lens upon the varieties of *transcendence* which become so clearly manifest in experiences of the festival, and which find especial resonance in references to the 'Christmas spirit' and/or 'magic'. To this end, I suggest that Christmas not only provides an apt empirical window through which to study a range of diverse contemporary worldviews, beliefs, and attitudes, but constitutes in and of itself an especially prime site of meaning-making in the contemporary world. Considering in particular the manner in which Christmas comes to mark and mirror the key changes and transitions of people's lives, this study represents to my knowledge one of the very first ethnographic attempts to examine the important role Christmas continues to play as a prime ritual-symbolic platform for the 'sacralisation' of contemporary British identities and worldviews (Mol 1976).



The Varieties of Christmas Magic: An ethnography of festivity, identity, and worldview in British life

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*This thesis is in many ways about belief,
and there have, it must be said, been moments when I have found it
hard to believe that its completion would ever become a reality.*

*I would therefore like to dedicate this text not only
to all those who shared their stories as part of this research,
to all who facilitated me in their homes and communities, and
to all those who helped make my adventures with Gelf the Elf so special,
but with my deepest gratitude
to all those who believed in our project when we could not,
to all those who cheered and renewed our spirits along the way, and
to all those who helped make our dreams come true.*



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1. Introduction

‘Christmas, our major festival, is celebrated by devout Christians,
by those of luke-warm faith and by non-believers.

The reasons for its abiding appeal go far beyond a desire for massive annual celebration.
They are to be found, amid paradox and in the presence of many Christmas Pasts,
in the central dilemmas of mortal man.’

(Golby & Purdue 1986: 18)

CHRISTMAS: AN ‘ACTIVE MIRROR’

The cultural phenomenon described in this thesis is one that evidently remains deeply engrained in the British psyche, and will no doubt prove familiar to the majority of readers. This presents both something of a privilege and a challenge. As with the interlocutors here presented, each will come to the topic with their own preconceptions, experiences and reflections. The annual shift into this purportedly ‘magical’ world of wish-fulfilment and enchantment has, it seems, become second nature to most of us. It is a shift that many of us work hard to make an active effort - and indeed, often feel an equal pressure - to construct. And yet, it is also a shift which is for the most part experienced as a moment of felt collective transcendence; of the extra-ordinary breaking in to the ordinary. We find in the Christmas festival a distinctive world of ritual symbolism and activity. A world in which realities are suspended, if not strangely magnified; a world in which time stands still, dreams are indulged and escapist utopias entertained. A world of intensity in which expectations press, and emotions run high; a world in which everything seems to have that extra little bit of sparkle. For good and - as we shall see - sometimes sadly for ill, most of us experience at this time of

year a significant intensification of the everyday life-world (D. Davies 2008);¹ of its highs and lows, and of all the complex and often painful ‘social dramas’ which lie entangled within its interweaving relationships (Turner 1982).

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork carried out across a range of locales predominantly in the North East of England from 2016-2019, this study proposes to delve into the complexity of the above described emotional matrix to explore just what the world of ‘Christmas’ might have to reveal about the nature of religion, culture, value, and belief as it is conceived and lived out in the context of contemporary Britain. In exploring the ways in which Christmas comes to reflect and refract the lives of the people who celebrate it, I want to suggest that this set of ritual practices and corresponding moods holds something of an ‘active mirror’ up to the very root of people’s hopes, fears, desires, disappointments, ideals, and beliefs (Turner 1982e: 104-105), and thus offers an especially apt empirical lens through which to study the dynamics of contemporary worldviews as they come to be formed and embodied in what Daniel Miller has cogently described as lived lifestyle ‘aesthetics’; that is, the integrative, holistic ‘pattern’ by which - and through which - people draw together, balance and organise the various ‘dispersed’, and sometimes ‘contradictory’, elements and influences of their lives (2008: 5-7, 293-7).² Tracing the complexities and paradoxes of lived lifestyle aesthetics as they play out on the ground, this study sets out to problematise previous commentary on the variously conceived ‘religious’ aspects of the festival to allow for a more nuanced appreciation of the organic and idiosyncratic manner by which contemporary social actors understand, absorb and navigate the ‘webs of significance’ (Geertz c.1973a: 5) - the categories, moods,

¹ In making references to ‘world’ - and more specifically, to the ‘everyday life-world’ as the environment in which such axiological world-building and maintenance takes place - I consciously utilise the phenomenological language of Alfred Schutz as an especially helpful and theoretically foundational conceptualisation of the kind of dynamic relationality between organism and environment this study seeks to emphasise (Schutz & Luckmann 1973; 1989).

² I here invoke the concept of ‘aesthetic’ formulated by Miller in his (2008) ethnography, *The Comfort of Things*; a study which, as we will see in Chapter 2, has very much influenced the methodological trajectory of my own work. ‘Aesthetic’, as Miller there conceives of it, can be loosely understood to refer to the embodied stylistic ‘pattern’ by which distinct individuals come to integrate and live out the various influences and proclivities of their lives, and essentially amounts to the lived manifestation of discrete orders of social ‘cosmology’ and/or ‘culture’. The emphasis I place on ‘lived lifestyles’ seeks - as per the terminology of Davies (2015) - to enhance this concept by highlighting the dynamic and affective nature of the sense-making processes which give energy to such ‘aesthetic’ patterning as it relates to the evolving cultivation of contemporary identities and worldviews. From here on in, I shall hence refer to ‘lived lifestyle aesthetics’ as a way of referring to the dynamic styles by which distinct individuals come to live out their emerging worldviews, and give meaning and/or order to the pattern of their own discrete cultures of influence.

environments and relationships - which guide and ground their emerging lifestyles and values both generally, and in relation to Christmas.³

By approaching the field via the carefully loose conceptual language of interrelating and complementary theoretical categories such as 'worldview', 'lifestyle', and 'aesthetic', I seek to crosscut the go-to debates which have tended to dominate both colloquial and scholarly discourse around the more classically conceived 'religious' vs. 'secular' associations of Christmas to cast a broader anthropological lens upon the varying and intra-influencing conceptions of *transcendence* which become so clearly manifest in experiences of the festival; and which come to be expressed perhaps most evocatively through the means of the magical mood and/or charismatic energy popularly referred to as the '*Christmas spirit*'. To this end, the chapters that follow aim to show the multiple ways in which experience of transcendence and/or connection with the 'spirit' of Christmas can be seen to occur across a whole *spectrum* of interwoven and overlaid worldviews and domains; from more ostensibly 'religious' carol services and nativity scenes at one end of the spectrum, to more ostensibly 'secular' experiences of Father Christmas, gift-giving, and home-spun family 'traditions' on the other. This attention to the fluid complexity of interaction which characterises engagement with such varied domains of experience chimes quite clearly with recent efforts to capture a more integrated and holistic understanding of the 'lived' realities of contemporary 'everyday' lifestyles as they pertain to our wider understanding of religion and belief (see esp. Ammerman 2007, 2014; McGuire 2008; Stringer 2008),⁴ and it is with this in mind that I attempt to enhance our empirical understanding of the way Christmas has come to both reflect and interact with these dynamics as they have developed within the context of 21st century Britain.

³ I likewise draw on Clifford Geertz' useful, and perhaps rather underutilised, concept of 'webs of significance' to paint a picture of the process of meaning-making by which cultural patterns - or in Miller's terminology, unique lifestyle 'aesthetics' - come to be woven from the various influences which arise from the wider environment(s) of the human agent. A concept which can in many ways be seen to underpin the very crux of the wider understanding of meaning-making which has come to be so associated with Geertz' distinctive interpretation of culture, reference to 'webs of significance' can be found in pride of place at the very opening of his famous essay on 'Thick Description', and reads as follows: 'Believing with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning' (c.1973a: 5).

⁴ See Bowman & Valk (2012) for cogent discussion of complementary disciplinary movements within folklore studies as they pertain to the study of 'vernacular religion' (Primiano 1995).

More broadly speaking, this study thus situates itself in the trajectory of the movement of voices both within and beyond the discipline of religious studies which have lately been calling for a re-conceptualisation of the general categories by which we might best describe the increasingly complex and dynamic plethora of beliefs, attitudes, repertoires, and/or styles by which people across varying contexts of contemporary socio-cultural pluralism come to live and frame their identities (see esp. Davies 2015; 2022; Droogers & van Harskamp 2014; Taves et al 2018). In-keeping with this perspective, I take a decidedly process-focused approach to the study of what the above-cited authors variously refer to as ‘meaning-making’ or ‘sense-making’ activity, utilising the more etically conceived terminology of ‘worldviews’ to make sense of the complex terrain of emic categories which define and colour identity dynamics on the ground.⁵ It has become increasingly clear to me throughout the course of my study that the socio-cultural dynamics which come to be mirrored in contemporary performances and understandings of Christmas shine an especially translucent light upon such processes of social construction and/or (re)production,⁶ and it is my hope that this venture might help to trace the beginnings of a more empirically coherent picture of the significance this key contemporary festival continues to carry for people as they navigate their way through the life-course, and through all the inevitable undulations and transitions which come along its path.

Hence, whilst this study on one level clearly aims to show the manner in which attitudes towards this prime annual cultural occasion can be seen to reflect the changing dynamics of British society and worldviews more generally, I here intend to focus rather more closely upon

⁵ In André Droogers and Anton van Harskamp’s key text on the subject, ‘worldview’ is conceptualised ‘as a specific form of the universal human cultural ability to signify and create meaning’ (2014: 33-34). Whilst this constitutes a distinct theoretical background from the likes of Nancy Ammerman (2007) and colleagues, I draw these frameworks together as complementary models for describing the dynamic complexity of the contemporary identities I here wish to describe.

⁶ The above cited work on worldviews theoretically positions itself as the outworking of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s conceptualisation of the meaning-making process as postulated in their now classic text *The Social Construction of Reality* ([1966] 1991); namely, the three-fold process by which cultural forms come to be (1) externalised (2) objectified/reified (3) internalised (Droogers 2014a: 25). Addressing Berger and Luckmann’s own sense of disquiet around some of the go-to interpretations of their theory - many of which have often tended to imply a rather over-engineered quality to such processes of ‘construction’ (for further analysis see Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch 2019) - I here attempt to modulate this terminology, attempting to infer more of a sense of the authors’ originally intended focus on the *cyclical* re-production and/or re-incorporation of pre-existing or past cultural knowledge.

the manner in which the evolving celebration and construction of Christmas in this context can be seen to intersect with the rather more personal currents of individual lives; and in particular, the manner in which the festival comes to be negotiated in relation to the dynamics of personal change and conflict which accompany and drive the individual's movement through the life-course (Myerhoff 1982; Hockey & James 2003; Janusz & Walkiewicz 2018). With this in mind, the main part of my analysis draws Arnold van Gennep's ([1960] 2019) classic 'rites of passage' theory together with Victor Turner's (1982) notion of 'social drama' as an especially apt conceptual frame through which to consider the reflexive processing of personal and socio-cultural transition and/or dissonance that can be seen to play out in contemporary performances of 'Christmas'. As we will see in Chapter 2, this focus on *dissonance* has come to constitute a key dimension of my thesis. Indeed, as per the above-described emphasis on rites of transition, the heart of my study has essentially come to focus around the manner in which performances of the utopian world of Christmas variously act to both accentuate and reconcile the central conflicts and crises of people's lives. This conceptualisation of 'performance' will likewise constitute a recurrent hermeneutic metaphor throughout my study,⁷ and seeks to emphasise (1) the highly 'staged' nature of Christmas in what is clearly a heavily commercialised and entertainment-oriented context, and (2) the dynamic, creative agency of the people who 'put on' and/or engage with such variously efficacious performances of festive 'meaning-making' activity.⁸ In what follows, I sketch an initial outline of the trajectory of my overarching argument, before offering a sense of the structure of this opening chapter.

⁷ Whilst I have predominantly chosen to frame my analysis around the conceptual language of Victor Turner's anthropology of performance and/or experience as it pertains to the study of ritual settings (see esp. 1982; 1988), it is important to note here the intersecting influence of the interrelated, though distinct, 'dramaturgical' terminology more often associated with the likes of Erving Goffman ([1959] 1990), and his sociological descendants (for further analysis, see Smith 2013). Though I hold such terminology together admittedly rather loosely, reference to performance language which emphasises the embodied nature of social action, and the agency of individual 'social actors' will be made throughout this study by way of emphasising the phenomenological dimensions of the situated and dynamically embodied processes of socio-cultural interaction and praxis I wish to here convey.

⁸ Recourse to metaphors of performance has now become something of a widespread and well-established practice across the social sciences (Edgily 2013; Vösu 2010), as well as more specifically within religious and ritual studies (Bell 1998). Such approaches have, however, naturally and rightly also attracted some considerable critique; not least in relation to the study of ritual (see esp. Bell 1992: 37-46). It is therefore important to emphasise that I have chosen to employ such language on the condition it be understood to operate as an apt hermeneutic metaphor for a particular kind of social activity, and/or mode of socio-cultural expression, as opposed to a like-for-like descriptor; whilst acknowledging the inevitable limitations of this particular frame of analysis.

EXPLORING “THE STUFF THAT DREAMS ARE MADE ON” : CHRISTMAS AS A PRIME RITE FOR THE STAGING OF INCORPORATION & ENCHANTMENT

Christmas is a highly anticipated, highly pervasive cultural event - a winter holiday season⁹ - and we might even say phenomenon, which carries with it a rich repository of symbolic resources and repertoires comprised of deeply familiar stories, characters, music, media, foods, décor, smells, imagery, rituals, attitudes, ideologies, and even emotions (Whiteley 2008). In Britain, as across many other parts of the world, such associations and memories form almost inescapable annual features of the dominant socio-cultural land, sound, and emotion-scape (Johnes 2016; Klassen & Scheer 2019).¹⁰ Positioned as it is in the liminal space of punctuation between one year and the next, this much celebrated ritual-symbolic fixture of the British societal calendar constitutes a deeply integrative - and crucially cyclical - rite of incorporation for the positive affirmation of social bond and value; and one which I want to argue carries some considerable affective and symbolic ‘resonance’ in the rhythmic flow of contemporary British life (Leavitt 1996: 528). In the words of popular historians J. M. Golby and A. W. Purdue cited at the opening of this chapter, it seems to me that the ‘abiding appeal’ of this event does indeed ‘go far beyond a desire for massive annual celebration’ (1986: 18). Rather, this study concurs with Claude Lévi-Strauss’ analysis that we ‘witness’ in ‘Christmas rituals’:

...not just...historical relics but...forms of thought and behaviour which illustrate the most general conditions of social life ([1952] 1993: 47)

Following Daniel Miller’s (1993; 2017) lead in paving out a more anthropological reading of the festival’s contemporary significance, this study maintains that Christmas constitutes an important manifestation of ‘sacred time’ (Deacy 2016: 4) which holds an ‘active mirror’ not only up to the ‘social dramas’ and dissonances of people’s everyday lives (Turner 1982e: 104-105), but up to the very ‘*stuff* that dreams are made on’ in Britain today (Shakespeare [1623] 2015: 4.1). In the context of an increasingly pluralised world (Berger 2014; Droogers & van

⁹ Given that this study focuses solely on Christmas in Britain, my examination pertains specifically to experiences of the festival in the northern hemisphere.

¹⁰ I here draw on the notion of ‘emotionscape’ outlined by Stockinger (2018) as an effective way of describing the embodied and highly signifying nature of culturally-specific ‘affective atmospheres’ (Anderson 2009).

Harksamp 2014), I contend that we find in the contemporary performance of Christmas a rare - and uniquely anticipated - moment of 'collective focus' which acts for many as a crucial culminating 'anchor-point' for the key narrative events and emotions of the life-course; and which, in turn, provides an important collective 'opportunity' for the consolidation and renewal of identities and worldviews.¹¹ Considered in this way, the festival can, I suggest, be understood in more directly functional terms as providing an important contemporary socio-cultural platform not only for the processing of loss and conflict, but for the emotional evaluation of the complex systems of worth and exchange which come to inform and energise the boundaries of our collective belonging and meaning-making.

The following chapters propose to explore the 'stuff' of the Christmas dream-world more closely - its values, its expectations, and its contradictions - and will ultimately argue that we find in the annual 'return' to this performance of festive enchantment a prime seasonal rite of passage and/or 'periodically recurrent social occasion' which pertains to the very core of who we are, what we have, and indeed, what we *believe*, from one year to the next (Eliade [1954] 2005; van Gennep [1960] 2019: 3-4; Falassi 1987: 2). In this opening chapter, I offer a brief review of the literature, considering what I believe my own distinctively 'person-centred' approach and findings might have to contribute to our broader understanding of the topic, as well as to current debate within the contemporary study of religion. I will then turn back to a more specific consideration of the methodological trajectory of my study, outlining: (1) the placement and location of my area of fieldwork, and (2) the structure and direction of the chapters which make up this thesis.

MAPPING THE CONTOURS OF A COMPLEX FIELD: TOWARDS THE STUDY OF CHRISTMAS AS A KEY EMPIRICAL WINDOW FOR THE STUDY OF CULTURE & RELIGION

In identifying Christmas as a key cultural resource for contemporary social-scientific study, I build on what can only be considered a rich tradition of ethnological and socio-historical research on Christmas; and more specifically, on the somewhat surprisingly much more recent momentum of interest in the subject which has begun to emerge amongst scholars of

¹¹ The notion of Christmas as 'anchor-point', 'collective focus', and 'opportunity' came directly from participants and will see some considerable expansion in Chapters 7 & 8.

religion over the past few years (e.g. Larsen 2020). Christopher Deacy's *'Christmas as Religion'* (2016), and Pamela Klassen and Monique Scheer's even more recent collaboration on *'The Public Work of Christmas'* (2019) have in particular gone some way to signalling the striking scope of the topic for the study of contemporary attitudes toward religion, meaning, and belief, and it is from these festive trailblazers - alongside Miller's anthropological forays into the subject (1993; 2017) - that I take my cue in identifying the need for a more fine-tuned, empirically informed, understanding of Christmas as it is experienced in contemporary Britain. The present study hence in many ways anticipates - and will I hope act to further encourage - what appears to be a growing recognition of Christmas as a prime empirical resource for the study of contemporary society and culture.

Recent years have indeed more broadly speaking seen the sporadic emergence of an assortment of publications which seem to indicate something of an incipient application of interest in the scope of 'Christmas studies' beyond the more purely historical and folkloristic fields of inquiry which have classically dominated research in this area, and it is with this in mind that this opening chapter seeks to highlight the significance of the work that has been done in re-tracing the contours of Christmas studies to draw attention to the rich potential such a reflexive relocation of scholarly perspective on the topic contains for a deeper understanding of the significance of the festival in the life of contemporary societies. It is important to emphasise that this movement still remains relatively inchoate as a substantive body of literature in its own right. However, it is from our perspective notable that a good number of these contributions have been produced by scholars of religion, and/or in some way tangibly intersect with the central exploratory themes and issues with which many of us continue to grapple. This to my mind places the study of religion firmly on the map in terms of its relation to the field of Christmas studies, and correspondingly opens up - or perhaps even re-purposes - the study of Christmas ritual and praxis as a rich exploratory base of inquiry for the historical and/or social-scientific study of religion.

What is noticeably lacking from existing explorations of Christmas and religion - and indeed from investigations of Christmas per se - is a depth of contemporary empirical research, and it is my hope that this study will initiate a conversation which might deepen - or in Geertzian language, 'thicken' (c.1973a) - our critical anthropological understanding of this significant

area of contemporary life and culture. In order to better contextualise the various and somewhat disparate strands of literature which have informed the emerging orientation of my study, it seems first important to situate my developing perspective in relation to the wider field of Christmas studies. In what follows, I thus sketch an introductory map of the contours of this somewhat disparate field of cultural commentary with a view to exploring the potential ways in which the study of Christmas might come to benefit from critical engagement with the social-scientific study of religion, and vice-versa.

FAMILIAR & YET UNFAMILIAR GROUND: A REFLEXIVE SHIFT IN CHRISTMAS STUDIES

The field of Christmas studies has from its very beginnings been dominated, and indeed characterised, by a distinctly antiquarian genre of historical inquiry (Nissenbaum 1996: xii). The complex processes of diffusion and cross-fertilising syncreticism involved in the development of its multifarious myths and traditions quite clearly make Christmas a ripe and recognised arena for close ethnologically minded study (Miller 2017: 423-424), and for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, commentary on the festival has thus perhaps understandably tended to remain the perhaps somewhat narrow preserve of folklorists and popular historians. As one might anticipate, scholarly reception of such material tends to veer towards varying - though often covert - forms of intellectual exclusivism, and it is therefore important to be clear about the kind of role each *type* of analysis might have to play in developing our knowledge of the topic. This thesis is intended to be predominantly ethnographic in vein, and though the limits of space have precluded a more thorough treatment of this particular literature, the rich body of material it represents must be given its due as a significant starting point for any more purely conceptually focused study of the 'comparative symbolics' of Christmas (Turner 1982b).¹²

¹² As was clarified by my attendance at a helpfully orienting conference on 'Winter Festivals and Traditions' held at the *Oxford Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (Wand 2017), focused work on the varied range of localised winter festivals across Europe is extensive, and constitutes a body of literature hitherto perhaps rather untapped in wider social-scientific circles. Personal conversations at this event in particular also drew my attention to the fact that German and Scandinavian work in this area may well offer a further goldmine of material currently inaccessible in English. For concrete examples of this kind of work, Armstrong (2010) and Samuelson (1982) provide good bibliographic starting points. For relevant examples of more anthropologically focused analyses of the rhythmic pattern of such seasonal customs, see James (1961), Hutton (1996).

Aside from this rather dauntingly diffuse body of emic commentary concerning the festival's roots and origins, more concerted social-scientific study of Christmas has up until now been sporadic, if not limited. Despite notable exceptions, the initiation of social-scientific research on the subject has typically tended to be incidental, or even accidental. Scholars have either seemed to stumble upon the topic as something of a rich side-note in the midst of studying something else,¹³ or have utilised it as a fun and/or accessible way into the study of other phenomena (e.g. Bennett et al 1981; Riis & Woodhead 2010). We can only but speculate as to the reasons Christmas has been slow to make it onto the mainstream social-scientific agenda in a way that befits and honours its clear relevance in the socio-cultural and economic life-stream of contemporary societies across the world. However, it seems quite possible that this very lack of attention may well have something to do with the near-universal and almost sacrosanct familiarity with which the festival is pervasively perceived and experienced. Perhaps, like many of those who have commented on the nature of my research, people are afraid that studying Christmas would ruin it for them. Or perhaps, as one commentator wryly suggested back in the 1970s, 'all the academics go home at Christmas' and have been simply too preoccupied with their own festivities, tensions, and proclivities to contemplate any serious reflection on the matter (Weightman 1975: 677).

Dry irony aside, what *does* seem clear is that scholars who *have* attempted to tackle the subject from the perspective of contemporary culture have often tended to fall into relatively uncritical analyses of the all-too familiar material the subject presents. This is not least the case with regards to the treatment of 'religion' across the available literature. Indeed, as Deacy's recent analysis well identifies, commentary on the relationship between Christmas and religion has tended to operate around decidedly personally infused and often 'defensive' perspectives as to the festival's cultural function, ethos, and placement (2016: 1-7; Larsen 2020a). We hence find that it is likely not just despite, but perhaps even because of, the evident personal significance of the festival that scholars have only comparatively recently begun to cast a more critical, 'wide-angle view' (Samuelson 1982: xxxi) over the vast and

¹³ Deacy, for example, stumbled upon the rich depth of the topic whilst working on his earlier (2012) monograph in which he had planned a 'single chapter' on Christmas films (2016: ix); a focus of expertise which is clearly reflected in the emphasis of his subsequent book. Similarly, Coleman, Bowman & Sepp's important contribution to Klassen and Scheer's recent collection emerges as the offshoot of a wider project on Pilgrimage and English Cathedrals (2019: 240-261).

varied swathes of material that have been produced on Christmas since the zenith of its nineteenth century revival as a major - and we might even say, *the* major - festival of the contemporary West (Miller 2017: 410).

A MIRROR UP TO THE DYNAMICS OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Whilst popular literature expounding and elaborating the ins and outs of Christmas' much-loved myths and traditions remains abundantly self-propagating, more reflexive recognition of its significant potential as a critical lens through which to study wider social, political, and cultural dynamics has to date largely emanated from the work of social historians as opposed to scholars of contemporary culture.¹⁴ Though much of this work has still been aimed predominantly at the popular market, these more concerted attempts to legitimate Christmas as a worthy arena of rigorous historical enquiry certainly seem to represent something of an important, and - so it seems - increasingly, reflexive shift in the field of Christmas studies; a trajectory which has, as Armstrong notes, also been evidenced by scholars who have incorporated considerations of Christmas into their broader historical explorations of family, festivity, and consumerism (2004: 124).¹⁵ There is, it should be said, quite some considerable disciplinary overlap across much of this literature, and it is interesting to observe here the blurred line between social-historical and sociological discourses.¹⁶ Much of the appeal of this broadly socio-historical work can to my mind be found in its rather Weberian acknowledgement of the ways in which the evolving societal placement and praxis of Christmas can be studied not only as a *marker* of wider socio-cultural change, but as a

¹⁴ J. A. R. Pimlott's *The Englishman's Christmas* (1978) is widely cited as the first significant history of Christmas in the English context, whilst James Barnett's earlier sociological take on *The American Christmas* (1954) has been seen as the standard work in the US. Subsequent contributions have followed a similar, primarily social-historical vein (e.g. Golby & Purdue 1986; Weightman & Humphries 1987; Bella 1992; Waits 1993; Restad 1995; Nissenbaum 1996; Connelly [1999] 2012; Marling 2000; Forbes 2007). Whilst such studies have tended to predominate in American circles where, as Armstrong suggests, the need for 'understanding the construction of a new nation in social and cultural terms' quite possibly provided more of a natural impetus for the study of its key emerging public rituals (2004: 124), Armstrong (2010) and Johnes (2016) have more recently gone some substantial way to rejuvenating the social historical field in the British context (Hutton 2018).

¹⁵ For examples of comparative studies of festival customs which include Christmas, see Santino (1994), Schmidt (1995); Etzioni & Bloom (2004); Forbes (2015). For examples of historical studies which consider such themes more specifically in relation to the role of ritual in family life, see Gillis (1996) and Pleck (2000).

¹⁶ A fair few of these historical investigations provide examples and analyses which creep into more contemporary time frames. For example, Johnes' (2016) volume on the history of Christmas in the twentieth century traces British social practices and attitudes right the way into the 2000s.

significant causal *generator* of and amidst such change. As Stephen Nissenbaum puts it in the preface to his detailed work on the development - or rather, the sentimental domestication - of Christmas traditions in the context of nineteenth-century America, Christmas can in this sense be seen as both 'an active *instrument* of change as well as an indicator and a *mirror* of change' (1996: xii).

It is indeed in not so dissimilar a vein that this study conceptualises Christmas as holding up to self and society what Turner refers to as an 'active mirror'; a metaphor which he draws on to describe the effect of various 'genres' of cultural 'metacommentary' which act to create moments of acute socio-cultural reflexivity (1982e: 104-105).¹⁷ Just what Turner meant by the 'active' nature of such 'mirroring' moments and/or genres of socio-cultural reflexivity is discussed further in our next chapter where we will contextualise the concept in relation to his core ritual theory of 'social drama'. Fundamental to our investigation, however, will be the idea that the annual ritual of Christmas holds a uniquely 'intensifying' mirror not only up to personal and collective dynamics of continuity and change, but up to personal and collective visions of the ideal (D. Davies 2008). Mirrors of course reveal all sorts of things; a reality which has constituted both the bounty and the bane of this research. As a scholar of religion, my gaze has naturally focused in on what I can make out of the reflections of value and belief revealed in the Christmas 'mirror'. The more I have stared, however, the more it has proved somewhat revealingly impossible to separate out these qualities of abstraction from the wider ripples of refraction in which - and through which - such reflections are formed, and it is with this in mind that I have come to understand my knowledge of the empirical field as inflecting my perspective as it pertains to the study of religion and culture in the contemporary context.

MAKING MEMORIES, MAKING TRADITIONS: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY SEGUE

At the heart of this exploration lies a broader theoretical interest in the embodied process of maturation by which affective bonds of meaning come to frame, infuse and propel the values

¹⁷ Turner here draws directly upon Geertz' term 'metacommentary' in order to illustrate genres of reflexivity in which a society comes to generate some form of interpretive self-definition back to themselves; or in his own words, 'a story they tell themselves about themselves' (c.1973d: 469). I will expand more directly on the relevance of this concept to my study in the next chapter.

by which people live their identities and crystallise their situated worldviews, and it is, I want to propose, exactly this dynamic process of meaning-making - exactly this kind of dynamic 'mirroring' activity¹⁸ - which becomes especially visible, and often even accentuated, upon the intensity of the festive Christmas stage. Indeed, much of the acute affective traction the festival inspires can, as I see it, be put down to its somewhat unique status as an occasion which has come to provide a much-beloved opportunity for active meaning-making; or as many of my dialogue-partners themselves referred to it, '*memory-making*'. It is this self-conscious process of memory-making which has particularly captured my attention as I have come to reflect upon my experiences in the field, and much of the following discussion will explore the ways in which this process of memory-making comes to be performed and manifested in the lives of the people I interacted with over the course of my fieldwork; perhaps most notably in popular colloquial conceptions of 'tradition'.

If the notion of 'memory-making' can be seen to refer to the cognitively grounded process by which people come to organise their affective experiences into the emerging pattern of their identity and corresponding 'aesthetic' (Miller 2008: 5-7, 293-7),¹⁹ 'tradition' can, I suggest, be understood as the contemporary colloquial idiom for the ritual activity by which and through which this more broadly conceived process of 'memory-making' often tends to be consciously performed and embodied. Perhaps due to its customarily rather negative association as a perceived opposite of the 'progressive' and the 'modern', the more dynamic - and we might say 'living' (MacIntyre 1984; Mason & Muir 2013: 608, 626) - understanding of 'tradition' and 'tradition-making' I here wish to consider has arguably been much neglected amidst the typical dynamics spoken of in studies of contemporary religion, non-religion, and secularity.

¹⁸ I here envisage an understanding of adaptive meaning-making which ties such theories drawn from the sociology of knowledge very much together with Dan Sperber's (1974) understanding of the dynamic processes of knowledge formation involved in the emergence and 'evocation' of 'symbolic knowledge' and associated ritual behaviours. Viewing these theories together will in this sense act to modulate Sperber's critique of theories which imply a more collective, structural - and thereby, perhaps rather static seeming - approach to ritual-symbolism, and should allow us to read the likes of Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz in the context of a much more dynamic, and biologically driven, framework of sense-making activity. Utilising the concept of 'mirroring' as a kind of metaphorical alternative to the terminology of 'social construction' (Cf. Note 6) will to my mind likewise enable us to move beyond more one-dimensional depictions of processes of building and construction (which might on first viewing seem more directly applicable to the accumulation of what Sperber calls 'encyclopaedic knowledge') to a more dynamic - and psychologically relevant - understanding of the intersubjective and often rather unconscious nature of socio-cultural and symbolic knowledge formation.

¹⁹ I here draw closely on contemporary psychological understandings of the dynamic role of 'autobiographical memory' in the construction of the self-concept and self-identity (see esp. Berntsen & Rubin 2012).

And yet, for so many of the people I interacted with, the perceived importance of constructing and maintaining 'traditions' which might preserve a sense of continuity, belonging, and legacy within and beyond the life of the social group - and particularly kinship groups and relations - appeared to remain a significant, and for the most part positively viewed, emic category for the organisation of life experience.

Where for many, it was the opportunity to engage with and cultivate the so-called 'magic' of 'tradition' which appeared to make Christmas such an important occasion, for others it was the conflicting matrix of obligations, expectations, and ambivalences wrapped up in negotiations of 'tradition' which made it a significant point of potential societal tension. Either way, the good majority of those I encountered tended to perceive their experiences of Christmas in relation to their experiences of 'Christmas traditions' (Golby & Purdue 1986 9-19). This finding to my mind raises some rather fascinating questions surrounding the placement of 'tradition' in contemporary life, and I have since found corresponds rather closely not only with the significant - though seemingly rather untapped - literature on the dynamic nature of 'tradition' to be found within folklore studies (see esp. Glassie 1995; 2003; Blank & Howard 2013), but with a selection of three rather underappreciated studies to be found more specifically within the wider literature on Christmas; namely (1) Elizabeth Rytting's (2005) study of the 'reflexive commemoration' implicit in Mormon experiences of Christmas in the US, (2) Jennifer Mason and Stewart Muir's (2013) examination of the 'tradition' talk which arose out of their broader study of the role of 'family background' in accounts of 'interpersonal relationships and life trajectories' narrated in Northern England,²⁰ and (3) Tracy Collins' (2014) more therapeutically-focused analysis of the role of Christmas tradition - and in particular, the exchange of Christmas cards - in assisting the transitions of British women in late-life widowhood.

These studies represent rare instances of empirical work which has fallen perhaps rather under the radar within the wider trajectory of Christmas studies, and which clearly acts to underscore the relevance of the study of 'tradition' as it is conceived in this context. As we

²⁰ These studies are both cited by Johnes in his depiction of the development and personalisation of British Christmas rituals (2016: 73-112).

shall see, however, much further work needs to be done if we are to better uncover and understand the nature of the role this key emic concept has come to play in relation to the formation and maintenance of contemporary identities and worldviews. This is not least the case in relation to the study of Christmas. Whilst social historians have drawn much upon the idea of the modern Anglo-American Christmas constituting a set of 'invented traditions' concocted to bolster and cement the bourgeois ideals of the mid-nineteenth century elite,²¹ the clear potential for a more anthropologically informed understanding of 'tradition' - and 'tradition-making' - as a bolstering process of ritual construction and legitimation has up until now remained strikingly underexplored in more ostensibly social-scientific studies of Christmas as it pertains to religion and/or wider cosmological ideals. The present study hence intends to redress this balance not only in relation to the study of Christmas, but to shine a light on an emic notion which - though especially intensified at Christmas time - has I believe been considerably underestimated in relation to the dynamics of contemporary families and worldviews more broadly.

This approach will thus, as I see it, prove not only disciplinarily congenial in terms of its acknowledgement of the go-to conceptual resources of the interconnecting fields which have come to be most associated with the study of Christmas (i.e. historical and folklore studies), but empirically relevant in its attention to the ways in which emic and etic discourses in this area come to overlap. Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer anything but a preliminary and tentative exploration of such themes - which in the context of this study should be seen as but one dynamic in a much broader matrix of interconnecting phenomena - it is my hope that this work might open the way for further research which begins to explore more thoroughly what it is about this particular cultural concept which continues to make it so seemingly important to the felt maintenance of contemporary identities. I here build especially on the work of a small movement of scholars who have variously attempted to

²¹ It seems that the publication and ensuing popularity of Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) volume in British intellectual circles rather coincided with the emergence of more sustained historical discussions of Christmas; thereby making the concept of 'invented tradition' something of a natural conceptual tool base with which to interpret the nature of these festive rituals and their development (Armstrong 2010: 12). Though the 'invented tradition' theme has been more recently challenged and/or adapted in historical interpretations of the festival (e.g. Nissenbaum 1996: 315-319; Restad 1995: viii-ix; Connelly [1999] 2012; Armstrong 2004: 124; 2010; Johns 2016), this approach constituted a significant interpretative consensus amongst earlier Anglo-American histories of the development of modern Christmas.

problematise the customary treatment of tradition and traditionality which has arisen in the context of social-scientific discourse, and to reinvigorate our understanding of the way tradition might be seen to operate in contemporary ritual contexts (Eisenstadt 1973; Shils 1981; Post 1996; Hervieu-Léger 2000; van Henten and Houtepen, 2001; Engler and Grieve 2005; Lewis and Hammer 2007; Hammer 2016).²²

Of course, social evolutionist connotations aside, the association of 'tradition' with socio-moral constructions of the status quo - or the desire for continuance of the way things *used* and/or *ought* to be - represents a fundamental dimension of the term's continued popular emic usage, and is indeed symptomatic of the kind of privileged orientation to the past Hervieu-Léger outlines as central to its wider societal function as a stabilising affirmation of continuity which establishes the past as an authoritative guide of normativity for present and future forms of socio-cultural life (2000: 86-88). Critical analyses of the ways in which 'tradition' comes to be employed as a strictly exclusionary and somewhat restrictive 'strategy of legitimization' (Engler & Grieve 2005) by certain socio-cultural groups and perspectives thus quite clearly constitutes an important continued trajectory of study (see e.g. Klassen & Scheer 2019; Day 2011). This study, however, wishes to cast analysis of 'tradition' in a rather broader - and perhaps more dispassionate - light. Drawing on my time of observation in the field, I contend that notions of 'tradition' and creative forms of what Rytting (2005: 19) terms 'proto-tradition' making - though often associated and connotatively connected to socially conservative attitudes, authorities, and/or nostalgic reifications of 'culture' and 'cultural heritage' - need not be exclusively tied to them, and are in fact popularly utilised in different ways by a range of people across the contemporary socio-cultural and political spectrum.

Whether conceived more explicitly as 'tradition', or more implicitly in variously veiled conceptions of memory-making and reminiscing, I ultimately want to suggest that the process of conscious tradition and/or memory construction here highlighted can be considered of particular significance for the manner in which it appears to crosscut and transcend the more go-to distinctions between the 'religious' and the 'secular' which have so occupied discussions

²² As indicated above, similar movements have also been made for some time now within folklore studies (e.g. Blank & Howard 2013), and are certainly worth some further cross-disciplinary conversation.

in the contemporary study of religion; and which not incidentally come to be especially intensified in both emic and etic debates surrounding the cultural placement and import of Christmas. This attempt to search beyond the seemingly pre-assumed 'religious' vs. 'secular' binary shares in many ways the goal of neo-Durkheimian approaches to the study of religion which aim to collapse such emic binaries by re-defining 'religion' and 'belief' in more broadly social functionalist terms; a trend of analysis which has more recently been perhaps most commonly taken up in studies of religion and popular culture (see esp. Lyden & Mazur 2015; Forbes & Mahan 2017).²³ Though such theories have much to commend them, it is I believe important not to lose sight of the 'historically shaped' emic discourses and categories which continue to influence the nature of experiences on the ground (Klassen & Scheer 2019a: 4), and it is with this in mind that I attempt to pave my way through the complex terrain of emic categories which colour and modulate the tone of contemporary negotiations of Christmas in the British context. I hence now spend some time outlining the contours of the relationship between Christmas and religion in this context, considering the ways in which varying definitions of the 'religious' might be brought to bear in our study of the festival, before considering what my own approach and findings in this area might have to contribute to this debate.

WORKING WITH AND BEYOND BINARIES: NEGOTIATING THE 'EMIC' AND THE 'ETIC'

Whilst Christmas can in many ways be seen as an inherently 'religious' festival, it can also quite evidently be seen as an obvious contemporary stage upon which underlying tensions between the 'religious' and the 'secular' play out. For alongside its more classic Western 'religious' - and indeed 'cultural' - associations with the Christian feast celebrating the narrative of the birth and incarnation of Jesus Christ, Christmas can now arguably be seen as *the* prime festival of an increasingly globalised - and perceivedly 'secular' - mass-mediated culture of capitalist consumerism (Belk 1993; Forbes 2017; Whiteley 2008). At the heart of the festival's contemporary dynamic we thus find a distinctly competitive tension between socio-cultural - and often readily politicised - claims as to its authentic ethos and meaning

²³ Though Luckmann's (1967) text on 'Invisible Religion' must be seen as a significant forerunner of such functional definitions of religion, more recent years have seen a plethora of theories which have attempted to find an appropriate conceptual language for this phenomenon, e.g. implicit religion, quasi-religion, para-religion.

(Larsen 2020a).²⁴ As we shall see, this tension is by no means the only paradox which appears to beset the dynamics of Christmas. Despite its clear - and one might even say 'aggressive' - rhetoric of radical inclusivity and harmonious incorporation (Klassen & Scheer 2019a: 3), commentators have been quick to point to the multiple contradictions and dissonances which pervade the character of Christmas performance and culture (Deacy 2016: 9, 32; Golby and Purdue 1986: 139-142). To this end, Monique Scheer points out that much of the literature on Christmas has circled around an intriguing 'hermeneutic of binary oppositions' (2019: 17).

Drawing on this trend, Scheer's own contribution to the field seeks to map out what she sees as the key 'coordinates of Christmas' as they pertain to the key binaries around which contemporary discourses of the festival revolve (2019: 22-24); and which I want to suggest might be worth holding in mind as this study progresses. 'On their way to becoming a web', Scheer names these orienting 'coordinates' as: (i) 'materiality' vs. 'spirituality', (ii) 'ideology' vs. 'authenticity', and (iii) 'religion' vs. 'culture' (Klassen & Scheer 2019a: 7, 10). In calling for a closer examination of the dynamic relationship between 'religion' and 'culture', the contributors of Klassen & Scheer's timely volume identify the increasing need for a deeper understanding of the broader issues of contestation which they see as key to the negotiation of Christmas in the context of contemporary multicultural societies. It is however important to note that the tension they identify can in many ways be seen to tap into what can be seen as a central dynamic of tension throughout the festival's chequered history. Indeed, a survey of the wider literature on the topic reveals overlapping tensions between (1) worldly vs. other-worldly cosmologies, and (2) sanctioned conservative piety vs. Bacchanalian folk festivity have characterised manifestations of Christmas from its earliest origins (see esp. Miles [1912] 2006; Miller 1993a; Deacy 2016: 33-39; Schmidt 1995: 107-122; Bausinger 2019).

Considered in relation to the religious landscape of contemporary Britain, this underlying dialectic manifests itself perhaps most explicitly in the tension between more perceivedly 'traditional', institutional forms of officially sanctioned 'religion' - which in this case primarily refers to the culturally-embedded and civically endorsed Church of England, positioned as it

²⁴ In the United States in particular, we see this dynamic playing out more concertedly in terms of what has been strikingly referred to as the 'war on Christmas' (Klassen & Scheer 2019).

is against the wider 'fuzzy' backdrop of cultural Christianity (Davie 2007; 2015; Voas 2009) - and the 'so-called secular...consumer values' associated with the capitalist orientation of modern Western society, and popular culture (Deacy 2016: 1-4, 33-39). Hence, whilst the above-described tension between religion and culture is certainly key to understanding the dynamic and often fluid nature of interaction between the key categories and domains which stage and direct performances of Christmas in Britain, equally if not more important to consider in this context is the manner in which such categories and domains come to interweave with the still much-used emic distinction between the 'religious' and the 'secular' (Bausinger 2019: 263).

In the British context as elsewhere, morally-infused debates surrounding the 'religious' vs 'secular' dimensions of Christmas loom large across both colloquial and scholarly discourse (see e.g. Horsley & Tracy 2001), and often play out in judgements of the monopolisation of the festival for 'religious' ends, or concerned diagnoses around the widespread loss of its 'true' (i.e. its 'religious') meaning; a cultural commentary that has come to represent a kind of Christmas-specific rendition of the secularisation thesis. Despite these tensions however, it seems clear that the manner in which people negotiate and engage with the variously so-called 'religious' and 'secular' aspects of the festival is in reality substantially more complicated. Though the reality of secularisation in this context can clearly not be denied (Brown 2009; Guest, Olson & Wolffe 2012), if we are to truly understand the varied nature of the forms of meaning-making which take place at this time of year, we must also seek to interrogate such colloquial distinctions and diagnoses in relation to the overlapping varieties of transcendence, enchantment, and authentication which become so clearly manifest at this time of year. This kind of analysis is perhaps most notably exemplified in Christopher Deacy's recent (2016) depiction of Christmas as a prime contemporary site of 'implicit religion' (Bailey 1998; 2012), which I will now briefly outline, before returning to a more specific consideration of how my own approach might critique, and build upon such a stance.

Here, any notion of theorising about the relationship between Christmas and religion is effectively turned on its head. For contrary to those who have connected the purported loss of the 'true meaning of Christmas' to a picture of increasing religious decline, Deacy collapses the binary altogether; encouraging us to consider instead the ways in which ostensibly secular

experiences and performances of Christmas have *themselves* come to operate as a significant 'repository' of contemporary religiosity (2016: 1-16). According to Deacy, 'Christmas' should hence be understood not as some culturally popular vestige of a fast-fading 'religious' past, but as 'one of the most fertile embodiments of religious activity in the world today' (4, 7). In this view, Christmas is not only considered a 'prime' and 'pivotal site of religious activity', but as constitutive of its own kind of 'implicit religion' with its own characteristic supernatural figures, associated ritual behaviours, and ideologies. Deacy in other words argues that we are presented at Christmas time with not one, but *two* broadly complementary 'religious' worldviews: (1) the more traditional understanding of 'religion' embodied in the Christian worldview, and (2) the Santa-worshipping religion of jovial capitalist consumerism in which the culturally Christian-inflected values of love, family, hope, and charity become tied up with secular Christmas narratives of 'magical' supernatural figures (65-68).

Deacy's analysis is itself significantly influenced by deChant's (2002) book *'The Sacred Santa'*, which argues that in restoring and reaffirming harmonious 'proper relation' with the sacred order of the economy (which deChant believes has taken the place of nature as the guiding cosmological and integrative force of postmodern Western culture), the secular commercialised marketplace values we associate with Christmas - and which find their symbolic epitome in the sacred figure of Santa Claus²⁵ - perform an essentially 'religious' ritual function. It is important to note, however, that whilst deChant's analysis of this aspect of contemporary popular culture seeks to differentiate the *cosmological* dimensions of postmodern religiosity from what he sees as the more *transcendental* focus of post-Reformation institutionalised models of Christianity (x-xiv, 14-24), Deacy's analysis of popular Christmas media seeks on the contrary to posit the continued prevalence of investment in transcendental as well as cosmological dimensions of the sacred (2016: 13-16, 114-117). Hence, where deChant argues that Christmas is a religion of *material consumption* expressive of a contemporary postmodern form of worldly cosmology in which 'right relation' is restored with the economy (2002: 37-53), Deacy argues that Christmas is a religion of 'immanent' transcendence in which transformative engagement not just with consumerism but with

²⁵ For further literature on the evolution and character of Santa Claus as a contemporary mythical and sacred figure, see Belk (1987; 1993: 77-85); Schmidt (1995: 130-148); Stronach & Hodkinson (2011); Deacy (2016: 51-72).

otherworldly agents and utopian narratives marks out a period of unparalleled 'sacred time' (2016: 4, 16).

This particular focus on supernatural beings makes for an interesting twist on what might otherwise appear to be a broadly Durkheimian-esque analysis of 'religious-like' phenomena. Though Deacy's thesis is to my mind perhaps somewhat misleading in its allusion to the *kinds* of belief which underlie popular attachment to such festive phenomena, his line of argument clearly opens up a host of intriguing questions concerning the kinds of varieties of belief and/or 'modes' of engagement such realms and entities might generate (Hervieu-Léger 2000: ix, 65-82). Deacy himself acknowledges that his study does not especially emphasise the ways in which lingering allegiances to Christianity - as per 'religious' worldview (1) described above - continue to influence the more 'implicit' religious behaviour and apparent belief system upon which his work focuses (2016: 7), and it is my hope that my own study might begin to further elaborate upon this relationship. Whilst my overarching focus of exploration is thus in a sense not so dissimilar to Deacy's, this study wishes to move away from the apparent conceptual confusion of etic definitions of the 'religious' to honour the ways in which emic designations continue to drive the perceived nature of experiences and identities on the ground. This will not only allow us to explore the continued relevance of traditional religion and church-going at Christmas, but to account for the fast developing work of those who wish to credit and explore those increasingly substantial experiences of 'non-religion' which appear to cross-cut - and often simultaneously re-entrench - emic perception of such binaries (Lee 2015).

Navigation of the complexities of such interweaving dynamics and definitions quite clearly warrants a connotatively sensitive complex of working conceptual 'scaffolding' (Mol 1976: ix), and it is for this reason that I have chosen to frame my own study in the more neutral theoretical semantics of 'identity' and 'worldviews', alongside more emically conceived notions of 'tradition' and 'enchantment'. Whilst there has been, and will surely continue to be, much discussion around the placement of this grammar of discourse in relation to religious studies (Davies 2022), the 'worldview' terminology should to my mind be considered an especially useful and substantive conceptual framework with which to account for both ostensibly 'religious' *and* 'non-religious' perspectives; and the ways in which these varying

perspectives interweave and overlap (Droogers 2014a; Taves, Asprem & Ihm 2018). In-keeping with this perspective, I suggest that connecting this terminology of sense-making activity together with a more process-focused conceptualisation of the originally conceived Durkheimian categories of 'sacred' and 'profane' which underscore the theories of ritual I draw upon throughout this study will offer a more illuminating etic terminology with which to interpret the interrelationship between the above-described experiences, identities, and domains (Angel et al 2017). Though this classic distinction can admittedly by no means be seen to refer to 'neutral' categories (see esp. Hervieu-Léger 2000: 42-61), it is my hope that careful navigation of the associative connotations of these frameworks will enable us to negotiate a terminology which might account for the varying forms of transcendence which have come to be associated with Christmas, whilst still acknowledging the cultural dynamics which have shaped - and continue to shape - identities and worldviews in the context into which this study speaks. Following this trajectory, it seems to me that the anthropologically informed conceptions of the sacred discussed above might be combined most effectively with Daniel Miller's (1993a) work on Christmas 'cosmology'. Seemingly rather neglected by scholars of religion, this work has provided a key conceptual building-block in the formation of my own more Turnerian-based theory of Christmas ritual, and for this reason deserves some special attention.

TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL 'THEORY OF CHRISTMAS': MILLER'S TYPOLOGY OF FESTIVE COSMOLOGY

A significant moment of watershed in the apparent dearth of anthropological material on Christmas, the publication of Miller's edited collection, *'Unwrapping Christmas'* not only signalled a new variety of perspectives on the increasing globalisation of the festival, but moved to resituate the study of Christmas as a prime empirical base for anthropological explorations of modernity. Though the volume certainly motivated some take-up of interest across the small flurry of socio-historical work which clustered around the time of its publication in the 1990s, more concerted critical engagement with this work has been negligible. Given Miller's clear determination to open up the subject to a more concertedly social-scientific audience, this is both something of a shame and an irony; and it is my hope that this study may build empirically on the legacy of his project to begin to redress the

decided gap in our understanding of the festival, whilst also exploring how such a perspective might come to inform and enrich ongoing debates within the contemporary social-scientific study of religion. In what follows, I thus spend some time outlining his argument before turning back to a more general consideration of the way in which such insights have come to inform my own understanding of the field.

Distancing itself from the ‘invented tradition’ approach which had tended to characterise historical treatments of the festival up to that point - and drawing inspiration instead from Lévi-Strauss’ analysis of the deep structure of Christmas ritual - the ‘theory of Christmas’ Miller develops in the opening chapter of *‘Unwrapping Christmas’* seeks to account not only for the various ‘heterogenous’ manifestations of ‘Christmas’ discernible across different parts of the world, but for the much older historical trajectories which can be traced via its European form (1993a: 1-7, 22-24).²⁶ To this end, much of his discussion frames itself in relation to an extended anthropological comparison of the ‘parallel sense of modernity’ he identifies in the festival’s Roman precursors (Miller 1993: 7-11, 33). Utilising these alternative ‘foundations’, Miller ultimately seeks to distinguish between the kinds of rituals produced by societies whose sense of themselves in relation to their wider cosmology is strong and for the most part homogenous, and the kinds of rituals produced by societies for whom this relation is more ‘distanced’ and/or differentiated. The ‘underlying factor’ he concludes should be considered the fundamental cross-comparative pivot around which Christmas ritual operates is thus:

the sense of distance which a society feels exists between itself and the larger world inhabited as cosmology (1993a: 32).

He hence goes on to propose two ‘ideal types in the cultural logic of Christmas’, distinguishing between what he dubs: (1) the ‘*centrifugal*’ dynamic of more outwardly-focused and wildly life-affirming celebrations of ‘*carnival*’ which tend to characterise the festivals of societies which bear a close and integrated relationship with their wider cosmology, and (2) the ‘*centripetal*’ dynamic of more inwardly-focused and conservative celebrations of ‘*Christmas*’

²⁶ For an updated expansion of this material rehashed for the German market, see Miller (2017).

which tend to find fertile ground in societies rather less certain of their collective cosmology. Where the former more lively celebrations tend to operate through the means of unapologetic strategies of ritual inversion and liminal licentiousness, the latter more restrained celebrations tend to operate, as Miller sees it, through the means of strategies which act to reaffirm society's sense of itself in opposition to the perceived threat of disintegration (1993a: 30-33).

Whilst Miller emphasises the complex and often overlapping nature of the relationship between the above described 'ideal types' (1993a: 26-27), it is ultimately the *centripetally* driven model which he believes constitutes the dominant cosmological focus of Christmas in contemporary Western contexts. Applying this consideration of the festival's deeper structural features, he argues that 'Christmas has become central to three of the most important struggles that define being modern' in the context of contemporary Western cultures: (1) our relationship with 'family and kinship', (2) our relationship with 'mass consumption and materialism', (3) our relationship with 'syncretism' as it pertains to tensions between differing perspectives of belief and practice, and between their 'local' and 'global' manifestations (2017: 409-410). The relationship between these first two features of Christmas should as Miller sees it be understood as the key dialectic around which any attempt to understand the Western model of Christmas must be based (1993a: 6). For as he puts it: the main controversy which has now long pervaded both emic and etic discourses around Christmas in this context is undoubtedly the question of whether the forces of commerce which have become so central to the festival's modern manifestation have become so successful in their appropriation as to destroy the 'spirit' of Christmas embodied in the idealised domestic atmosphere of convivial reciprocity and 'goodwill' which underscores what many deem to be its 'true' spiritual meaning (1993a: 4); a dynamic which can of course be clearly mapped onto the first, if not also the second, of Scheer's above-described coordinates of: (i) 'materiality vs. spirituality', and (ii) 'ideology' vs. 'authenticity'.

Seen in this light, the model of Christmas performed in contemporary Western cultures can be best understood as a 'festival of the family of microcosm', in which 'ideal', 'royal' and 'religious' families come to symbolically encompass wider societal ideals of normativity and affirmation. Established as the 'primary' - and we might even say, most *sacred* - 'unit of

sociality', the 'family' thus comes to act in this context as an embodied 'emblem' for the positive incorporation of wider social groups; from the local community, to the wider globe, to even wider cosmological notions of the 'universe', and of 'humankind' as 'objectified' in the notion of the 'spirit' of Christmas (1993a: 29). Whilst this can be seen rather literally epitomised in the incarnational theme of the Christian narrative of Christmas in which we see an 'attempt to anthropomorphise the divinity in the form of the domestic family unit', it can Miller contends also be seen clearly encompassed in more broadly secular conceptions of an 'equivalent larger morality' which manifests in transcendent notions of humanity, the world, and/or the universe (1993a: 29-30). The dominant form of ritual process manifested in this 'centripetal' model of Christmas can, in other words, be seen as one of steady 'consolidation' and 'progressive incorporation, through which the domestic becomes not merely an enclosed space, but a kind of centripetal force striving to bring as much of the outside world as possible into itself' (2017: 421-422).

BRINGING COSMOLOGY 'HOME': EXPLORING THE 'COMMUNITAS' OF 'THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT'

It is this very same ability to hold together the universal and the particular - this very same *homing* quality - which Miller argues makes Christmas the ultimate syncretic festival (2017: 423). This said 'ability of Christmas to appropriate' - that is, 'to secure its identity almost irrespective of the content of the rites which take place in its name' (1993a: 24) - is echoed in various other sociological commentaries on the nature of contemporary Christmas ritual. To this end, in the same way that Klassen and Scheer identify the 'malleability' of the festival as being key to its success in the context of contemporary multicultural societies (2019a: 4), Martin Johnes contends that it is the 'flexibility' of Christmas ritual which has been so key to its ongoing popularity in the context of contemporary Britain (2016: 111). For just as this 'malleability' has allowed for the syncretic mingling of a vast range of heterogenous local elements and varying interpretations throughout the festival's long and complex history (Miller 1993a: 4), so too does it allow for the intensively creative '*personalisation*' of what might otherwise be deemed standardised ritual-symbolic repertoires of cultural conformity (Johnes 2016: 73-112; Wolin & Bennett 1984).

Hence, in the same way that the family becomes the 'primary idiom' for ever wider degrees of sociality, Miller contends that the most 'local' and/or 'personalised' manifestation of the Christmas rite often comes to be experienced not only as the most 'authentic' *version* of the festival (2017: 423; Löfgren 1993), but as an 'embodiment of much larger', 'global', or 'even eschatological concerns' (1993a: 24, 32-33). There is thus, he suggests, a sense in which the globalisation of Christmas itself becomes an 'instrument in accomplishing that sense of Christmas as the festival of microcosm.' For:

the more people believe that their celebration is a token of global action, a rite being repeated by millions across the world, the more Christmas is felt to establish a relationship between the celebrant and the world at large (1993a: 31).

Whilst not fully developed by Miller, this depiction of the intimate experiential relationship between 'celebrant and the world at large' quite clearly resembles a phenomenon akin to the anthropological concept of '*communitas*' which has now long been widely used to describe intensified experiences of collective belonging, and which will constitute a vital concept as this study progresses. Famously developed by Victor Turner (1969) as an outworking and tangible manifestation of the liminal dimension of van Gennep's ([1960] 2019) rites of passage schema - and later further elucidated in the subsequent work of Edith Turner (2012) - the concept of *communitas*, as I see it, provides an especially apt concept with which to understand the nature of the experience of transcendence captured in Miller's depiction of the 'centripetal' dynamic of Christmas cosmology.

Described as a 'moment in and out of time' and 'secular social structure' which 'reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition...of a generalised social bond' (1969: 96), Turner's theory of *communitas* attempts in its various illustrations to encapsulate an experience of what might essentially be considered *the pure reciprocal relationality of mutual recognition*²⁷ in which hierarchical divisions of social structure, and/or chronological divisions of time, are dissolved - or held in the tantalisingly reconciling subjunctive of 'betwixt and between'

²⁷ Indeed, Edith Turner equates the phenomenon of *communitas* with the innate - and emotionally essential - reactive recognition between infant and mother (2012: 13-14); a dimension of child development theory which incidentally maps clearly onto the metaphor of 'mirroring' which can be found at the heart of this study.

suspension (Turner [1964] 1967) - to make way for a transitory glimpse of eternity, egalitarian humanity, and/or utopian society. This is, in other words, a transcendence not of far distant abstraction, but of immediate - and we might say, immanent - *presence*; a direct and dynamic 'flowing' from 'I to thou', particular to universal, generation to generation, individual to 'humankindness' (Turner 1969: 105, 116-117, 127-128) which feels rather strikingly reminiscent of the ideological worldview contained in the 'ethos' of the 'Christmas spirit' (Geertz c.1973c). We will explore the dimensions of this Christmas worldview as it pertains to Miller's conceptualisation of the incorporating 'cosmology' of Christmas ritual more closely in our next chapter. I now, however, want to draw all this together to offer an introductory outline of my study, and of the pattern of fieldwork which has informed it.

ZOOMING INTO THE FESTIVE 'MIRROR': MY STUDY OUTLINED

As our review of the existing literature has shown, emerging work on the socio-cultural and religious dimensions of Christmas has for the most part focused on the *large-scale* picture; that is: (1) how the Christmas we know and recognise today came to emerge and crystallise amidst the cultural and social tensions of the mid-19th century, (2) what the ideological values it appears to promote indicate about the nature of changing belief into the present day, (3) how we come to see the tensions of this changing picture mirrored in the public negotiation of 'Christmas', religion, and culture. Though much of my work of course taps directly - and intentionally - into such themes, my intention in this study is to zoom further in to the festive mirror to take a closer look at the ways in which the above dynamics might play out on the *small-scale*; that is: in the lives of the various people who inhabit, embody, and perform such worlds and worldviews on the ground. As I believe is the case for any phenomenologically engaged ethnography, a consideration of the picture at this level - and indeed, in this *mode* - imbues my line of enquiry with a decidedly more psychological vein; and it is with this in mind that I push further into the mirror to consider the ways in which the festival might hold a light up to the dynamics not just of Society, but of the Self as it *relates* to Society.²⁸

²⁸ I tread a careful line here between what Mellor and Shilling refer to as 'macro', 'meso' and 'micro' level frames of analysis (2014: 7-9).

Like many ethnographic projects, the direction of my research crystallised very much organically as I came to forge my way through relationships and encounters in the field, and as I came to renegotiate what the ‘field’ itself might look like in the context of such a mish-mash of familiar and unfamiliar settings, contexts, and relationships. This set of conditions was in my case only further complicated as I sought a way of extending my research beyond the rather time-constrained conditions of studying one season of the year,²⁹ and it was as we shall see very much in the midst of such experimentation that I came to formulate the ‘multi-sited’ program of fieldwork I eventually came to more formally refer to as ‘The Festive Log Research Project’.³⁰ Keen to get a sense of the various stages upon which ‘Christmas’ is performed and cultivated in the context of contemporary Britain, the most intensive part of my fieldwork was situated across four key sites where the public performance and transmission of Christmas ritual and culture was clearly discernible. Chosen consciously for their straddling of different types of public institution which act to promote and cultivate Christmas values, these sites have not only come to constitute the prime comparative ‘prisms’ of my broader ongoing reflections, but proved fertile settings for the grounded and iterative generation of themes and participants in the earlier phase of my research (Glaser & Strauss [1967] 2017; Teddie & Tashakkori 2009).



Taking place in the lead-up to Christmas 2017 across locations in the North East of England, this immersive experience of participant observation and encounter involved exploration of:

- 1) The activities of a local non-faith primary school in the lead up to Christmas

²⁹ Whilst the predominant and most intensive part of my fieldwork took place in the lead-up to Christmas 2017, more formally organised interviews with people I had met and/or recruited from each of these spaces were stretched over the course of the year that followed, and more informal observation has of course continued amidst the rather naturally blurred boundaries of the ‘field’. Exploratory pilot studies had been carried out and a number of my fieldwork partners established during the lead up to Christmas 2016.

³⁰ <<https://lucindaslog.com/thefestivelog/>> [Last accessed June 2022].

- 2) North Tyneside Council's 'Make Christmas Special' Campaign, an initiative aimed at providing community lunches and corresponding volunteering opportunities to the socially isolated on - and in the lead up to - Christmas Day
- 3) A range of Christmas Carol Services held at Durham Cathedral
- 4) Working as a volunteer 'Elf' at local visitor attraction, Crook Hall, as part of their Christmas activity days for children and families



Having spent time endeavouring to capture a sense of the 'spirit' and/or 'magic' of Christmas as it came to be conjured and performed across each of these public settings, the remainder of my research has built upon the relationships and exploratory knowledge-base generated by this formative set of experiences to hone in more closely on the ways in which people at different 'stages' of their life-narratives and trajectories experience and interact with the festival and its rituals. My ultimate aim here was to explore the manner in which different people came to interact with these various public performances of Christmas, and to examine how engagement with each of these key Christmas spaces might relate to the identities and worldviews of distinct individuals. The central part of this thesis is, to this end, moulded around a small selection of individual narratives which are presented as vignettes across Chapters 3-7. Further detail of the conceptualisation and management of these various field-sites and dialogue-partners is provided in Chapter 2 where the trajectory of my methodological approach is explored and extrapolated in relation to the questions and themes which have emerged during the course of my study. Suffice to say, however, that this immersive participant observation was primarily envisaged as a shaping set of theme-generating experiences which enabled me access to people across a range of everyday Christmas settings, grounded my observations in relation to more active performative encounters, and offered a point of shared reference in the personal interviews that followed (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015).

In setting up this initial phase of my fieldwork, I was keen to select field-sites which offered me the opportunity to compare and contrast both settings which pertained to variously conceived 'religious', 'cultural', and/or 'secular' narratives of Christmas, and settings which pertained to people at different stages of their lives. The comparison between the Cathedral

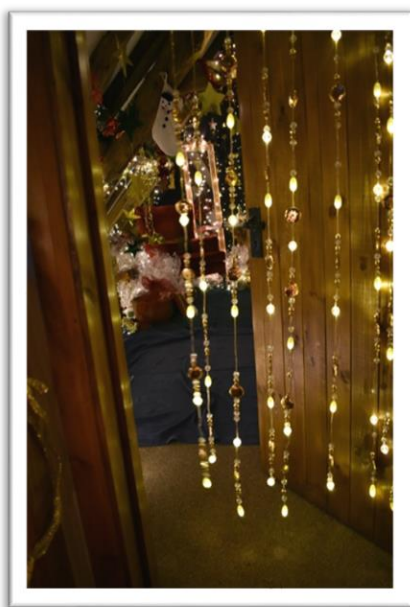


Figure A. Entrance to Father Christmas' grotto at Crook Hall

carol services and the local Father Christmas visitor attraction provided an obvious comparative parallel in this regard, given that both settings involve the ritual performance and inculcation of a foundational mythical Christmas story. Meanwhile, given my intended focus around life transition, I had originally hoped to compare the school setting with a care-home setting so as to focus in on institutions which directly pertained to different age groups. After scoping out this possibility however - and upon accounting for the ethical complications connected with working with people in this particular context - I eventually decided to focus instead on charities connected to caring for the elderly at Christmas.

Keen to tap into the current cultural attention around loneliness which is often said to be intensified around this time of year (Johnes 2016: 128; Keming 2019),³¹ I decided to try and become a volunteer on a community Christmas lunch. My search soon led me to an initiative named 'Make Christmas Special' run in conjunction with the 'Care and Connect' service provided by North Tyneside Council which had been set up to facilitate a set of community Christmas lunches for the socially isolated on Christmas Day. Fundraising and preparation for these occasions went on for some considerable months beforehand, and constituted a large part of my early interactions in the field. This put me into contact not only with a range of

³¹ <<https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/the-challenge-of-christmas/>> [Last accessed June 2022]

individuals and charitable organisations involved in the scheme, but with a quite contrasting demographic of people with which to explore the themes of my study. However, it also allowed me to focus in on what is clearly a significant area of Christmas culture; that is, the championing of charitable causes, concern for the vulnerable, and community action. The people I encountered as part of this project were by no means as I had originally envisaged all elderly, but rather constituted a much more diverse group of people who had either chosen or been recruited to help organise, fundraise for, and/or volunteer as part of the scheme, or who had been invited to attend the lunch as ‘guests’.



Figure B. Mince-pie table display at ‘Make Christmas Special’ event on Christmas Day 2017

Whilst some of those involved in volunteering for this project considered themselves to be actively ‘religious’, and saw this charitable work as a natural extension of their Christian commitment, the majority did not; or at least, if they *did* identify in some way with



Figure C. Volunteer packing up at the end of the event on Christmas Day

Christianity, saw this particular setting as a more authentic and/or less problematic way to perform ‘Christian’ morality than engaging with organised religious institutions. This was certainly the case for the lady I stayed with over the main part of the Christmas period. Indeed, in her case in particular (described in Chapter 4) we see a good example of how the Christian-infused ‘spirit of Christmas’ often comes to be transmuted into more secular-moral values of ‘community’ and ‘kindness’ (Johnes 2016: 124-131). As her narrative reveals, where on the one hand there is a sense in which this particular setting constitutes a form of community activity that may in some way parallel - or even replace - more ostensibly ‘religious’ Christmas ritual, on the other, Christmas

also quite clearly represents a time when people who do not usually engage with such institutional forms of ‘religious’ activity come to connect or re-connect with Christian

institutions and/or Christian narratives; even if only by way of ‘perfunctory lip-service’ (Golby & Purdue 1986: 140).

Consideration of the influx of non-regular church-goers who attend church at Christmas time has been key to my study from its earliest stages, and as I see it constitutes an important area of ongoing research, especially in relation to the role of the Church of England in this context. For while Church of England attendance figures continue to rapidly decline, *Christmas*



Figure D. People queuing for one of Durham Cathedral’s carol services in December 2017

church attendance at the very least appears to be declining at a much slower rate (e.g. Archbishop’s Council 2014).³² Indeed, some commentators have suggested fluctuating attendance figures at this time of year might in some areas even constitute something of an unprecedented upward curve (Walker 2015: 111-112; Davies 2018). Whilst it is difficult to make any hard and fast statements regarding this data which is to date rather patchy at best, it is clear that Christmas still constitutes an important civic occasion at which a large number



Figure E. Key Stage 2 Carol Service held in local church in December 2017

of people who are not customary church-goers come to engage with the Church and/or the Christian narrative of Jesus’ birth. This is an obvious point of interest not only for the Church, but for sociologists of religion striving to make sense of the complex and somewhat ambiguous ‘middle ground’ of

³² Personal communication as indicated in summary by Brierley (2017). For a helpful historical overview, see Johnes (2016: 113-124) who goes so far as to suggest that Christmas has acted to stem the tide of secularism in the British context.

vicarious and/or cultural Christianity Davie and others have long sought to capture in the British context (2007; 2015; Voas 2009). However, it also quite clearly offers an insight into the nature of contemporary mediations between Christian institutions and wider contemporary culture (Johnes 2016: 113-143; Forbes 2017); and more particularly of the specific role Christmas has come to play as a prime civic occasion for public religious ceremony (Phillips 2011; Walker 2013; 2015; Murphy 2016; Davies 2018; Coleman, Bowman & Sepp 2019; Percy 2020).

Despite the clear relevance of the topic for the contemporary study of religion however, substantial empirical study of the intensified interaction with Christianity



Figure F. Key Stage 1 Nativity Play performed in 2017

which takes place at Christmas in the British context (e.g. Christmas church attendance, school carol services, nativity plays) has, up until now, been rather surprisingly sparse. Acknowledging that there is still some significant need for further research in this area, my own research has sought to better contextualise these more explicit modes of engagement with Christmas religiosity in the hope that comparing the manner in which people come to engage with performances of 'Christmas' across the range of public sites here described might enable us to shine a more translucent light upon the nature of engagement in and with these particular settings and 'traditions'. To this end, the vignettes presented as part of this study aim to compare and contrast the multiple ways in which people of varying worldviews and perspectives relate to the range of ritual-symbolic repertoires to be found across these key public sites of Christmas performance and culture. The key 'coordinates' mapped above are, of course, here clearly discernible, and can be traced both across as well as within each of these individual sites and settings.

All four of my sites clearly represent key cultural carriers of Christmas, and I was especially interested to observe the manner in which Christmas values came to be imparted and evoked



Figure G. Donning my Christmas elf outfit 'behind the scenes' in the staff office at Crook Hall

across these different settings. Whilst Cathedral carol services were easy enough to observe as instances of high civic 'religious' pomp and ceremony, in negotiating my role at Crook Hall, I soon came to see the highly cultivated performances of 'Christmas' I there joined in with as pertaining to an almost parallel form of high 'secular ritual' and enchantment (Moore & Myerhoff 1977).

Indeed, my rather immersive experience of participative observation as an elf in this context afforded more than a literal front-seat ticket not only into the inner-workings of the behind-the-scenes effort which went into the construction and maintenance of this 'magical' Christmas world, but into the various encounters of transcendence which appeared to take place in its midst. Meanwhile, my extended time working with children in the primary school context allowed me to compare a more formal approach to Christmas socialisation, and more pertinently to assess the mixture of 'religious' and 'secular' cultural repertoires prioritised by a public institution of education.

Considering the significance of this context as a primary location of near compulsory socio-cultural transmission, I was here keen to explore not only the nature of the festival's presentation in this setting, but to consider the nature of the school's role as a key community hub of Christmas ritual and celebration. Though the school I worked with is not a faith school, it is located in a predominantly white community of North East England which carries heavy undertones of cultural Christianity, and relatively high - if varied - levels of engagement with local churches, and church



Figure H: Teachers secretly decorating the school Christmas tree to surprise children coming out of assembly in early December 2017

buildings. The presentation of Christmas in this context was hence heavily inflected with Christian culture. This strong endorsement of Christianity was reflected in the outlooks of



Figure 1. Headteacher's last candlelit 'Advent Assembly' of term before children were sent home for Christmas

many of the parents and teachers, as well as in the nature of the various Christmas events put on by the school. Thus, alongside the dramatic revealing of the school Christmas decorations put on as a surprise for the children in early December and the intense Father Christmas hype which was actively encouraged by teachers as we approached the end of term, the school's Christmas celebrations also included 'Advent Assemblies', religiously-worded songs, a Key Stage 1 nativity play,³³ and a Key Stage 2 carol service complete with bible readings and prayers.³⁴

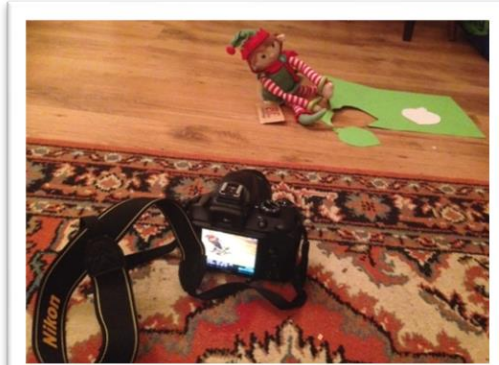
³³ The Christmas and/or nativity play can undoubtedly be seen as something of an implicit rite of passage which - though perhaps not essential as such - still constitutes a significant background socio-cultural marker and symbolic reference-point in the lives of many contemporary British children and families. Customarily performed by young children, these plays have been popular across Britain since their introduction to schools, youth-groups and churches during the interwar period (Johnes 2016: 120-121), and continue to feature as an important and highly-anticipated part of Christmas celebrations in this context. Like the performance given at the school I observed, a good majority of schools - and especially non-faith schools - now more often than not opt for contemporary and perhaps somewhat more inclusive variations on a theme; incorporating the religious tableau as a 'traditional' and/or 'cutesy' moment of nostalgia in the midst of more ostensibly secular, and often conveniently pre-packaged, 'Christmas productions' in which Mary and Joseph come to share a stage with mince-pies, fairies, elves, or even - to draw upon one popular British Christmas film - lobsters (*Love Actually* 2003). For further analysis see, Murphy (2018); Clemson (2020: 372-373).

³⁴ In the context of the British education system, Key Stages 1 & 2 pertain to children of Primary School age (4-11); 'Key Stage 1' comprising children between the ages of 4-7, and 'Key Stage 2' comprising children between the ages of 7-11.



INTRODUCING 'GELF THE ELF': CAPTURING THE 'SPIRIT' OF BRITISH CHRISTMAS IN THE 'PER-FORMANCE' OF MY RESEARCH

Given my own identity as a British woman who has grown up very much in the midst of the above described cultural contexts, the character of this distinctive tonal repertoire was certainly not alien to me as I came to approach this research. The more I immersed myself within my field of study however - and indeed the more I found myself having to practically position myself in *relation* to a topic which felt perhaps inevitably rather close to home - the more I felt the subject itself coming to shape my own identity as it evolved with the performance of my research. As the outworking of my methodological stance will make clear, it is exactly this sense of performative reflexivity that I have come to see metaphorically expressed - and rather literally embodied - in the 'shape' and character of 'Gelf the Elf' (Turner 1974; Leavy 2015: 3-4); the child-friendly 'research assistant' and mascot who has accompanied me through the various stages of my research, and who has in turn come to carry the 'spirit' of the field from my pocket to my desk.



If Gelf has come to metaphorically symbolise the embodiment of my research as it has been *per-formed*,³⁵ the portraits painted in this text stand as but a fragment of the larger collage of impressions and experiences she has come to represent (Ruby 1982; Steier 1991; Coffey 1999), and it is my hope that presenting the material in this manner might shine a light upon the kinds of tonal nuances which more statistical and/or quantitative methods rarely manage to capture (McGuire 2008: 5; Droogers 2014b; 2014c; Davies

³⁵ In envisaging my fieldwork as reflexively 'per-formed', I draw from Turner's late understanding of the structure of '*per*'-formance as lived experience, in which the 'living through' of 'experience' is conceptualised as itself a kind of ritual passage with etymological roots pertaining not only to trepidatious journeying, but to 'attempt, venture, risk' and 'experiment' (1982a: 12-19). For further elucidation of this material, see Szokolczai & Thomassen (2019: 185-195).

2022). Drawing the highly ‘person-centred’ nature of my research together with this idea of embodied reflexive per-formance, the emerging methodological stance advanced across this thesis (and developed especially in Chapter 2) conceptualises the research process as a collective, and highly relational, endeavour of reflexive meaning-making. In envisaging the dialogical dimension of the research encounter as constituting an ever-evolving process of embodied ecology, I attempt to provide an implicit critique of the ‘insider’ vs. ‘outsider’ debate which has so often dominated methodological discussions around reflexivity in ethnographic studies, and offer instead a view of anthropologist and subject as part of a much more complex ‘dividual’ exchange of experience and socio-cultural ‘metacommentary’ (Geertz c.1973d; Ruby 1982). With this in mind, I now offer a brief outline of the theory of personhood which has come to inform this approach, before providing an overview of the chapters which make up the remainder of my study.

SEARCHING BEYOND THE INSIDER-OUTSIDER DEBATE: AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO REFLEXIVITY

This understanding of the anthropological endeavour as a process of embodied ecology has in many ways underpinned my whole research process, and comes back to a consideration of the integrated - and affectively-oriented - depiction of the meaning-making self foregrounded throughout this opening chapter. If we are to truly reflexively account for the manner in which researchers come to engage with the worlds in which they study as fellow ‘meaning-makers’ (Droogers & van Harskamp 2014) in a way that reaches beyond the confines of the classic - and now in many ways outdated - ‘insider-outsider’ debate (Dwyer & Buckle 2009; Chryssides & Gregg 2019),³⁶ we to my mind need to envisage a correspondingly relational conceptualisation of personhood. Considered in relation to the fieldwork encounter, such a model of personhood should allow us to conceive of reflexivity in a manner which depicts *both* the ways in which the researcher has come to be shaped by the research encounter, *and* the ways in which the research encounter comes to variously leave its mark on those who have participated in it.

³⁶ The impact of the reflexive turn upon social-scientific methodologies - alongside the increasing acceptance of so-called ‘anthropology at home’ - has now long substantially complicated our conceptualisation of such distinctions (Powdermaker 1967; Jackson 1987; Okely & Callaway 1992; C. Davies 2008).

It seems to me that drawing such an understanding of the embodied encounters which take place during the research process together with anthropological theories of 'dividuality' - which have variously attempted to encapsulate the relationally porous nature of the human subject - might here prove an especially fruitful avenue of thought (Marriott 1976: 109-42; Strathern 1988; Harraway 2016). The ethnographic sketches here offered have with this in mind been informed by a developing conceptualisation of what might best be described as (in)dividuality in which the person is understood as an actively *indwelling* (Ingold 2000) composite affective embodiment of the 'dividual' relations, 'substance-codes' (Marriott 1976: 110-111), or 'webs of significance' (Geertz c.1973a: 5), which make up and influence their developing sense of identity. Though theories of dividuality were originally formulated in relation to non-Western contexts in which the kinds of psychological processes we here attempt to describe may appear more phenomenologically and culturally muted, the critique of the classic Western conception of the bounded - and essentially isolated - self which underlies these alternative models of personhood has as I see it much to offer developing understandings of the self in Western contexts; not least in relation to understandings of gift-exchange, personal loss and attachment (Appuhamilage 2017; Davies 2017: 75-78; 2020; Granqvist & Shaver 2020).

To this end, the inclusion of the (in) prefix intends to retain within this relational model of personhood a more psychologically-imbued understanding of the emotionally dynamic - if often subconscious (Redin & Jackson 2011) - processes of cognition and 'autobiographical memory' by which the self is continually reflexively shaped and organised (Bernstsen & Rubin 2012), and by which corresponding 'webs of significance' come to be absorbed into a person's ongoing sense of self-definition. Here, as throughout this thesis, I hence envisage Clifford Geertz' concept of 'webs of significance' as forming inter-relating, permeable parts of a dynamic, organic - and crucially biological - process, as opposed to the more linear conceived model which might be associated with sociological theories of networked identities (e.g. Molm & Cook 1995; Stryker 2004: 2; Castells 2010). Indeed, contrary to the more static impression of interpretive action which has traditionally characterised reception of Geertz' theory of ritual-symbolism, the model of dynamically energised synapses I am here proposing should be considered more akin to the kind of system of cybernetic communication Bateson famously came to conceive of as 'ecology of mind' ([1972] 2000; Charlton 2008). Just what

Bateson meant exactly by 'mind' remains rather characteristically allusive. However, it seems to me that the rich depth of his model might arguably be most effectively understood if we replace his rather misleadingly Cartesian sounding concept of 'mind' with the more embodied and affective understanding of 'memory' and transmission which lies at the heart of this study (Nelson & Fivush 2004; Taves et al 2018). Such a nuanced altering might indeed allow us to speak not so much of an 'ecology of *mind*', but of an 'ecology of *memory*' in which the embodied structure of living systems comes to be reciprocally adapted by experience and 'corresponding' moulds of expectation and exchange.³⁷ The experiences and exchanges which have moulded the developing shape of this project have functioned in not so dissimilar a way, and it is in this sense that we might refer to the following ethnographic exploration as depicting something of a snapshot of the 'ecology' of British Christmas.

THE ECOLOGY OF BRITISH CHRISTMAS: AN OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

The ethnographic 'portraits' presented across the main part of this thesis aim to illustrate the manner in which contemporary celebrations of Christmas - and invocations of its 'spirit' - act to reconnect and reincorporate people with the things, places, and relationships they deem to be most important to their core identity as it relates to the evolving formation of the 'systems of worth' which shape their overarching worldview, and guide the ongoing construction of their lived lifestyle aesthetic. Outlining the methodological orientation of both the fieldwork that has driven this research, and the developing theoretical frame which has emerged in the midst of it, Chapter 2 provides the methodological groundwork for my study, and offers an introductory analysis of the 'Christmas spirit' as the prime charismatic and affectively mood-based carrier of the Christmas ethos. Conceptualising Christmas as a prime seasonal 'rite of passage', I here compare van Gennep's theory of rites of passage with Turner's theory of 'social drama' to explore the ways in which Christmas can be seen to comprise an especially fertile ritual site of what Douglas Davies (2008) has referred to as 'cultural intensification'; a felt magnification of experience in which the affective dynamics which mark and mould people's lives are brought to a focus, and emotionally appropriated.

³⁷ This understanding of mutual learning through the 'correspondence' of exchange very much aligns with Ingold's recent understandings of anthropology as a kind of learning '*with*' (2018); a perspective which we find significantly foreshadowed in Geertz' call for ethnographers to 'think' not so much 'about' concepts as 'creatively and imaginatively *with* them' (c.1973a: 25-26).

Such emphasis on 'intensification' quite clearly fits well with the Turnerian metaphor of Christmas as 'active mirror', and much of the following analysis will consider the ways in which these processes of 'intensification' and 'mirroring' can be seen to interact as the illuminated cracks and crises of the everyday-life-world come to push against the set of cultural ideals contained in the 'Christmas spirit'. The extended narrative presented across Chapter 3 will to this end explore in more detail the ideology of the Christmas worldview which underpins the ethos of this 'spirit', and will ultimately provide an introductory outline of the key forms of enchantment the festival can be seen to evoke. Tracing a dialogical path through the key themes which arose out of my time in the field, this prime opening case-study considers in particular the Anglican roots of Christmas heritage in this context, using the 'hermeneutic prism' of my conversation with Heather - a self-identifying 'Anglican' Grandmother - to show not only the complexities of such designations as they pertain to wider lived identities, but the specific role Christmas has come to play in mediating varying identity commitments and life transitions, as well as varying emotions, beliefs, and ideologies. Absolutely key to this analysis will thus be an understanding of the ways in which intimate - and highly personal - notions of home, upbringing, childhood, and family, as well as conceptions of heritage and nationhood, come to drive both experience and performance of Christmas ritual.

Exploring the matrix of obligations, ideals, and values which colour the negotiation of Christmas in this context, I here identify four dominant obligations which can be seen to drive the socio-moral ideology of the festival, and which could be seen clearly depicted across my fieldwork conversations: (1) to keep in touch, (2) to make an effort, (3) to make things special, and (4) to bring people happiness. These obligations can in turn, I argue, be mapped onto four key bio-social needs which all emphasise the drive towards social integration implicit in rites of this kind: (1) communication/belonging, (2) motivation for life/action, (3) meaning-making, and (4) the promotion of wellbeing. Central to the anthropologically informed orientation of this consideration of the performance of Christmas ritual is an exploration of the dynamics of reciprocity and transmission by which collective values - or 'systems of worth' - are negotiated, and through which affective connection comes to be kindled. Whilst the reciprocity of connection I propose to discuss is perhaps most obviously made manifest in the widescale exchange and transfer of material gifts which dominates the popular and highly

commercial epicentre of contemporary Christmas ritual, my analysis more fundamentally intends to draw attention to the ways in which these perceivedly *material* exchanges come to be deeply interwoven with the more immaterial exchanges of inalienable virtue, moral value, and presence which drive the momentum of social relationships and proffer a continued sense of worth and belonging amongst the people who share in them. With this in mind, Chapter 3 provides an extended anthropological analysis of the wider cosmology and emotional import which lies behind such acts of material and immaterial Christmas gift-giving. Framing such exchanges of affective connection in relation to Victor Turner's (1969) concept of '*communitas*' as it pertains to notions of the 'magic', the 'spirit', and/or the 'true meaning' of Christmas - and comparing this concept with Mircea Eliade's ([1957] 1959) notion of '*hierophany*' - I here offer an introductory analysis of the ways in which such experiences of Christmas enchantment act to combine and incorporate conceptions of rooted and worldly authenticity with conceptions of the transcendent, the magical, and/or the supernatural across both 'secular' and 'religious' domains.

Examining the broader ritual function of the festival in relation to these complementary theoretical frameworks, I propose that Christmas - and its accompanying 'spirit' of *communitas* - carries the capacity to stimulate not only a reaffirmation of social bond and belonging, but of personal purpose, hope, and worth. At its most fundamental level, I ultimately contend that Christmas can be seen to operate as a key ritual symbolic juncture for the reaffirmation - and celebration - of social life; of its origins, of its vitality, and of its continuance. This line of argument to my mind not only begins to make sense of the dominant tone of nostalgia which accompanies much of the festival's contemporary mood and ethos (Golby & Purdue 1986: 142; Johnes 2016: 135-138; Larsen 2020a: 583), but provides a powerful indication as to the position Christmas has taken on in such contexts as a stabilising and comfortingly familiar set of ritual-symbolic repertoires in which - and through which - experiences of loss, dissonance, and/or life transition might be affectively processed (Turner 1982). Whether it involves longing for the perfect gift, longing for the ideal family, longing for world peace and harmony, longing for the things one hasn't - or hasn't yet - got, longing for the relationships or times one cannot get back, or longing for a renewed sense of the 'true spirit' of Christmas, the heart of the contemporary festival has, I argue, essentially become about the cultivation and/or aspirational performance of desired utopias.

If 'Christmas' can ultimately be understood to constitute an enchanted universe of prelapsarian 'wish-fulfilment', it corresponds that the magnification of such a world also carries with it the capacity to painfully juxtapose the cracks and tensions of affective loss and dissonance which in some way *prevent* the feeling of *communitas* Christmas has come to both symbolise and inspire. Much of the following ethnographic exploration will thus focus in on those rather less 'wonderful' aspects and experiences of what is so often spoken of as the 'most wonderful time of the year' to show the ways in which Christmas appears to magnify and accentuate the contrasts of dissonance which shape and colour affective experiences and constructions of identity. To this end, the stories featured in this study act to hold a mirror not only up to the dynamics of the so-called 'Christmas lament' which has now long pervaded Christmas culture (Armstrong 2010: 2-11), but up to the varying ways in which people can be made to feel both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in the midst of the festival's performance. Hence, just as Heather's narrative highlights the various ways in which Christmas acts to accentuate the often bittersweet affective dynamics of reflexive life-review which pertain to the maintenance of belonging and wellbeing, the vignettes presented across Chapters 4-7 likewise aim to explore the multiple ways in which the intensity of expectation wrapped up in performances of Christmas carry the capacity to both alienate and integrate as people come to encounter the festival in relation to the changing circumstances of their affective lives.

Following my conversation with Liz, one of the volunteers at the 'Make Christmas Special' event I attended as part of my fieldwork on Christmas Day, Chapter 4 offers us a window into the perspective of someone who can be seen to actively seek in such charitable Christmas activity a seemingly more authentic, secular - and yet complementary - community of morality and belonging which comes to be set apart from the negative connotations of institutional, and seemingly inauthentic, religion. Here, we see the valuing of 'kindness' triumphing as the central message of the festival in a way that effectively transmutes and endorses Christian-infused values of love and charity, whilst establishing an alternative base and philosophy for their inculcation. Liz's narrative also, perhaps more importantly however, paints a particularly pertinent picture of the acute dynamics of loss and disappointment the performance of this supposedly 'magical' utopian world of hope and 'goodness' so often

evokes for people, pointing to the ways in which the search for life, community, presence, and/or meaning often comes to be bound up with experience of deep absence and loneliness. In not so dissimilar a way, meanwhile, the conversation with Paul depicted in Chapter 5 holds an important light up to the negotiation of felt expectation and obligation which is precipitated for many by the financial and affective demands of the festival, offering a rather telling example not only of the conflicting emotions which come with the pressure to provide 'a good Christmas' for one's family and/or loved ones, but of the ways in which the festival brings underlying tensions and conflicts to a head. Clearly demarcated as a time which precipitates an active re-evaluation of the systems of worth and belonging which shape identity and worldview, Christmas is here once again directly associated not only with family, women, and children, but with life and emotion per se.

Whilst this chapter might equally have been entitled 'The Reluctant Scrooge', Paul's self-diagnosis as a 'Christmas Tourist' offers us an especially interesting insight into the manner in which another ostensibly non-religious individual can be seen to seek out both non-religious and religious spaces in his quest to find affordable and enjoyable 'Christmas experiences' and 'traditions' which will suit his family's different needs, whilst balancing their expectations of the Season. Here, the Cathedral space is rather fascinatingly interpreted as a uniquely alternative non-commercial space of authenticity and decency where people of varying beliefs, backgrounds, and perspectives are able to engage in a rather intimate moment of dedicated personal life-review which allows them to transcend the concerns and distractions of the everyday life-world, and re-consider and/or be 'reminded' not only of the roots of Christian Christmas heritage, but of their own personal cultural attitudes and beliefs. As Paul's narrative so well attests, this moment of collective reflection and/or remembrance is almost inevitably likely to bring up conflicting feelings surrounding the things in life and society people are not so satisfied with, or which they feel have been in some way lost. Though it by no means serves to resolve any of these tensions and conflicts, or to take away any of the loss, for Paul - as for many others I spoke to - the experience of Christmas in the Cathedral does at the very least appear to offer something of a cathartic opportunity to gather all his thoughts and emotions together, and to glean some sense of hope, resolve, and/or meaning in the midst of them.

Chapter 6 meanwhile deals with the theme of loss much more explicitly, considering more specifically how Christmas carries the capacity to both accentuate and mediate the dynamics of grief, and in this case, of bereavement especially. Telling the story of Hazel, whose youngest son was sadly killed in action in Afghanistan just before Christmas, we are here offered a striking example of a situation in which the hopeful performance of Christmas comes to be rather starkly juxtaposed against the dissonant incongruity of tragedy and loss. Just as for so many others who have lost a loved one at this time of year, Christmas has since become something of a bittersweet occasion for Hazel and her family, and has in this sense come to act not only as a painfully poignant symbolic reminder of a difficult anniversary, but as a consciously active time of remembrance. Exploring the manner in which the family have come to negotiate the festival since Charlie's death, the chapter concludes that whilst Christmas has acted as something of an incubating backdrop for their grief, it has also provided them with a natural set of ritual-symbolic resources for the processing of their feelings, as well as an impetus to carry on - and to rediscover meaning - in the face of their sorrow. We are hence here offered a view not only of the manner in which the 'habit' of 'tradition' carries the capacity to sustain people through some of the more difficult and/or apathetic times of their lives - where 'going through the motions' may be all they have the energy for - but of the manner in which Christmas comes to act as a symbol of endurance, and of the continuance of life, in the face of anomie and death.

This is a theme which is continued from quite a different perspective in Chapter 7, where we meet Claire, an overworked mother who has found the challenges of the transition into parenthood rather intensified in the midst of the pressure to create the 'perfect' Christmas for her two young children. Just as Hazel has found it difficult to get into the 'spirit' of Christmas since the death of her son, so too has Claire found it rather personally difficult to feel the 'spirit' since becoming what she terms, the 'Christmas provider'. Much of this chapter to this end seeks to explore the ways in which conflicts of expectation and responsibility come to inflect people's experience of the festival in the midst of their changing circumstances; a theme which maps clearly onto the mismatches of expectation experienced in different ways by both Liz and Paul. Tracing in some detail the manner in which Christmas has come to intersect with the affective dynamics of Claire's extended rite of passage into adulthood/parenthood, this somewhat lengthier vignette seeks to reconnect the themes of

my ethnographic material more explicitly back to the theory and themes developed in Chapters 2 and 3 to explore the ways in which such manifestations of secular-eschaton construction come to play out against the tensions and realities of personal constraint and circumstance. Here, the theme of the Christmas mirror appears clearly into the picture once more as we see Claire struggling to 'balance' both the 'conflicts' of worldview and parenting-style which the festival 'brings to the fore', and the ideal performance of 'perfection' she feels such pressure to deliver amidst the needs and wants of her various family-members. The chapter in this sense, however, also offers us a rather useful view not only of the manner in which Christmas comes to reflect the dynamics of what is in this case a rather complex and 'mish-mash[ed]' worldview, but of the manner in which both 'religious' and 'secular' ritual-symbolic repertoires come to take their place for people as part of the broader cultural 'Christmas jigsaw'.

Claire's active desire for the rooted connectedness and reassuring familiarity of 'tradition' meanwhile shines an important light upon the nature of the festival's role as a key 'constant' in the lives of so many in this context, her depiction of active 'memory-making' offering crucial insight into a process of contemporary meaning-making which transcends any sense of boundary between the secular and the religious, and which focuses instead around a heightened valuing of moments of significance as they relate to ongoing narratives of autobiographical identity. Speaking of the manner in which Christmas comes to sanctify other key rites of passage which have taken place during the rest of the year, Claire comes to envisage the festival as a kind of 'anchor-point' for identity which provides both a vital cyclical 'reference-point' for the organisation of significant autobiographical memories as they pertain to the wider trajectory of the life-course, as well as a prime 'access-point' for both synchronic and diachronic configurations of community and belonging which allow people an 'opportunity' for connection across the boundaries of time and space. The pressure to provide Christmases which might ensure the legacy of happy Christmas memories into the future thus here becomes a key preoccupation as the activity of 'memory' and/or 'tradition-making' becomes not simply about memory-gifting, or even value-gifting, but about shared destiny-making.

Picking up these themes, our concluding chapter aims to draw the above described 'varieties' of Christmas transcendence together to begin to elucidate more clearly both the genre of liminality contained in the Christmas rite, and the nature of the role it has come to play in the 'anchoring' and/or dis-anchoring of contemporary identities in this context. Emphasising once again the personalisable nature of Christmas ritual, we will here explore the manner in which the so-called Christmas 'anchor-point' comes to act as a 'collective focus' for the celebration of the values and relationships we hold most dear, and for the transcendence and/or redemptive dissolution of loss and dissonance. We will then end with a postscript which explores these dynamics in relation to the Covid-19 Pandemic which has come to underscore so much of the writing of this thesis, and which clearly provides a rather stark example of the manner in which Christmas comes to be utilised in this context as a positive symbol of endurance and hope for the continuance and flourishing of social life.

2. Through the festive looking glass: 'logging' the British 'Spirit' of Christmas

A 'CHRISTMASSY' WEB OF SPIRITS, SCENES, & SHADOWS

'You're studying Christmas?', the incredulous voice gasps. 'Yup', I smile. 'Becoming Dr Christmas wasn't necessarily the career path I had mapped out for myself, but there you go. It's a lot of fun.' Astonishment still not quite worn off, the next predictable, searching question arrives. 'But, isn't all that study going to ruin Christmas for you?' My go-to, laughter-guaranteed quip is, by now, well-rehearsed. 'Nah I don't think so. Come on, it could be *worse*. I mean, forget about *wishing* for it...for me, it's *genuinely* Christmas every day!'³⁸It appears that for many, Christmas seems just a little too 'fun', and perhaps just a little too close to home to be deemed worthy of anything resembling serious academic study. If people are not quietly bemused by my choice of research topic, they are often perplexed, and sometimes even horrified. And yet, it is precisely the surprised smile of delight that appears on people's faces during these conversations, precisely the alarmed concern for preserving the sanctity of my own Christmas experiences, precisely this quality of *intimacy*, which I believe reveals something of the significance of this topic for the study of religion - and more broadly, of *meaning-making* - in Britain today.

The paradigmatic scenes and ritual-symbolic repertoires evoked at this time of year immerse us within a highly affectively-resonant - and highly amplifying - matrix of associations and emotions (Davies 2009); a porous palette of light and shadow. Such emotionally-tinged

³⁸ <<https://www.thenorthernecho.co.uk/news/15787552.meet-student-whose-job-christmas-every-day/>> [Last accessed June 2022].

scenes are, as Rodney Needham terms them, ‘paradigmatic’ of very particular cultural - and often deeply personal - narratives (1981: 89). I suspect that if we were to ask almost any other British person to imagine a Christmas scene, many of their idealised images might look a little something like mine. This much is unsurprising. Many of us have grown up buying the same Christmas cards, singing the same carols, and stirring up the same recipes. We’ve been there, done that, got the shepherd tea-towel headdress. But of course, no one shepherd tea-towel headdress, no one set of sparkly angel wings, no one garish Christmas cracker crown, is ever worn in *quite* the same way. For all its rhetoric of continuity and cohesion, Christmas is only ever - and indeed, *can* only ever be - experienced through the prism of intra-personal flux and societal heterogeneity. This is as true temporally as much as it is true horizontally. As the ghostly figurations of Dickens’ ([1843] 2012) much-loved *Christmas Carol* narrative so evocatively attest, no Christmas is ever quite the same, just as no family is ever quite the same, just as no one person is ever quite the same from one year to the next.³⁹

Each celebration of Christmas must always be met and mirrored by a uniquely evolved - and indeed evolving - set of inter-personal and socio-cultural dynamics; each realisation of its performance borne out in relation to the affective sediments of experience (Schutz & Luckmann 1973: 7-14) - the ‘ghosts’ of Christmases past, the vitalities of Christmas present, and the anticipatory whispers of Christmases ‘yet to come’ - which lurk and blur amidst the intra-subjective flows and shadows of our consciousness. It might in this sense be said that just as there are as many Christmases as there are *people*, there are as many different *experiences* of Christmas as there are experiential phases in people’s *lives*.⁴⁰ The social reality of ‘Christmas’ as it is experienced in contemporary Britain is hence rather inevitably often far from the seeming homogeneity of the happy and abundant Dickensian ideal contained in our go-to ‘Christmassy’ images. Indeed, it is a Christmas truth universally acknowledged that behind the shimmer of such images lies quite another set of shadowy and rather less romantic experiences of alienation, loneliness, grief, and shame; of familial break-down, financial

³⁹ Or, in the words of the classic Heraclitan saying, ‘no person ever steps into the same river twice’ (Bateson & Bateson c.1987: 40).

⁴⁰ I refer here to life ‘phases’ as opposed to life ‘chapters’ or ‘stages’ as has often been customary in psycho-analytic and/or narrative analyses of lives, so as to emphasise the often non-linear nature of the affective flows and transitions which take place across the life-course.

instability, and emotional fragility; of intense societal pressure and perceived-heightened inequalities.

Whilst the escapist nature of the enchanted Christmas world certainly carries the capacity to magically transport people away from the uncertainties and difficulties of mundane life, the juxtaposed - or indeed, the *failed* - performance of such a purportedly utopian world also quite clearly carries the capacity to generate a sense of bitter and jarring *disenchantment* (Deacy 2016: 31). Hence, as much as the festival is popularly seen to spell a time of temporary *release* from the tensions and harsh realities of the everyday life-world - of time out, or indeed time off, from the unrelenting obligations and responsibilities of the world of work (Turner 1982b: 28-59) - for many the pressured and/or aspirational performance of 'Christmas' appears to precipitate a somewhat dissonant *accentuation* of pre-existing burdens, tensions and losses. Experience and awareness of varying forms of tension and dissonance have thus in a sense become as much wrapped up in the affective web of people's conceptions, expectations, and memories of Christmas as have the fragments of sparkle and delight which accompany its popular image. In holding a utopian - and we might even say, prelapsarian - mirror up to the dissonant realities of the ordinary everyday life-world, I ultimately want to propose that Christmas not only constitutes something of a living temple to our deepest desires, fantasies, and values (Deacy 2016: 17-32), but a redressive symbolic 'metaphor' for our dreams of the way we believe the world - and our lives - *ought* to be (Geertz c.1973d: 465; Turner 1974).

This, I believe, might just begin to get to the heart of what people really mean when they jest about 'wishing it could be Christmas everyday'; the heart of why so many people deem it such an important and intimate feature of their lives; and indeed, why so many others find it such a difficult, painful, and frustrating time of the year. At the heart of this *research* lies the stories of people for whom this idealised societal 'wish' percolates; people whose hopes and dreams - whose disappointments and losses - come to be reflected and refracted under the sparkly lights of Christmas. For all the jesting around the seeming festive jollity of my research topic, it was often not until we entered a little deeper into conversation that people began to realise that, in telling me about their Christmases, they were actually telling me about their *life*. Conversations would suddenly reveal why so and so's in-laws refused to stay this year; why

another person decided to buy their family ‘experience’ gifts rather than more material objects; how someone else found this Christmas particularly ‘special’ because it was the first one in their new home, or because it was the first one as a ‘proper family’; how someone else found being at home with family a little strange and alienating this Christmas having returned back from university for the first time; how another found it particularly difficult to feel the same way about the festivities this year because their Dad had just been diagnosed with cancer, or their Grandmother had died the year before.

As the lady I stayed with over the most intensive part of my fieldwork put it, it’s almost as if Christmas provides a kind of ‘timeline’ of one’s life. This study aims to offer a sense of the ways in which Christmas acts to punctuate this ‘timeline’ for people, and in so doing aspires to provide a rarely studied glimpse into the manner in which the festival comes to ‘mirror’ and ‘intensify’ (Turner 1982e: 104-105; D. Davies 2008) the central values and styles by which people live their lives and make sense of their developing autobiographical narratives (Fivush & Haden 2003). The present chapter intends to situate the trajectory of my research in relation to this process of ‘mirroring’ and ‘intensification’, and to give a sense of the manner in which the methodological approach and conceptual framing here discussed has come to be forged in the midst of the interactions and experiences which have shaped and ‘mirrored’ my time in the field. Drawing together Clifford Geertz’ understanding of religion as a ‘system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations’ (c.1973b: 97) with Max Weber’s earlier conception of the manner in which the ‘charisma’ of the ‘distinctive religious mood’ comes to act as a prime carrier of moral sentiments ([1922] 1993: 151; [1905] 2002), the following analysis foregrounds an understanding of the ‘Christmas spirit’ as the prime carrier for the ‘ethos’ which has come to pervade the tone of the Christmas worldview in this context (Geertz c.1973c).⁴¹

Exploring the manner in which this charismatic mood comes to generate energy at the ‘interfaces’ which drive Christmas ritual,⁴² I here map the ritual framework which will guide our understanding of the festival as this study progresses. This conceptual framework

⁴¹ For further discussion of the interrelationship of these theoretical concepts, see Davies (2022: 24-27, 121-122).

⁴² See Bateson’s depiction of the ‘interfaces’ between ‘mental subsystems’ (c1987: 19).

established, we will then turn back to a reflexive consideration of the fieldwork which generated this approach, outlining in more detail the means and ‘shape’ (Leavy 2015: 3-4) by which this research has attempted to capture the ‘spirit’ of Christmas as it has come to be experienced in contemporary Britain.

‘THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT’: A CHRISTMAS-SPECIFIC COMMUNITAS

Love it or dread it, embrace it, or resist it, Christmas is an occasion which comes along each and every year without fail; a public event and holiday season which carries with it not only its own distinctive set of ritual-symbolic repertoires and emotions, its own distinctive set of sorrows and expectations, but its very own distinctively effervescent *charge*; its very own magically festive ‘mood’ (Bausinger 2019).⁴³ The paradigmatic repertoires associated with Christmas do not simply remind us of the festival; they make us feel ‘*Christmassy*’. They transport and/or compel us into what Klassen and Scheer have characterised as a ‘seasonal habitus of belonging’ (2019a: 3-5). As Santa Claus himself puts it in the classic (1947) version of popular Christmas film *Miracle on 34th Street*, ‘Christmas isn’t just a day, it’s a frame of mind’ (Johnes 2016: 113). In Britain, as indeed elsewhere across the world, this Christmassy ‘frame of mind’ has become highly associated with what is commonly referred to as the ‘*Christmas spirit*’; a warm - and almost confrontingly ‘happy’ and/or ‘nostalgic’ (Johnes 2016: 131-140) - disposition of festive ‘cheer’ and/or reflective sentimentality in which affective, ethical, and behavioural drives appear integrated, and a kind of Dickensian-imbued ‘carol philosophy’ reigns triumphant (Barnett 1954: 14-18).

We are thus here presented with a rather intriguing example of a mood-based phenomenon which appears to act as a Weberian-esque carrier for a distinctive set of culturally-constituted values and behavioural repertoires, and which can in a sense be seen as an affective cultural shorthand for what Riis and Woodhead have aptly described as the ‘emotional regime of Christmas’ (2010: 11-12).⁴⁴ A ‘distinctive mood’ (Weber [1922] 1993: 151) - or we might say, ‘*mode*’ (Taylor 1985: 48) - of festive embodiment, the ‘Christmas spirit’ has come to act as a

⁴³ For further analysis of the ‘festive’, see Turner (1982f); Falassi (1987); Taylor (2007: 469-470, 482-483).

⁴⁴ It seems telling that Riis & Woodhead (2010) choose the notion of the ‘Christmas spirit’ as an especially apt example with which to introduce their concept of ‘emotional regime’ as a tool with which to consider the dynamics of religious emotions.

well-recognised and much invoked cultural expression not only for experiential, and often highly sensory, manifestations of the felt ‘magic’ and/or aesthetic *atmosphere* of Christmas, but for the kinds of desirable behaviours which might effect its ‘true *meaning*’. I hence want to suggest that we find in this cultural idiom a rather fascinating manifestation of a culturally-constituted form of emotional embodiment which is perceived and experienced both as a morally virtuous and aesthetically-charged feeling-state which people feel the need and/or pressure to ‘get into’, *and* as a kind of externalised instance of reified transcendence and/or hierophanic-esque charisma which acts to cast ‘magic’ and/or meaning into people’s lives (Eliade [1957] 1959).

Facilitated by the affectively positive and symbolically rich sensory medium of a comfortingly - and for some, hauntingly - familiar atmosphere of festivity and abundance (Anderson 2009), this Christmassy ‘habitus’ sets the stage for an acutely intensifying vortex of energy and emotion, and it is this seed-bed of *intensity* which I want to argue provides especially fertile ground for expressions and/or manifestations of what might be best described as a kind of Christmas-specific form of ‘*communitas*’ on the one hand (Turner 1969), and a kind of negatively intensifying experience of what we might call *anti-communitas* and/or *anomie* on the other (Turner 2012: 13-22; Durkheim [1897] 2002: 201-239). The charismatically-charged set of cultural idioms which capture this Christmas-specific form of *communitas* have quite clearly come to act as something of a tonally affective carrier not only for what many people consider to be the festival’s ‘true meaning’ and ethos, but for the very notion of ‘*Christmas*’ itself, and it is thus in capturing a sense of this rather elusive phenomenon - of where it might be found, and indeed of where it might be lacking - that I believe we might find something of a ‘magic key’⁴⁵ with



Figure A. ‘Magic keys’ hand-made by one of my participants each year for her children alongside specially personalised letters from Santa

⁴⁵ A large number of children I interacted with in the field believed Father Christmas had a special ‘magic key’ which allowed him to enter houses without chimneys [e.g. Figure A.]. This ‘magic key’ was indeed shown to many of the children who visited the grotto at Crook Hall.

which to unlock the 'spirit' that has come to pervade performances of Christmas in this context.⁴⁶

Throughout my fieldwork, experience of Christmas enchantment was most commonly bound up with interrelated notions of 'Christmas spirit' and 'Christmas magic'. Though these expressions are often referred to interchangeably, they quite clearly carry rather different tonal connotations, and it is important to note that there are correspondingly subtle differences in the way they tend to be invoked by different (in)dividuals in different contexts. Subtle distinctions of tonal nuance aside however, these largely complementary cross-fertilising references to 'varieties' of Christmas enchantment should, I suggest, be considered key to any broader understanding of collective formulations of 'belief' and/or 'religious experience' in this context (James [1902] 1982). Whilst the 'magical' certainly appears to have become something of a go-to cultural expression for experiences which act to in some way uplift or enchant the ordinary everyday life-world, the 'magical' quality evoked in experiences of the '*Christmas spirit*' should be considered of particular significance for the considerable cultural currency it appears to carry not only in relation to its clear Christian resonances, but across a wide variety of worldviews and perspectives.

A concept which is of course deeply tinged with the zeitgeist of the late romantic sentimentalism which so shaped the character of Christmas ideology and praxis as it emerged out of nineteenth-century bourgeois Britain (see esp. Connelly [1999] 2012; Armstrong 2010; Johnes 2016), the notion of the 'Christmas spirit' is especially culturally associated with the sentimentally-infused writing of Charles Dickens, and most particularly with its well-known literary depiction and characterisation in his story of '*A Christmas Carol*' ([1843] 2012). Though there has been some historical debate as to the precise role of Dickens in the evolution of the standardised cultural repertoires we have now come to associate with Christmas, the impressive influence of this now almost mythic-like narrative has been widely identified by commentators as vital to the development of many of the key moralising tropes

⁴⁶ The tone of my study in this sense follows a model not dissimilar from the ethnographies of Michelle Rosaldo (1980) and Charlotte Hardman (2000) which stand out as distinctive examples of anthropological accounts which base their reflections of the emotional life of the societies they study around exploration of the affective complexes which surround specific socially constructed cultural idioms of emotion. For further example of work in the anthropology of emotions, see Leavitt (1996).

and stereotypical figures of mainstream contemporary Christmas culture (Miller 1993a: 19-20; Deacy 2016: 39-51). Still widely read, re-enacted, and re-engaged with as part of many people's contemporary Christmas celebrations, '*A Christmas Carol*' ultimately tells the story of the miserly - and pointedly *anti-social* - character of 'Scrooge' who is gradually redeemed from his hard-hearted misery and isolation by a series of visitations from the 'Spirits' of 'Christmas Past', 'Present' and 'Yet to Come' who mirror the trajectory of his life back to him, and thereby force him to confront the dissonances that lie therein. The conclusion of the narrative thus sees Scrooge transformed into a Christmas-loving philanthropist whose newly found enlightenment at long last enables him to participate fully and joyously in the 'spirit' of the festival, and to take pride and pleasure in being able to give generously to those in need.

The extent to which Dickens' narrative might be read as an explicitly 'Christian' tale has been much debated in the wider literature; not least in relation to the apparent affirmation of capitalist consumerism which would appear to lie implicit in the nature of Scrooge's redemption (Deacy 2016: 39-51).⁴⁷ Irrespective of the nuance of this debate however, it seems clear that what we find in this narrative is: (1) a distinctively Victorian affirmation of a sentimental humanitarianism which affirms domesticated Christian values as they relate to ideals of home and hearth, family and childhood, nation and charity (Johnes 2016), and (2) the depiction of a decidedly interior and inward redemption which traces the contours of what might be easily identified as a secularising form of 'Protestant work ethic' (Weber [1905] 2002). Hence, whilst the narrative is often depicted as 'secular' in its orientation, Deacy is right to emphasise the more subtle ways in which Scrooge's redemption comes to be affirmed by the implicitly Christian backdrop of the story's wider themes and setting (2016: 39-43). As his analysis of popular Christmas media well highlights, this Christian-infused 'parable' of redemption has since become something of a go-to 'formula' which we see replicated and readapted not just across the story-lines of a variety of *Christmas* films (e.g. *The Grinch*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, *It's A Wonderful Life*, *The Santa Clause*, *Elf*), but across a similarly sentimental genre of heart-warming blockbusters often ceremoniously re-watched at this time of year (e.g. *Mary Poppins*, *The Sound of Music*, *Harry Potter*).

⁴⁷ Scrooge's epiphany of 'goodwill' essentially encourages him not to renounce any kind of dependence on material possessions, but to go out and spend his money on others.

Described by several of my participants as ‘feel-good films’ they liked to watch to get themselves into the ‘Christmas spirit’, and/or to indulge in the escapist atmosphere of ‘cosy’ nostalgic comfort they identified with Christmas, this genre of festive viewing can largely be identified by narratives in which we see various short-sighted, egocentric, money-obsessed, distracted, disenfranchised, downtrodden, over-stretched, and/or grief-stricken protagonists ‘undergo transformative experiences’ through the means of some revelation or life-changing interaction - often, though it should be said not always, with ‘some supernatural or magical *deus ex machina*’ - which allow them to see their life from a new perspective, and/or which reaffirm to them a sense of that which is most important (Deacy 2016: 48-51; Connelly 2000). Reviewing the storylines of such festive favourites, it becomes clear that the tonal inflection of the ‘Christmas spirit’ and/or ‘magic’ has come to encompass not only a child-like mentality of joyous and innocent abandon - not only an indulgent reverence for nostalgic and romantic sentimentality - but a decidedly morally-tinged ethos of ‘peace and goodwill’; of forgiveness and redemption. We hence to my mind quite clearly find in this redressive manifestation of enchantment - this distinctive ‘carol philosophy’ of communitarian ‘brotherhood’ and humanitarian generosity (Barnett 1954: 14-18) - an instance of ideological *communitas* which comes to be experienced as an embodied experience of seemingly ‘timeless’ communion and charisma that extends both horizontally between different people and social-groups, and vertically between generations.

The belief that the sharing of this optimistic attitude of collective joy and communitarian solidarity has the power to magically transform the ills of society is of course central to the utopian vision of Christmas, and it is to this distinctive pattern of the redemptive transcending of dissonance that I now turn. In what follows, I offer a brief discussion of the theories of ritual transition which have come to inform my developing understanding of this dynamic, before turning back to a consideration of how these complementary conceptual models can be seen to illuminate the dynamics of my study; of its themes and of its performance. Drawing especially on Victor Turner’s concept of ‘social drama’, and putting this theory into direct conversation with Arnold van Gennep’s earlier understanding of ‘rites of passage’, I will here

contend that Christmas presents us with a unique ritual space - and distinctive 'world'⁴⁸ - of enchanted liminal transition; a 'sacred' or 'dramatic time' of utopian and/or fantastic escapism and reflexive reckoning during which the ordinary flow of experience is disrupted, and the dynamics of the everyday life-world are brought to a climax (Turner 1982a: 9).

CRISIS AT CHRISTMAS: INCORPORATING TRANSITION

Whilst Christmas is quite clearly widely associated as a time which acts to highlight and accentuate pre-existing social crises,⁴⁹ labelling such a time of positive celebration as itself a point of 'crisis' may not on first viewing appear the most natural of categorisations. However, when read in conjunction with Turner's ritual theory of 'social drama', the underlying dynamic of conflict contained in the festival's performance - and indeed much reflected in both academic and colloquial discourses around the topic (see esp. Löfgren 1993; Scheer 2019; Johnes 2016: 41-42) - begins to make more sense. According to Turner, conflict should be considered a fundamental component of the ritual sequence. This was true, as he saw it, not just of rituals which can more obviously be seen as a direct response to some specific form of 'affliction', but of any ritual which pertains to the processing of change or transition (1982e: 110). Drawing consciously on the influence of van Gennep's ([1960] 2019) theory of 'rites of passage' which had attempted to document and sketch a general processual pattern by which we might understand the plethora of rites whereby people come to be eased over the changes and transitions which characterise the flow of socio-cultural life, and putting such a theory together with his own impressions of the kinds of 'conflict' which he had so readily observed in his own ethnographic endeavours - particularly, and most famously, during his time amidst the Ndembu - Turner viewed what he eventually came to refer to as 'social drama' as constitutive of the fundamental pattern by which and through which the dynamics and dissonances of social life come to be affectively processed and expressed.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ To 'cross the threshold' from the 'profane' into the 'sacred' is in van Gennep's words, 'to unite oneself with a new world' ([1960] 2019: 20).

⁴⁹ That Christmas is a painful and/or stressful time of the year for some was a commonly recognised trope across my fieldwork, and was expressed by those even as young as 6 and 7 years old.

⁵⁰ Though much of this theory was mapped out in his formative (1957; 1967) studies of Ndembu ritual, I here draw more specifically upon Turner's later development of this theory as it pertains to his broader processual anthropology of performance (see esp. Turner 1979a; Turner & Bruner 1986; Turner 1988). Most of the references here cited are correspondingly taken from his (1982) volume of essays which effectively presents a culminating encapsulation of this maturity of thought.

As van Gennep's distinctive processual framework of transition implies, a 'passage' of change supposes by its very nature the traversing of some form of dissonance between one condition and another - the negotiation of some form of 'incompatibility' which threatens to disturb the delicate balance of our relationship with the varying environments in which we dwell and with which we interact ([1960] 2019: 1-13) - and it is this notion of the navigation of *dissonance* which Turner comes to especially take up and emphasise within his developing impression of the fluctuations which characterise the dynamics of social life. Hence, where 'rites of passage' may be viewed as the ritualised - or in van Gennep's terminology, the 'magico-religious' (13) - marking of temporally and/or spatially oriented passages of movement between the 'thresholds' of condition and/or 'position' which colour and constitute the varying realms of socio-cultural life as they pertain to the dynamic movement of activity between the 'sacred' and 'profane' (2-3, 20), Turner's theory of 'social drama' focuses more directly upon the shifts in affective condition which characterise the fluctuation of social dynamics; and more specifically, upon what he considered to be the classic - and near universal - passage of negotiation which accompanies those moments of 'crisis' that threaten to in some way disturb the pattern and/or 'flow' of social life (1982a: 9-12; 1982c).

Whilst there is a sense in which van Gennep's theory emphasises the nature of transitions as they pertain to the individual where Turner's focus on social dynamics lends itself more obviously to an emphasis on transitions which affect the group as a whole, to draw such a stark distinction would be a mistake; not least in relation to a consideration of the more seasonal and 'celestial' rites of transition included in van Gennep's original schema ([1960] 2019: 3-4; Turner 1982b: 24-25). Indeed, for the purposes of this study, I suggest these two classic anthropological concepts should be held together not only in relation to their apparently complementary theoretical view of the agency of the socially constituted person (Szakolczai and Thomassen 2019a), but as complementary models - or as Turner himself puts it, dynamically 'dialectical dancing partners' (1982c: 78) - of socio-cultural behaviour which pertains in some shape or form to the affective processing of change, and of the varying shades of dissonance which lie therein. For fundamental to the trajectory of both genres of cultural performance is a concentrated flow of progression from *dissonance* to *resolution*, from *uncertainty* to *security*, from *anomie* to *harmony*; a transformation of being from the

de-stabilising and alienating confusion of *loss* to the comforting and connected satisfaction of '*incorporation*'. As we shall see, this is a trajectory of movement which is highly applicable to the affective dynamics of Christmas, and it is my hope that exploring Christmas ritual in relation to these frameworks might begin to unpack something of its placement and role in the context of contemporary Britain. I thus now turn to a more in depth consideration of Turner's integrated framework of ritual process to examine more closely the manner in which its dynamic might be seen to play out in relation to Christmas.

A SEASONAL 'PASSAGE' OF INCORPORATION & REDRESS

In Turner's view, 'social life, even in its apparently quietest moments, is characteristically "pregnant" with social dramas' which carry the capacity to in some way dislodge the carefully balanced equilibrium of the social group, and which serve in more directly functional terms as a kind of self-regulating system of maintenance and momentum by which such equilibrium continues to be sustained (1982a: 9-11). These 'dramas' were as he saw it, discernible not only in the day to day 'crises' which beset the 'flow' of socio-cultural life, but in their reflection and/or mediation through the means of culturally-inscribed genres of public ritual, legal process, art and theatre (1982e: 105-11).⁵¹ It is thus both *like* and through the *means* of their manifestation in such genres of cultural performance that 'social dramas' can, as he sees it, essentially be understood to constitute: key moments of 'social reflexivity' - of time which comes to be set apart from the ordinary flow of 'quotidian life' - in which divisions and dissonances are brought to a focus, and in which the affective dynamics and normative moral values which guide and govern the group in question are in some way revealed and/or communicatively expressed (1982c: 68-82).

Configured along the narrative contours of a processual movement which can be seen as a kind of variation on a theme from van Gennep's original spatially-oriented formulation of the

⁵¹ A conceptual framework which rings strikingly reminiscent of Berger and Luckmann's view of the cyclical pattern of cultural knowledge formation (Cf. Notes 6 & 18), it is this parallel between - and perhaps more pertinently, this oscillation in and out of - the 'social dramas' of the everyday life-world and the dramatic narrative structure of these varying genres of cultural performance which comes to so underscore Turner's developing anthropology of performance (e.g. Schechner [1977] 2003; Turner 1987).

much-rehearsed threefold movement from: (1) the 'pre-liminal' moment of 'separation', to (2) the 'liminal' moment of 'transition', to (3) the 'post-liminal' moment of incorporation ([1960] 2019: 11-12), Turner's theory can be mapped in its most basic form as follows: (1) the appearance of some form of 'breach' or transgression in the natural flow of societal life, (2) the instigation of a 'crisis' in the community in question which divides the social order into opposing factions and 'divisions', (3) an attempt to resolve and 'redress' such divisions in order to restore the peace of moral and social order, and if this proves impossible, (4) a further disintegration of the pre-existing group via the re-instigation of 'crisis' - or more formal 'schism' - which then more often than not leads to the formation of new alliances and bonds (1982c: 68-76). It is, he suggests, in the midst of this drama - in the very midst of this crescendo of activity and momentum - that we find the dynamics which act to provide something of an:

apt occasion for the performance of a major ritual celebrating the values, common interests, and moral order of the widest recognised cultural and moral community, transcending the divisions of the local group (1982a: 10).

Viewed in relation to this framework, Christmas becomes almost instantly recognisable as a prime annual ritual platform for the restoration of relations and the reaffirmation of the socio-moral order; an 'apt occasion' for the facilitation of affective 'incorporation' and reconciliatory 'redress'. Indeed, considering especially the 'spirit' of Christmas-specific *communitas* discussed above in relation to the performance and ethos of Christmas in Britain, it does not take all that much of a leap to see how Christmas might be viewed in this context as elsewhere across the world as a cultural performance akin to the 'rituals of reconciliation' Turner observes amongst the Ndembu; rituals which 'in their verbal and non-verbal symbolism' act as he puts it to:

reassert and reanimate the overarching values shared by all Ndembu despite the conflicts of norms and interests on ground level (1982c: 75).

Whilst Christmas should of course first and foremost be understood as a moment of *celebration* in the life-flow of contemporary British culture, crisis management and resolution

can on this reading be seen at the very heart of its festive ethos and function. Indeed, considered in relation to this theory, I suggest that we might in fact perhaps more accurately understand Christmas as a kind of 'prophylactic' cultural apparatus for the general dispelling of loss and conflict which operates through the ritual-symbolic demonstration of harmonious 'co-operation', and the effervescent re-affirmation of collective meaning (Turner 1982e: 110-111). Christmas can, I argue, in this regard be seen as a kind of culminating ritual platform which encompasses not only the active celebration of the relationships and values which act to uphold the *vitality* of socio-cultural life (Turner 1982g), but the affective processing of all those *anomic*-like dynamics and forces which threaten to numb and destroy it. For, as Turner himself rather evocatively puts it:

even as they expose our demons and chaos-dragons, celebrations also affirm our vitality and resolve to continue (1982g: 29)

If Christmas is about providing a cyclical rite of passage for the annual processing of loss and transition - and/or for the prophylactic reassertion of belonging and value in the face of such potential dissonance - attending to the *liminal* dimensions of its performance should be seen as vital to any anthropological understanding of its place and ethos in the rhythmic pattern of contemporary Western societies. Indeed, framing our analysis in relation to an understanding of the ambivalent potentiality inherent in this so-called state of anti-structural indeterminacy, as I see it, not only begins to make much clearer sense of the inherent dynamic of 'paradox' and/or 'binary' opposition many commentators have argued is in some way central to its performance (Scheer 2019), but offers us a way of holding a more functional reading of the festival's import together with a more sociologically sensitive and psychologically informed understanding of the complex manner in which such dynamics come to play out on the ground.

Such a reading also raises important questions surrounding the study of liminality itself. For whilst the concept has often tended to be framed in relation to its apparent invocation of passive *absence*, in the case of Christmas, even the more negative dimensions of the liminal state appear to invoke a kind of active *abundance*, in which anticipation, hope, possibility, and fear become the dominant and variously applicable affective tones; and where more

positive dimensions encompass ludic and/or cathartic behaviours which involve the entertainment of imaginative dream-worlds, alternative moralities, and/or utopian potentialities (Turner 1982c: 76-77, 82-85).⁵² Miller's anthropological theorisation of the 'Janus-faced structure' of Christmas ritual expresses the 'ambivalence' of this liminal quality especially effectively (1993a: 25-26). However, whilst his analysis does indeed indicate the festival's clear overlap with more purely carnivalistic rituals of inversion - much of his discussion circulating around Christmas' dual, and yet seemingly contradictory, dynamics of 'inversion' and 'embodiment' (15-17) - he does not expand upon the manner in which the 'Janus-faced structure' he speaks of might be read in conjunction with broader Turnerian-esque conceptions of the ritual process. It is hence my hope that re-framing our understanding of Christmas in this manner might allow us to open up the beginnings of an anthropological framework which might expand fruitfully upon the Lévi-Straussian 'foundations of Christmas' Miller identifies (7), whilst also indicating some of the more negative dimensions of such processes.

AN 'INTENSIFYING' MOMENT OF SOCIETAL REFLEXIVITY

Drawing this theory together with my reflections from the field, I propose that Christmas can be best understood to constitute a form of break in the dynamics of the everyday life-world - a kind of peak-point or culminating space - which not only brings personal and societal tensions to the 'fore' (Klassen & Scheer 2019: 30; Turner 1982c: 21), but provides a facilitative collective occasion for: (1) the emotional evaluation of the previous year and of the world at large, (2) the playful and/or escapist imagining of alternative possibilities and/or desires, (3) the 'redressing' of 'crises' in relation to such aspirations and frameworks, (4) the re-affirmation and 'decoration' of identities, values and worldviews, and (5) the renewal and restoration of social bond, belonging and resolve. The festival should, I argue, in this sense be regarded as a kind of crowning 'social drama'; a 'sacred' or 'dramatic time' of ritual liminality and playful creativity which attempts to ease the 'passage' of transition through mid-winter - and through the end of another calendar year - via the performance of a distinctively rich genre of cultural symbolic repertoires and life-affirming activities which act in Turnerian terms

⁵² For further analysis of the positive dimensions of liminality, see DaMatta (2017).

to celebrate the 'values, common interests, and moral order of the widest recognised cultural and moral community' (1982a: 10).

This to my mind marks Christmas out as much more than the 'religious festival' of a distinct '*religious*' group - at least in the colloquially-recognised sense of that term - and instead positions it as a performance of collective cultural *meaning-making* which carries the capacity to touch and incorporate people right the way across the complex spectrum of worldviews which make up the socio-cultural fabric of 21st century Britain. As this study progresses, I explore the ways in which Christmas comes to act as a 'focus' not only for the most dominant and normative values and metanarratives of our society, but as a platform for the affective integration and/or assimilation - or indeed, the perceived dissonance and/or disintegration - of such repertoires as they relate to the autobiographical life-narratives and perspectives of distinct (in)dividuals. As Turner himself points out, the precise form that such an affirmation of 'shared meaning' might take from circumstance to circumstance is of course 'always temporary and provisional' (1982c: 75) - always dependent on the evolving inter-subjectivities of generative social actors as they relate to the tonal dynamics of the socio-cultural milieu in which they feel and interact - and it is this notion of the relationally dynamic *generativity* of the meaning-making process that I particularly want to draw out in the chapters that follow (Droogers 2014a).

For as much as Christmas is in many ways about rehearsing the familiar and reasserting a sense of form and permanence into the midst of the uncertainty and flux of social life (Turner 1982c: 76-77), it is also about reassessing the very nature of that which is to be reaffirmed in the *light* of this flux; in the light of the fresh socio-cultural and intra-personal circumstances into which such familiar ritual-symbolic repertoires are re-viewed, re-formed and per-formed (1982a: 12-19). In this regard, I propose that the set of moods and cultural repertoires performed at Christmas time might be most effectively framed as an instance of what Douglas Davies (2008) has described as 'cultural intensification'. This is a notion he suggests might provide something of a more integrated 'general analytic category' with which we might describe the process of affective appropriation whereby the core values of a group come to be absorbed into a person's evolving autobiographical identity, and which he believes might offer a more appropriate conceptual apparatus with which to understand rites - and

phenomenological experiences of rites - which focus more closely around acts which stimulate 'repeatedly renewed familiarity' and 'affective engagement' with the core values of the social group (2008: 19).

Building on well-established theories of embodiment (Mauss [1950] 1979; Bourdieu 1977; Csordas 1990; 1994; Burkitt 1999; Mellor & Shilling 1997; 2014), Davies' theory essentially provides a conceptual expansion of Chapple and Coon's notion of 'rites of intensification' (1942: 507-528); a concept which he contends has been rather regrettably neglected in wider studies of ritual. Notable for its then rather unique treatment of van Gennep's theory of 'rites of passage' which is here taken to refer rather exclusively to those 'non-periodic' or so-called life-crisis rituals whereby individuals undergo some form of status change, this work had attempted to provide a parallel concept which might account for those more 'periodic' rituals which correspond to 'the daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly changes...associated with changes in technology through the alternation of day and night and of the seasons' (1942: 485-486); in other words, those changes which affect the group as a whole. Whilst such a classification seems in danger of misrepresenting the broader intentions of van Gennep's schema which - as Turner (1982b: 24-25) points out - had in fact included in its original understanding of the 'ceremonies of human passage' those 'rites occasioned by celestial changes, such as the changeover from month to month (ceremonies of the full moon), from season to season (festivals related to solstices and equinoxes), and from year to year (New Year's Day)' ([1960] 2019: 3-4),⁵³ Chapple and Coon's analysis undoubtedly raises the need for a closer consideration of these kinds of cultural occasions.

If 'rites of intensification' serve to 'maintain' the 'conditioned responses' of the group in question by *intensifying* 'habitual relations' and 'interaction rates' through the expressive means of dramatic and/or symbolic representations (1942: 507-508, 528), 'cultural intensification' can by Davies' account be taken to constitute a broad conceptual umbrella term for the 'variety of behaviours' and, more fundamentally, for the 'process identifiable within them in which the values of a group are brought to a behavioural focus and emotionally

⁵³ Such patterns of change and 'periodicity' were hence, as van Gennep understood them, as much embedded in the flow of the natural world as they were reflected in the flow of social life; as much about the shifts of whole societies as they were about the shifts of the individual agents who engaged with them.

appropriated' (2008: 17); i.e. any cultural experience, situation, narrative, image, place, or activity which acts to intensify personal affective engagement with collective values and/or beliefs. It seems to me that Christmas provides us with a particularly distinctive example of exactly this kind of socially reflexive cultural phenomenon, and it is this stress on the (in)dividual appropriation of meaning that I particularly wish to emphasise as we consider (1) the ways in which Christmas comes to both accentuate and reflect the autobiographical narratives of particular (in)dividuals, and (2) the ways in which people come to utilise Christmas as a creative platform for the reaffirmation of their core values, attitudes, styles, and relations (Searle-Chatterjee 1993).

'MAGIC MIRROR' ON MY FESTIVE WALL: WHO HAS THE MOST WONDERFUL CHRISTMAS OF THEM ALL

The ethnographic portraits that make up the following chapters intend to show the ways in which the ritual performance of the Christmas fantasy-world holds an '*active mirror*' up to the reality of the everyday life-world, reflecting and interpreting its 'social dramas' in magnified - or we might say, 'intensified' - form. I here draw once more from Victor Turner, who evocatively refers to such occasions as opening up:

a hall of...magic mirrors...in which social problems, issues, and crises...are reflected as diverse images...[and] reflections...some magnifying, some diminishing, some distorting... (1982e: 104-105)

As is powerfully testified by the jealous Queen's wielding of the 'magic mirror' in the classic fairy-tale of Snow White,⁵⁴ Turner suggests that the distortion created by the 'the faces peering in' to these mirrors has the potential to provoke 'not merely thought, but also powerful *feelings* and the *will* to modify everyday matters in the minds of the gazers' (1982e: 105).⁵⁵ In invoking the metaphor of 'magic mirror' he thus infers that, whether or not we like

⁵⁴ The Queen of this fairy-tale is so dissatisfied by the image reflected back at her in the 'magic mirror' that it inspires jealous - and indeed, ultimately fatal - action of revenge in a desperate attempt to restore her own image and position in relation to the threat of Snow White's superior grace and beauty. See: <<https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm053.html>> [Last accessed June 2022].

⁵⁵ Emphasis my own.

what we see in the mirror, it is our *emotions* which act to determine not just the very nature of the image which gazes back at us, but the kind of feelings we are most likely to feel - and the kind of action we are most likely to take - in response to our perception of its form. 'For', as he so rightly points out, 'no one likes to see himself as ugly, ungainly, or dwarfish' (ibid). In other words, this kind of 'active mirroring' - this performative 'metacommentary', to use Clifford Geertz' interpretive terminology (Cf. Note 17) - guides construals of self-perception and esteem not through some form of objective like-for-like reflection, but through the means of a reflection shaped in subjective relation to the emotions and affective tonalities of the present feeling-state.⁵⁶

THROUGH THE ANTHROPOLOGIST'S LOOKING GLASS: CHRISTMAS AS REFLEXIVE METACOMMENTARY

This process of mirroring is ultimately an act of reflexive *comparison* - a process of reflection and/or representation which operates both horizontally and vertically, both socially and temporally - and it is this sense of affective relational appraisal that I want to especially emphasise as my study progresses. It is with this in mind that my analysis hinges around explorations of what Christopher Deacy has referred to as 'the transformative possibility engendered by the fantasy-realism dichotomy' (2016: 25) - the latent 'mirroring' oscillation in and out of social drama and public performance (Turner 1982c: 73; 1982e: 107-108) - which is so intensively performed at Christmas time in Britain as elsewhere across the world. As I hope will become clear, the extended metaphor of 'active mirror' used throughout this thesis consciously intends to evoke something of a doubly reflexive metaphor. For whilst I argue that Christmas holds a 'mirror' up to the dynamics of society, I *also* intend to utilise this metaphor as an effective explanatory means of describing the phenomenological dynamics of intersubjective *mirroring* I see playing out in people's experiences of Christmas itself. I have thus increasingly come to envisage this research as a product of public dialogue, and fundamentally *two-way* reflection. For to hold a mirror up to Christmas is in a sense to engage in a kind of ethnographic inception. It is to tell a story of the telling of stories; to write a

⁵⁶ The theory in this sense corresponds well with contemporary psychological understandings of the deeply emotional processes of embodied cognition which drive the ongoing construction of memory (see e.g. Bernsten & Rubin 2012).

‘metacommentary’ of ‘metacommentaries’. It is to gaze through not just one mirror, but a kaleidoscope of mirrors. It is to refract the metacommentaries, to evoke them, to capture their essence, to engage in the same kind of ‘public work’ (Klassen & Scheer 2019a); the same self-reflexive act of ‘reflective discourse’ (LeVine 1984: 81). Whilst my developing methodological approach draws perhaps most obviously from Geertz’ (c.1973a) famous and pivotal essay on ‘thick description’ as a holistic form of ethnographic knowledge, it hence also wishes to emphasise the affectively *embodied* nature of the emic and etic dialogue which has come to shape my developing idiographic reflections (Turner 1982d; Okely & Callaway 1992; Marcus 1998: 67-68).⁵⁷

THE FESTIVE LOG RESEARCH PROJECT

I had been playing with these thoughts for some time as I tossed and turned over where to go for my fieldwork, what to do, where to focus, whose story to tell. I had had them in the back of my mind as I assembled my field-sites, forged my relationships, and agonised over the inevitably taxing on-the-ground, day-to-day realities of permissions, entries, emails, data-protection strategies and endless consent forms (Burgess 1991: 5). And yet, it was not until I found myself sitting round a table in early August at a North Tyneside Council Christmas Day planning meeting in a community library that I began to sense the ‘thread’ which might draw together the rather disparate sites and activities which made up my research (Turner 1982c: 64; Marcus 1998: 14, 90). As is customary at such meetings, we began by going round the table, introducing ourselves, and explaining our role in the project. Faced with the almost bizarre anthropological task of having to explain what on earth I was really *doing* there, I found myself committing to an idea I had previously only nervously prodded about, and shelved for post-doctoral keeping. Having explained that I was going to be travelling round to different places in the run up to Christmas to find out more about how people make meaning at Christmas, as I looked out at their expectant faces, I intuited that I needed something more.

⁵⁷ Geertz’ interpretative school of thought has been oft critiqued for its intellectualist focus on the text. Re-reading Geertz’ theory of ‘metacommentary’ as an embodied affective process and/or performance hence to my mind deals with this critique and renders it compatible not only with more recent work on embodied cognition (Cf. Note 18), but with the attention which has increasingly been paid to the study of emotion within religious studies over the last ten years (Corrigan 2008; Knibbe & Versteeg 2008; Davies 2008; 2011; Riis & Woodhead 2010; Davies & Warne 2013).

If this was going to be anything like a two-way process - and indeed, if I was to gain any sense of legitimacy within the group - I needed to *offer* something. I needed a role.

It was then that I took a deep breath in, and whipped Gelf the Elf out of my bag. Placing her firmly on the table before me, I continued... “And I’m not alone. I come with an Elf!” Propelled by the enthusiastic smiles and intake of intrigued recognition which Gelf seemed to generate across the room, I went on, solidifying my plans quickly as I



spoke. The idea was that people would be able to follow the project (and my ‘research assistant’ Elf!) online as we journeyed around to our different sites, as we told the story of our research, as we documented and journaled it. Naming it ‘The Festive Log Research Project’, people were invited to log their own stories as part of the research in ‘one big community logging of Christmas’.⁵⁸ Stories could be engaged through interaction with posts, blogs, and ‘conversation starters’ via the website and social-media forums, and officially ‘logged’ as part of the research by offering a response to an open-ended questionnaire in the



form of personal ‘field-notes’;⁵⁹ material which I then incorporated into my own ongoing iterative reflections.

This became a way of extending, continually re-grounding, and triangulating my reach well beyond the practical limitations with which I inevitably grappled in managing a time sensitive one-person study of a relatively brief season. As the research process progressed, however, I increasingly came to see it as part of a much broader attempt to consciously experiment with a potentially alternative form of ethnography, and just maybe, with an

⁵⁸ <<https://lucindaslog.com/thefestivelog/>> [Last accessed June 2022]

⁵⁹ <<https://lucindaslog.com/log-your-story/>> [Last accessed June 2022]

alternative form of publicly engaged scholarship; a generative interface for collective cultural reflection. The conversation that emerged amidst the immersive encounters my research facilitated in this vein followed what might be best termed a ‘multi-sited’ and dialogically ‘co-constructive’ approach which sought to forge ‘strategic mediations’ and connections across a range of ‘networked knowledge sites’ (Marcus 1998; Marcus 2007; Falzon 2009). Throughout this phase of immersive fieldwork, I experimented with a range of exploratory group activities and informal interviewing techniques, which included visual mind-mapping, craft activities, focus-groups, participant observation, and in the case of the sites which involved children, more actively participative play.



In a similarly experimental vein, I documented where I could the unfolding ‘story’ of my research under the remit of my online community engagement project [see Appendix A]; material which I envisaged would be followed both by those I was directly working with and



by people further a-field. This online activity and dually-purposive research publicity was hence loosely intended to act as something of an integrating site and ‘emergent form’ of reflexive inscription (Fortun 2009: xx; Carrigan 2016; Hughes et al 2016) which I hoped would occasion ‘strategic mediations’

not only between sites, but beyond sites (Marcus 2007: 1131).⁶⁰ Though it is hard to discern the extent to which people engaged with this platform - which did not initially seem to attract as much of an active following as I had originally hoped - it did undoubtedly act to bolster my

⁶⁰ For further discussion of the role of social-media in broadening engagement possibilities with public audiences, see Leavy (2015: 292-293).

identity as a researcher who was interested in hearing people's Christmas stories, and appeared to stimulate a sense of excitement and ongoing investment in my project in some quarters. Meanwhile, 70 stories were officially 'logged' as part of the community field-notes survey I initiated as part of this side of the project; material which has certainly proved useful in the triangulation and stimulus of emerging themes (Glaser & Strauss [1967] 2017).

INTRODUCING THE 'SINGERS' OF CHRISTMAS: A 'PERSON-CENTRED' APPROACH TO 'DISCURSIVE' ETHNOGRAPHY

It was from this distinct 'bricolage' (Denzin & Lincoln 2018: 11-12) of fieldwork negotiation and immersive encounter that I sourced and grounded the series of 35 semi-structured interviews which have come to constitute the foreground of my analysis; a selection of which will be presented across Chapters 3-8. Whilst many of my participants were keen volunteers, the ultimate aim was to identify people from a range of everyday Christmas settings who may not otherwise have freely come forward, and whose lives in some way came to cross over with my wider fieldwork interactions.⁶¹ This allowed me to put my observations from the initial phase of my fieldwork across various *public* stages of Christmas into direct conversation with the more *personal* life stages upon which, and in relation to which, Christmas comes to play out for distinct (in)dividuals. Though I have sadly not been able to represent them all here, each ethnographic conversation and experience has come in turn to form and inform my own developing intersubjective impression of the emotional significance the festival holds for people, and it is my hope that painting the following ethnographic 'miniatures' (Geertz c.1973a: 23) in some descriptive detail might serve to evoke and honour something of the idiosyncratic depth of (in)dividual narratives, whilst interweaving through these narrative snapshots of interaction a sense of the broader tropes and reflections which emerged over the course of my fieldwork.

In the words of early Christmas historian Clement Miles, it is my hope that this somewhat poetic approach might 'reveal the *emotions*' which lie behind 'outward observances.'⁶² For it

⁶¹ The identification of subjects inevitably varied across sites. Those who had attended a carol service at Durham Cathedral or attended an event at Crook Hall for example were mainly recruited via a voluntary sign-up form.

⁶² Emphasis my own.

is, he suggests, only ‘when the singers of Christmas have laid bare to us their hearts’ that we might begin to discern something of the ‘significance’ with which such observances are held ([1912] 2006: 6). Rather than group these reflections thematically, I have hence chosen to let them emerge as they emerged during the course of my research; amidst the messy complexities of (in)dividual stories, episodes, and lives. The stories I have chosen to feature are thus not so much intended to be strictly representative of particular groups, ‘types’ of people, or sociological categorisation, as examples of the manner in which the dynamics here discussed come to play out in the lives of heterogenous meaning-seeking (in)dividuals. In adopting this approach, I draw consciously upon the methodological model illustrated by Daniel Miller’s rich (2008) ethnography of a ‘typical’ London street, which aims to portray the diversity of contemporary lifestyle ‘aesthetics’ as they relate to material ‘things’ through a series of ethnographic ‘portraits’ of the households he and his colleagues find juxtaposed alongside one-another on the street.⁶³ Here, the classic anthropological method of *comparison* is brought ‘home’ in the truest of senses.⁶⁴ Hence, rather than interpreting and editing his subjects into ‘restrictive’ frameworks of predetermined categories or top-down themes, as has often been customary within qualitative research of this kind (5-6, 291-292),⁶⁵ Miller instead paints each household in some considerable descriptive depth, allowing the participants and their belongings to - both literally and figuratively - speak for themselves; and correspondingly allowing the research process to be guided and executed by the exchanges of knowledge and experience the immersive research encounter occasions.

Miller’s approach is thus, it might be said, not so much descriptive as it is ‘discursive’ (Stromberg 2020: 331). In depicting select (in)dividual narrative ‘portraits’, this study aims to take a similarly ‘discursive’ approach in seeking to illuminate the ways in which (in)dividual lives come to dynamically interweave and draw upon the various ‘webs of significance’ which influence their developing lived lifestyle aesthetic and worldview. In so doing, I here, once

⁶³ See also Miller’s subsequent (2017a) depiction of hospice patients which pursues an almost identical method.

⁶⁴ Miller essentially proposes that each individual household be seen as equivalent to a society in ‘microcosm’ with its own ‘cosmological order’ (2008: 6). If ‘the street is New Guinea’, he reasons, ‘every household’ in the book ‘is a tribe’ (295).

⁶⁵ This tendency can arguably even be seen within grounded-theory approaches (Glaser & Strauss [1967] 2017) which still for the most part end up using quantitative-esque methods to reinterpret and organise their themes. For a cogent critique of more explicitly positivist methodologies which tend to organise their interview material into ‘codes’ that become seemingly ‘disconnected from their wider narrative performance’, see Stromberg (2020).

again adopt what might be considered a loose version of a ‘multi-sited’ approach (Marcus 1998; Falzon 2009) that works outwards from the generative meaning-making (in)dividual to build a ‘thicker’ (Geertz c.1973a), and more holistic, picture of the ways in which such categories of experience intersect with emerging autobiographical identities (Fivush & Haden 2003). Though this approach has inevitably limited the number of people I have been able to include in the final text, it is my hope that depicting ‘fragments’ of my fieldwork material in this more narrative, ethnographic style will offer an insight into the depth of the encounters which made up this research and contributed to the development of its themes, whilst also enabling us to focus in more directly on the dynamics of the (in)dividual as they relate to the wider ‘sites’ and relations which make up their socio-cultural world (Marcus 1998: 73).

As discussed in our opening chapter, this focus on the (in)dividual person as the ground of empirical study is, as I see it, highly in-keeping with developing perspectives across the broader social-scientific study of religion which have in more recent years spoken of the need for approaches which might better embrace and capture the ‘lived’ fluidity of increasingly individualised contemporary lifestyles and worldviews, and which are perhaps better able to tap into the dynamics of complexity that more quantitative and/or thematically organised studies often tend to miss (e.g. Primiano 1995; Ammerman 2007: 9; McGuire 2008; Day 2011; Davies 2011; Bowman & Valk 2012; Droogers & van Harskamp 2014; Stringer 2008).⁶⁶ Though not directly drawn upon by Miller who distinguishes his study carefully from more psychological traditions of thought (2008: 6), it seems to me that the tone of this kind of work is well matched by understandings of ‘person-centred’ ethnography which focus on the intersubjective and emotional dynamics of lived experience (Levy 1994; Hollan & Wellenkamp 1996; Hollan 1997). Whilst such a perspective has perhaps more classically been associated with psychoanalytic approaches to anthropology (e.g. Hollan 2001; Crapanzano 1980; Obeyesekere 1981; Shostak 2000), there is I think a good argument for its more conscious incorporation into wider social-scientific thought and praxis in a way that might complement more established modes of ‘narrative’ inquiry (see esp. Levy & Hollan 2014).⁶⁷

⁶⁶ For work which calls for a re-consideration of the place and value of ethnographic methods within such inter-related disciplines, see e.g. Spickard, Landres & McGuire (2002); Knibbe & Versteeg (2008).

⁶⁷ Although such loosely person-centred approaches have in reality been in existence since the 1920s or earlier - and went on to play a vital role in the sociological outlook and methodology of the Chicago school in particular (Schwandt & Gates 2018: 344) - their adoption, especially within anthropological ethnography, has since been

With this in mind, this study has been produced very much in the spirit of these so-called person-centred approaches; attempting to paint a thicker and perhaps messier picture of contemporary worldviews and meaning-making processes in setting (in)dividual 'stories...side by side' (Bateson & Bateson 1987: 35), and allowing the intersubjective narrative of my research to 'breathe' both within and across these episodes (Marcus 1998: 18, 86). Although I have of course intuitively chosen people whose stories I thought might be especially illuminating of broader themes, it is important to say that any one of the 35 people with whom I shared formal ethnographic conversations - or indeed, any one of the more informal interactions, surveys, and focus-group sessions I conducted throughout the course of my fieldwork - would have produced equally interesting and illuminating themes. There is thus a sense in which my method of selection is - as Miller puts it - somewhat consciously 'arbitrary' (2008: 292). The portraits - or to continue with Miles' rather apt 'singers of Christmas' metaphor, the *soloists* - presented in Chapters 3-8 are correspondingly painted in varying hues and degrees of detail to emphasise, and indeed honour, the ways in which any one of my fieldwork encounters might have been explored and extrapolated in similar ways.

Hence, where the opening vignette presented through Chapter 3 provides the 'discursive' backdrop, and key 'hermeneutic prism', for the main part of my analysis, the select portraits presented in the shorter chapters that follow are painted with rather less interpretative brushstrokes so as to allow the voices of these individuals to speak for themselves.⁶⁸ The portrait offered in Chapter 7 will then return - by way of a kind of sandwich technique - to a more etic analysis of the dynamics there reflected in order to hold together a sense of the dialogic manner in which this study has come to be formed and per-formed (Turner 1982a:

somewhat chequered. For a historical overview see Langness & Frank (1981); Tierney & Lanford (2019). In practice of course, the genre of this approach holds much in common not only with the small case-study orientation of most ethnographic studies, but with more recognisably established 'life-history' and/or 'narrative' qualitative methods (e.g. Riessman 1993; McAdams 1997; Holstein & Gubrium 2012; Chase 2018).

⁶⁸ Though the quotations cited have been heavily edited, I have tried where possible - and especially where relevant to the nature of the content expressed - to leave a sense of conversational tone of each speaker.

12-19), before we turn to our concluding chapter. Whilst they tended to take place in people's own homes, the interviews were convened across a range of locales, and - though they



followed a loosely semi-structured format in terms of the types of questions posed - were conducted in a relaxed, largely unstructured manner (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015). Most lasted for several hours or more, and were in some cases held over several sessions. All necessary permissions were of course obtained in advance, and the identities of

those involved (including anyone mentioned as part of the conversations) have been protected as far as possible as they appear in the main text by the use of pseudonyms.⁶⁹

I became increasingly conscious throughout the research process that talking about experiences of Christmas often seemed to bring up highly personal and potentially painful themes for people,⁷⁰ and it was thus made especially clear to each participant that all due discretion and sensitivity would be applied in the analysis and depiction of their stories. Anyone who felt uncomfortable at any stage about any aspect of what they had shared was given the opportunity to withhold that particular information from being explicitly included in the research, or indeed to abstain altogether. Participants were encouraged - as per the person-centred methodology described above (Levy & Hollan 2014) - to

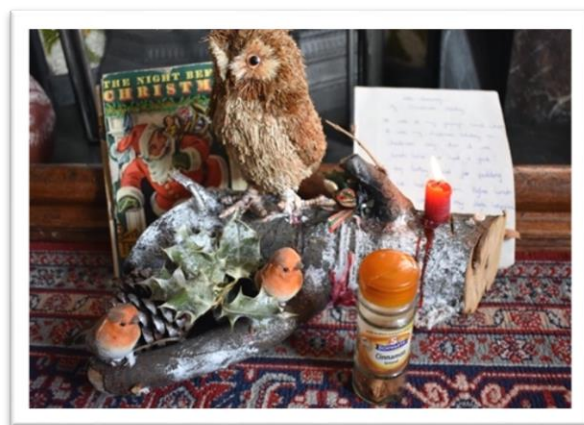


Figure B. One family's chosen Christmas objects. For further examples of some of the items shared, see photos presented at conclusion of this chapter

guide the conversations as much as possible according to their own emphases and priorities, and were to this end asked to identify prior to the discussion a particular material item which

⁶⁹ See Appendix B for more specific information on ethics and data-protection.

⁷⁰ To this end, phone numbers of relevant helplines were included on my information sheet.

most reminded them of Christmas (e.g. decorations, songs, photos, clothes, books).⁷¹ I found this to be an especially effective method of conversation trigger and triangulation,⁷² which allowed people an alternative - more tangibly material mode - through which to express their



feelings about the topic, and often allowed me to discern a deeper dimension of insight into the emotional dynamics at hand.

Likewise, as developed from an activity I had originally devised for children's focus-groups, I concluded each conversation with a written exercise which asked people to sum up the

themes of the conversation by asking them to write onto a 'Christmas bauble' three emotions they associated with Christmas on one side, and the 'true meaning' of the festival on the other. As discussed further in the conclusion to Chapter 7, the more practical and in some ways more formal mode of this exercise not only provided an apt - and almost therapeutic - end to the proceedings, but often allowed people an alternative space in which to review and sometimes even revise their earlier responses. On a broader level meanwhile, this exercise was also intended to serve the notion of the research as a community 'logging' of Christmas; as each paper bauble came to be added to the giant 'research trees' I have subsequently displayed at interactive community events and workshops, as well as throughout this text. These trees in many ways represent an apt symbolic metaphor for my research as a whole. For just as each 'bauble' stands as a symbol of a distinct personal exchange,



⁷¹ I here follow an increasing cross-disciplinary interest in the materiality of culture (e.g. Miller 2008; Turkle 2011; Hutchings and McKenzie 2017).

⁷² This activity in the case of one particularly enthusiastic and hospitable couple stimulated the decoration of a whole room of Christmas associated memorabilia and the donning of Christmas outfits specially for our interview conversation.



MAKE MAGICAL MEMORIES
WITH A MODERN FAMILY TRADITION

AN elf[®] FOR CHRISTMAS

MAGICAL REWARD KIT

YOUR ELF BRINGS:

- 100% Real Gift Certificates
- 100% Real Elf on a Shelf
- 100% Real Rewards
- 100% Real Letters to Santa
- 100% Real Thank You Cards
- 100% Real Magic

100% real magic inside.

FOR THE

GRANDPARENTS WHO WOULD LOVE TO BECOME THE CENTER OF THE HOLIDAY

SMALLER FROM SANTA CLAUS

⁷⁴ All due permissions were obtained during a personal conversation in the lead-up to Christmas 2017.

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letters, and create cheeky ‘mischief’; all of which provides ample scope for competitively creative social-media primed snaps. Interpretation is of course left up to parents and elf owners, and it is interesting to note that some have more recently begun to soften the mischief narrative by introducing ‘kindness activities’. Either way, this new ‘tradition’ has undeniably innovated - and indeed mediated - the Father Christmas myth for a fresh generation, giving it a sense of tangible efficacy and immanence as ‘Christmas magic’ is revealed before children’s very eyes. This development has perhaps predictably proved somewhat controversial amongst those who harbour fears of the potentially damaging psychological effects of unleashing Orwellian-style behaviour surveillance on young children,



those who see this as yet another Americanised commercial fad (Johnson 2012), and not least, those exhausted and frustrated parents who really just can’t take this much extra pressure in the lead-up to Christmas.

However, despite the bemused scepticism the trend has generated, the elf phenomenon is undoubtedly gaining considerable traction in the UK, and is fast emerging as an important feature of contemporary Christmas celebrations for many children and families.⁷⁶ Elves have in short ‘gone viral’ (Haworth 2017). A few days of taking my own Elf into school, and I was inundated by curious and spell-bound children desperate to be given permission to hold her,⁷⁷ interact with her, or to give me their own theories of ‘elf magic’. As mornings quickly came to consist of queues of children lining up to tell me what their own

⁷⁶ Though it has proved beyond the scope of this thesis to reflect upon this empirical phenomenon in the depth the topic deserves, it seems to me that this would constitute a rich and fascinating area of future research, especially as these ‘traditions’ - and most likely the elves themselves - come to be passed down through families.

⁷⁷ The power dynamics and issues which emerged around holding Gelf became quite substantial, as for many children, touching a Christmas elf is taboo, as it is understood to make it lose its magic. My own rules and narrative justifications for her handling thus had to be negotiated with some sensitivity and care in relation to this considerable range of belief. Most children accepted an understanding that I had a special relationship with Gelf which allowed me to touch her, and that her long period away from the North Pole had allowed her to keep her magic for longer periods. Even then however, some children continued to be visibly disturbed by the touching of the elf, and I found myself at times utilising the ‘no touching’ rule when necessary as a control device for managing these dynamics, and for wrestling her away from children who either refused to give her up, or needed to get back to class.

elves had been up to, and playtime propelled me into something of an Elf celebrity, I soon realised this was anthropological gold. If anything - or rather *anyone* - can best transport me into the 'spirit', or indeed the 'magic', of the field I am so often straining to evoke in words, it is Gelf. For she has now come to evoke not just the cultural world of the Father Christmas narrative, not just the evidence of a new 'modern family tradition', not just the perceived 'spirit of Christmas', of childhood, fun, innocence, imagination and make-believe, but the 'spirit' of my research. As she continues to sit beside me, she not only evokes but also actively *embodies* all the many 'adventures' (Ellingson 2015), all the many interactions we have shared (Steier 1991; Coffey 1999; Collins & Gallinat 2010); the 'magic' we have together created (Tyler 1986: 131).



There is thus a sense in which Gelf has become not just the expressive *form* of my research, but has herself *per-formed* it. In her co-presence (Spry 2018: 645), she has in this sense become part of what we might call my dividual research-sElf, my 'portkey' into the field; my 'mood memory' of it (Davies 2011: 19). We might even say that she has at times, *become* the



field; the 'field' which I have quite literally carried around in my pocket. She is thus a 'symbol' in the authentic Tillichian sense of the word; she participates in what she represents (1959: 53-67). As a performative 'expression' of my research (Bruner 1986: 6) and of my own reflexive orientation towards it, she has, as I see it, become 'not only...an

object', or even '*the* object' of the research, but rather the 'meditative vehicle for a transcendence of time and place' (Tyler 1986: 129); a 'means' of reaching the kind of holistic understanding so sought after in the ethnographic endeavour (Geertz c. 1973: 11-15; Vandler 1984). Whilst much has since been written on the more poetic and performative dimensions of the ethnographic endeavour (e.g. Wolcott 2005), I here wish to turn to a brief consideration

of a rather earlier proposed vision of the transformative, and perhaps even cathartic, potential of this kind of ethnographic inscription, before turning back to a consideration of how the more artistic - and we might even say escapist - dimensions of my own methodology might constitute a kind of 'public work' (Ruby 1982; Klassen & Scheer 2019a).

AN ELF 'SHAPED' METHODOLOGY OF ESCAPIST FUN

In his rather unique contribution to Clifford and Marcus' (1986) volume, *'Writing Culture'* - which had at the time constituted something of a significantly trailblazing documentation of the experimentations of ethnographic form that had emerged in the wake of the so-called 'crisis of representation' which had driven the twists and turns of the 1970s/1980s paradigm



wars over subjectivity - Tyler envisages postmodern ethnography as fashioning 'fragments of discourse' which might allow both ethnographer and audience to be transported into a 'fantasy reality'; an almost transcendent space of 'aesthetic integration' from which they might emerge in some way 'transformed, renewed, and sacralised'. Somewhat consciously and intriguingly ahead of its time, this poetic - and almost utopian - vision of the future of ethnography ultimately proposes that moving beyond the fragmented pieces of postmodern sensibility towards the kind of 'holism' which might truly evoke the 'real' demands profoundly



aesthetic, and even spiritual and/or therapeutic activity (1986: 125-126; 134).⁷⁸

Whilst such a notion may on first glance seem perhaps a little overly ethereal, this vision of dynamically participative reflexivity to my mind not only speaks

⁷⁸ See also Hutch (1997) who suggests something of a 'spiritual quest' must always be involved in any attempt to engage with the Other through the means of biography and/or autobiography.

directly into the increasing movement towards participative performativity which is now being increasingly encouraged within social-scientific research of this kind (Kindon et al 2007; Marcus 2007; Gergen & Gergen 2012; Denzin & Lincoln 2018), but also feels strikingly reminiscent of the Turnerian theory of performance and ‘mirroring’ discussed throughout this chapter. Indeed, viewed from this perspective, Gelf the Elf might be seen not only as a tangible embodiment - and mascot - of my research, but as an embodied artistic metaphor for the *mode* and/or ‘spirit’ with which it has come to be performed. Gelf’s adventures can, I



suggest, in other words be seen to stand as a unique form of artistic ethnographic inscription which sits at the interface not just of art and science, but of theorisation and practice; a stance which rather notably parallels arts-based approaches to social research which have in recent years attempted to formulate clearer paradigms for the integration of research, practice, and pedagogy (Irwin & de Cosson 2004; Ingold 2013; Leavy 2015; 2018).

Travelling with me across the boundaries of ‘field’ and ‘home’, ‘interaction’ and ‘reflection’, ‘subject’ and ‘object’, ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, ‘personal’ and ‘professional’, ‘academy’ and ‘public’, ‘teacher’ and ‘learner’, she has - to use the terminology of the above authors -

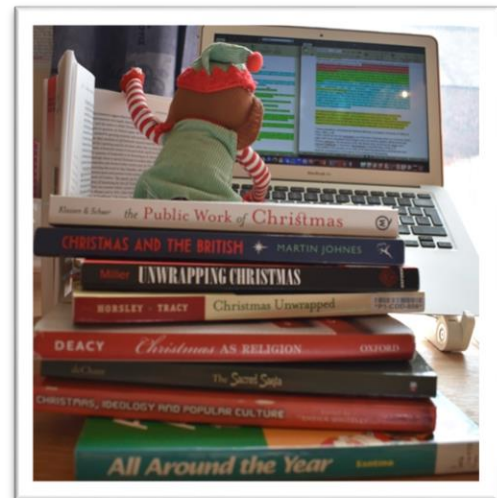


‘shaped’ both the mode and the reception of my research as it has unfolded (Leavy 2015: 3-4); carrying that ‘Christmas spirit’ of ‘fun’ into the ‘serious’ libraries of the University, whilst simultaneously spreading the ‘spirit’ of critically reflective research to a variety of engaged non-academic audiences. Ever the cheeky trickster,⁷⁹

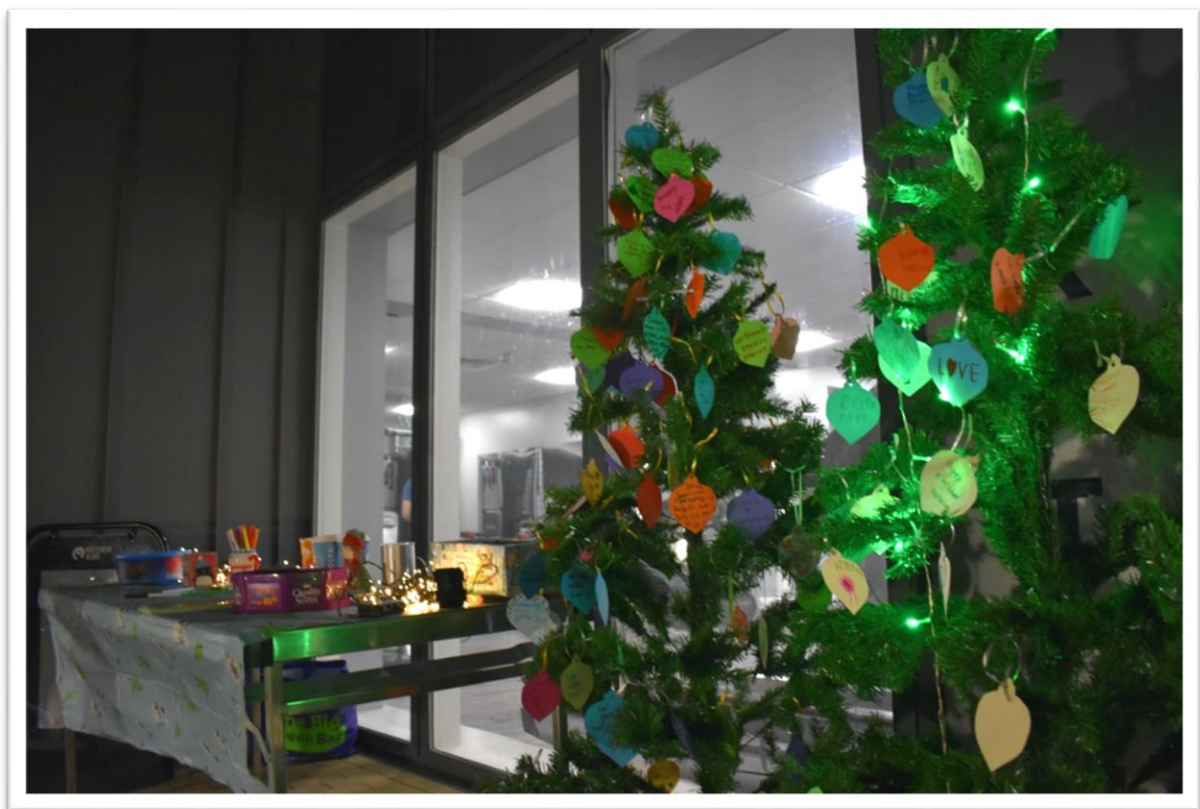
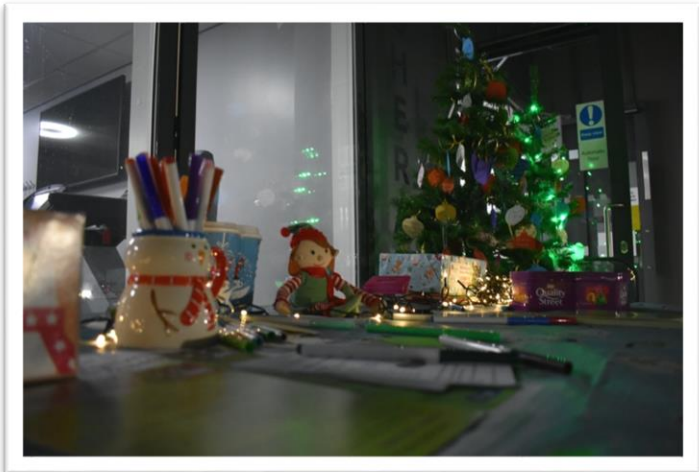
I believe her critical realist (C. Davies 2008) - and one might even say escapist - methodology of ‘serious’ and ‘deep play’ (Ellingson 2015) might just have begun to break through the

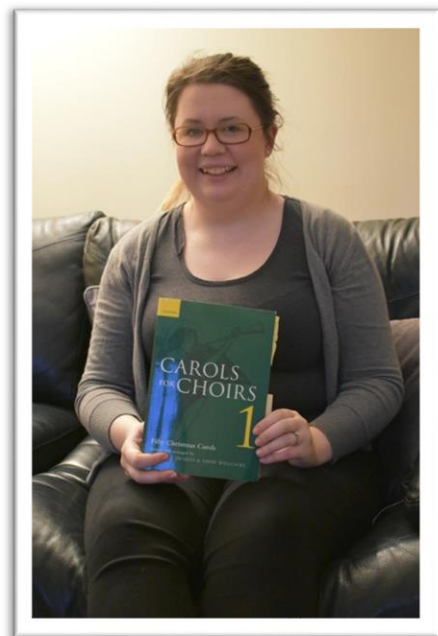
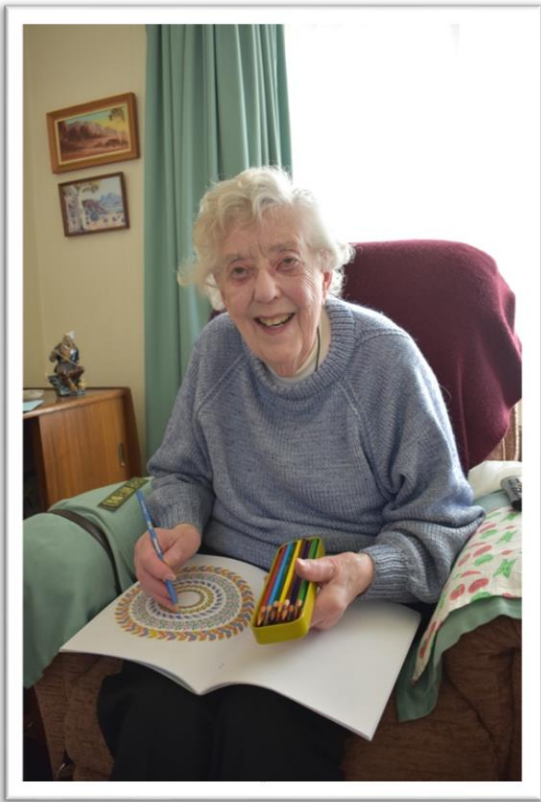
⁷⁹ Gelf in this sense embodies rather directly the vision of the reflexive, and dichotomy-transcending, ‘trickster’ depicted by Ellingson in her imaginative exploration of playful modes of research (2015: 431-432).

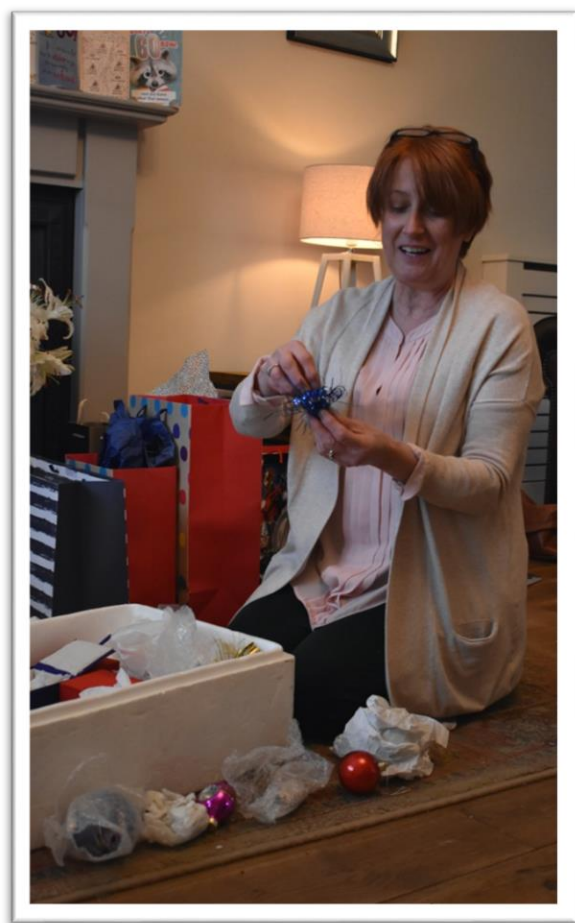
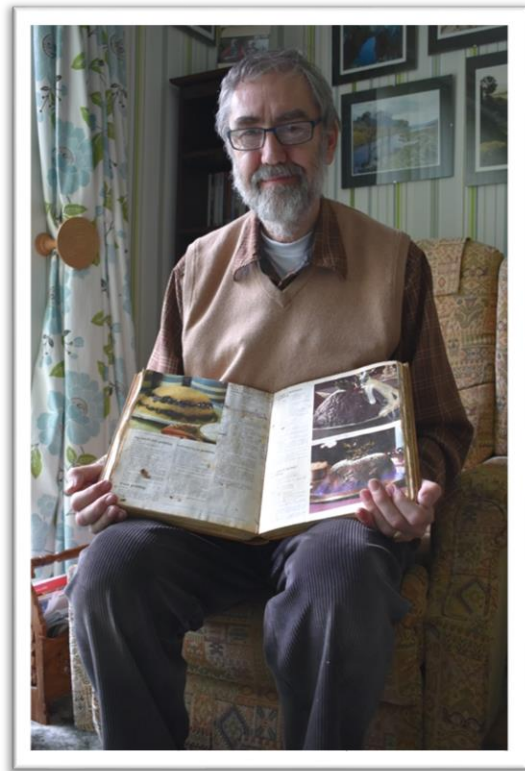
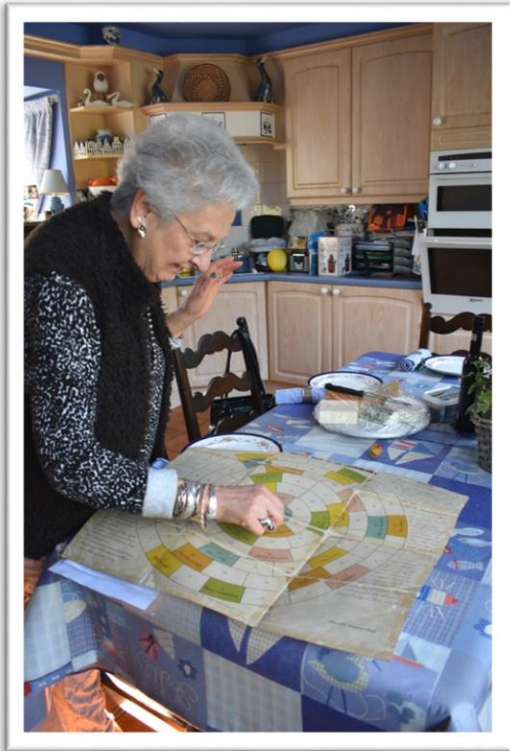
interface between representation and evocation; [s]Elf and Other. Whilst Gelf constitutes a somewhat silent voice in much of the text that follows, her presence has been very much reflexively 'co-present' with my own throughout its writing (Spry 2018: 645). Hence, just as this text stands as the formally written mode of ethnographic inscription by which the themes of my research have come to be represented, Gelf the Elf sits beside - and within - this representation as the performative medium of its 'spirit'. In order to illustrate the various forms of ethnographic evocation which have gone into this research, I thus not only provide images from the field throughout the text, but an accompanying Appendix [A] which will, I hope, help to portray something of the performative research identity and community engagement which has driven and grounded so much of this study.













3. The 'Anglican' Matriarch: Exploring the 'Magical' Reciprocity & Rootedness of Christmas Enchantment

A PARADIGMATIC PORTRAIT & HERMENEUTIC PRISM

I open my selection of portraits with the sketch of an ethnographic encounter which transports us rather directly into the cultural milieu of Christmas church-going I spent much of my fieldwork traversing, and which I believe might help elucidate not only the nature of the symbolic positionality the Church of England has come to take on in this context, but the somewhat mediating role Christmas - and its corresponding worldview - has come to play in modulating the cross-cutting complexities of lives and worldviews. I had been promised Heather's details after one of Durham Cathedral's big Nine Lessons and Carols services by a friend of mine who spied me loitering with my research box as she pushed her way out of the buzzing crowd of congregants. Anxious to assist me in my endeavours, I detected something of a knowing gleam in her eye as she enthusiastically assured me, 'Oh Heather will talk to you.' Intrigued by the somewhat illustrious nature of this introduction, I was especially pleased when a concert I rather conveniently happened to be involved in at Heather's local village church presented me with the perfect opportunity to go and make her acquaintance some months later. Smiling to myself as I relaxed into what is for me a somewhat comfortingly familiar territory of church choir politics, charity bake-sales and broccoli quiche, Heather instantly came across to me as something of a stereotypical Anglican matriarch, a member of that steadfast, bastion generation of women with whom those of us who have spent any great deal of time in these kinds of church circles are so well accustomed; those faithful, fervent women who - whilst oft seemingly rather taken for granted by the likes of those clergy anxious to attract more, and preferably younger, congregants into their pews - quietly continue to

keep the Church of England afloat with their jam jars and raffles and gently warmed pots of tea (Day 2017).⁸⁰

As the conversation progressed however, I soon came to realise that whilst this decidedly warm hue of Anglicanism quite clearly represented a vital - and significantly accommodating - undercurrent amidst the broader brushstrokes of Heather's wider lived lifestyle aesthetic, it did not by any means make up the whole picture, and was not without its own distinctive complexities. As was certainly not unusual across the broad spectrum of Christmas church-goers I engaged with as part of this research, the tone of Heather's Anglicanism appeared in large part to be rather more about (1) a commitment to highly culturally contextualised - and distinctly nostalgic - ideals of Englishness, 'family', 'decency', and 'tradition' (Johnes 2016: 114), and (2) a corresponding yearning for the comforting familiarity and felt 'magic' of a particular aesthetic 'atmosphere' (Anderson 2009; Mason & Muir 2013: 614-615), than it was about a particularly strong commitment to the tenets of Christianity per se. Indeed, as we shall see - and as will I suspect come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the complex paradoxes and ambiguities of contemporary Church of England congregations - Heather's overarching worldview could in many ways be seen to be every bit as complex as any of those more broadly non-church going and/or 'non-religious' folk who presented on first glance with perhaps more ostensibly agnostic and/or 'secular' worldviews; and could in fact on one level be seen to have just as much in common with such perspectives as it did with the broad and rather elusive spectrum of nominal, 'vicarious' and/or culturally infused 'Christianity' (Davie 2007; 2015; Voas 2009) which appears to so dominate the Church of England's pews at Christmas time (Walker 2015; Coleman, Bowman & Sepp 2019).

⁸⁰ As Day (2017) has so well established in her recent in-depth study of the religious lives of older lay Anglican women, this particular cohort has for some time now rather visibly made up the core demographic of mainstream church attendance in Britain. Often described as the 'backbone of the church' (5-6), the lifestyles and attitudes of such women quite clearly offer an important insight not only into the distinctive tonality of the Church of England as it has developed into the 21st century, but into the contrasting shifts of generational attitude which have emerged over the span of their lives. It is important to note that the majority of actively church-going women I interacted with as part of my own research tended to fall into the generation below the women Day describes in her study as 'Generation A'; i.e. the mothers of the 'baby-boomers'. Born in 1947, right at the beginning of the so-called 'baby-boomer' period, Heather falls interestingly only a micro-generation below the younger members of Day's 'Generation A'.

The presence of this kind of syncretic complexity has of course been much discussed in relation to the diverse make-up and ‘bricolage’-like formation of worldviews in the context of contemporary Britain as elsewhere (Day 2011: 22; Davie 2015: 8; Miller 2008: 295), and is to my mind perhaps most effectively captured in approaches which attempt to account for the ‘everyday’ nature of worldviews as they come to be ‘lived’ out on the ground (Primiano 1995; McGuire 2008; Bowman & Valk 2012; Ammerman 2014; Murphy 2017).⁸¹ That said, it seems to me that - just as it is perhaps sometimes all too easy for the needs and perspectives of regular, and actively contributing church-goers, to fall somewhat under the radar as the Church of England seeks to diversify its congregations and to stay ‘relevant’ to people who no longer appear to fit into the seemingly rather conservative brief of traditional parish Anglicanism depicted above - it is equally sometimes just as easy for the rich complexity of perspectives such as Heather’s to become somewhat overlooked by sociologists of religion keen to focus their attentions on (1) the study of those areas of life and activity which might in some way or other be described as non-conventionally, or functionally ‘religious’, (2) the study of those blends of ‘religiosity’ which seem to be in some way unusual and/or growing, or as we have seen more recently, (3) the study of the increasing denomination of people whose worldview might most accurately be described as ‘non-religious’ and/or ‘secular’.⁸²

It has become increasingly clear to me through the course of this research that the lines between such categories are as various - and often as ambiguous - as the people who draw them, and it is for this reason that I have chosen to open my selection of portraits with the perspective of an (in)dividual whose worldview not only quite clearly acts to cross-cut such pre-determined categorisations, but whose narrative stands as a prime example of the way in which the cultural inheritances of ‘Christmas’ in this context come to both *shape*, and be shaped *by*, the developing autobiographical narratives of distinct families and (in)dividuals. The vignette that follows should thus not be seen to represent a ‘typical’ kind of worldview as such - any more than the depiction of *anyone’s* life can be seen as ‘typical’ - but a ‘typical’

⁸¹ As McGuire and others have noted, this dynamic of syncretic complexity is likely not as new as we might first assume. That said, it certainly seems fair to suggest that such ‘eclecticism of belief and practice’ has come to be somewhat intensified in the context of the contemporary life-world (2008: 17, 210).

⁸² I here concur with Ammerman who makes the point that ‘lived religion’ should not simply be considered synonymous with what might be perceived as ‘popular religion’, but can indeed be found across all dimensions and spheres of life and perspective, including the more traditionally and/or explicitly ‘religious’ (2014: 190).

example of the manner in which Christmas comes to ‘mirror’ the dynamics and transitions of people’s lives.⁸³ As the chapter unfolds, my conversation with Heather seeks to provide something of a dialogical guide with which we might begin to explore the broader themes and impressions of my fieldwork. This opening narrative should hence be viewed as both a paradigmatic portrait of the kind of significance the Christmas festival has come to carry in this particular context, and a kind of crystallising hermeneutic ‘prism’ (Armstrong 2010: xiii) through which we might begin to discern a sense of the pattern which has come to be reflected and refracted across the encounters which have made up this research. Whilst there are passages in which Heather becomes inevitably quiet in the dialogue, my ultimate aim here is to depict the manner in which the enchanted world of ‘Christmas’ - and its corresponding worldview - comes to inflect and interact with the life-perspective of a distinct (in)dividual.

INTENSIFIED RECIPROCITY: AN OPENING EXCHANGE

Somewhere in the midst of my florid welcome into Heather’s home, I was asked whether I’d like ‘normal coffee’ or ‘coffee from the machine’. Trying to second guess from the intentness of the question what would be most socially apt, I opted for ‘coffee from the machine’ with polite positivity. In the same breath, a bright yellow cardboard box of Marie Curie daffodils was thrust into my lap, and payment demanded. The deal was clear-cut: coffee from the machine equals a pound to Marie Curie. In many ways, this seemed to sum Heather up: assertive and yet compassionate, feisty, and yet firmly fair. Though she is now ‘retired’ after an evidently fulfilled career as a matron and midwife, the nurse in Heather has quite clearly never left. Her indomitable effervescence, spirited capaciousness, and highly-cultivated sense of responsibility for those she deems vulnerable shone in abundance throughout our conversation, and it was indeed with some bemusement that I attempted to redirect the discussion back to Christmas as she flitted conspiratorially from topic to topic, from pre-ambling caveat to distracted aside, from sharp witticism to firm home-truth. Deeply invested in the happenings and fortunes of those around her, Heather has become something of a well-respected matriarchal figure not only within her own extended family, but across her wider community networks. As with so many others I spoke to however, it was her conception

⁸³ As rehearsed in the previous chapter, my methodology in this sense reflects Miller’s approach in presenting his participants not so much as ‘typical’, but as ‘typically *untypical*’ (2008: 292).

of family and heritage which appeared to constitute the foundation upon which she had come to form and secure her self-identity.

Feeling a sense of recognition of her place and value at the heart of this most intimate of social-groupings quite evidently meant everything to her. Indeed, one of the very first things she showed me as we settled down together in her well-adorned conservatory was the much acclaimed photograph of her recent 70th birthday celebration; an occasion at which her family had surprised her amongst other things with coordinated painted t-shirts which spelt out the word 'Grandma' in individual letters, and listed all the reasons they loved her. 'I'm telling you this person did not exist', she said, impressing a sense of humility upon her abundant pride. 'I was in tears by the time I'd read them.' Not unlike our earlier exchange of the Marie Curie daffodil, the sharing of this prize possession - and indeed of the prize memory it evoked - drew me rather instantly into the affective dynamics of Heather's relational life, betraying the sure beginnings of a glimpse into the prime emotions and values with which she had come to order and assemble her evolving lived lifestyle aesthetic. This creative symbolic performance of intergenerational reciprocity, photographically 'framed' and memorialised as it was in all due pride and for all due posterity (Turner 1982c: 28), rather undoubtedly comprised a heart-warmingly positive affirmation of the systems of worth and belonging - i.e. of the prime inalienable values and experiences - by which Heather's dividual identity had come to be patterned and lived out.

Quite aside from offering us a key window into such dynamics, this opening scene, as I see it, provides a rather apt entry into the affective genre of the 'moral economy' I here wish to explore (Cheal 1988; Golby & Purdue 1986: 139). Indeed, viewed in relation to the interpretative framework of this thesis, there is no doubting that the picture of identity-affirmation presented in Heather's frame constitutes a moment of cultural - or in this case we might say, familial - 'intensification' directly akin to the process of intensification we have already so readily identified with Christmas ritual. At the heart of this culminating moment of intensified reciprocity we ultimately find an affective exchange of *virtue*; a mutual acknowledgement of recognition, and reciprocally shared moment of appreciation, in which the values and bonds which connect those present come to be emotionally and symbolically expressed in what is essentially an actively performative celebration of positive shared

belonging. Both here, and in the collective *memory* of this event, we in other words witness what might be best described as a moment of *communitas* in which the identities of those who feel it come to be reaffirmed and reintegrated in relation to a collective recognition of the core values and shared experiences which bind the group together (Turner 1982a: 10). It is, in effect, almost exactly this genre of intensified reciprocity that I especially seek to capture as this chapter progresses, and as we come to observe more closely the qualitative dimensions of varying forms of ‘magical’ Christmas transcendence.

Whilst the notion of intensified reciprocity might perhaps most obviously be seen made manifest through the means of the intensified material gift-giving which has come to be so popularly associated with Christmas in the context of contemporary Western societies - and which has thus rightly attracted its own distinct, if rather disparate, literature (e.g. Beattie 1962; Caplow 1982; 1984; Cheal 1988; Carrier 1993; 1995; Waits 1993; Otnes & Beltramini 1996; Werbner 1996) - the analysis of this chapter proposes to build on the more anthropologically focused work of Daniel Miller (1993a) and James Carrier (1993; 1995) to focus in rather more particularly on the affective dynamics of the immaterial exchanges of inalienable value which interact with - and indeed drive - such materially-driven reaffirmations of relational identity. In employing the term ‘inalienable’ to distinguish the nature of the intersubjective identity-forming exchanges I describe from the so-called ‘alienable’ exchanges of the market economy which has become so integral to the intensified consumer activity which takes place at Christmas,⁸⁴ I frame my analysis very much within the anthropological tradition of reciprocity theory which has from Marcel Mauss ([1925] 2016) onwards essentially revolved around different understandings of this classic typological distinction.

Though the term ‘inalienability’ was itself not explicitly referred to by Mauss, his original understanding of the ‘hau’ (spirit) of the gift as constituting an actively animating ‘bond’ between ‘souls’ - i.e. the notion that ‘to present something to someone is to present something of oneself’ and that correspondingly, ‘to accept something from someone is to

⁸⁴ For cogent reviews of the festival’s historical entanglement with such forces of commerce, see Belk (1993); Schmidt (1995).

accept something of his spiritual essence, of his soul' ([1925] 2016: 72-73) - has since been significantly extrapolated and developed by a vast variety of scholars across both Western and non-Western contexts; most notably, Gregory (1980), Weiner (1992), Carrier (1995), Godelier (1999). Though the limits of space have prevented a more extended analysis of this literature, there is I want to point out a rather clear resonance of this theory of the transference of material and immaterial 'possessions' and 'identities' as it has come to be conceived in the Western context (e.g. Carrier 1995; Cheal 1988) with the transference of 'substance-codes' depicted in the theory of 'dividual' personhood adopted throughout this thesis (Marriott 1976: 110-111).⁸⁵ Holding this in mind, it has thus made sense to speak not simply of economies of exchange, but of those accompanying *ecologies* of exchange which come to shape the values and identities by which we live (Appuhamilage 2017; Bateson [1972] 2000).⁸⁶ Key to this exploration will hence be an understanding of ideal gift-exchange as an act of 'mutual recognition' in which givers and recipients acknowledge one-another's identity (Komter 2004: 55), and in which inalienable values and/or intentions are thereby communicated and exchanged. A line of argument which can be clearly traced back to Mauss' original understanding of gifts as identity-exchange, this chapter ultimately proposes to explore the manner in which this broader ecology of such Christmas exchange comes to interact with the various forms of transcendence and enchantment which come to be experienced at this time of year.

EXCHANGES OF RECOGNITION & VIRTUE

Like so many of the people I spoke to, Heather's reply to my opening question of what a 'typical Christmas' might look like for her came quickly and instinctively: 'I think Christmas is all about *family*. I would hate to be on our own.' She hesitated slightly, before continuing:

⁸⁵ This point of conceptual convergence is especially well encapsulated in more recent work such as Carrier's (1995: 31-36) discussion of 'inalienable identities' as relationally 'moral persons' and Belk's (1988) notion of the gift constituting part of the giver's 'extended self', as well as in Mauss' original formulation of exchanges as 'manifestations of communion' in which we witness the 'blending together of sentiments and persons' to create 'mixes' of 'lives' ([1925] 2016: 87).

⁸⁶ In holding together this notion of 'ecology' with that of 'economy', I seek to account for the manner in which 'both individual and dividual modalities and aspects of personhood' might be seen to interact with one another in this context as elsewhere (Lipuma 1998: 56). I here draw on the work of those who have attempted to move away from customary conceptualisations of individual and dividual modes of personhood as 'mutually exclusive' to considerations of 'how such seemingly conflicting constellations of subjectivity' might be seen to ambiguously 'coexist' as interrelating 'dynamics' or 'problematics' (Appuhamilage 2017: 11-13; Bialecki & Daswani 2015: 272-273).

So what I like to do is alternate between the boys. But we can't always because Martin is a fast-jet pilot, and sometimes he's abroad...but, we also have...what we call our almost daughter, so sometimes we go to her. She's our almost daughter because she's the only child of our best man and his wife, and they both died very young. So we've adopted her - not on paper - but we've adopted her. She's always called the boys her little brothers, and her four children we view as grandchildren as well - so we have two sons and our almost daughter [laughs]

In this short response we are thrown directly into the dynamics of Heather's family set-up. This was a tendency which appeared across many of my conversations as people for the most part intuitively associated Christmas with the intimate relational dynamics of their family situation. In Heather's case, these dynamics have more latterly come to crystallise around her newfound role as ultimate matriarch and grandmother; a shift which she appears to have made for the most part comfortably, and with some security. Discussing how this particular transition had come to play out in the provision of Christmas, she explained:

Well...I always offer myself as a scullery maid, but they usually say, "No mum, play with the children." Well what's more delightful?!...So I'm doing me Granny bit now.

Unlike many of her friends who have struggled with the transition from being the central family providers, Heather claims to actually enjoy not having to do so much of the hard work.⁸⁷ Asked whether she would bother to make much of an effort if she for some reason found herself on her own for Christmas, she said:

I always put the decs up. Whether I would if I was on my own I don't know. I couldn't bear the thought of Len and I being at home on our own for Christmas...and I think - that's an awful thing to say really...

⁸⁷ This may well of course be partly due to the fact that her role as Christmas provider took secondary place to her hospital duties during her own children's childhoods. Furthermore, it seems quite plausible that her continuing frenetic voluntary work ensures this provider role is already fulfilled elsewhere outside of the family; and the transition thereby mediated.

Her slight embarrassment at this inclusion of her husband in the 'alone' space indicates an important dynamic. For Heather, Christmas is about '*extended* family time'; in other words, a celebration that necessitates *more* than just staying at home with her husband. The first time they suspected they might have to be on their own for Christmas when Martin was in California and Andrew was with his in-laws, Heather concluded they would 'have to go out for Christmas dinner'. This situation led to a poignant moment in her relationship with her 'almost daughter' Katy, who upon realising Heather and Len might be on their own, excitedly invited them to join her instead. That this invitation had come from Katy herself had clearly meant a great deal to Heather:

I'd already said to Len, I wouldn't say to Katy, "would you like us?" because I know she's got in-laws...but it needed to come from her, because I know she calls us second mummy and daddy, but I also know in my brain that I'm *not* mummy and daddy

This episode to my mind provides us with an effective window not only into the evolving relational dynamics of Heather's family, but into the manner in which Christmas acts to 'mirror' and 'intensify' the flow of such pre-existing relational dynamics. It is clear that Heather has provided Katy with tremendous emotional and practical support in the wake of the loss of her parents. However, it is also clear that Katy's dependence on and indeed gratitude for this support reciprocally bestows upon Heather a vast deal of recognition for the compassion she pours out in so many of her other relations. This relationship - arguably more than any other - provides Heather with a force of value which carries the capacity to sustain her in her self-constructed role as carer, and essentially, as *giver*. Katy's enthusiastic Christmas invitation can hence be seen not only to *mirror* this implicit dynamic of reciprocity in her relationship with Heather, but to *accentuate* it; thereby offering us a pertinent example of the manner in which Christmas comes to provide a collective opportunity - or platform - for the highlighting and re-affirmation of such dynamics of relational recognition and value. At its most basic level, we here see Christmas coming to provide a ripe 'opportunity' not only for Katy to affirm her recognition of Heather as a maternal figure, but for Heather to reaffirm her loving commitment to Katy in the reception of said recognition. The variously layered emotional currents of this exchange offer a clear glimpse into the dynamic of fluidity which

underlies the intensification of reciprocity so often found in popular conceptions of inalienable gift-giving at Christmas (Fennell 2002), and which I now want to consider more closely as we turn to a more general exploration of such dynamically overlapping modes of such cross-generational Christmas exchange.

EXPLORING THE COMPLEX ECOLOGY OF CHRISTMAS GIFT-GIVING

Gift-giving can undoubtedly be seen to constitute a key socio-symbolic feature of popular affective associations of Christmas, and is of course fundamental to the nature of the festival's position and outlay in the socio-economic rhythm of the Western societal calendar. The practice of exchanging material gifts, tokens, and cards occupies for many in contemporary Britain as elsewhere the very epicentre of the festival's collective ritual-making, and indeed



Figure A. Children's emotions listed as part of my bauble exercise notably included feelings of nervous anticipation alongside feelings of excitement and happiness

of its very climax on Christmas Day. For the majority of the children I interacted with as part of my research, Christmas was indeed first and foremost about 'presents'. Eyes shining and voices buzzing, this was often one of the very first things squealed and/or murmured when I asked them to tell me what instantly came into their heads when they thought about Christmas. Given that it is children who for the most part

constitute the primary beneficiaries and central symbolic focus of this intensified activity of ritualised gift-giving, this much seemed unsurprising. It was thus, rather more unsurprisingly still, the intense anticipation for the arrival of Father Christmas on Christmas Eve - and for the nervous excitement of waking up early on Christmas morning to see if he *had* indeed delivered any presents⁸⁸ - which dominated the affective and behavioural repertoires of children in the build-up to Christmas; and which was of course only intensified by visits to see

⁸⁸ I refer to 'nervous excitement' here advisedly as a way to capture the tonal intensity of anticipation felt by children many of whom felt such excitement in conjunction with a particular genre of fear - several of those who completed my bauble exercise reported feeling actively 'nervous' or 'scared' that they wouldn't get their presents [see Figure A.].

him in specially designated grottoes like the one at Crook Hall, by his appearances in varied public locales, and by the magical presence of elves in the home from the 1st December.

Whilst many of the adults (and especially older adults) I engaged with - Heather included - were sceptical of this seemingly incessant focus on the material dimensions of Christmas and were quick to express concern about what was perceived to be an increasing commercialisation of the festival alongside an



Figure B. Father Christmas visiting children at school on last day of term before the Christmas holidays

increasing tendency of parents to over-spoil their children, most spoke fondly of their own childhood memories of receiving presents, and were keen not only to recreate such memories with their own children and/or grandchildren, but to 'keep the magic alive' for the next generation. The majority of parents were thus anxious and/or excited to ensure not only that their children received what was in some sense considered to be their 'right' at this time of the year and at this point in their lives, but that they had been given as good a time, if not better - and/or that they received as much, if not more - than they themselves had received in their own childhoods.

This complex ambivalence of perspective clearly illustrates the tension between the 'material' and the 'spiritual' we have already described as central to the ethos and performance of Christmas in this context. Such tension is not least encapsulated in the very figure of Father Christmas himself. For whilst often described as the God of the 'material' and broadly 'secular' dimensions of Christmas (Belk 1987; 1993; Stronach & Hodkinson 2011), this mystical character stands simultaneously as the ultimate embodiment of the socially moralising values

of the 'Christmas spirit', and of the ambiguously reified and curiously hope-inflected notion of 'belief' which has come to be associated with this time of year more generally. There is



Figure C. Gelf the Elf visiting Father Christmas in his grotto at Crook Hall

hence a sense in which the performance of this mythical repertoire constitutes something of a mediating ritual-symbolic focus - or we might even say, moralistic cover - for the consumer-driven aspects of Christmas, and for the intensified presentation of material gifts to children in particular (Cross 2004).

As Theodore Caplow points out in his study of the 'unwritten rules' of Christmas gift-giving in Middletown,⁸⁹ such 'imbalance' in the gift-giving patterns of parents and children is in a sense 'central to the entire ritual', and in many ways 'provides one of the few connections between the secular and religious iconography of the festival'; i.e. 'the emblematic figure of Santa Claus' coming to give bounteous 'unreciprocated' gifts to children, just as the three wise men come from a distant land to bring unreciprocated gifts to the Christ child (1984: 1316). Whilst Caplow's analysis suggests this dynamic does not tend to change as children become adults - or at least, does not appear to ever be fully equalised in terms of the overall value of gifts given over the life-



Figure D. Nativity Scene taken from typical Christmas card

⁸⁹ Arising out of a much broader study of social change in Middletown which sought to replicate the Lynds' famous sociological explorations of the 1920s (Caplow 1984: 1306-1307), this work constitutes one of the first - if not the first - detailed empirical study of Christmas gift-giving in the American context. Whilst their predecessors had ignored the phenomenon, Caplow and colleagues determined that Christmas gift-giving was too significant to the people of Middletown to leave out of any more sustained study of the area (1982: 383).

course (1982: 387, 391; 1984: 1307) - it seems to me that such apparently continued 'imbalance' might be understood differently when viewed in relation to the complex and overlapping modes of inalienable exchange we wish here to discuss. Indeed, I want to suggest that if we situate the dynamics of such intergenerational gift-giving in relation to the transmission of the core affective-symbolic values of generosity celebrated and embodied in notions of the 'Christmas spirit', it becomes possible to reframe our understanding of such apparently imbalanced giving within the intersubjective flow of a much broader 'moral economy' (Cheal 1988) of 'generalised' societal reciprocity (Sahlins [1972] 2017).

As we analysed together why it might be that we so often associate Christmas with children and why many consider its performance to be effectively '*for*' children, a fair few of my participants pointed out that in the context of our society it is children who - alongside other vulnerable categories of people - are not themselves in a position to be able to provide material gifts to others. Such stress on the relative needs and capabilities of others - and on the essential social-hierarchy there implied - should be considered key to the pattern of intergenerational and charitable gift-giving instituted at Christmas, and can be seen as one of the prime ritual strategies by which the socio-moral values of the festival come to be 'intensified' in this context.⁹⁰ For central to the set of values Christmas acts to enshrine is the romantically idealised and hierarchically transcending notion of what Carrier and others refer to as the 'pure' or 'perfect gift' conceived as a 'pure expression' of other-focused sentiment which is both 'unconstrained' and 'unconstraining' in its outpouring, and which essentially expects nothing back in return (1995: 145-149; Belk 1996).

Perhaps better understood in relation to a model of sacrifice or 'agapic love' (Belk & Coon 1993: 407-411),⁹¹ the *ideal* 'pure gift' is ultimately deemed as costly to the giver as it is

⁹⁰ As Carrier points out in his analysis of Caplow's depiction of parental gift-giving at Christmas, if parents wanted children to reciprocate equally, they could easily give gifts in their names as is frequently practiced in both Western and non-Western societies on other occasions. It hence seems that such 'imbalance' is a concerted ritual-strategy of what Carrier calls the 'ideology of the perfect gift' (1990: 28-29).

⁹¹ For an interesting portrayal of 'agapic love' as a proposed alternative to more rationalistically framed models of economic or social exchange, see Belk & Coon (1993). Meanwhile, Miller's (1998) work on the nature of contemporary shopping practices as 'acts of devotion' provides an apt example of an attempt to conceptualise such forms of giving in relation to anthropological theories of sacrifice. More famous however is Godelier's (1999) work on what he calls the 'fourth obligation'; i.e. the obligation to give to the gods. See also Wyschogrod et al (2002).

‘priceless’ to the recipient.⁹² For here the materiality, utility, monetary cost - and even the very aesthetic likeability - of the gift become ‘immaterial’ (in both senses of the word) as such factors come to be either ‘transcended’ by - or elided with - the ‘sentiment’ the present contains,⁹³ and as it becomes the *effort*, or rather literally ‘*the thought*’ that truly ‘counts’ (Belk 1976; Pollay 1987; Carrier 1995: 146; Komter 2004: 45; Benson & Carter 2008: 5). Whilst the tone of Carrier’s analysis appears to present a perhaps rather overly masculine picture of this ‘ideology’ as a modern illusion of individualistic ‘freedom’ which transcends the reality of ‘obligation’ and constraint involved in the exchange (1995: 145-167),⁹⁴ his socio-historical analysis of this movement towards ‘the gift’ as a purely ‘expressive’ socio-symbolic communication of social-relations raises important questions as to how we might conceive of shifts in the nature of obligation as it relates to the complex spectrum of expectations and/or attachments which come to shape exchanges of inalienable worth in the postmodern context (Granqvist & Shaver 2020).

Read in conjunction with Miller’s (1993a; 2017) conception of Christmas as a time for the reaffirmation of sentimental notions of family and homecoming, it becomes easy to see how Christmas gift-exchange comes to act in this context as a prime occasion for the expressive reaffirmation of ‘highly valued’ and yet potentially ‘insecure’ relationships (Caplow 1982: 383, 391-392), and for the more general prophylactic bolstering of affective and instrumental solidarity which has long been considered the primary social function of gift-exchange as a system of social communication and collective meaning-making (Belk 1976; Caplow 1984: 1318-1322; Cheal 1988; Komter 2004; Engler 2005: 366-374; Benson & Carter 2008). It is indeed, more colloquially speaking, this notion of ‘*giving*’ - alongside its relational partner of

⁹² This notion of the gift as sacrificial love is especially well expressed by O Henry’s famous story of ‘The Gift of the Magi’ cited by Carrier as part of his chapter on the ‘ideology of the gift’ (1995: 148-149).

⁹³ As Belk & Coon’s study of gift-change in contemporary dating attests, factors such as the monetary value, unique personal suitability, and utility of the gift may sometimes indeed carry significant weight in such exchanges, but only by virtue of the manner in which they act to symbolically convey the affective state of the relationship itself (1993: 408-411).

⁹⁴ That there may indeed be no such thing as a free gift (Douglas 1990) should not discount rather less rationalistically framed notions of altruism, empathy, and of other-directed care as opposed to self-directed interest (e.g. Cheal 1987; Belk & Coon 1993; Fennell 2002).

the womb.⁹⁶ The central idealised message of Christmas in this context hence becomes that it doesn't matter what one has, or what one's social status is: all that matters - and all that belonging depends upon - is that one can offer oneself to others with an open heart, and in the hope of being recognised and received. A message which is quite clearly 'malleable' enough to encompass a vast variety of worldviews in the contemporary context (Klassen & Scheer 2019a: 4), this socio-cultural ideal is reinforced by both religious and secular symbolic repertoires, from 'the Grinch' who realises his 'heart is three sizes too small' and that he really does in the end have something positive to offer the community who in turn come to accept him as one of their own (Seuss 1957; Burns 1976), to the words of popular Christmas carol, 'In the Bleak Mid-Winter', listed as a firm favourite amongst several I spoke to:



Figure F. Taken from Christmas card

What can I give him, poor as I am,
if I were as shepherd I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I would do my part,
yet what I can I give him,
give my heart

Whilst the exchange of material goods is clearly a hugely significant and much-documented feature of contemporary Western Christmas, the immaterial and affective modes of inter-subjective and inter-generational exchange depicted above should hence be seen as absolutely key to understanding the systems of worth which guide people's moral perception of the festival's import. Indeed, following the insightful work of Miller (1993a; 2017) and Carrier (1993; 1995) in this area, I contend that such inalienable systems of worth and

⁹⁶ I here draw consciously on the psychological work of Donald Winnicott ([1971] 2005) whose depiction of the development of the differentiated self out of this pre-natal experience of non-self, and of the 'transitional' movement between inner and outer worlds, provides a rich conceptual base with which to consider the juxtaposition between harmony and dissonance much of this thesis explores in relation to a consideration of the bonds of attachment alluded to above. This also provides a fascinating parallel with Douglas Davies' analysis of sacred space as conjuring up 'peaceful' notions of 'homecoming', and/or re-entry into the security of the womb, as an integrating form of 'axis mundi', or prefiguring of eternity (2011: 249-253).

belonging can be seen to interweave closely with - and even carry the capacity to *transform* - the alienable exchanges of material goods which dominate much of the festival's ritual activity and traction across the wider socio-economic sphere. Considered in relation to the Turnerian framework of 'social drama' discussed in Chapter 2, I want to suggest that this complex negotiation of differing modes of value constitutes a significant ritual-strategy by which Christmas acts to regulate, and/or restore our right moral relation, both to the economy (deChant 2002), and to society more generally. I hence now offer a closer consideration of this alternative reading of the festival's relationship with consumerism, before turning back to Heather's narrative to examine further the role this underlying tension between the 'spiritual' and the 'material' dimensions of the festival can be seen to play in the annual regulation of identities and worldviews.

'SOME GIFTS ARE MORE THAN JUST A GIFT': THE 'REVERSE ALCHEMY' OF THE 'CHRISTMAS SPIRIT'

Drawing on Carrier's (1993) work, Miller argues the above described interplay between the alienable and the inalienable acts to produce a kind of 'reverse alchemy' by which the seemingly lifeless contractual exchanges of the marketplace are transformed into personally gifted 'tie-signs' which in some way embody the *communitas* and/or 'magic' of the 'Christmas spirit' (Cheal 1988: 20-39). The 'Christmas spirit' in other words here becomes central to the Christmas-specific process of appropriation by which the purchase of mass-produced pieces of plastic come to be transformed into lovingly wrapped expressions of care and/or lasting markers of personalised relational identity (Miller 2017: 439); and the apparent extravagance of the festival thereby effectively expiated. Hence, contrary to those depictions of Christmas which posit it as an almost potlatch-esque fest of crass materialism and status-wealth (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1969: 56; Moschetti 1979), this alternative reading of the festival's relationship with consumerism allows Miller to rather provocatively pronounce Christmas as the ultimate festival of '*anti-materialism*' (2017: 435).

Viewed in conjunction with this theory, the ideological *communitas* propitiated through symbolic representations of the 'Christmas spirit' can be seen to constitute a key part of the ritual-strategy by which the 'material' dimensions of Christmas are transcended and its

fundamentally ‘spiritual’ values expressed. Simultaneously however, such invocations of *communitas* also constitute a key symbolic means by which distinct families, groups, and (in)dividuals come to re-evaluate and re-express the core values and relational attachments which govern their own more personal and/or particular systems of worth and belonging. Christmas hence correspondingly becomes an ultimate occasion at which people are invited to bestow their loved-ones with gifts that might form and sustain their identity - and/or act as a continuing reminder of their relationship - as the years progress. Interwoven with the alchemic transformation of material commodities described above, we thus find those more intrinsically inalienable exchanges of value and experience which accompany the physical and/or practical dimensions of both material and immaterial transactions. We are in other words speaking here of the gifting of affective repertoires, traditions, and skill-sets, of time

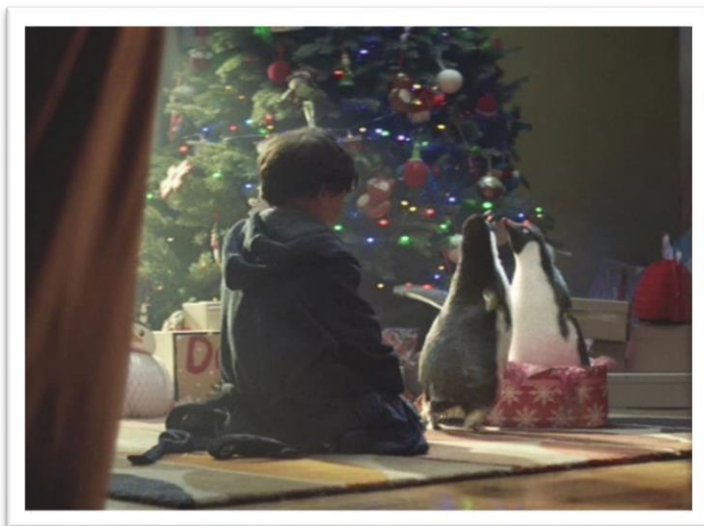


Figure G. Taken from John Lewis Christmas Advert (2014) – ‘Give someone the Christmas they’ve been dreaming of’ [Photo Credit: PA]

spent together, and wisdom passed down, as well as those more immediate exchanges of affection - of recognition, joy, and gratitude - which come to shape the contours of our dividual identities in the midst of this wider ecology of exchange. To quote the 2018 *John Lewis* Christmas advert, ‘Some gifts are more than just a gift’ (Hall & Petter 2018).⁹⁷

THE ‘CHRISTMAS LAMENT’: A DEATH-DEFYING MODE OF SOCIO-MORAL REDRESS

In the context of contemporary Britain, such inalienable forms of gift-giving are undoubtedly valued in distinct *oppositional relation* to the more material forms of gift-giving and

⁹⁷ The release of *John Lewis* advert has over the last ten years or so now itself become an important and highly anticipated fixture in the build-up to Christmas in Britain, and has indeed led to a substantial atmosphere of competition amongst other mainstream stores keen to capture - and monopolise upon - the festive mood of the nation via their own similarly targeted marketing campaigns. Such adverts are typically highly emotionally sentimental, and customarily carry an essentially moral message at the heart of their story-line; material which was notably effectively utilised by the Headteacher of the school I worked in to teach Christmas values in her specially devised ‘Advent Assemblies’.

commercial exchange which often rather ironically underlie such affectively resonant exchanges of personal recognition and value. This tension was well-evidenced in Heather's narrative. When asked about what kinds of emotions she associated with Christmas, she immediately expressed a nagging concern about commercialism taking over the season. 'I hate the fact that it's in the shops around September', she said:

I loathe that. It was much better when we were children...I hate the fact that I think commercialism has taken it over, and that most children...if you ask them probably would say that Christmas was about presents and nothing else

Heather was certainly by no means alone in this fear that the 'true meaning of Christmas' was being lost to a greedy-eyed commercialism. Indeed, as is in-keeping with the trope of 'Christmas lament' Armstrong demonstrates may even date back as far as the 17th century (2010: 2-11), almost all my conversation partners were united in a strong sense of scepticism that increasing 'commercialism' had somehow jeopardised or eroded that which is most important at Christmas time. The widespread perception that the festival seemed to be arriving earlier and earlier in the shops was a common complaint reflective of this concern,⁹⁸ and can in a sense be seen as the secular partner to more explicitly Christian concerns surrounding the neglect of the penitential season of Advent.⁹⁹ Even those who were more positively embracing in their attitudes towards the commercial aspects of Christmas were all highly aware of this variously conceived concern around the seemingly mercenary nature of the occasion, and most expressed at least some level of guilt around their own involvement with it.

Despite the widespread consensus of disapproval expressed surrounding the social evils of Christmas consumerism, however, almost everyone admitted buying - rather literally - into

⁹⁸ Differences of opinion around when Christmas was supposed to officially start represented some significant source of debate amongst those I surveyed.

⁹⁹ As with secular 'Advent Calendars', there is indeed a sense in which the arrival of elves on 1st December has now come to parallel the liminality of Advent in building anticipation for the eventual arrival of Father Christmas on Christmas Eve. For a cogent depiction of the manner in which Christians come to differentiate themselves from the temporal modalities of the secular festival, see Coleman, Bowman & Sepp's description of the negotiation of expectations surrounding the varying temporal modalities of Christmas in the Cathedral context (2019: 246-253).

the very 'naïf' commercialism they so despised. This more complex on-the-ground reality can be found persuasively illustrated in Miller's (1998) 'theory of shopping' which emphasises the acts of attentive love and care which so often lie behind - or perhaps rather give *life* to - the exchanges of the contemporary marketplace; an argument which clearly connects closely with his theorisation of the tension between the 'material' and 'spiritual' at Christmas. At the heart of Miller's general contention is thus a call for the formulation of a conceptual 'model' of Christmas - and indeed, of consumerism more generally - which might 'transcend any simple "for" and "against" portrayal of what is clearly an intense and intimate relationship to materialism' (1993a: 20). Drawing this theory together with my own observation of the field, I likewise contend that the majority of British families quite clearly find themselves - at Christmas likely more than any other time of the year - deeply immersed in the dynamics of ritual and relational 'devotion' involved in the act of choosing and buying material gifts (1998: 3), irrespective of - and often intriguingly *alongside* - their higher-end concerns of encroaching commercialism.

The sense that Christmas was ultimately about an opportunity to reaffirm commitment and 'devotion' to one's kin and/or loved-ones was a strong theme expressed throughout my



fieldwork encounters. More broadly speaking however, this affirmation of care for family was variously held both in tension with, and in complementary relation to, the wider sense of moral concern for others Miller captures in his depiction of the 'centripetal' dynamic in which the family 'idiom' comes to incorporate ever-extending conceptions of the community, and

human 'spirit' (1993a: 29-31). Throughout my fieldwork, the societal ideal that the 'true meaning' of Christmas had to do with the triumph of selfless acts of 'giving' and/or 'kindness'¹⁰⁰ over the ever-persistent reality of greed, self-interest, and neglect as posited against the needs of the vulnerable, the stranger, the impoverished, or the outcast operated

¹⁰⁰ 'Kindness' was a value several of my participants explicitly mentioned alongside 'love' and 'giving' as being central to the 'true meaning' of Christmas.

very much alongside the strong belief that no-one should be left out, or in any way wanting, at Christmas; and could thus be seen to run as an ambiguous morally-tinged thread through more generalised conceptions of the 'Christmas spirit'. This to my mind serves to underscore not only the festival's societal position as a prime rite of incorporation and culminating moment of annual socio-moral redress, but as a cyclical rite of *initiation* by which people come to be inducted as societal givers and/or 'moral persons' (Carrier 1995: 31). My focus-groups with some of the older children in the school to this end revealed a clear understanding that as one grows up, caring about giving to other people becomes more important than caring about receiving one's own presents.

This ideal was taught explicitly in the school context, and many of the children spoke meaningfully of their concern for others less fortunate than themselves, and of the importance of showing 'love' and 'friendship' to others at Christmas; a finding which speaks clearly to Christmas' role as a prime rite of moral socialisation in the context of contemporary British culture (Mason & Muir 2013: 614; Parker 2017). Meanwhile, across all my focus-groups in this context, initial responses to the question of what first came to mind when they thought of Christmas tended to feature 'family time' and 'Jesus' birth' just as much as they did 'presents' (e.g. Figure H). It should be said that for many children, getting to see family members they didn't usually get to see or spend much quality time with, and/or having 'time off' from the ordinary routine of school, was a key draw of Christmas just as it was for adults, and

seemed in this sense separate from the more directly morally-imbued refrains they had learned at home, school, church, or elsewhere. Irrespective of the varied nature of such emphases however, it seems that the apparent moral coercion of Santa's 'naughty and nice list' becomes in general terms less and less necessary as a parental tool for the encouragement of good behaviour and moral intent as children come to be increasingly



Figure H. Examples of bauble responses drawn from children's focus-groups

socialised into the *habitus* of the 'Christmas spirit',¹⁰¹ and as it eventually comes to be



revealed that Father Christmas in actual fact gives unconditionally (Caplow 1982: 388-399).¹⁰²

As Lévi-Strauss' brief excursus into the symbolic resonances of Father Christmas attests, this intimate familial ritual must undoubtedly be understood as a prime means by which children come to be initiated not only into the social ideals

of *Christmas*, but into society itself. For revelation of the secret of Father Christmas marks not only the passage into 'the truth', but the passage into adulthood ([1952] 1993: 43-46, 49).¹⁰³ As Lévi-Strauss rather enigmatically puts it, however, 'if the uninitiated are the dead, they are also the super-initiated' (45). We thus find that it is simultaneously this very same concealment of 'the truth' which positions children as liminal 'positive' socio-symbolic repositories and revealers of the 'true meaning of Christmas', and of its magical joy-giving 'spirit' of innocence, vitality, and fun. Hence, just as children need to be initiated into the 'spirit' of the socio-moral values which betoken their incorporation as competent societal providers, there is a parallel sense that grown-ups need to be initiated back into the 'spirit' of childhood innocence which facilitates the 'childlike' purity of belief and joyful vitality associated with the 'true spirit' of Christmas.

Father Christmas can in this sense be seen as the ultimate symbol of exactly the kind of intergenerational reciprocity we have been attempting to capture, and which framed from this perspective can be best understood as a key strategy for the ritualised conquering of various forms of social death and/or alienation. In the context of modernity, such death-defiance plays out, as Lévi-Strauss sees it, not so much in the 'traditional fear of spirits and ghosts', but in 'a dread of everything death represents, both in itself and in life: degeneration,

¹⁰¹ It seems possible that the naughtiness of the elves who visit children in their homes serve to symbolically invert this progression, positioning children as responsible caretakers and/or observers of naughty beings.

¹⁰² This notion of Father Christmas as the idealised benefactor of unconditional love is only reaffirmed through manifestations of horror, outrage and/or disappointment when children do not receive any, or as many gifts as others, or when parents are seen to in some way not hold up - or indeed to betray - their own part in the ritual.

¹⁰³ In the words of Lévi-Strauss, this 'age group of our society...is in fact defined by belief in Father Christmas' ([1952] 1993: 43).

desiccation, and deprivation' (50). This as I see it not only chimes well with Hans Mol's (1976) understanding of religion as the 'sacralisation of identity' in the face of the threat of loss and change,¹⁰⁴ but provides a helpful frame through which to view Christmas' dual - and heavily feminised - focus on the young and the vulnerable (Golby & Purdue 1986: 141-142). For just as people feel compelled to improve the circumstances of those who are in some way deprived at Christmas time, so too do they feel compelled to celebrate - and *re-enter* into - the vitality and perceived innocence of childhood (Lévi-Strauss [1952] 1993: 49). In indulging their children at Christmas, there is thus a sense in which parents are really offering up sacrifices to the altar of their own lost childhoods; to that perceived loss of sweet naiveté which encroaches as the responsibilities and realities of adulthood progress and as awareness of mortality becomes more pressing.

Overwhelmingly consistent across my conversations in the field was a pervasive sense that the 'true meaning of Christmas' had somehow been - or was in danger of being - lost. Whilst this so-called 'Christmas lament' has perhaps most obviously tended to be depicted along the lines of the secularisation thesis, i.e. that the 'religious', 'spiritual', and/or 'Christian' meaning of Christmas has been lost (Klassen & Scheer 2019a: 6-7; Deacy 2016), my own research would seem to suggest such a 'lament' operating on a much broader level of Geertzian-esque socio-moral critique. Whether expressed more explicitly in terms of a particular religious and/or cultural worldview, or more implicitly in terms of those aspects of socio-cultural life people felt most needed protecting against the onslaught of perceivedly harmful external forces - i.e. the perceived decline of family values, consumerism, multiculturalism, secularisation, foreign intrusion, war, greed, disease, poverty, divorce, loneliness, societal change, immorality,



¹⁰⁴ Whilst the limits of space have prevented any more extended analysis of the application of Mol's theory to this material, the parallel of his understanding of 'sacralisation' as the process by which identity comes to be emotionally integrated by way of response to the threat of differentiation and/or change clearly speaks directly into our discussion of rites of passage as a key means by which change and loss comes to be processed and/or incorporated, and will be picked up in our concluding chapter in relation to the themes of rootedness and homecoming so many associate with the festival (Cf. Note 129).

bereavement, or death itself - the sense of cultural 'lament' was palpable across discussions of the festival's 'true meaning' and ethos. Indeed, the question on my online survey which asked whether people had found any aspect of the previous Christmas difficult revealed responses which were just as likely to list societal ills, and/or large-scale world problems, as they were more personal grievances. The degree to which each of these various issues can be demonstrated as objective threats is, in effect, besides the point. Rather, what is relevant here is the power such perception and/or remembrance of potential threat has in generating an increased need for a sense of rootedness; or we might say, 'sacralisation' (Mol 1976).



For the majority of people in this context, conceptions of Christmas rootedness are inextricably linked to the sense of security and belonging afforded by the nuclear family unit. For many, the Christmas lament is thus tangibly coloured by the fear of not being able to live up to the societal expectations of the kind of 'ideal' family which is still so often romantically

idealised in the classic paradigmatic scenes of Christmas; an angle which occupies some substantial discussion in Miller's (1993) volume. As would perhaps seem in-keeping with the slow shift of societal values however, it was a broader fear of missing out on - or being in some way deprived of - *special time* or *connection* with loved-ones which for the most part came to the fore across my fieldwork settings as people narrated their perceptions of the festival's ideal. This is a concern which can clearly be traced to the wider societal valuing of 'quality family time' as a wholesome and authentic activity, and crucially an activity which many people feel has somehow been lost - or in some way compromised - amidst the pace and fracture of modern life (Etzioni 2004: 3-5).

HISTORY, HERITAGE, UPBRINGING AND FAMILY

However 'family' was variously conceived, Christmas ultimately seemed to operate for many of those I spoke to as an opportunity for the sacralisation of the relationships, values and

aspirations they held most dear;¹⁰⁵ an annual ritual reaffirmation of the boundaries of longing and belonging which defined, re-defined - and sometimes acted to dislocate - people's relation to their wider social-network, lived lifestyle aesthetic, and worldview. But it also operated as an occasion for the intensified evaluation of what it was - or indeed, who it was - that really *was* most important to them. Hence, whilst the 'true meaning of Christmas' was for many of the people I spoke to either directly or indirectly related to the 'religious' dimension of the festival, this was by no means always the case. More broadly speaking, the 'true meaning of Christmas' was almost always directly aligned with whatever it was people deemed to be of most *authentic* inalienable value; or to use another framework, of most 'ultimate concern' (Tillich 1957: 1-4).



As per the 'Christmas lament', this valuing of authenticity was often deeply connected with whatever it was that people most feared the loss of, and thus often came to be expressed especially well amongst my participants in responses to the question of what they would most miss at Christmas if it wasn't there. It is at this point that I wish to turn back more directly to my conversation with Heather, whose unflinching response to this question provides us with an especially clear example of this dynamic:

Family. There's too many of them to be ever taken away, but family. That to me is Christmas. And there's loads of other things at Christmas, but at the heart of Christmas is family

Heather has always been surrounded by a big extended family, and fondly looked back upon the 'massive family Christmases' of her childhood:

¹⁰⁵ I here allude to William Cantwell Smith's identification of the etymological roots of the English word 'belief', and its Germanic semantic connotation: 'to hold dear' (1977: 41). For more discussion, see Grieve & Weiss (2005: 7); Day (2011: 15-18).

We always had huge Christmases, my Grandpa who was Jewish...used to do a massive family Christmas for more than thirty. He used to cook turkey and goose, and all the rest of it

Despite her own essentially Christian upbringing, Heather feels a potent connection with her Jewish roots. Both her parents had been born into Jewish families, though her mother had grown up with the dual influence of a Dutch Jewish father and a Welsh Congregationalist Christian mother. Her parents had made the decision to convert to Christianity when they married in 1940 at the outbreak of war, feeling it would be 'safer'. Keen to discuss the complex religious background of her family, Heather explained:

My Dad was brought up Jewish, but then his parents died young, and he went to his Nanny...because his siblings were older...Mummy used to go to the Congregationalist church with Grandma, but she knew about all the Jewish side of the family. So Mummy was a mixture if you like. But they ardently turned Anglican when they married, so that for Dad...was a radical change [pause] so...on Daddy's side of the family they couldn't reconcile. But then they did, and I loved the Jewish side of the family - the strongest of my close relations are with Mummy's side...I see them often, as often as I can, when I'm down in London

Heather's affinity with her Jewish background seemed to be one of curious interest and distanced nostalgia. She used to love going to stay with her Great Aunt, and spent some time eulogising over the 'beautiful singing at the table on Friday nights', 'the dressing up in your party frock...and the cold fried fish on Saturday.' Things such as 'the absolute segregation of the pots and pans in the kitchen' had 'fascinated' her as a child. It was not however until she was in her 50s that she discovered what had happened to the rest of her extended family. Ever the proactive community organiser, she had helped to organise a trip to Auschwitz on behalf of her son's youth orchestra; an event which moved her deeply and resulted in an extraordinary personal revelation:

I for some reason didn't want to lay my stone on the pile where everybody's was, and I walked round the - and Len thinks I'm mourning sometimes - I always seek out Jewish

places wherever we travel to and synagogues and things, I love them - and I laid my stone at the back of the lake of ashes, and I'm telling them on the phone, and I said exactly that, I laid my stone. And Daddy said, 'You did that for the family'. I was about 53 or 4 - I said, "What do you mean, I did it for the family?" And Daddy said, "Well where do you think all my and Mummy's aunts and uncles and cousins went?" I said - I was 50 - I said "What?", and he said, "Well where darling where do you think they all went?" [pause] I said, "Did they go to Auschwitz?", and he said, "Yeah from Hungary and from Holland." I said "Why did you never tell us?", and he said, "because we were heartbroken, Mum and I, that we'd lost our uncles and aunts and cousins...If you'd asked we would have told you, but it didn't occur to you" - so I didn't learn that til my 50s

This somewhat nuanced manifestation of intergenerational trauma further underscores Heather's connection with that side of the family, and with her own sense of history and heritage. However, it also quite possibly adds cumulative emotional layers to the deep empathy she has fostered during her time as a nurse. One has to wonder how this dynamic might in turn feed into her need to surround herself with family and indeed, to her earlier statement that she has too many family members for them ever to be 'taken away'. The frequent refrain back to the age she was when she discovered the truth serves to underlie the profound impact this revelation has had upon Heather. The phrase 'you did it for the family' was also repeatedly drawn upon; a repetition which appears to indicate the telling and retelling of the phrase as it has become etched into her evolving self-definition.

Admitting her new knowledge of her family's past has increasingly changed her own orientation to faith, Heather was keen to emphasise the apparently mouldable nature of Christmas celebrations, distinguishing her attitude from that of her son and daughter-in-law:

I love the fact...now at Christmas time that schools have to be every religion because of my Jewish background. The older I get, the more doubtful I am...It's naughty of me to say that, but it's how I feel. And these two evangelical whatsits pray for me

She laughed as she continued: 'They love me to bits, but I say, "I'm a lost cause darlings."' Reflecting on this further, she said she liked the idea of a Unitarian church. Having been impressed by her nephew's wedding and his children's christenings, she thought she would probably go if there was one in the area, reflecting:

I cannot believe that, because every single great religion teaches exactly the same as far as I'm concerned, from Judaism, to the Muslims, the Hindus, the everything. They all teach the same thing: a decent life care for each other, ex cetera, ex cetera. And I will not believe that they're damned and I'm saved. I can't accept that, and that's why I'm doubtful I think really.

She continued:

I believe in something greater than we are, but I cannot totally believe in Christianity that says the only way to be saved is by me...I believe we're what we are largely by virtue of birth.

Hence, despite her doubts about Christianity, Heather is still very firmly rooted in the traditions of her Anglican upbringing, speaking warmheartedly of Carol Services, Christingles, and Sunday school nativities. Questioned further about whether she thought the performance of nativity plays in school might be in any way controversial, she once again endorsed an inclusive policy:

Yes, but I love it that they're all-embracing...I love it that all these things are nothing to do with Christmas...I think our little Bella was a unicorn this Christmas in the school nativity.

Intriguingly however, when directly asked what her reaction would be if a decision was taken to ban the performance of nativity plays in secular primary schools, she became quickly outraged:

I get very very angry with that, because I think essentially every country is proud of what it basically is, and basically we have a Church of England one, and I cannot understand why we're ashamed of it. The fact that I get more doubtful as I get older's got nothing to do with it - that is our national church...and I think our state and our government ought to have the strength to say this is - I don't understand. I have friends who are Muslim, and I love them dearly. I have friends who were Jewish and Hindu and Sikh. I'm not in any way racist...But er, I think it should be all-embracing, and I love the fact that it is, and the fact that we should do each other's - I love the fact that children do Diwali and all the rest of it at school, and learn about the other religions, because to me all these wars everywhere are intolerance, and at the end of the day, every great religion teaches the same thing, and we should be teaching it, so I think that's much better. But at the same time, I think we should be proud of our national identity, and I think we're getting stupid like that. We're frightened to say so, and I think that's why - which everybody's uncomfortable with - that the wrong side of Muslimism if you like is getting an upper-hand now, and we shouldn't allow it. I really think that.

This particular question appears to reveal a rather more complex picture of where Heather's 'all-embracing' religious perspective might intersect with her concept of national identity. Though she is keen to actively promote religious literacy, understanding, and tolerance across religious and perceivedly more secular worldviews¹⁰⁶ - and though she clearly feels personally sceptical of an exclusive Christianity - she still remains emotionally attached to the Church of England as the 'national church'. This is an institution she fears is being threatened not just by secularism, but by 'the wrong side of Muslimism'. That she becomes so fiercely protective of this aspect of British life when it appears threatened suggests a layer of identity which is particularly entrenched. This is perhaps due to the fact that such traditions appear to be embedded in warm ideas of home, childhood, and family; ideas which for Heather, like many others, constitute the 'heart of Christmas':

¹⁰⁶ Heather also honours the inclusion of unicorns as part of an 'all-embracing' approach to nativity plays.

I love all the carols. I love hearing the children - we go to the Christmas shows at the schools now, second time around...Len often missed the school shows cos he was away on business, but I never missed a single one of the boys' even if I had no sleep, I never missed a single one...I just love it. I mean it's so sweet isn't it...

Definitely the heart of Christmas is family. I love the Christmas music, I love singing the carols. We go to umpteen carol services. I love the Christmas concerts...

CHRISTMAS AS HIEROPHANY

In keeping with this tradition, Heather and her husband have been attending the Nine Lessons and Carols service at Durham Cathedral together with friends for a good number of years. The occasion has for Heather, as for so many other Christmas congregants I spoke to, come to represent 'a lovely start' to Christmas which is distinguished from the commercial, busy, stressful side of the festival:

Well sometimes because it's so commercial you forget what it's all about...We always come through to hear the carols...and then we go out for a meal with Eleanor and her fella, and...that's a lovely start.

Questioned as to why she thought so many people were attracted to these services, she said:

Probably because you learn the songs...we all learn them in school. It's associated with happy memories, school plays everybody flocks to - I think it's everybody associates it with happy memories, not necessarily the Christian message, but happy memories.

Probing her further on this, I asked whether she saw a *problem* with the fact that people might be turning up for these reasons. Interestingly, her response ran again along the lines of the so-called 'Christmas lament', revealing some of her deeper concerns about what she feels has been lost in contemporary society; a discussion which ran into a long excursus about perceived contemporary social ills such as family break-down and rising mental health issues amongst young people:

Well if it brings families together, no I don't. Cos I think family time is perhaps what's lacking in our cohesive society; that families - and I worry silly that all you young uns are on your gadgets all the time...they come out at the ruddy table, I won't have them at my table - I also worry silly because we've got a very real problem at Samaritans...

Here we once again see a clear example of the manner in which Christmas comes to be employed in this context as a means of restoring the good and the moral, and/or of making up for a felt sense of loss. Though allegiances to Christianity are clearly in some way important to Heather, the 'true meaning of Christmas', as she sees it, is rather more concerned with a more all-encompassing utopian ethic of 'kindness' and 'goodness'. When asked about what people might mean exactly when they talk about the 'true meaning of Christmas' - what they might be 'searching for' - she conjectured:

Do you think that all of us realise we're supposed to have some goodness in us. I don't know. I mean I couldn't enjoy Christmas unless I've tried to do something for other people...

Once again, we see here the juxtaposing of the stressful, busy, commercial side of Christmas with what is considered to be morally authentic. Throughout my fieldwork, I found that this sense of the morally authentic often appeared to be intuitively associated with that which felt spiritually - or even aesthetically - genuine, innocent, or pure. For Heather, the 'start of Christmas' is, to this end, directly aligned not only with the reverent atmosphere of the church carol service, and with the routine acts of charity she performs as Christmas approaches, but with the warmth of 'happy memories' and sense of 'goodness' she associates with such activities, and the sense of relief she feels when she's finally able to authentically 'enjoy' the festivities. There is thus a sense in which the 'true meaning of Christmas' often comes to be equated with manifestations not only of 'the start of Christmas', but of the *enjoyment* of Christmas:

The need for Marie Curie was even greater at Christmas, cos it's much harder for families coping with this at home at Christmas, so I'm working god knows all hours.

I've just done the [charity] ball, and I've got to do Christmas with my own family, plus do everything that's got to be sent off, so that's why I find Christmas immensely stressful. I only enjoy it when it actually arrives - when everything's finally done, and I've finally usually done my own family's wrapping usually on Christmas Eve, [laughs]...finally when everything's done, and I crawl into bed about 2am, thinking phew I can now enjoy it!

This mingling of (1) the satisfaction of desired utopias symbolised in the coming of 'Christmas', with (2) morally-imbued conceptions of authenticity is clearly a powerful one, and as I see it constitutes exactly the kind of charismatic concoction which so often comes to be associated with - and/or experienced as - 'Christmas spirit' and/or 'magic'; experiences which seem to appear most readily in moments of relief or surprise which signal a break in - or interruption of - the ordinary flow of everyday life-world experience. This is clearly evidenced in Heather's relief when she makes it to Christmas Eve, knowing that she can now *enjoy* 'Christmas' as something that acts on *her*, as opposed to yet another thing *she* is trying to organise and control. But it could be equally seen in the delighted surprise I observed across various Christmas settings as people were stopped short by some display of 'Christmas spirit', and were seemingly - in the words of one Christmas shopper I spoke to on a busy high-street - 'reminded of what it was all supposed to be about'. We are, in other words, speaking here of felt moments when the exertion of human efforts can reach no further, when something external to - and bigger than - the Self breaks in.

A phenomenon which seemed to warm people *beyond* their ordinary activity and, in some cases, remind them of the *point* of it, such moments of transcendence might easily be equated to Gregory Bateson's rather theologically resonant concept of 'grace' (Bateson [1972] 2000: 137-161; Bateson & Bateson c.1987), and/or the mystically-imbued form of revelation Mircea Eliade (1959) referred to as '*hierophany*'. Whilst experiences of the 'Christmas spirit' and/or 'magic' can perhaps rather obviously be characterised as experiences of this kind of revelation, I suggest we might on a wider level see the very arrival of 'Christmas' itself in much the same transformational light. In Eliade's framework, a *hierophany* acts both to reveal a truth, and to bring this truth to ground and shape the profane; literally, to recreate a world, to engage in the primordial act of 'cosmogony' (22, 31-32, 63-65). Hence, in revealing

a truth, the arrival of a *hierophany* acts in distinction from the everyday lifeworld, whilst paradoxically grounding it in a deeper layer of authenticity. The theological significance of this framing is clear, as Eliade himself indeed indicates (11). However, if we are to consider his conception of *hierophany* in its broadest anthropological terms, I believe this incarnational pattern can be seen to play out across *both* secular *and* more explicitly ‘religious’ domains at Christmas as revelations of the ‘true meaning’ and/or felt ethos of the festival come to be momentarily intensified and/or brought home. Viewed from this frame, the intensified sense of expectation which builds towards the arrival of Christmas might in this sense be best understood as an anticipation of *hierophany*; of the sacred - or indeed the magical - breaking into the space and time of the everyday (68-113).

THE BURDEN OF OBLIGATION VS THE COMPULSION OF DESIRE

It is, however, important to bear in mind that the anticipation of ‘Christmas’ is not always as romantically straightforward as such sentimental depictions of its ‘magical’ essence imply. Heather’s annual crescendo in giving activity may well be tied to almost intrinsically exciting anticipations of the ‘arrival’ of Christmas, but it also causes a great burden of stress. Like many others I spoke to, Heather clearly found Christmas preparation a pressure, and in many ways an almost futile societal burden:

I don’t know whether it’s something *you* feel, but I find it very stressful to get all the presents done and wrapped, I’m usually wrapping at the dead of night. And cos I buy lots of little things for the kids...and you must be fair with all nine of them, I have to post off to my siblings and things, and it’s ridiculous we exchange things. We don’t want most of it...Some of it, I think well, why do I want that at my age? I’ve got more than enough of those...It’s bonkers. Absolutely bonkers.

After listening to this for a while, I asked: ‘So why bother then? You clearly invest a significant amount of time, energy, and money in all of this. Why is any of this *worth* stressing about?’ The answer came:

I suppose because it's expected. I would love to have the courage...to send a round-robin to all my friends and family, and say, "I'm not doing Christmas cards any more. I'm giving this all to charity." But um, for a lot of them, it's the only time I communicate - the time we communicate - and I catch up on their news...

This response depicts a clear theme which came across throughout my fieldwork encounters. However much stress the increase of social obligations often precipitated, Christmas ultimately provided a key opportunity for communion not only with others, but with past parts of one's own life. Indeed, the exchange of Christmas cards in particular often represented a calling to mind of relations that betokened a recognition of the value of each as it pertained to the dynamics of the dividual self (Collins 2014). Whilst the exchange of Christmas cards has become perhaps less important for younger generations, that Christmas



was a time to rekindle friendships and/or to 'get together' with friends and family one hadn't seen for a while was a commonly held belief and practice across all the age-groups I encountered. Heather was here no exception, telling me how she and her husband 'call in on all fronts' during the Christmas season, 'travelling around the country' to visit people they don't have time to see during the busyness of the rest of the year.

Rather ironically however, this intensive increase of social activity can often end up leading to feelings of anxiety and overwhelm. Laughing as she discussed the complex maintenance of her Christmas card list, Heather commented:

Two years of not sending to me and you're struck off. So I strike them off and then it appears! [both laugh] I send *over* - we send over¹⁰⁷ - fifty abroad to our friends that

¹⁰⁷ This hesitation over the use of the personal pronoun is likely but symptomatic of the highly gendered nature of this activity. As with so many other aspects of Christmas preparations, it was - at least amongst the majority of those I spoke to - still seemingly predominantly women who tended to take the leading role in tasks such as Christmas card correspondence, and present planning. For a detailed review of women's historical relationship with the practical as well as emotional labour of Christmas, see Bella (1992).

we've gleaned abroad, cos...we were in Africa eight years and then we were in Papua New Guinea, and Australia for a bit, and so on and so forth erm, and...I now personalise a round-robin. I don't like round-robins, but I haven't got time with the ball to write individual letters...and I personalise it to each person on the computer, but I find all this very stressful to get it in the post in time...I hate round-robin letters, but I've got no choice.

Asked what exactly she hated about round-robins, she laughed:

Well because you aren't thinking about the person are you. You're just getting them off quick. But otherwise, they wouldn't have anything at all from us.

This discussion raises some important issues around the emotional and societal pragmatics of reciprocity. More specifically, it relates to the complex intersection and tussle between obligation and desire which I suggest represents something of a common emotional polarity for people - and perhaps especially for women - at Christmas. If Christmas juxtaposes alienable and inalienable systems of worth, such systems are clearly in some sense inherently regulated by emotional, aesthetic, and moral comparative appraisals which come to be measured against modes of societal expectation, cultivated norms, and their corresponding force of *obligation*; that bonding and/or constraining force which has long been characterised as the driving-seat of social solidarity and exchange. Viewed in its starkest contrast, such reassessments of value-systems must logically culminate in the rejection of societal obligation at one end of the spectrum, or in its validation and re-incorporation on the other. More often however, it seems to me that we witness a pragmatic holding together of the two systems in some form of suspended tension. The extent to which these tensions remain held implicit beneath the surface, and the extent to which they burst out into explicit internal or external rifts - or 'social dramas' - becomes dependent upon the emotional, inter-personal dynamics of the social-milieu at hand. Nevertheless, the sense of personal dissonance felt in the midst of such conflict often appears to lead to an experience not of intensified sociality, but of intensified interiority, which underscores the quieter - and sometimes melancholy - sense of reflection and/or lonely sense of alienation many associate with this time of year.

The excerpt below illustrates how the negotiation of conflicting obligations, ideals, and values come to manifest themselves for Heather at Christmas:

Because I was brought up and raised by converted Christians, Christmas is very important to me, but I cannot believe it's the only way [pause] and it's all very lovely. I find it obscene, as I did with our own and with the grandchildren, the pile of presents, but we come from a big family, so the mountains of presents, when you think of the how much there is - I love doing the um, er our church does the...boxes, you know, to Romania. I love doing those. I always give a teenage boy, because I think that's the least loved age-group...and I had two boys...We produce hundreds, literally, in the village...but most of them are for little children and babies, cos that's what's fun to do isn't it.

Here, the implicit dissonances within Heather's wider worldview come distinctly into view. Though she continually describes Christmas as 'lovely', and very special for children and for celebrating family, this is immediately brought into tension with her weighty awareness of how this contrasts with the needs of unfortunate others. This theme was also reflected in an implicit tension between her role in and devotion to the family, and her wider aspirational work in the community. She told me on more than one occasion that, though she was evidently itching to push herself to do more, her children had 'put their foot down' and made her promise that she would not work all-nighter shifts, or Christmas. During her nearly forty years of working life, the majority of Heather's Christmases had been spent in the hospital. 'Hospitals don't stop', she said, 'if you're running a unit you have to be there. You can't expect your staff to work if you don't go.' She explained:

Either I would come off duty Christmas morning, having done a twelve hour shift knackered, and then...as soon as I got home, the boys would open their stockings...I'd loaded the car the night before, before I went on duty. And then we would...head off down to mum and dad's...So I would sleep for two and a half hours going down, and I was a zombie all Christmas day. But adrenaline keeps you going...Or we would go down a couple of days before Christmas...and I couldn't have a single drink. And we

would enjoy Christmas, but we had to be back in time for me to go on duty at ten o'clock.

We see clearly here how Heather's instinctive sense of outward social obligation and responsibility comes into tension with her seemingly more inward personal desires for happiness and enjoyment with her own family. Upon closer inspection however, it seems that the tension between these two poles crosscuts both ways. Heather expounds a clear desire both to enjoy time with her family and to help others. And yet, both desires are reinforced by crosscutting social obligations. The obligation to keep the hospital ward going at Christmas is not only inspired by Heather's commitment to wider societal responsibility, and her own personal pride in being able to perform such a responsibility, but presumably more pragmatically by her commitment to help provide financial security for her family. Meanwhile, the corresponding obligation to provide her family with an enjoyable Christmas is an obligation Heather freely desires. Hence, she actively wants to provide her family with an enjoyable Christmas both so that she might also enjoy the benefits of her hard work and the life that she has built for herself, but also so that she might appreciate the enjoyment she has bestowed upon those she loves.

FOUR KEY BIO-SOCIAL NEEDS

It seems to me that enjoyment of the joy of others constitutes an essential dynamic in the reciprocal exchange of emotions which underpins the dynamic of inalienable gift-giving at Christmas, and which - through its ensuing flow of double-facing gratitude - amounts to a significant instance of *communitas*. The societal obligation to step up, 'make an effort', and 'provide' at Christmas percolates across the smallest to the largest societal units, as well as across a range of social needs. In this matrix of needs, I suggest the obligations to: (1) keep in touch, (2) make an effort, (3) make things special, and (4) bring people happiness become the dominant compulsions; compulsions which gain powerful traction when they come to match up with seemingly selfish personal desires. When we consider each of these Christmas obligations in turn, we as I see it uncover four key bio-social needs which emphasise the drive towards social integration implicit in rites of intensification like Christmas. I identify these as

(1) communication/belonging, (2) motivation for life/action (3) meaning-making, and (4) the promotion of wellbeing.

That Christmas brings opportunities for the promotion of happiness and wellbeing is a well attested social fact (Gilhus & Mikaelsson 2018). For Heather as for many others I spoke to, warmth, joy, excitement, and happiness undeniably constituted the dominant, integrative emotions through which the central message of Christmas was perceived. Indeed, when asked why Christmas is important for her, Heather replied:

Well I suppose it brings so much happiness. It's a lovely story. But that's what it is. A story. It's the start of the Christmas journey isn't it, of the Christian journey. I mean, as a child you don't question what your teachers your parents teach you, and therefore I was Christian. Although I've always been rebellious...No, I mean Christmas is very important to me. The children love it. I do find, I try to, I think we should - I can't enjoy Christmas without giving. I know how lucky I've been in life...and...I believe all charity work, no matter what it is, we all do it for a selfish reason as well, because we get as much out of it as we hope to do by it.

This response reveals rather directly the significance of asking people why Christmas is important to them. For in many ways, Heather's response to this question serves as an effective shorthand for her developed worldview as it has come to relate to her emerging identity and lived lifestyle aesthetic. As might be expected, 'Christmas' is placed firmly within the Christian narrative. However, rather than portraying perhaps more doctrinally received aspects of this narrative, Heather instead situates the Christian narrative in broad humanising conceptions of 'happiness', 'family', and 'giving', interpreting it as a 'lovely story'. The Christmas story is hence here positioned as a kind of sentimental origin story: 'the start of the Christmas journey', which is in turn connected to 'the Christian journey'. On one level this might seem a rather obvious connection. Upon closer inspection however, it seems that implicit in this rather natural sounding elision is a careful mediation and alignment of a set of nuanced identities. We thus see the wider worldview encompassed in the affective grouping of values contained in the notion of 'Christmas' being overlaid onto Heather's less certain identity as a Christian.

'Christmas' can, in other words, here be seen to hold what might otherwise be dissonant identities and disparate predilections together in one sentimental 'tension of consciousness' (Schutz & Luckmann 1989: 1-4, 118). In the notion of 'Christmas', Heather's deep valuing of familial relations merge together with her commitment to charity; just as her Christian upbringing and nationally-tinged attachment to traditions such as carol services and nativity plays merge together with the nuance of her subsequently cultivated religious perspective. The dominant - and perhaps organising - value contained within Heather's 'Christmas' convergence, however, is to be found in the enjoyment she claims to receive in *giving*. This is an action she says stems from that sense of gratitude she gains from knowing 'how lucky [she's] been in life', and which also handily - and perhaps not so incidentally - fits in with the broader Christian message. Christmas hence seems to constitute for Heather an intensification of the gratitude she is already want to feel in life; the gratitude which translates practically into the annual crescendo of her giving activities at this time.

A LIVED LIFESTYLE AESTHETIC OF 'INTENSIVE LIVING'

As for many active doer-types, Heather's retirement has involved not a winding-down of energies, but a renewed impulse to vociferously intensify her involvement in the various causes she champions. To this end, the habitus of her old familiar night-shift slot has made way for long nights volunteering at Samaritans, and her fervent determination to improve quality of life for her terminal cancer patients has meanwhile evolved into an unrelenting personal pledge to fundraise for Marie Curie cancer care. Someone who has undoubtedly seen and managed situations of life and death in some of its most stark and traumatic forms, Heather has been used to wrestling for every last bit of dignity, every last bit of authenticity, happiness, and appreciation in the face of mortality; every last bit of fairness in the face of irreconcilable unfairness. For much of her career, she has fought for the rights of others to hold onto such things; to hold on to *life* as good, as just, and ultimately, as loved. An apt example of this came in her description of how she used make efforts - sometimes rather courageously, against hospital protocol - to try to allow her patients 'some pleasure right up to the minute', whether it was just 'one happy hour', or one moment of laughter. 'Life is about living until you die, it's not about waiting to die', she said. If this high valuing of a life well lived

and appreciated can be seen as Heather's ultimate *raison d'être*, it is perhaps interesting to reflect upon how this pervades out into her existential orientation to her place in the world. Heather is clearly someone who takes great pride in her relations, involvements, and commitments; someone who is magnetically drawn to the intensities and vivacities of life, whether they be channelled through talent, prestige, drama, or emotion. These were the things that were on her mind, the things she wanted to tell me, the things she kept coming distractedly back to. Her gritty determination to keep these vivacities alive seems mirrored not only in her clearly accurate self-identification as 'a very busy person', but embodied in her patterns of thought and conversation; patterns which were both exuberant and darting in their whirlwind, scatterbrain focus.

This was something she was evidently self-conscious about during our conversation, repeatedly apologising for getting off topic, and jovially explaining that she was not accustomed to sitting down for long periods of time. The following excerpt - which followed her explanation of working in the hospital at Christmas - offers a good example of this typical type of linguistic pattern, whilst also revealing something of the existential orientation which might underlie it:

So for a lot of years that was that for Christmas...So that was a bit of a bother really. So as soon as I retired, I'm always a very busy person, I spend a lot of time in prison now erm...it's voluntary of course...I've always been a - I never stop. I'm told off for it, but I think that stops you getting old really. I don't want to be old...

We are here offered, in this small admission, a possible clue as to the strength and nature of the existential investment implicit in Heather's frantic and worthy busyness. The nursely instinct to protect and preserve life in the face of mortality has it seems come to permeate her very sense of purpose in relation to her own mortality; a dynamic manifested, in this case, as a fear of aging - of 'getting old'. Put rather bluntly, Heather 'never stop[s]' because she does not want life to stop. Though this is perhaps not an uncommon attitude, in Heather's case, it seems to have become especially intensified as an implicit core value by which she has come to live her life. Observing the impassioned relaying of her various activities and commitments, it became quite clear that this work - and the value-system which lies behind

it - constitutes a vital part of Heather's well-established self-image. This is an image which is firmly grounded in the sense of purpose fuelled by the particular security of belonging that comes from feeling *needed*. Heather's highly-narrativised accounts of her social-roles act as clearly externalised badges of belonging. Her acute experience and awareness of mortality and injustice - itself a form of anticipatory loss - meanwhile, appear to have propelled her into an attitude of what might be described as 'intensive living'.¹⁰⁸ As such, Heather exudes from the depths of her persona a positive and propelling kind of vitality. This attitude was not only made apparent in her bodily and conversational deportment, but in her moral proclivities, and in her sharp, intuitive instinct for intrapersonal and wider social-tensions which might somehow be resolved, or at the very least, raised and tackled.

'MAKING AN EFFORT' IN THE FACE OF THE CHRISTMAS 'SHADOW': CHRISTMAS AS A CULMINATING SPACE FOR 'POIGNANT' META-EMOTIONALITY

Drawing on her experience of health and social care, Heather affirmed that she felt social ills and harsh realities were undoubtedly accentuated for people at Christmas. As per our 'active mirror' metaphor, she depicted this both in terms of pre-existing realities which become reflected in Christmas, and in terms of traumatic events which become more acute when associated with that time of year, and which cast 'a shadow over Christmas for ever after'. Reflecting on her Samaritans' work at this time, she commented:

well...*any* celebration, yes any celebration, the lines are busier, because what's worse for people who've got problems...Christmas is awful - some people hate Christmas...

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given her extensive work with the dying and the bereaved, Heather was keen to draw out how experiences of bereavement might be viewed in relation to the festival:

¹⁰⁸ It seems likely that this fighting attitude was necessarily cultivated during her time as a nurse, and certainly resonates with many of the situational contexts in which the concept of 'intensive living' has traditionally been associated (Davies 2011: 95-98).

I know how much the need of the nursing hours is...how the families need you - how much worse at Christmas. They're trying to cope with losing someone they dearly love, and Christmas, I think having someone die at Christmas time is a terrible terrible thing, because it's always there. I mean...Janice all these years later - it's always when she lost her mum.

The following depiction of her friend's bereavement highlights some important dynamics for us to observe:

I think it's an awful time for death for the rest of the family, cos I think it's a shadow over Christmas for ever after. I have a very dear friend [whose] Mum died on Christmas day, and she had four young children, and she said Christmas had to go on, because she knew her Mum would want Christmas to go on...She'd been out Christmas Eve at the hospital, and she went back home to prepare Christmas. She was divorced so she went back home to do the four stockings, and get it all laid out. And then she got the call in the wee small hours that Mum had gone. So she berates herself that she wasn't with Mum. But she had to go home and do the finishing touches for Christmas. And then she scooped up Dad and did Christmas, her heart breaking all the time, cos the children couldn't not have Christmas.

We here clearly see Christmas coming to act as a symbol of life which must go on in the face of death, and in the face of the hopelessness of grief. In this instance, 'Christmas' can be seen as providing a motivating intensive-living-like impulse to *make an effort* for the sake of the children, for the continuance of social-life, and ultimately, of hope. A consideration of the kinds of emotions that may be experienced in the active performance of putting on Christmas - of 'making an effort' - however, reveals a potentially much more complex matrix of interweaving and intra-influencing emotional dynamics; a matrix which to my mind raises some pertinent questions surrounding that somewhat transgressive, dissonant experience of *feeling* one emotion and *performing* another. This is an experience which was all too familiar to Heather in the setting of the oncology ward, a phenomenon she interestingly raised in implicit affective connection with a hatred of the stresses and efforts of the run-up to Christmas:

They all say I'm barmy, and I grumble about it, cos now I have to tell you the truth...when I get to Christmas, I love it, but Christmas is my least favourite time of year. In fact that pre-Christmas bit, I absolutely loathe, well because erm [pause] I told you of my job and I specialised in oncology, especially the young. I was always incredibly cheerful at work...and used to come home and do my crying, cos I often nursed people the same age as my boys or Katy...And many many many times I had young Daddies: "How on earth is she going to manage with the children without my income?", Mums: "How on earth is he going to manage the children when he's working?" Husbands, maybe carers for their wives and vice versa: "What's going to happen?" you know, all the agonies. And I've arranged Christmases early, because I knew somebody was going to die before Christmas. I've arranged weddings too of people who were dying. Over the years I've done a lot of that kind of thing and loved every minute of it, although there's a great deal of tears and upset - very very poignant.

This passage encapsulates rather well the manner in which bittersweet blends of internalised and externalised emotion often culminate in an almost overwhelming outpouring of what we might call *meta-emotionality*. A notion that might be seen as a kind of parallel to the phenomenon Victor Turner referred to as the 'meta-experience' of celebration which 'distills all other kinds of experience to draw out the part that is essential to each of them' (1982g: 19), this is a genre of affective intensification which I believe we see playing out not only in relation to the 'emotional regime' of the 'Christmas spirit' and the often juxtapositional emotions it generates (D. Davies 2008; Riis & Woodhead 2010: 11-12), but in the broader genre of Christmas sentimentality which is often expressed in references to feeling 'emotional' - a genre of experience I have elsewhere referred to in relation to the bittersweet 'awh factor' of what might be best described as the *Away in a Manger effect* (Murphy 2018: 20-22). Heather's moving depiction of the contrast between life-affirming celebrations and the harsh realities of the lives of those she cared for in the hospital provides us with an especially pertinent example of this genre of 'emotional' experience. For whether it be the performance of a smile on an oncology ward, or the performance of 'Christmas spirit' in an otherwise adverse situation (e.g. Brauer 2019), what we here witness is an instance of intensified affective dissonance and/or suspension in which the pressure of energy involved

in the concealing of negative internalised emotion - or the juxtaposition of conflicting emotional experiences - causes the internal to erupt out, and/or more subtly metamorphise into some form of undefined ambiguous emotionality.

Whilst meta-emotionality may by its very nature take on a spectrum of different dominant tones - e.g. anticipatory nostalgia, momentousness, grief, hope, joy - it is here expressed as an overarching sense of 'poignancy'. As will be shown clearly in our next chapter, experience of such dissonance at Christmas often equates to negative manifestations of intensified 'identity depletion' as people come to feel affectively alienated and *disconnected* from the ideals and expectations of the 'emotional regime' at hand (Davies 2011: 68-94). As Cain (2022) has recently drawn out in her depiction of the 'bittersweet' however, I want to suggest that, when felt in conjunction with the kind of 'poignancy' to which Heather alludes, such experience of dissonance does not *necessarily* have to be wholly negative, and might in fact be seen to constitute a kind of quasi-numinous experience of *communion* and/or cathartic longing which holds dissonance together in a glimpse of momentarily integrated - and perhaps even implicitly reconciling - suspension (e.g. Josephson et al 1996). It is hence my contention that - whilst it must of course be understood to play out across a dynamically complex affective spectrum - this process of the transfiguration of conflicting types of emotion carries the capacity to create a felt sense of empathic, if sometimes rather painful, experience of immanent transcendence as elements otherwise experienced across boundaries come to be experienced in momentary alignment with one-another.

This sense of *connection* is, I propose, felt across four typical and often overlapping genres of dissonance which become especially affectively intensified through the 'active mirror' of Christmas:

1. Dissonance between conflicting emotions
2. Dissonance between Self and Other
3. Dissonance between disconnected experiences of the self in Time - i.e. of past and future selves with in-the-moment experience of present self
4. Dissonance between imaginative fantasy/dreams/utopias/the ideal with felt sense of experienced reality/the imperfect/the authentic

It seems to me that one of the reasons 'Christmas' comes to evoke such acute affective responses in people is that it provides something of a liminal culminating space which allows for suspensions across all four of these genres of dissonance. As per my previous work on the bittersweet - and potentially 'redemptive' - dimensions of Christmas nostalgia (Murphy 2016; Routledge 2016), I want to suggest that it is this felt recognition of the 'moment' - in other words, of the passing of time - which often comes to be regarded as 'emotional', and/or especially 'poignant', at this time of year. We are in other words talking here about hierophanic-esque moments in which the self experiences an intensification of the experience in question; moments in which reflexive awareness of the self becomes especially connected with Others, with Society, and ultimately, with Life itself. What I have found particularly striking throughout my research is the explicit colloquial alignment of these kinds of sentimental and/or effervescent moments of significance, poignancy, and/or longing with variously nuanced invocations of the '*magical*', and it is to a brief consideration of this particular genre of Christmas transcendence that I now turn.

THE ESCAPIST 'MAGIC' OF WISH-FULFILMENT: A DISTINCTIVE GENRE OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY ENCHANTMENT

In the popular imaginary of contemporary Britain, such emic allusions to the 'magical' represent a form of charismatically-charged animism which appears to be tonally associated with a kind of Disney-imbued experience of wish-fulfilment and/or *hierophany*. Given the impressively pervasive influence of 'Disney culture' in both reflecting and shaping the socio-cultural memories and values of generations of children in this context (Brehm & Rees 2017; Wills 2017; Wasko 2020), it seems no accident that Christmas - an occasion which has itself come to stand as something of a romanticised shrine not only to familiar childhood repertoires, but to the very notion of childhood itself - has in many ways come to closely mirror the ethos of Christian-inflected 'secular humanism' and sentimental prelapsarian romanticism promoted by what commentators have variously referred to as the 'Disney worldview' (Brode 2004: 103-127; Pinsky 2004: 1-12; Ward 2002: 113-135). Whilst the limits of space have prevented a more in-depth consideration of this relationship - and indeed of the considerable body of literature available on the quasi-religious dimensions of the Disney phenomenon (Brehm & Rees 2017; Lyon 2000; Mazur & Koda 2011; Pinsky 2004; Wasko 2020:

265-267) - the clear parallel between Disneyland as the 'happiest place on earth' and Christmas as the 'most wonderful time of the year' should be considered of especial note.¹⁰⁹ For here we find two distinctly modern, and commercially significant, cultural phenomena of now global reach, which each in their way represent attempts to manufacture fantasy-worlds of mass-entertainment and 'happiness' that aim to universalise an ideology of wholesome family values and hope-filled positivity; and which ultimately stand as benevolent symbols of 'common humanity' that triumph and endure in the face of evil (Pinsky 2004: 6).

This parallel should be seen as significant not only for its comparative view of two curiously similar cultural manifestations of transcendent wish-fulfilment in which notions of secular grace come to be sacralised alongside culturally-specific manifestations of the Protestant work ethic (Weber [1905] 2002), but for the



Figure 1. My fellow elves pictured in costume at Crook Hall

attention it draws to the manner in which such complementary cultural metanarratives come to mirror and inflect the dynamic formation of identities and worldviews on the ground. In the context of contemporary British Christmas traditions, experience of this kind of consumer-driven fantasy-world of 'wonderous' childhood innocence and magic can of course perhaps most obviously be seen evoked in performances of the Santa Claus myth. The more I observed and interacted with people across my various field-sites however, the more I came to see a clear parallel between the genre of enchantment which characterised this more ostensibly secular repertoire, and the typical mode with which people came to engage with the more ostensibly Christian Christmas repertoires performed across these settings. Hence, just as people perceived the 'atmosphere' of Crook Hall's 'traditional' Christmas concoction of aesthetically beautiful old buildings, charming English 'hygge' (Wiking 2016), and magical elves as an enchanting evocation of the 'Christmas spirit', so too did they tend to perceive

¹⁰⁹ Johnes also notably - if briefly - highlights this parallel between 'Christmas' and 'Disney' magic (2016: 111).

experiences of Anglican Christingles, Nativity Plays, Carol Services, and Midnight Mass as enchantingly uplifting - and almost beautifully bittersweet - manifestations of poignancy and 'tradition' (Anderson 2009; Mason & Muir 2013: 614-615).

The associative element of innocent sentimental charm evoked across these occasions is of course only furthered by the warm emotions which accompany their performance by - or in



Figure J. Taken from Christmas card

symbolic association with - children. As per the genre of the utopian world of Disney, the child-centric nature of contemporary Christmas ritual is clearly deeply entangled with the historical evolution of attitudes regarding the significance of childhood - and the corresponding emphasis on the importance of childhood memories - which has come to be so highly prized within the context of contemporary Britain as elsewhere, and which has rather naturally

come to inform the practical and affective organisation of such familial rituals as it has the structure of contemporary family life (Gillis 1997; Cross 2004; Pleck 2004: 43-48; Strhan 2017). It thus seems that, where being asked to stand up and affirm a doctrinal Christian creed is one thing, going to watch children dressed up in red robes, tea-towels, and fairy-wings is quite another.

THE DYNAMICS OF CHRISTMAS WORSHIP: AN ENCHANTING TALE OF MYTHIC BELONGING & CIVIC SANCTIFICATION

Irrespective of whether they were able to fully accept the belief-sets which lay behind such traditions, many of those ordinarily non-church-going folk - including apparently self-identifying atheists - I encountered during my time of study saw no especial contradiction as they spoke enthusiastically of the aesthetically-charged *communitas* they experienced whilst singing community carols, soaking up the evocative 'ambience' of candlelit churches, or watching their children perform in nativity plays (Coleman, Bowman & Sepp 2019: 254).

Indeed, such romanticised retellings of the birth of the sweet innocent baby Jesus amongst the docile cattle were for the most part seen as just as ‘harmless’ by many of those I engaged with as was concealing the true authenticity of Father Christmas from one’s children. The apparent similarity in perception of these two ‘lovely’ - and in many ways foundational - childhood Christmas stories, and/or ‘complementary’ ‘mythological universes’, to my mind reveals something of considerable significance when related to an analysis of contemporary religiosity in this context (Deacy 2016: 68-72; Gilhus & Mikaelsson 2018: 96-99). For there is a sense in which these key paradigmatic scenes each serve to conjure tonally peaceful, and essentially inoffensive, impressions of a romanticised prelapsarian utopia which evokes almost universally resonant - and strikingly liminal - images of innocence, authenticity, mystery, intimacy, vitality, fertility, and/or natural purity (Davies 2015: 377-378).

Putting this observation into conversation with those who have identified the Christian narrative of Jesus’ birth - and correspondingly incarnational theme of light coming into darkness - as carrying perhaps more obviously universal appeal than that of the crucifixion and resurrection (e.g. Percy 2020: 163; Gilhus & Mikaelsson 2018: 93-98),¹¹⁰ it becomes easy to see how the institutional forms of Christianity on offer at Christmas become more palatable to Davie’s key ‘middle ground’ constituency of vicarious and/or cultural ‘believers’ (Davie 2007; 2015; Voas 2009) than the perhaps more dogmatically challenging, less aesthetically engaging and/or familiar modes of religious engagement offered in Anglican contexts during the remainder of the year.¹¹¹ For what is being offered at Christmas is an aesthetically rich and sentimentally powerful form of cultural religion which not only facilitates genuinely enjoyable and comfortingly familiar modes of civic engagement for large numbers of people, but which binds this sense of ancestral heritage and local legacy together with what appear to be universally resonant themes of hope and redemption; of the authentic and the divine. Indeed, David Walker’s preliminary explorations of the generally liberal tendencies of Christmas Cathedral congregants suggest this predilection for the ‘traditional’ does not

¹¹⁰ This was an observation also made by several of my participants.

¹¹¹ Whilst Easter liturgy is clearly comparatively aesthetically rich in dramatic form, and still - as with perhaps more civically-imbued occasions such as Remembrance Sunday or Harvest, or life-cycle rituals, i.e. weddings, baptisms, and funerals - attracts more people to Anglican churches than attend on an average Sunday, given the wider cultural significance of Christmas and more intensive engagement with the Church at this time of year, familiarity with such liturgical repertoires is generally much more likely than it is for other high festivals and/or key moments of celebration within the Church calendar.

necessarily equate to social and/or religious conservatism (2015: 123), but has rather more to do with the sense of satisfaction generated by culturally familiar modes of the numinous, and/or a nostalgic affinity towards a maternally-imbued, contemporary manifestation of what Eliade famously referred to as the ‘myth of eternal return’ ([1954] 2005).

Simon Coleman, Marion Bowman, and Tiina Sepp’s more recent (2019) examination of the negotiation of Christmas by clergy, vergers, and staff in English Cathedrals meanwhile, likewise suggests that the ‘sensational’ ‘appeal’ of Christmas liturgy provides an effective means of ‘semiotic mediation’ which not only acts to modulate a complex range of religious and cultural expectations surrounding the season, but which:

gives access to a civic and seemingly gently spiritual realm of “belonging” that can conflate the historical, the regional, and the ecclesiastical in ways that are deeply dispositional even if they are also highly diffused (255).

Whilst it has been well established that the apparent growth and popularity of such ‘episodic’ engagement with the church does not seem to equate to ‘an overall rise in actual Church of England membership’ (Percy 2013: 70) - and may even itself be seen to constitute evidence of the decline of more integrated and/or ‘dispositional’ modes of faith - I concur with the above-cited inference of Coleman and colleagues, as well as with Walker (2015: 127-128), that this more occasional engagement can, at Christmas time especially, be seen to play an equally ‘dispositional’ - if periodic - role in the representational framing and regulative embedding of complex contemporary identities. Indeed, there is a sense in which the variously framed liturgical manifestations of ‘Christmas’ put on by the church come to act as something of a civic sanctifier of wider festive ritual as the familiar ‘structures of repetition’ and comfortingly ‘gentle’ modes of enchantment there provided come to mesh with ‘annually kindled habits of participation’, with ‘regular familial, regional, or work-related obligations’, and with ultimately more complex patterns and modes of belonging (Coleman, Bowman & Sepp 2019: 243, 254-255).

THE 'WONDER' OF CHRISTMAS 'WISHING'/'DREAMING': AN IMMERSIVE MODE OF PERFORMATIVELY HOPE-ORIENTATED BELIEF

We are hence talking here about the kind of 'low-threshold', 'feel-good religion' which does not ask people to sign on the dotted line, or 'to change their fundamental positions' (Walker 2015: 128; Gilhus & Mikaelsson 2018: 85-86; Percy 2020: 163), but which - as per the tradition of conscious ambiguity and 'ambivalent hybridity' which has now long surrounded the aura of the Church of England (Percy 2020: 153-154, 157) - acts instead to tap into a richly malleable and culturally resonant repertoire of ritual-symbolism to foster a communal experience of transcendence in which boundaries between cultural aesthetics and collective effervescence, between personal identity and a sense of Otherness, between the will to believe and belief itself, are for just a moment made mysteriously and attractively opaque. When we consider this genre of religious ritual in comparative relation to the fluidity of belief and/or suspension of disbelief which tends to characterise engagement with the enchanted fantasy-worlds of Christmas, it seems to me that we see a not so dissimilar mode of 'gentle' transcendence and/or invocation of 'mythic time' occurring in the performance of the magical world of the North Pole. Perhaps most obviously redolent with connotations of the kind of romanticised childhood utopia we here wish to discuss, this is quite clearly the predominant cultural repertoire from which the theme of Christmas wish-fulfilment percolates, and which carries considerable tonal influence over the wider genre of enchantment people tend to associate with Christmas.

Here, the notion of wish-fulfilment becomes closely tied not only to adult nostalgia for childhood, but to a very particular mode of hope-oriented 'belief'. This distinctive mode of belief was evidenced right the way across the wide range of age-groups I spoke to, as well as across a variety of different worldviews. Indeed, even some of the children I interviewed - some as young as 4 or 5 - hinted that they might not actually be so sure about the Father Christmas thing, but wanted to believe so much that the very ambiguity of this hopeful wish *itself* appeared to drive the ability to transgress the boundaries of reality as they strained to hear the tinkling of sleigh-bells, or as they inspected the flecks of sparkle their elves had left

behind.¹¹² There is hence a sense in which *hope*, and the consequent *will* to believe, here comes to constitute the very nature of belief itself. This can clearly be seen illustrated in Heather's following depiction of performing the Father Christmas tradition with her grandchildren:

Ethan didn't believe in Father Christmas, but wanted to, Adam was eight and absolutely knew he didn't exist, but of course they'd got Ellie...so we continue it, and Ellie needs to have the fun doesn't she...I said, "Come on, we've got to go and get it all ready for Father Christmas." So we went and got it all ready, and I said, "What's he having?" A mince pie and a carrot...etc. etc. and I said, "What's he having to drink?" So Ethan looks at you, and you know he wants to believe, but doesn't. "I think we should put out a glass of milk." I said, "Well he's going to get very fat, how's he going to get down the chimney Ethan with a glass of milk?! If he has a glass of milk in every house he'll be HUGE!" "Should we give him a whiskey or a port as well then grandma" [both laugh] Oh I said, "I think so, I think he'd rather have that. He wouldn't get so fat on one of those!" [laughs] I love doing this kind of thing, and I said, "Don't forget you've got to rush down"...

Observing the varying layers of interactive performance and intergenerational reciprocity occurring in this scene as grandmother performs belief to - and with - her grandchildren, and doubting siblings 'make an effort' for their younger sister who 'needs' to get her fair share of the 'fun', we here see expressed rather clearly something of the ambiguity of the 'magic' which characterises engagement in this world of 'serious' play (Turner 1982b). The sense of joy Heather elicits from this improvisation of belief with her grandchildren feels tangibly

¹¹² It fascinated me that the younger children I spent time with seemed more likely to directly challenge the veracity of Gelf the Elf and Father Christmas than the older children aged around 8-11 (I could detect no especial discrepancy regarding gender here either). Though the fiercer defences tended to come from the younger children, by around age 7-8 beliefs surrounding 'Christmas magic' seemed more thoroughly worked out and rationally justified. Indeed, I managed to hold several focus-groups with 10 year olds without a single challenge. It struck me that in some cases, there might have been a sense of embarrassment in challenging the apparent belief and authority of a grown-up stranger. I was after all directly affirming my own belief through the presence of Gelf the Elf, and some of the children I spent more time with even admitted to me that Gelf had helped them to believe and/or convinced them that 'Christmas magic' must be real. That said, without challenging the children rather more directly and individually, these dynamics were more broadly difficult to assess.

infectious, and whilst her performance is clearly ‘put on’ for the children, it is hard to tell who is having more fun! Here, enjoyment in observing the joy bestowed upon others becomes an enjoyment not of distanced admiration, but of active immersion; of vicarious participation. The role of humour is in this regard particularly significant as Heather’s chuckling bemusement comes to express both the pure enjoyment of participating in childhood naïveté, whilst also serving as an in-the-know indicator of our shared adult wisdom as to the nature of the performance *as* performance. Asked why she thought this was an important tradition to perform, Heather replied:

because it’s lovely to see the wonder in the children’s eyes isn’t it - *lovely* to see

The experience of finding joy in active observation of the ‘wonder’ of children’s interactions and reactions with the magical enchanted world conjured by the performance of such ritual-symbolic repertoires clearly underscores a vital dimension of Christmas transcendence, and has been central to my own experiences in the field. As I experienced repeatedly in the context of my performances both as an elf and with Gelf the Elf, at the heart of this genre of festive enchantment - this mode of playful participation - is the reciprocity of joy adults come to vicariously share as the fond re-enactment of familiar mythic repertoires enables re-experience of, and re-immersion within, the mood of pure innocence and blissfully uncomplicated joy of childhood perception and belief which has come to be associated with the ‘magic’ of the ‘Christmas spirit’. Whilst I came across many adults without young children who were only too keen to keep performances of this childlike side of the festive ‘spirit’ alive - not least those who turned up to see Father Christmas at the evening events for adults put on at Crook Hall - this somewhat escapist performance of romanticised childhood attitude is of course only intensified in the presence of children, and in the shared construction of such mythic repertoires *with* children. To this end, several of my participants commented that the ‘magic’ of Christmas seemed to go away when they themselves grew into adulthood, and/or when there were no longer young children around in the family.

We find in such recreational performances of ludic participation a genre of ritual behaviour whereby acting *as if* one believes comes to constitute itself a very particular ‘mode’ (Hervieu-Léger 2000: ix, 65-82) - or we might say *performance* (Day 2011: 6, 10, 47-51) - of belief

(Turner 1982g: 28-29; 1988a: 169; Ellingson 2015: 430). To this end, the very word ‘believe’ has in fact itself come to carry a distinctive kind of resonance when invoked in relation to Christmas. Drawn upon across a variety of cross-cutting cultural spaces and narratives, this notion of ‘belief’ is strongly inflected by an implicit sense of ‘faith’ in almost reified notions of the common good/the intrinsic moral goodness of humanity,¹¹³ and is ultimately underscored by the imaginative act of hoping; of projecting desires into the liminal territory of the mysterious unknown.¹¹⁴ Where many children continue to ‘believe’ so Santa will continue to bring their presents, for adults the injunction to keep believing is rather more about a motivating impulse to keep going - to keep holding onto hope - in the face of uncertainty. This act of holding ‘faith’ that things really will come good in the end, that dreams really can come true, and that miracles really do happen is of course directly mirrored in the projection of ‘Christmas’ itself as a kind of pre-lapsarian utopia-land of wish-fulfilment and moral goodness, and it is this mirroring activity that I particularly wish to consider as we draw Christopher Deacy’s conceptualisation of the ‘transformative possibility engendered by the fantasy-realism dichotomy’ evoked in Christmas narratives of belief (2016: 25) together with the reflexive dimension of Victor Turner’s anthropology of performance. The transgressive ambiguity felt as mirror-images of fantasy and reality come to press and blur against one-another - and as ritual performances come to oscillate in and out of such worlds (Turner 1982c: 72-75) - can



Figure K. Gelf proudly wearing her special ‘I believe’ Christmas badge bought from a local Christmas market

¹¹³ This mode of highly protestant-imbued belief/faith/trust is made especially clear in the (1994) rendition of *Miracle on 34th Street* which concludes with the whole community coming together to declare they ‘believe’ in Santa Claus after he has been in this case literally put on trial. As Santa himself puts it mid-way through the film: ‘I’m not just a whimsical figure who wears a charming suit and affects a jolly demeanour. You know, I’m a symbol. I’m a symbol of the human ability to be able to suppress the selfish and hateful tendencies that rule the major part of our lives. If you don’t believe, you can’t accept anything on faith, then you’re doomed for a life dominated by doubt.’

¹¹⁴ For an especially clear rendition of the genre of positively hopeful longing which characterises this magical mode of ‘belief’, we can look no further than the famous performative utterance in J. M. Barrie’s eventually Disneyfied story of Peter Pan - ‘I do believe in fairies, I do, I do!’

be seen to generate an especially rich site of liminality, and it is this experience of enchanted communion which I suggest enables a quasi-transcendent feeling of bittersweet longing as the dissonance between reality and fantasy dream-worlds - or indeed between the cynical, the earthy, and the saccharine - come to be temporarily experienced together in connected suspension, and as the entertainment of imaginative possibilities allows people to momentarily dwell with their desires *as if* they have already been satisfied (Turner 1988a: 169).

Such performances of 'belief' can clearly be seen to operate across a complex spectrum. As such, whilst at the farthest end of this spectrum we find an experience which might be best equated to a form of escapism in which the bitter realities of life are blissfully - and for a moment, *totally* - put on hold (Deacy 2016: 25-32), somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, we find an experience of longing which is rather interestingly often expressed in terms of 'wishing' and/or 'dreaming'.¹¹⁵ Rather crucially, these appear to be activities which imply a certain ambiguity of consciousness; 'wishing' implicitly corresponding to magic, and 'dreaming' to sleeping. The following song from Disney's portrayal of *Cinderella* offers an especially revealing insight into exactly this kind of popular cultural Western trope:

A dream is a wish your heart makes
When you're fast asleep
In dreams you will lose your heartaches
Whatever you wish for, you keep
Have faith in your dreams and someday
Your rainbow will come smiling through
No matter how your heart is grieving
If you keep on believing
The dream that you wish will come true

Children are here encouraged not - as might be expected - to derive hope from their faith, but to put 'faith' in their hopes; a utopian message which is undoubtedly closely entangled

¹¹⁵ For further consideration of the relevance of 'dreaming' to notions of wish-fulfilment, see Pleck (2004: 55).

with the contemporary moral notion that all children should be able to grow up to be whoever they want to be, achieve whatever they want to achieve, love whoever they want to love, and believe whatever they want to believe. They are thus told that if they can have just a little 'faith' in their 'dreams', no matter how difficult their situation - no matter how unbelievable their dream starts to become - their wishes 'will come true'; just like Cinderella's did. The reference to 'los[ing]' one's 'heartaches' in 'dreams' and to 'keep[ing]' one's 'wishes' meanwhile appears to allude to a desire for inalienable possession which relates directly back to our discussion of reciprocity, and which serves to underscore the loss-defying character of the song's sentiment. The act of believing is hence expressed here as tantamount to the act of *hoping*; that imaginative state in which desires are made tantalisingly obtainable, dreams authenticated, and possible realities expanded. Intriguingly therefore, awareness that there is - or, in the case of children sceptical about Father Christmas, *might* be¹¹⁶ - a reality out there which appears to throw doubt across such experiences of hope, arguably seems to be the very thing which makes such experiences feel 'magical'; i.e. somehow *beyond*, or subverting of ordinary experience.

Heather explained she doesn't think there's a need to tell children 'the truth' immediately because she 'can't see that there's any harm' in letting them 'enjoy' the magic 'for a little while.' It appeared that my question about why society would be encouraging children to believe a lie was - though understood - something of a misnomer. 'Childhood magic' was about something different. It wasn't 'true'. But it wasn't 'harmful' either. It was something which Heather just didn't want to tamper with, or spoil too early. 'I don't think you need to break the spell', she said. Nostalgia for childhood innocence is thus, it seems, inextricably tied to a desire to reach back to a time in which this magical 'spell' remains unbroken; a time free of the disappointments and demands of adulthood. The 'magic' of Christmas thus appears in large part to be about allowing adults to re-inhabit the enchantment of this 'unbroken' utopian world as children for whom such reality boundaries appear to be more naturally flexible. The *adult* desire at Christmas hence frequently becomes transposed into one not of direct hope, but of nostalgia. As per our earlier analysis of Lévi-Strauss' ([1952] 1993a) theory of the fundamentally death-defying nature of contemporary Christmas symbolism, it seems

¹¹⁶ The nature of this 'might' effectively then becomes inverted in adulthood.

particularly significant that this experience of nostalgia which involves the projection of a utopia into the past is grounded in a stage of the human life-cycle associated with hope for the continuance of life; in other words, the projection of this utopia into the *future*. This is well exemplified in songs such as:

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas
Just like the ones I used to know
Where the treetops glisten and children listen
To hear sleigh bells in the snow

In the popular imagination, 'Christmas' has thus effectively become synonymous with a form of wish-fulfilment which by proxy signals a simultaneous intensification of nostalgia for the past and hope for the future; value-driven imaginative emotions which play out on both personal and collective levels. As I saw in the case of so many of those I spoke to, such comparative consideration of the interface between fantasy and reality often leads to an identity-driven awareness of what we have and haven't got in relation to others, and an affective evaluation in turn of the things, people, and values we most want to hold onto and protect; of the things we can truly consider to be *ours*.¹¹⁷ This more often than not comes to be expressed in positively valenced identifications of the things for which we can be thankful; and conversely, in negatively valenced identifications of the things which have caused us feelings of resentment, disappointment, or regret. Since our desires are often for things that are contingent upon forces beyond our control, their fulfilment or frustration tends to be experienced in feelings of gratitude for good fortune on the one hand, or feelings of hopelessness at misfortune on the other. We are in other words speaking here of the manner in which affective orientations come to frame and inflect interpretations of the autobiographical positioning of the Self in relation to the existential.

COMPARATIVE CONTRASTS

Christmas provides a natural occasion for the intensification of these kinds of emotionally-driven existential comparisons. For in its capacity as a prominent moment of cyclical cultural

¹¹⁷ Possession in this sense be understood as the singular of belonging.

intensification, it holds an 'active mirror' up to the passage of time. To ask someone about how *Christmas* has changed for them over the years is hence to ask how their *life* has changed; it is to ask how their perceptions and narrations of self and other have evolved in relation to that which they value. The festival can thus be seen to constitute a time of intensified evaluative reflection as to where we might be at in relation to our various respective idealised utopias. I hence propose that Christmas brings into view and intensifies a reflective consideration of *contrasts*; contrasts which map easily onto the four types of dissonance described earlier:



Figure L. The image of 'Bridget Jones' (2016) dragging a Christmas tree through the streets as the dynamics of her life change is drawn upon as a deliberately repeated symbolic device in this popular trilogy of British films. [Photo Credit: XPOSUREPHOTOS.COM]

1. Contrasts between how I think I'm *expected* to feel, how I *want* to feel and how I *actually* feel
2. Contrasts between what I have/what we have in relation to what others have
3. Contrasts between what life was like for me in the past, what it is like for me now and what it might be like in the future
4. Contrasts between what we dream about and for - what we idealise - and what we actually have and what we are likely to be able to get in reality

Such contrasts carry the capacity to conjure up a vast array of sometimes further conflicting relationally-oriented emotions. This was a dynamic Heather was quick to identify in her assessment of why Christmas was often a particularly hard time for people suffering with depression:

Well an awful lot of people have got nothing in life. They're seeing everybody rushing around getting ready for what they see as their nearest and dearest. They've got nothing, nobody giving them anything, and nobody to do anything *for*.

Sharing some of her experience of volunteering at *Samaritans* where she regularly comes across people who have nothing to live for, nothing to hope for, nothing for which to be grateful, no reason to 'make an effort', Heather became quietly reflective as she considered the manner in which depression causes people to look 'inwards':

If you're unhappy, and everybody else is happy as you see it...then that's doubly double whammy isn't it.

The intensively internalised nature of such an existential position here is key:

I think for other people that Christmas is just awful. And if it's depression, then you're only seeing what you haven't got. And what you see - I mean none of us show our true face do we. Nobody ever does. Nobody knows what's behind that smiling face...Only you yourself know what's actually going on in your own life, but...you see, I'm usually a very jolly person, but there's another side to me too.

Asked whether she thought Christmas increased depression, she said:

It's a very sad time for a lot of people. Any festival like that where people are seen in other people's minds to be together...is a terrible time for people, cos it's very often a family time, and people are very lonely - everybody else is seeing family and friends. What are they doing? Nothing.

Again, we are given a sense of the framing of a depressive existential position in relation to the emotions elicited by comparison with others. As spelt out above, however, these comparisons need not be made only with others, but with various conceptions of the self as it relates to itself in time. At Christmas, the particularity of time and space is both accentuated and collapsed. This became especially clear as Heather showed me one of her favourite photos which depicted her mother with her great-grandchildren 'in their Christmas gear'. 'There you are', she said proudly, chuckling as she reached over to show me the frame:

I love that picture...that's Great-Grandma with her two little great-granddaughters at Christmas with their green little Christmas suits

The ‘blissfully happy memories’ Heather has of her mother’s presence and enjoyment of her great-grandchildren constitute a communing of the past with the present; a fluid collapsing of the boundaries of time and space. However, this is a collapsing which in itself acts to accentuate *awareness* of such boundaries, as Heather is reminded that her mother is sadly not now here to enjoy Christmas, and that George, the little baby in the photo is now not so very little. Looking at the photo, she directly contrasted his age; pinpointing the particularity of the photo in relation to the present:

‘And that was George’s first Christmas - now almost ten’

‘You must have seen quite a few people’s first Christmases’, I reflected, to which she promptly replied, ‘Of course, and their last Christmases.’ As per our conceptualisation of the festival as



Figure M. [Photo credit: The Little Picture Company Ltd.]

a prime seasonal rite of passage, Christmas is hence here clearly shown to provide a particularly apt mechanism for the pinpointing and accentuation of different life-stages, statuses, and experiences. Awareness of this is instituted in many of the material practices of the festival. For example, Heather’s proud status as a Grandmother has become embodied in the form of a bauble marked ‘Best Grandma in the world’ which now ‘comes out every Christmas and...flashes on the tree’. The flashing of this particular bauble thus

becomes symbolic not only of Heather’s grandmotherly status, and of the nature of her relationship with her grandchildren who gifted her the bauble, but of the passing of time reflected in - or rather *on* - the symbol of life-affirming continuity that is the Christmas tree.

COMING HOME FOR CHRISTMAS: JOYFUL REUNIONS & FADING FAMILIARITIES

A similar sentiment is also often felt acutely in the act of ‘coming home for Christmas’. For many, the flux of time - and ultimately of change - becomes more acutely observable when reflected in re-communion with the distinct, and/or sometimes rather fading, familiarity of ‘home’. This is felt even more acutely when expectations of familiarity do *not* match

experiences of reality; or put in the more phenomenological language of Schutz and Luckmann (1973; 1989), when expectations of the future derived from experiences of the past do not match up with experiences of the present. Heather illustrated this powerfully in her description of her son Martin's return home one particularly poignant year:

But that Christmas I can remember he came home, and he saw Grandma here. We had Christmas here, and then he went off, and you know...he's not a hard nut, he's as soft as butter...but he's got that military hard-front you know. He was in tears as he said goodbye to Grandma, he said, "I won't see Grandma again will I Mum." I said, "I don't think so."

Heather's view of how dynamics of grief might play out at Christmas reflected a rich mixture of accentuation and resolution in much the same manner as the bittersweet intermingling of time boundaries outlined above. Her response - the nuance of which was echoed by so many of my other conversation partners in discussions of bereavement - suggests that Christmas might be seen as a time of *both* accentuated grief at separation from loved-ones who had once shared in the celebrations, *and* as an occasion of active remembrance and memorialisation. As we will see in Chapter 6, tendency towards each side of this spectrum of grief is of course naturally heavily contingent upon the dynamics, timing, and affective evolution of the loss. Nevertheless, it seems that in the midst of this dichotomy of emotion, bonds with the deceased come to be not just 'continued', but adapted and transformed (Valentine 2008). This might be applied not only to the more obvious loss involved in bereavement, but also to other kinds of losses accrued as statuses, relationships, and life situations change. Asked about how she thought family dynamics played out more generally at Christmas, Heather said:

Christmas time, it's hard isn't it. I think...I would view the divorce situation as much like when your children marry situation, that you know, you've got to share them. In divorce, you know...you've got to take it in turns, and in when your children marry, you know you've got to take it in turns. I mean, we love being all together and Neil as soon as he married, "let's have one great big family Christmas." I said "No Neil." "Why

ever not mum?" I said, "because if you do that, the following Christmas, Dad and I are on our own, and I can't bear the thought of that."

It seems that for many, Christmas becomes a key stage upon which significant life transitions become navigated. That is of course not to say that significant life transitions *only* happen at Christmas; but rather that the life transitions which are *already* taking place might become particularly *highlighted* under the spotlight of Christmas. Often - as in this case - it is the necessity of practical family arrangements for the festival which draws attention to such dynamics and shines the spotlight upon various forms of loss. Since Christmas has become associated with the expectation of wish-fulfilment and/or harmonious 'homecoming', any reality which falls short of this ideal is likely to be experienced as a loss by contrast. By the same token however, it is the same intensification of ideal experience which makes Christmas a prime site for the cultivation of significant - and perhaps even 'self-defining' - memories (Blagov & Singer 2004; Williams & Conway 2009; Singer et al 2013). Heather thus spoke of 'very, very happy childhood memories' which stretched through both her own, her children, and grandchildren's childhoods.

NEGOTIATING THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF CHRISTMAS VALUES AS MORAL SYSTEMS OF WORTH AND BELONGING

Such mirroring of emotion can be seen not only in Heather's narrations of family dynamics, but in her assessment of wider social issues. Indeed, it seemed telling that when asked about the kinds of emotions she felt at Christmas, she spoke again of societal loss; this time more directly in relation to her own generational positioning:

Well I suppose, because of what I've always done and what I do, I'm very very aware for those who Christmas is a terrible time, and I like the fact that churches open the doors. I think it's awful that we need the foodbanks, but we do need the foodbanks. I mean Martin our eldest is always spouting about how "your generation ruined it for ours." Well we didn't personally have anything to do with it, but it so happened that we were born at the right time if you like [laughing].

The dominant values which come to organise and frame existential orientation of the self in relation to society and worldview are of course naturally evidenced in the interplay between alienable and inalienable systems of worth which underlies the material and symbolic praxis of gift-exchange at Christmas discussed earlier in this chapter. This is all too clear in the case of Heather who is deeply disdainful of those who find worth in the status of branded goods as opposed to the love and presence of family. Having always followed her own family's tradition of choosing just one 'smallish present' to go alongside an annual contribution to each grandchild's education, she used to get absolutely horrified listening to her co-workers discussions of Christmas gifts:

...very often their husbands were out of work, they were the main breadwinner...and as soon as Christmas was over they would join this Christmas club and they would spend four figures per child on presents...four figures per child on Christmas, you know. I couldn't get over it, and I had to keep it zipped, and I said, "Do they *need* that many?", "Oh yes! The room must be filled with presents"...It's mind-boggling they thought it was necessary. I could not understand it. They would put themselves into debt for it.

We here see a rather clear depiction of the manner in which Heather's prioritisation of particular inalienable values corresponds with her sense of the alienable worth of things. This inevitably plays out in the way she navigates her lifestyle choices in relation to her own financial situation. Unsurprisingly these are lifestyle preferences which relate to inalienable values which have been passed down through several generations of Heather's family, and which thereby clearly form an essential part of her developed worldview. Crucially, these were values which became particularly relevant as she made decisions about how to raise her children in distinction from others, and what kind of values to pass down to them. This can be rather clearly seen in following passage, where we see Heather teaching her boys what she believed - and she wanted *them* to believe - was of more worth than the branded clothes they coveted:

...I used to say, "Well what would you rather have: Daddy coming home every night, or Nike trainers?" I said, "You've got a Daddy who comes home when he's not

away...and you're lucky aren't you"...you know, I think the mercenary side of it is dreadful, and I hate that side of Christmas.

Whilst the conscious re-definition of Christmas value and 'tradition' occurs at various stages of significant life transition - and particularly as people come to differentiate themselves from, and in relation to, their families of origin - re-evaluation of the systems of worth which underlie evolving lived lifestyle aesthetics is perhaps rather unsurprisingly especially visible in negotiations of the socialisation of children (Mason & Muir 2013: 615-616, 626). This of course becomes a more complex process in the case of grandparents who are required to negotiate their own values and 'traditions' in relation to those of their children. Any potential dissonances which might have formed between parent and child - and which may have become especially acute with the advent of new partners - often here come to be highlighted as disparate nuclear families strive for integration of value and practice across generations. This kind of dynamic was made particularly evident when Heather described the questioning she received from her granddaughter who had been brought along with her brother to the village church Christingle service by Heather's son:

I love the Christingle because I always think that Christingle service is the start of Christmas. And Neil brought the two through, which I was very delighted about this year, and I explained the meaning of the orange and all the rest of it...and Hannah said to me - eight - she said, "Of course Grandma, it's all pretend - Mummy says so you know." Well how do you answer that...she says, "you know it's pretend don't you Grandma", and I said..."Well grandma comes from a different point of view", and she said, "What do you mean Grandma?" And I said, "Well Grandma believes that somebody greater than us made this wonderful world in which we live. I don't know whether it was somebody or something, but something greater than us, cos none of us could have done it could we Hannah?" "No Grandma." I said, "And whether you want to call it Christ or Jesus, I don't know, but I have no problem that believing that somebody greater than us made this, and if this person was Jesus and this was when he was born, why shouldn't we celebrate his birthday?" I said, "Cos I don't know, you don't know, so I think it's a good job if you learn about Jesus, and you learn about the Jews, and you learn about the Muslims, and you learn about the Sikhs, and you do at

school don't you?" "Yes Grandma." I said, "And then when you're bigger, you'll make up your mind what you believe in and what you don't." I was really proud of myself cos I couldn't say, "I disagree with Mummy" - I thought, you know, I'm frantically thinking on my feet at this point because she's an intelligent child...You mustn't dismiss what Mummy said of course...Those two are not christened or anything - she agreed to be married in church, but they're not christened. I wish they were. I don't know why I wish they were, cos as I say I'm a doubting Thomas, but I wish - whereas the other two are too bible-bashing in my book.

Here, we see the direct way children's questions push adults to address, and/or integrate potential dissonances in worldview. More specifically, however, this passage offers us a glimpse as to the manner in which 'Christmas' - in its public magnification of personal and collective value - acts as a key societal platform for the accentuation, and potential resolution, of such dissonance. This response to Hannah's question in many respects provides us with the most crystallised statement of Heather's religious worldview, and the way she positions it in relation to the rest of her family. As much as she claims to be becoming more and more of 'a doubting Thomas' as she gets older, it seems that somewhere inside her - and unsurprisingly closely connected to the fond traditions of her upbringing - there *is* still a kernel of faith. This kernel of faith - or we might perhaps say, of *hope* - is clearly strong enough that when pushed to formally present her beliefs, she cannot *not* pass it on to her grandchild.

CHRISTMAS AS 'CULMINATING SPACE'

'It ought to be about thinking about each other, and other people', Heather said when elaborating upon the festival's central message, before quickly adding:

and I love it that the Jews and the Hindus and the Sikhs and the Muslims celebrate Christmas. I mean, most of them recognise Jesus as a saint...my Jewish relatives we exchange Christmas cards, erm [laughs] mazel tovs always in it, but we exchange Christmas cards.



Figure N. 'Central message of Christmas'

'Christmas' hence appears to represent for Heather a key culminating space in which the various - and sometimes rather dissonant - aspects of her life might come to align and

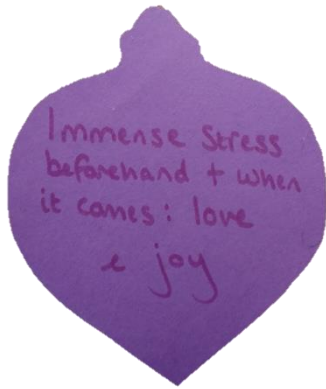


Figure O. 'Christmas Emotions'

harmonise. For Heather, as for countless others I spoke to throughout my fieldwork, the 'true meaning of Christmas' is wrapped up in the *meaning* she gives to, and finds in *Life*. It is concerned with the things she holds most dear, the things she considers to be of authentic value; the things she believes really *matter*. To perform 'Christmas' is thus it seems to perform something of an ideal state. It is to inhabit a utopian world in which dreams come true and losses are transcended; in which

morality is restored, identities integrated, and dissonances reconciled. It is to make an effort to perform and inhabit this utopian world even if one cannot *quite* get behind it, even if one is not entirely *feeling* it. Perhaps most fundamentally however, the performance of Christmas can be seen to operate as a moral 'reminder' of what *is* most important; and of the appropriate attitude which allows access to this potentially transformative moral knowledge.

4. The Christmas Volunteer

Previously trained as a counsellor, Liz was quick to pick up on the dissonance wrapped up in people's experiences of Christmas. Recalling the intensity of emotion she used to have to deal with amongst her client-base in the months following the festive season as 'reality' hit home and people's crises were brought to a head, the idea of Christmas holding a 'mirror' up to our lives was a concept she was all too familiar with. Christmas had in her own personal case become bound up in more recent years with feelings of deep sadness, and the sense of loss was palpable as we reflected together about the way in which the dynamics of her own life story could be mapped onto her experience of the festival. Now living on her own, Liz had 'lost everything' a few years back after a relationship had gone badly wrong and she had had to give up her house and business as she battled the onset of PTSD. She was when I met her in the midst of trying to forge a fresh start for herself in a new area, and had taken to *Airbnb* so she could make ends meet as best she could whilst she was searching for work. Her advert had in fact come across my radar quite by chance as I had myself been searching for somewhere to stay for the community lunch I was due to be shadowing on Christmas Day, and it was thus in a real moment of serendipity that I ended up getting to know Liz in the months leading up to the event which it soon rather fortuitously transpired she had also signed up for.

Since money was short, and she was unable to spend Christmas with any family, Liz had decided to volunteer to try to do something positive rather than letting the day go to 'waste'. My extended stay over that Christmas period certainly turned out to be something of a bonding experience, and Liz seemed grateful for the company at a time she had reportedly otherwise been 'dreading'. As we chatted late into the small hours of Christmas morning, she confessed if I hadn't been coming, she probably wouldn't have bothered with all that much decoration. As it was, she had made an effort to do 'a few Christmassy things' like putting

‘tinsel round the mirrors’, and had also taken the trouble to knit me a special companion for my elf Gelf. Until recently, Christmas had been one of Liz’s favourite times of the year, and her whole being appeared to glow with enthusiasm as she eulogised about the happy time she had spent creating ‘traditions’ with her four now grown-up children. They would ‘get sick with excitement’, she said as she reminisced over her memories of this time, fluidly interchanging her tenses and time-frames as she became caught up in the nostalgic joy of it all:

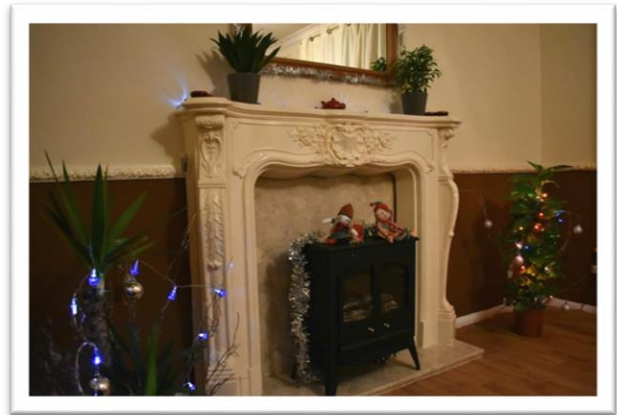


Figure A. Liz’s living room specially decorated for Christmas 2017

it starts off the 1st December...when they all get their advent calendars, and...you know, they’re counting down the days...Christmas Eve they never used to sleep...We’d put the tree up the closest Saturday to Christmas...It was such a big thing...Christmases were lovely

She had loved attending their nativity plays, taking them to pantos, and just generally finding different ways to make it ‘special’ for them. ‘You know’, she said:

I used to spend a lot of money on the children, buy them all the presents that they loved

And then when they were older:

they all pretended to believe in Father Christmas...and...I’d fill their stockings up with the same things, so they always got a new toothbrush and underwear and tangerines and nuts, and all sorts of magazines and yeah, they all used to pretend when they woke up that ooo Father Christmas has been...and you know I used to make a huge dinner with loads of vegetables...which they all loved...oh and another thing full of tradition...but we always made our own traditions as well. So they all like - I make

these little mini quiches...and crunchie chocolate biscuits, so every Christmas Eve I'd do that...they had to have their quiches, and I would just have to stay up all night wrapping presents [laughing]...they always used to cry cos they got so excited

As was by no means uncommon amongst those I spoke to, Liz had constructed a careful personalised format for the ritual of present opening so as to make sure it didn't get too out of hand and things were properly appreciated:

we had the tradition, having four children, the youngest would always open the first present, and then...we'd go to one child then another, then another, then another, and we'd just keep going round and round and round until they were all open...so it was kind of like, it's not just a question of, you know being greedy and opening everything...it was about the giving and the thought that's gone into it and everything like that as well

Memories aside, it was these days 'very rare' for them 'all to be together on the same day', and Christmas was in this sense no exception. 'They all make their own Christmases now', Liz told me as she expressed her sadness that she wasn't getting to see any of them this year. They'll probably 'do something' with their father, she said, but Christmas has not been the same for any of them since she stopped being the 'central figure' of the occasion. Considering the way Christmas had changed for her over the years, Liz admitted she had found my initial questionnaire on the topic quite 'disturbing'. 'Until probably about five years ago', she explained, 'all of my life...was all connected with Christmas'. She had found everything about it enjoyable, and loved all the food and the drink, as well as seeing the 'kids happy'. Looking back, she said, 'there was no sense of...foreboding'. And then, 'when everything started to go very wrong', Christmas suddenly became 'quite a sad time'. 'I don't know the percentage rate, but actually', she said pausing for a moment, 'it's quite a horrible time of the year'.

'So you've sort of gone from one extreme to the other', I said. 'Yeah', she replied, intimating that she 'would like to find a middle' so that she didn't 'dread it' quite so much. Asked where this sense of 'dread' came from, she said:

it's probably because I miss them so much...um I miss all the happiness

Though she recognises Christmas' importance for other people, now that her children are no longer around and that phase of her life has 'gone', Liz doesn't feel like there's all that much in it left for her. 'I think Christmas is crap to be honest', she sighed, the sense of disillusion growing stronger as she spoke. 'I think Christmas is for children'. 'It's magical', she said, 'completely unreal'. Asked what she meant by this, she continued:

there is no such thing as Father Christmas, it it's like erm...Christmas is erm...it's just like you can imagine the perfect world...you know it's just like...oh we've got a wonderful family, I'm going to get all the gifts that I want, everything's wonderful, and it's total crap, you know, in reality

Asked if she thought this 'reality' had perhaps only really come home to her in the last few years, she agreed, 'yeah, I could pretend for the sake of the children.' It hence seemed that now that she had no-one to 'pretend for', Christmas had just simply lost its 'magic'. 'Having said that', she reasoned, reflecting for a moment:



Figure B. 'Christmas Emotions'

doing this voluntary work, I still want to make it magical for other people.

'Yeah, I still want to make it magical', she affirmed:

but it's not, you know, life's not like that.'

Still, 'for the sake of one day', Liz sees nothing terrible in letting the fantasy take over just a little bit. 'Let's just make it magical for one day', she said, a hint of wistfulness still detectable amidst this moment of asserted defiance. Though she suspected 'very few people' now thought about it as 'Jesus Christ's birthday', she told me at the moment the clock struck twelve that Christmas morning that she thought the Christmas 'message' was quite 'amazing'. Asked what she thought this 'message' was, she said:

I think the message is that we have to be kind to each other. That's my big thing actually, that we have to be kind to each other...Why can't we just be kind to each other?

She admitted she felt she hadn't personally always been kind, especially when she was struggling with mental health problems. But she'd been especially inspired by a friend of hers who had been 'kindness itself' to her, and who had become a 'very important person' in her life:

She's helped me a lot...and I do think, you know, if I think about all the people that I know, I think kindness is up there



Figure C. 'Central message of Christmas'

If she hadn't been doing the voluntary work this year, Liz said she'd probably have just 'had a ham sandwich' on her own. This was in fact exactly what had happened that 'horrible' year when everything had 'gone wrong', and the 'cliché' of the 'ham sandwich' had since become something of a personal condensed symbol for the acute sense of absence she had felt at that time. A low point she was anxious not to repeat, Liz had since been searching for things which might in some way fill the void. 'Determined' to keep Christmas in some way 'special' for herself, she had spent a few Christmases abroad. The rather strange experience of trying to make 'the best' out of a Christmas dinner with 'gross' Chinese food, however, somehow seemed to only add to her underlying sense of misalignment; as did the mistreatment of the elephants she had ridden in Thailand. Along with the volunteering, she had this year decided she might try going along to a church carol service. 'I just wanted to get myself a new tradition in a way', she told me as she relayed her experience. 'I have thought about becoming more religious', she said, 'so I'd been to that church before, but I, I'. She stumbled for a moment, 'it's not for me'.

Describing the service she had attended at a Catholic church earlier on Christmas Eve before I had arrived, she admitted she had found this experience deeply 'disappointing'. 'I wanted to

find something, but it didn't give me anything. Nothing came to me at all', she said with some sadness, pensive for a moment, before rather tellingly adding:

I wanted to find erm a, a spirit

All in all, she had found the whole thing quite 'upsetting'. In fact, if anything, it had only 'confirmed' her doubts regarding religion. She wished there was a God, 'a Godly spirit that would save...and help' her, and though there appeared to be a lingering niggles of hope which sometimes still made her wonder, she felt she was now coming to terms with the fact that there wasn't. 'I'm completely on my own', she sighed, 'although I have started to think I might have an angel'. 'But that might just be due to desperation', she qualified with a hollow laugh. Pondering this further, she reckoned the 'spirit' spoken about by Christians likely had more to do with morality than anything else. 'I think it's maybe a conscience...that we *should* be *good*', she said, comparing the ethos of this 'spirit' to 'lovely' nostalgic TV programmes and films she felt encapsulated a kind of 'heaven' of moral goodness.

Whilst she acknowledged she may have had a rather different experience if she had gone elsewhere, the experience she had had in church had been nothing like this. 'There wasn't a *seat* free, it was *so* full, and yet it was *such* crap', she said:

it was just so *boooring*...it was just all to do with ritual...erm, there was no *humanness* about it

Asked what she might have needed 'to feel something like a spirit', the theme of children perhaps unsurprisingly returned once more, but fascinatingly this time in relation to conceptions not only of emotional warmth and 'humanness', but of an abundant kind of presence:

I would have *liked* to have seen some kids [pause] up front, or some parents, um, see *some* kind of emotion. *Any* kind of emotion. There was no emotion *whatsoever*....There was *nothing*...It was full, but it was empty...*completely* empty...to the extent that I left. You know, I just thought there's just, you know, why am I here?

‘I was sat at the back so nobody noticed’, she said, ‘I didn’t feel anything when I left. I just thought, yeah, that is just’, she paused, ‘what people do’. ‘They need, you know...Catholics...need to have um a’, she paused again, ‘like a *system* where they feel involved’. ‘And you know’, she continued:

I would love to find a system where I could feel involved, but I’ve never found anything...you know, I *did* seriously consider erm, you know *joining* a church, but I just find it all so boring, I do find it so boring

Resigning herself to this fact through the means of her apparent dislike of ‘ritual’, she concluded she was just ‘not really into church itself’, though she was ‘into people acting in a Christian way’. ‘Although I don’t even think of it as Christian’, she quickly added:

I think of it as goodness. So that could be whatever religion. And so yeah, so that’s kind of why I like VODA really,¹¹⁸ that’s kind of why I got involved with that. Erm [pause] I wish I could be Christian, or you know Muslim, or something that I could...*throw* it all there and somebody else will make everything better, but I don’t think that’s the case. I just think I need to be a good person.

Hence, whilst Liz hadn’t found any such ‘sense of purpose’ or ‘spirit’ of goodness in the *church*, she felt she *had* ‘found it from the voluntary thing’. ‘That’s the Christmas spirit to *me*’, she



Figure D. Decorations packed up ready for the event on Christmas Day

said as she later reflected back on the feel of community camaraderie and kind neighbourliness she had witnessed at the event. ‘I actually do think that that is what it’s all about’. Though she ‘felt quite flat’ when she ‘woke up on Christmas morning’ because she knew she ‘wouldn’t see the children’, she said

¹¹⁸ The partner charitable organisation which had run the scheme Liz had volunteered for the ‘Make Christmas Special’ event through.

it had 'also felt good that we were going to be more helpful to somebody else, and maybe make *their* day better'. Whilst perhaps a little 'disorganised', she had found herself surprised by how 'lovely' and 'friendly' the atmosphere was, despite the sadness that had brought many of them together. 'I loved it when the kitchen staff all put their hands together, the five of them. They just felt so satisfied', she said:

Everybody was chatting with each other and everybody was nice to each other...and there *wasn't* a lot of sadness there...only that one lady who was crying...I thought probably everybody in this room has felt like that today...and has managed to hold it together...but even after that, she was the last one to go, you know... she ended up having a nice time...so it was actually quite *nice*

Asked why she thought this kind of event was important, she replied:

because I think it makes people reflect...that you should be kind to your fellow people...and if you can't *be* there for other people, you should give something, you know, I think that's important...but indirectly it also helped me, because I'd have just been stuck at home, um I wouldn't have had a ham sandwich, I'd probably have made ast dinner, but um, yeah it would have just been a waste when I could be out there making things a little bit better for somebody else



Figure E. The room in the community centre all set up before everyone arrived

As much as Liz had found herself pleasantly surprised by the 'nice' atmosphere of the event however, she had admittedly felt a sense of relief when it was all over. 'I do remember when midnight came thinking, thank god that's over', she said when we met back up in the January. Nevertheless, it *had* felt good to have made the best of things. Telling me how she had always been involved in one way or another with 'voluntary work', she reiterated that she thought this was really the 'part of the Christmas spirit' she thought everyone should be aspiring to. Whilst she knew lots of people - her own family included - would certainly not be willing to

let strangers in on '*their* Christmas', she felt overall people generally *were* 'nicer' at Christmas. She just wished they could keep it up during the rest of the year:

which is why I said to you, you wait til January, because everybody wants to have a nice Christmas, so when I was counselling, I [was] so used to seeing people crash in January...People...would all get together, have the Christmas, and then as soon as Christmas is over they split up, and...I agree with that to a degree though, you know, because...wouldn't it be horrible if you decided to split up a couple of days before Christmas when you've got kids...

Hence, as much as she thought it was important Christmas was in some way protected, Liz also felt there was something kind of healthy about the manner in which it acted to bring underlying tensions to a head, because 'in real life, people should be honest'. 'I just don't think you need to be honest for Christmas', she laughed, adding:

I expect counsellors the world-wide are very busy at the moment...and there's a lot of sad people now because they're living more honest lives

Liz could in fact herself 'remember being acutely aware that it was the last Christmas' she 'was going to be with the children's father'. 'It was like a real pretence', she said as she recalled the New Year's Eve party where 'everybody was very Christmas spirit, and all happy, and very drunk'. 'I remember just waiting til midnight', she said, 'and then saying, right I'm going to take the kids home now'. She had 'told a couple of the women there that it was going to be the last time', but other than that she had managed to just keep it to herself. And then, '2nd January I told him he had to leave', she said, 'so I managed to keep going for another two days.' As we reflected together on the stark juxtaposition of the emotions involved in this, Liz said she felt there was 'quite a dichotomy' when it came to Christmas emotions. 'Because the main thing is excitement', she said, 'happiness. Yeah, a feeling of belonging':

but then on the reverse side...it's like disappointment, depression, erm sadness...so there's the two aspects, either the really lovely things in life, or the really worse things in life

‘So is it possible to feel both simultaneously do you think?, I asked.

mm, now that’s interesting, I think only that last Christmas before I chucked him out when I knew that that was going to be the last one, I was feeling all the good things, but I was feeling the bad things, except I didn’t feel them as bad as later...

Asked why she thought Christmas was so important to people, Liz said she thought it had ultimately ‘to do with family’. ‘I think it’s a time to be with family’, she said, ‘and people try to be nice to each other’. ‘It doesn’t always work’, she laughed, ‘but people do try’. Having said that, she felt that the level of societal pressure that was placed on people to do what was ‘expected’ of them at this time of year could sometimes be quite harmful. ‘You know’, she said:

it’s like everybody, even like now I’ve spoken to a few people today who I haven’t spoken to since before Christmas, and they say, “Oh did you have a good Christmas?” You know, who’s going to say, “No, I had a shit Christmas”, you know, so everybody lies about it...Those of us that have had bad Christmases don’t generally tell anybody, you know, just suffer it in silence, and then be glad when the day’s over

Asked whether she’d experienced any particularly bad Christmases before her divorce, Liz did not choose to dwell as might have been expected on the troubled years of her childhood when her parents had split and her mother had died. Indeed, she interestingly had rather few memories of Christmases from this time. Her answer was instead focused almost entirely around the untimely death of her baby son, who it eventually emerged had since come to be directly associated with the ‘protective’ guardian ‘angel’¹¹⁹ she had earlier spoken of:

¹¹⁹ This revelation interestingly emerged out of a conversation about Liz’ proud role as an angel in her school nativity play; a point of interest which to my mind offers an excellent example of the complex, and often ‘latent’, nature of the ‘clusters’ of ‘sensory codes’ which make up this type of ‘symbolic field’ (Turner 1982g: 19, 22), or in Sperber’s terms, ‘evocational field’ (1974: 115-149).

Yes, when my son died, that was a horrible Christmas...because it was November when it happened...so it was just a month before Christmas, or 6 weeks, so that was a horrible, horrible time, erm and I do remember it very clearly

To take the pressure off, and ensure their then three-year-old only daughter had 'a nice Christmas' with her cousins, the family had gone to Liz' in-laws which had in and of itself caused some tensions. 'They wouldn't let Hannah...open her presents...until the evening', Liz recalled:

and it was just like so cruel. And I just, you know, their tradition was different to our tradition

Conflicting traditions aside however, Liz admitted 'there was no way' she 'could have had a good Christmas' that year. For the truth was, she didn't actually even 'want a Christmas'. Tears welling up as she thought back to that day, she said:

I can even remember what Hannah was wearing actually...she was wearing a black and purple dress. She looked so pretty, but I was so sad.

Although Liz had felt a deep and irrevocable sadness 'every day' in the months after her son's death - a sadness which she told me had never truly left her - Christmas had undoubtedly appeared to intensify her feelings. 'I think generally about Christmas, I think there's expectations that everybody should be happy', she said:

you know, it's like with um, you know people with mental health problems...if they're not happy on Christmas day, you know it's like "Oh pull yourself together, you should be ok on Christmas day", you know, you get nice presents and you should be grateful, and you should be happy...but if there's something wrong with your mental health, you know it, it's quite difficult

Despite the pain it often caused however, Liz thought Christmas *did* ultimately have a 'positive' societal role to play overall. 'I think it does bring families together', she said, 'and people do try to be nice to each other'. 'You know', she continued:

if you look in the supermarkets...there's always those boxes...can you give a present, whether it be dogs, or cats, or local children. And I remember at the lunch we did, erm I went to sign on a few days before, and the woman there asked me what I was doing for Christmas, so I told her and she said they'd, everybody in the job-centre had chipped in money for that very charity, and I think people, it does make people think about people that are less off, you know less better off than themselves

Not so dissimilarly to those who feel wary of 'religion' being shoved down their throats at this time of year however, what Liz can't abide is charities who demand money at Christmas, sending through leaflet after leaflet after the hint of a first donation. There was it seemed something about all the hassling that took away her ability to give freely, acting instead to make her feel controlled and disrespected by some inauthentic corporate entity who cared only about money. 'In the end, I used to just write "gone away", and "return to sender"', she said. As much as she clearly thought Christmas was a time of giving, she likewise thought it a



Figure F. Gelf the Elf with Liz's hand-made elf gifted to me in memory of the Christmas we spent together

'shame' that 'a lot of people' just simply did 'their duty'. She was clear in this sense that, however much she missed seeing her children, she would 'never want' them to feel like they *had* to be with her. A lot can change in a year, she intimated, but she does nevertheless hope that she might be a little 'more settled' by next year. 'You know', she said almost as if writing her own mental Christmas list, 'I hope I'm

working, I hope I'll have more money, I hope I'll know more people'. 'But I also want to make sure that I *do* see the children, you know...at Christmas time-*ish*, whenever it is'. By then, she hoped she might be in a place where she felt 'peace and secure', and with any luck perhaps even more able to appreciate the 'Christmassy feeling' of 'peace and happiness' she had been unable to feel for so long.

5. The Christmas Tourist

‘Money, money, money’. These were the three words that summed up Christmas for Paul. When I mentioned over the phone that he might like to bring a symbol along to the interview, he admitted that all he could really think of was his bank-balance: ‘I could bring you a bank statement?’, he half-joked. Anxiety over spending pressures dominated the majority of our conversation, and cast a considerable shadow over his enjoyment of the festival. Asked what first came into his mind when he thought of Christmas, he said:

Christmas erm [pause] probably family time [pause]. And then if I’m completely honest expenditure. Financial outlay. Without a doubt, it just leaps to the forefront of my mind. And that is because of, er probably what me partner likes to do, supporting her to a certain degree - erm, think you have to draw the line somewhere, which then you get all sorts of accusations coming back your way, along the lines of, you know, “You’re the Christmas Grinch”, and things like that. And I’m absolutely not [pause] but that’s, you know, that’s erm, that’s where we’re at as a family. You know, as many families probably are. Current financial climate has you over a barrel, and if I had more I’d do a lot more. But you know, I keep saying, you can only spend it once...

Caught between the social pressure to perform, and the realities of limited funds, Paul was defensive when it came to discussing how he went about managing the high expectations of his partner, Kelly, and her two grown-up kids. Having suffered a series of strokes when she was younger, Kelly has only recently been able to return to employment, and so for many years, Paul has acted as the sole breadwinner. Handling a tight income has only been ‘compounded’ by Kelly’s struggle with bipolar depression and her high levels of anxiety. Though Paul takes full responsibility for the family’s finances, he finds that he is not often in

full control of them. Continually frustrated by the rest of the family's apparent lack of appreciation for the value of money, he despairs when he finds receipts for items he has not accounted for, or when he finds himself emotionally blackmailed into buying stuff he doesn't think they need or - more importantly - can afford. In this context, Christmas provides a natural source of conflict. Paul finds himself constantly reprimanding Kelly for her lack of judgement when it comes to how much should be spent and, though he is the first to say he wants to be able to 'have a good Christmas', he is clearly weighed down with the responsibility of always being the one who has to draw the line, and tighten the purse strings.

The trouble is, he says, 'having a good Christmas often relates back to getting lots of things'. Describing himself as 'the absolute polar opposite' of Kelly and her kids, he explained his version of 'having a good Christmas is different.' Whilst he's 'not frugal', he's personally 'just very content with what [he has].' Though he did mention a plethora of material gifts he had received as a child, the focus of these gifts seemed to rest very much around the *experience* of either receiving them, or using them. He spoke of the football shirts he would wear to Newcastle United matches with his 'Da', and with some gusto of the moment when he came down to the kitchen one Christmas morning to find a 'blue Grifta bike' with coloured gears. His main memories of childhood centred, it seemed, around going to places and doing things; in all likelihood a consequence of the free rail travel the family had enjoyed thanks to his Dad's job working on the railways. Perhaps unsurprisingly therefore, he explained that he 'would rather go to loads of places...have days out, go to the races, make memories, whatever you want to call it':

I'm not into material possessions at all. I do like nice things, but I can live without them, or I can accept something as it is. Whereas, you don't have to go the whole nine yards...If you want the best of everything, you get less. It's just simple economics. So, Christmas [pause] er, as much as it's a wonderful occasion [pause] it ultimately always comes back to a bit of a "are you kidding me" moment.

Incredulous at the level of expectation involved in providing a 'good Christmas', he spoke of how his friends 'can't wait' until they can tell their kids 'Santa doesn't bring everything.' When you consider everything these kids are getting, he said, it comes to 'about a grand each.' And

everyone says 'it will be better when they know that this magical Santa' doesn't exist, and that presents 'don't just drop from the heavens'. In his fraught attempt to accommodate his partner's wishes as best he can without tipping the financial and/or emotional balance, Paul has found himself entering into an incessant - and somewhat wearing - pattern of negotiation, compromise, and concession. Christmas has thus become something of a losing battle; a battle which, more often than not, has him surrendering in aghast apathy:

I honestly think a lot of it comes back to money. People just think, "Shit. How much is this going to cost?" I'd love to do a lot more in every aspect of me life, *particularly* around Christmas, and yeah I have to just think, you know, "Fuck it. Do what you want. If you spend more than 500 quid, you've spent more than 500 quid. And we'll just have to take one for the team every month." So...it's you know, it's expectation managing [pause] you try not to burst bubbles...She normally wins. But I'll always have me say. If that upsets her, tough shit like, you know, that's how it is. I haven't got fortunes, and cards have got limits on. You can only spend your money once, and if you're then prepared to do that, be prepared for not really doing much because you're down paying debt like everyone is - you know, a lot of people are...I'd love to just be able to pull 500 quid out for each kid, put it in their hand and say there you go. You know, the mythical 500 quid limit. What do you get for 500 quid these days?...You know, you've got a 20-year-old son wants a pair of trainers, a tracksuit...and then he wants to come to the Christmas market...you know. I've seen it all before...it's lovely, I like to come. But if you want to take the whole family, it's 100 quid night out having a sausage and a couple of glasses of Glühwein.

The bitter reality remains that Paul feels he simply just can't really afford to give his family 'a good Christmas.' He therefore spends much time fighting his corner, weighing up each 'Christmas experience' to scrupulously assess just how much value each thing really carries. The perennial weighty question at the back of his mind, and the front of his lips echoes: 'Is this going to be worth it?' 'You do try and monetise it', he said:

I didn't want to argue when we're walking round Morrisons, but you have to say like, "Are you for fucking real? Why do we need 24 pounds worth of beef?...I'd have half of that, and I would *love* to have it, but what are we going to do with it?"

Previously, they had gone to his Mam's for Christmas dinner, but Paul hasn't really spoken to his parents for the last six years or so due to a rift with Kelly. The rest of her family live much further away, and are also not on good speaking terms. For the last couple of years, they have experimented with going out for Christmas dinner to take some of the pressure off. The alternative had just proved too stressful. 'It was me Mrs', he justified:

like is Christmas Day going to be spent essentially in the kitchen from the night before...she's not particularly good with timings in the kitchen, and kind of anxiety kicks in. It's ridiculous if you don't suffer from it, but trying to time things, or cook things the night before, and warm them, present things like that, and dress the plate, it's just impossible, and [there's] possibly not a great deal of enjoyment there. And you think, for one day in the year [pause], shall we do it.

Though he is 'badly into' watching Christmas cooking programmes, Paul is not confident enough to cook the dinner himself, and so in the end, it's easier to just take everyone out. With as many as four adults to pay for however, this can get expensive, and first time round, he found himself quite outraged by the whole experience:

All I remember is being back home by about three o'clock in the afternoon thinking, I'm still hungry. I've paid 40 quid a head for a Sunday lunch. I've probably paid nearly 200 pound, and at least 160 quid, on lunches and we just got one drink cos of the cost. I'm back home, I spent 180 quid on Christmas dinner, and what on earth was all that about?!

They've now tried various different places, including an Italian restaurant where, Paul laughed, it was kind of hard to make it feel like Christmas. Like everything else, the decision on whether to stay in or go out remains continually under review. 'You try and keep a running tally of how much are we spending on a Christmas day in, and is that much more expensive,

with a lot less hassle to go out', he explained. Asked why he thought people felt so much pressure to make such an effort for Christmas, he said:

Apart from birthdays...I think, now more so than ever, it's...your potentially one kind of legitimate blow-out in the year [pause] cos, everyone's skint...Christmas is the only legitimate excuse for getting into debt, chucking the rule-book out the window, and *spending* to almost trick yourself into thinking that you're enjoying yourself having a good time. And maybes you are, maybes you're not. It's that short-term - you're buzzing when you buy your kids or your partner something. You think it's great and you're chuffed with all you've got. You get the reaction. That is then replaced by dinner...and then, you know, it's the kind of enjoyment as a family, whether it's games, having a crack, getting together...Whether you're going to get drunk, have parties, buy new outfits. You justify it. You know...sod it, "it's Christmas, it's Christmas, it's Christmas". You hear it from October onwards. "It's Christmas. Don't be a meany. It's Christmas. Don't be a Grinch. It's Christmas. Are you coming out? Put your hat on, get your Christmas jumper on" and that, and you're thinking like, you know, personally it starts too early. I won't even entertain Christmas until the 1st December at the earliest, and we normally have an argument about when the tree goes up. She puts it up whenever she wants, but sometimes she goes into the end of November. Sometimes it goes up to cheer her up.

Describing himself as a bit of an 'emotionless' person, he said if he was on his own he probably wouldn't bother doing much. If someone else wanted to come round and put something up, he'd 'let them', as long as they came round afterwards and took it down. Otherwise, he laughed, 'it would just stay up all year.' 'I'm just not into the hassle', he said:

But people do it, and when people make an amazing effort, I think, "Oh my god that's amazing", and I wish I was more...and this is another kind of argument we have - erm, that I'm not into like [pause] kind of *fuss*. But I love it when people do make a fuss, whether it's *for* me, or I observe, or I'm there. I want people to make a huge effort. I think it's absolutely great, whether they're decorating the tree, the house, putting banners up. You know, putting a huge party on. Whatever you're doing, it's great. If

I'm involved in it, great, I do get into it. But I am a bit kind of like the tin-man - I am a bit stony-faced. I don't cry at films...I don't know whether it's being an only child, or having had an awful lot of life experiences...Nothing really fazes me.

Back when he was single, he and his mates rarely 'bothered' with Christmas:

Three single white 20 odd, early 30-year-olds, we didn't put Christmas trees up. Me current partner would come in, cos she lived two doors down, and her kids would come in, and they would put some tinsel on the fireplace, or they would put a Christmas tree on top of the telly, just a little one. And if we would get cards off people at work, they would be up...We never bothered ourselves with Christmas trees, which me partner just constantly refers back to like I'm some kind of Scrooge Grinch.

According to Paul, Christmas was, when it came down to it, really for families. Women felt differently about it, he felt, because they had that 'motherly instinct.' Being single at Christmas was, he admitted, 'a bit lonely and a bit sad to be honest with you.' He often ended up staying in with an assortment of other 'waifs and strays' who had nowhere else to go. He'd 'get pissed, look around the room, thinking "where's all the birds." And then he'd straighten himself out, and crawl back to his Ma's for bubble and squeak on Boxing Day. The year his previous partner left him in the November, he'd even decided to pack it all in and work overtime 'to fill Christmas day.' He did this for a couple of years when he was working for his old company, who used to offer 'double time, Christmas dinner, a bottle of wine, and 50 quid extra for doing it'. Though this seemed an alright compromise, Paul agreed it certainly fell short of the ideal image of being with those you love at Christmas time. Asked why this was such a big deal, he said:

Well you've got to go somewhere, even the hardest of people...it does get you a bit dewy-eyed [pause], er sometimes the loneliness is a terrible thing. It's bad enough being long dark winter mornings and winter nights but, you know, when you see all the stuff running up to Christmas, and you're looking, and you're thinking, you know what I mean, "I wish I had a bird, I wish I had a family, I wish I had a kid, I wish I was sitting with someone." You know what I mean, it does get you, I don't care what

anyone says...whether you've lost someone, or there's a memory or something like that, you've gotta find somewhere to go at some point.

He continued:

I don't know, I think it can only take you back to your childhood, and your...first kind of positive memories of a fuss being made of you, or generally a fuss being made, and you probably crave for that. And you just think, you know, is it right I'm a thirty odd year old, you know, couple of single guys have a couple of high-fives on Christmas morning, and maybes have a bacon sandwich and stroll off to their parents with their tail between their legs cos their single. What a pair of saddos. Really, all we've got is one eye on...getting back to the house for 7 o'clock and getting the can open or...the play-station on, or having a joint...you know, is that all you want to do? Get absolutely, you know, bollocks off your face on Christmas night? What you gonna do, nowhere's open.

Remembering the times he'd worked in the pub trade over Christmas, Paul said he thought it was a 'disgrace' that people can get away with leaving their families to go out and get pissed 'on Christmas night.' Reflecting on this, he thought 'maybe' *that* had 'knocked the stuffing out' of him 'a little bit.' Getting quite worked up by this thought, he exclaimed:

You just think for flip's sake man, what on *earth* is it all about? Is this all it's about?

'I don't know', he said:

'maybe it's your own experiences rubbing off, but when you see big Christmas parties out, like genuinely, you think, "My god they're having a good time", you know, "Why aren't I out with my mates having a good time?" You know, it's horses for courses isn't it - where on the other time, you're thinking, "Oh my god, that's the worst Christmas party. They look like they're having a shit time, it's so *boring*. They clearly don't all like each other, or they're clearly accountants, and can't let themselves go, or whatever. If that's your Christmas party, I'd rather not bother.'"

Despite this admittance of calculated apathy, he was keen to defend against the 'Scrooge' accusation, expressing resentment at the burden of having to be the bad guy tasked with curbing the desires of those around him. He protested:

But you just think, I'm the only one who really looks after the money. I love having a nice time, as long as it's kind of affordable. And I know you've got to cut the purse strings once in a while. You've got to cut loose, but...you know, it's still within er [pause] moderation...because it then impacts on you for the rest of the year. Just because Christmas has gone and the tree's away...you know what I mean, then all of a sudden it's Easter...so, where does it end?

Where his patience really runs thin is over the 'lack of gratitude' expressed to him by Kelly's kids. Now in their 20s, the pair of them remain quite heavily dependent on parental assistance, demanding money and lifts at the drop of a hat for, it seems, not a whole lot in return. Paul goes along with this to keep Kelly happy, though clearly does so at a grudging cost. Finding himself perennially at the mercy of their whims, he nurses a brooding resentment at this violation of his time and resources. As we talked, he repeatedly castigated their seeming lack of responsibility, juxtaposing their poor attitude against his own upright, non-materialistic outlook; something he felt was a product of his 'good upbringing'.

'You know we weren't wealthy, but we weren't poor. Me Mam and Dad saved up', he explained. Straining back to his earliest Christmas memories, he recalled seeing his presents 'set up' and 'wrapped' in the living room. 'There wasn't loads' but 'there was enough to keep me satisfied', he said, adding: 'I was an only child, so everything...there was mine'; an admission which gave me pause for thought as I speculated over the emotional dynamics of his present situation. As he looked back to his childhood, the tinge of resentment seemed all too implicit:

I weren't a greedy kid. I wasn't a needy kid. It was potentially kind of managed out...I'm not materialistic at all, so didn't want amazing Nike trainers, or fabulous football boots. You know, back in the day, I was happy with a decent 20, 30 pound pair of

football boots - didn't want like, the latest boots worn by the best player, because I wasn't that kind of kid. I wasn't a dresser. I wasn't a poser. You know, I was just a normal kid at school like.

This makes for a direct contrast with Kelly's kids, and particularly her son Wayne, who spends his life going after every next designer brand. According to Paul, where they're concerned, 'Christmas is just an exercise in getting everything you've wanted for the past few months - getting a tablet, getting an iPhone.' 'That's all it is,' he said, 'it's just a pure transaction.' Occasionally, he grimaced, he'd even gone 'as far as' not buying anything, and simply making their 'Christmas money available' to them 'at some point in December.'

Now that both 'the bairns are older', he and Kelly have been 'doing a little bit of soul searching' as to how future Christmases might pan out. Wayne's behaviour this last Christmas seemed something of a final straw for Paul:

He really pissed us off Christmas day this year. You know, he was doing whatever, you know, 24 year olds do on council estates the night before...that he didn't touch his dinner. That was just a piss-take. I mean, the dog having a 50 pound Christmas dinner on Boxing Day, sitting on the floor in the kitchen. *He* thought it was - the dog thought it was *great*. I was just absolutely dying inside, erm [pause] so I don't really care what happens to him on Christmas day. He's got a lass, they live together, should be having Christmas day as a couple...I don't really give a shit where he has Christmas, he's got a flat erm, you know he's got a Christmas tree if he wants to put it up put it up. If not, I'm sure some member of the family, or one of his mates, will have Christmas day dinner with him. If his lass is, you know, on good terms with him and living there, she can make something. I don't want to see him on Christmas day, and I don't think his Ma does really, er so, I'm all for just taking meself out of that equation of family and visits altogether, and going to a log-cabin me, her, and the dog.

In the next breath, however, the same old sarcastic scepticism crept back into his mind, sweeping away the potential utopia of this new idea almost as quickly as it had arrived:

If he comes he comes, if he doesn't he doesn't. If he doesn't come, I'll probably get the job of going and picking him up on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day drunk, you know. And you just think...where we going to be, you know, how long's *that* drive going to be

There was hence a sense that Wayne was essentially spoiling the Christmas Paul could otherwise happily be spending together with Kelly in peace. Thinking about all the time and money he sacrifices for her kids, all that keeps coming back to his mind is, 'Do they deserve it just because it's Christmas. Do they deserve it? And on the whole', he resentfully concluded, 'probably not, nah.' For all he is forced to put in, ten times out of ten they simply end up, 'not saying thanks, probably not appreciating it, breaking it, easily losing it, forgetting about it, not using it, just not really giving a shit about what's gone into getting that gift to them.' Then there's all the 'related issues around Christmas':

of just like, "can I have some money to go out." Are you taking the piss. "It's two days after Christmas and I'm bored in the house." Well you've got a tablet or you can go and play on your bike. "Can I have some money for petrol?" Well use your Christmas money. "Well I didn't want to, I want to get a tracksuit with that." Well tough shit mate. Just they never ending of wanting, so I'm just kind of over it with them. You get what you get, and if you're not happy, I don't care. [pause] I really don't care. That's something you're going to have to process as a person, and I don't owe you anything in your life...I've lost out on this, that and the other trying to help yous move forward with your life

We see here quite clearly the manner in which Christmas comes to act as something of a reactive catalyst for Paul's rejection of Wayne's behaviour; or at least an incubator for the accentuation of such tensions. Paul reflects with some regret that this is behaviour he had no hand in from the beginning. 'The bar' being 'kind of...set' before he 'pitched in', he wonders what it might have been like had he had children of his own; had he not entered into 'an existing family' in which 'it's kind of the norm to get branded and named stuff.' Having a family at Christmas comes with 'responsibilities', Paul said:

It's all about memory making, creating opportunities, things like that, which is great. If I had me own kids, believe me they would, you know, they would get the whole nine yards. They would be round to Granny's for dinner and pulling crackers, and you know going to the panto, and stuff like that.

It thus seems that, as well as spoiling the possibility of a quiet Christmas with his partner, Wayne's behaviour also brings into sharp view a contrasting - and seemingly, rather resentful - lost vision of the Christmases Paul *could* have otherwise shared with his *own* kids who might have been rather more grateful. 'Looking back', he said, he wished 'a lot of things were different':

I wish she hadn't been ill. I wish Wayne wasn't such an asshole. You know, I wish he was a normal kid, and got a job, you know. But he doesn't think like that, so I have to get on with it.

Just as Paul grudgingly resigns himself to the life circumstances which constrain him, so he also resigns himself to the Christmas spirit. 'I don't know', he sighed:

you just, you know, once Elton John's on, and Slade's on and that, and, you know, you're thinking, "Ah gawd it's coming," I cannot do anything about it. I *have* to get into it. I'll concede I do get to that tipping point where I almost give up, and you just think, fuck it, get into it, try and enjoy it.

After some discussion of the various Christmas events he usually tried to get to, he said:

You know, Christmas is probably all about me trying to make meself feel Christmassy by taking in a Christmas event like a market, you know, midnight mass...a nativity play. I think, I've got to make meself feel Christmassy because, me tree in the house only does so much. Christmas films, Home Alone, only does so much. You know, stuff on the telly only kind of does so much.

What Paul has found really *does* give him a sense of ‘the true spirit and meaning of Christmas’ is going to Midnight Mass at Durham Cathedral. Having debated going for some years, he and Kelly turned up for the first time about two Christmases ago. Though he said he ‘possibly’ felt drawn there simply because he was ‘looking for a different experience’, Paul was quick to say he felt ‘a bit of a fool’ turning up when he doesn’t attend the Cathedral ‘or indeed any church at any other time of the year.’ ‘I’m not religious at all’, he confessed, ‘I don’t, you know, practice religion or anything like that.’ For Paul, going to the Cathedral at this time was first and foremost about looking for a new Christmas experience which was free of charge and gave them ‘something to do’ on Christmas Eve. ‘It was absolutely wonderful’, he said, adding:

and I’m not kind of soppy or dewy-eyed like that, but it was [pause] you know, you thought, “Ah right fair enough. That’s like, it’s real, it’s decent, it’s honest.”

Finally, here was a space which felt non-commercial, and ‘non-judgemental’; a space where ‘no one was wanting to sell [him] anything’, and where everyone was judged on an equal level whether they ‘were dripping in gold or hanging in rags’, whether they were a Japanese tourist, a regular Sunday worshipper, or a ‘Christmas tourist’ like him. It was a space that reminded him of ‘how it should be’ or ‘maybe’, he pondered, ‘how it was in the olden days’ when everything was stripped back to its ‘barest form’ and ‘nothing’ was ‘corporate’.

Fearing what he perceived to be the increasing dominance of the big corporates, and mourning the loss of the idiosyncratic local high-street, Paul felt the Cathedral provided something ‘unbelievably alien and unique’ in the context of modern society, and was keen to promote it as a bastion of the values of common decency and morality he believed had been in some way lost. Although he said he certainly didn’t feel a sense of *responsibility* to go, he did repeatedly express a fair amount of anxiety about his *right* to turn up to church. Whilst he appreciated the non-commercial nature of the space, there was something about this change in reciprocal relation that he couldn’t quite square:

I felt a bit of a fraud rocking up, yeah I did...I thought, you know, you don’t use the church for anything else, and I was probably getting more out of it than I was giving back.

It certainly wasn't about 'giving thanks to God', he said. After all, he'd really 'got nothing to thank him for.' But it did act as a reminder of 'where it all started from', and so he thought it was important to 'give it the respect.' If 'we didn't...have Jesus, would we have Christmas? What would we be doing right now?', he reflected; a firm hint of awe detectable. So, though he did clearly feel quite uneasy about his place there, Paul is now the first to recommend the experience to others, talking with some animation about how he had posted his photos on Facebook after their first visit. 'You should go and experience it for yourselves', he had implored his friends:

Not for the photos, but for how it makes you think and look at yourself, look at your family, look at your expenditure, look at what's under the tree, look at what's getting exchanged...and look at your Mrs and say, d'you know what, you're a fucking disgrace, what you spent on Christmas, d'you know that you're an absolute piss-take...you're an absolute piss-take, say to Wayne, you're a piss-take. What you're buying him, he doesn't deserve it, cos he goes on like an asshole throughout the whole year, a total chav. He's ducking and diving, and selling this, nicking that probably. Gawd knows what he does. He's in and out of work, you know driving uninsured, and I just think [pause] you deserve fuck all son.

Though 'bits' of the service were 'certainly definitely not for [him]', Paul felt he could 'appreciate' it for 'what it [was]', whilst engaging in some concentrated personal reflection, free for once from all the usual irritating 'distractions' of his family, and of the consumer world. Asked what kind of emotions were evoked in this process, the response came:

Probably regret, sadness, wishing that things were different, erm [pause] hope that they can be.

He added:

You know, I don't take anything out of the religion from it. It doesn't make us, you know, want to start wearing a cross or, you know, I'm not going to go on some mad crusade or convert.

Asked whether he believed in God, he said:

I couldn't tell you. There's too many different people believe in, you know, they can't all have these different religions, can't have all these different gods worshipping in a different way. So there's not one, so there can't be one, and on the back of that, there's not one for Buddha, for Allah, for Christian, you know, there's not loads of gods so [pause] I guess probably not overall [pause] because they just, the simple mechanics of it tells us that [pause] there's nothing there. It's, you know, do what you want, believe what you want, you know, say what you want, but there's nothing there mate. I know there's nothing substantive there. I know it might be in the back of your mind or, you know, you might feel as though there's some extra-terrestrial force sometimes, or if it makes you happy to kneel down in front of a cross sometimes and look at the sky, if that's what floats your boat mate, so be it. But I know there's nothing up there.

So 'would you ever pray?', I pushed:

Me? [pause] No, because it's wrong, because that's an even bigger fraud than going to the church on Christmas Eve. You know, um, lying under a car - "Oh my God please don't let me die" - why should he help you mate? You know...you cannot just suddenly play the "God help us" card cos you're in the shit. I think you have to like go to the well so many times before you even think it's going to be effective what you were asking for. It's like just knocking on someone's door and saying, "Hi I know I don't know you, I'm in the shit, but can you possibly help us out?"

There was it seemed something just plain unfair about the nature of this uneven dynamic of reciprocity that Paul found it impossible - and in fact irresponsible - to accept. 'I haven't got the time to give to get nothing substantive back', he said.

If you're like just continually placing bets and always losing...thinking one day the bookie's going to pay us out, cos I'm that sad loser who's regularly in and loses all the time, he'll say, "You poor fucker, there's 100 pound. I cannot bear seeing you lose all the time", or the pub landlord, maybes he's buying you a pint all the time - "I'll get you that one, that's on the house." Well that's fair enough, aye. Well just constantly going to church every Sunday...maybes I *would* see something back, maybes you know, the sea would open or you know six horses would appear to me in a dream and...I'd book them all on me accumulator...and...I would look at my accumulator and pay a million pounds. And I would look at the heavens and say, *thank you lord*. You know, I'm going to give 10 grand to the church, or 10 grand to disadvantaged people, or something like that.

Hence, although he did disclose something of a lingering doubt over the God stuff, Paul's sense was that it was all such a long shot that it simply wasn't worth investing in. Would he call himself an atheist I wondered? He hesitated on this one, pausing, before answering:

I don't think there's anything there because I've never seen anything substantive [pause] and it's never really benefitted me in any way. It hasn't hindered me in any way though. But it hasn't benefitted me in any way. I don't get anything out of it. But on the other hand, I don't give to it, so I don't want to take anything back from it...Some people go hard for it you know, some religions I don't understand. You know, these people who turn east and pray to Mecca. And, you know, they do it so many times a day and that, and I just think, "Mate, how does that benefit you?" Apart from spiritually or mentally, I don't see any physical or financial benefit, but if it benefits you spiritually, if that's what you want to take from it, so be it.

Though he appreciated the church experience for what it was at Christmas time, it certainly didn't make him want to go back on a regular Sunday. He was clear, this was a one off 'Christmas tourist' experience. However, one or two things the vicar said did 'put a few things back on [his] conscience', reminding him of his 'responsibilities to others' and satisfyingly

endorsing not only his anti-consumerist sentiments, but his broader cultural attitudes; all of which he came to tie to 'the true spirit and meaning of Christmas':

and I thought, that is the true spirit and meaning of Christmas. Like, no-one was wanting to sell us anything, there was no corporate branding there, you know, and I just remember the guy saying, you know, he did put a few things back on your conscience, and it was good that he did...you know he talked about society and modern day life and that, and you know, refugee word came up, and you know, immigrants and things like that. He did say that it's a little bit sad that all the lights say "season's greetings", they don't say "happy Christmas" any more or anything like that, I thought d'you know what mate, you are absolutely spot on there, so erm, Christmas is Christmas, um, and if you're in England, and you don't like it, it's still Christmas

Trying the next go-to card, I asked, 'Would you describe yourself as a spiritual person?':

I don't know, cos this world's a spooky place innit. There's little spooks all over the place. I do appreciate that there cannot just be walking talking human beings knocking about planet earth. There's too much weird stuff goes on [pause] that I don't think science has an answer for. There...there has to be [pause] something. I couldn't tell you what it is, but some funny old things happen, some bad things happen, some good things happen, some downright peculiar things happen that have no right to happen, and you just think, how did you come out the other end of that? You had no right to win that, do that, survive that. You know, there before the grace of God, like the cards have absolutely fell in your favour that day. Can't see you ever being that fortunate, lucky, but at the end of the day, you know, what is luck? Same with good fortunes. You make your own luck in business. You know, in betting in sport, you maximise every opportunity to win - is it that luck is at the cusp of cheating, or is the sun just shining down on you one day and it's your day? Is it karma? Is it fate? Does life know you've had it rough, and it gives you a little bit and you maximise it, or do you just miss it completely?

This notion of 'luck' has, it seems, been central to Paul's life. Indeed, he admitted he had signed up for the interview as a way of trying to give something back. He had no idea who I was, or what I was really doing it for, but he felt sorry for me, and thought hell with it, what goes around comes around - 'how many people are going to do this for this lass.' Tellingly, the best Christmas present he'd ever received was a year's membership to a racing club. As our conversation progressed, it became clear that horse-racing was his one true passion in life. It went back, he thought, to the days when he used to watch it with his Grandad. 'Me Grandad would probably have *The Sun* with the racing pages out', he said, 'I just remember seeing pen marks against the horses' names.' Of course, back then, he 'didn't know anything about them.' This changed when, at about 13 or 14, he put '50 pence each way on four horses in the grand national.' To his delighted surprise, they came in '1 2 3 4', and he went to pick up the winnings himself. This led to a series of lucky streaks for which he received much astonished adulation from his peers. It didn't take long before he was hooked. Every bit of time off he could get went into building a knowledge of the racing world - of the 'intricate puzzle' of each up-and-coming race:

...there was just something to work toward. Every Saturday there was a couple of decent races on the telly, and it was free to watch it, and you didn't have to bet. And then it was always there for you, and I would kind of get up in the morning on me days off when there was nought happening, I'd go to the bookies and read the paper, watch a few races to share the chat, try and get me head round the intricacies of horse-racing, cos sometimes it's just as easy to go down the paper and say, "Oh he's in prime, I'll bet that."

This was the place where he appeared to feel most alive; the place where he could focus his mind free of all other distractions and worries, the place where he was finally free of such constraints, the place where he could just simply be himself; where he could do what he wanted in exactly the way that he wanted to do it. And yet, increasingly, it was becoming a part of his life which had to be snatched here and there. That he hadn't been able to make the most out of his Christmas present seemed in some way symptomatic of this. Asked what was most important to him in life, he justified his current life circumstances after some considerable hesitation:

The most important thing is just being happy and healthy and - current climate - obviously keeping your head above water, and where possible, try and have as nice a *time* as possible that doesn't involve going out to the best places, having the wildest time...it's about just managing expectations...

This markedly appeared to match his sense of the central message of Christmas which he spoke almost as though he was speaking directly to his partner:

Let's try and have a good time together collectively with ourselves, me and you, the kids. But let's keep it sensible...you know, go here, go there. But you're having a quiet January and a quiet February, and as long as you accept that, and you know that, you can't get upset when I remind you of it.

Unsurprisingly, his one wish for Christmas next year would be 'a million pounds' on his credit card. This way he eulogised, he could pay for Christmas as he went, and have everything accounted for and 'dealt with'. 'Two grand would do it', he said, 'and I'm not saying ten grand or naught like that. I'm not about to start buying diamond rings. Just two grand. Two grand would absolutely do it, no questions asked, all paid for.'

A POSTSCRIPT OF TRIFLE & BAUBLES

Alongside his bank-balance and a few decorations from his childhood he guesses his Mam still has, Paul suggested his Mam's trifle might be a good symbol to represent Christmas with. He explained:

I love to get everyone together. Years ago, before we kind of fell out, me and the kids *would* go over together with the Mrs, and me Mam would make Christmas dinner. Me Mrs doesn't really like me Ma's cooking, but fuck me, she can make a Christmas dinner, and me Mam's trifle is the only thing me Mrs will say, ask your Mam to make us a trifle. It's an old 80s Delia Smith recipe and it takes about two or three days to make cos you have the sponge, and then the kind of jelly, and then real custard, and

proper thick like double cream, and you know, bits of fruit in it. And me Mam's trifle is UN - REAL. I don't have a sweet tooth. I'm not into desserts. I'm not a chocoholic. But I swear to God I could eat an entire bowl of my Mam's trifle in one sitting. I've seen us in it three spoons, just eating like cartoon characters, and the dog just trying to put his nose in it. It is unbelievable. Ah you know what - Christmas memory - me Ma's trifle. I'll try and get a picture of it for you.



Figure A. Paul's Mam's trifle

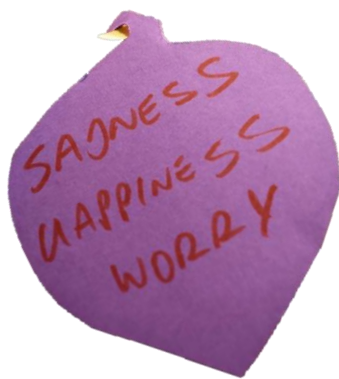


Figure B. 'Christmas Emotions'

'I'm going to have to write sadness. But not like [long pause] but not like suicidal, or nothing like that. I just...you know, maybes it's just the current climate, you just wish everything was better...people had more money in their pocket, life was easier, society was [pause] erm [pause] I'm going to have to write happiness as well even though it sounds totally [long pause] another emotion [long pause] Tell you what. I'm going to say, I'm going to have to say worry, from the financial perspective.'

L: 'Why giving and togetherness?':

P: 'Cos it ultimately does come down to giving...And it's...you know apart from birthdays, it's probably the only...excuse you've got to say, "Fuck it, it's Christmas, we're all off!"'



Figure C. 'Central message of Christmas'

6. The Stabat Mater

*'For many, I remain the Mary of Christmas cards.
If I am to be called blessed,
please remember all I stand for.*

*As you receive your cards this Christmas,
please look at me - and remember that
this is only the beginning.'*

(Baker 2005: 38).¹²⁰

It was with a hesitant, and yet quietly discerning, composure that Hazel met my bouncy nervousness. A few seconds, and I clicked into her somewhat more mellow tone, sensing distinctly the awkward dislocation of my go-to demeanour. Christmas, and indeed 'life', had changed 'irrevocably' for Hazel's family when the youngest of her two sons was killed in action in Afghanistan on 23rd December. It had in fact been the first Christmas Charlie had not been due to come home; but nothing could have prepared them for the news that was to come in his place. 'The day that we were told will live in me forever and a day', Hazel told me. Of course, given what he did, 'the risk was always there.' But naturally, 'you work on the assumption that, it's not going to happen to you.' And so when the news came, it was a 'horrendous shock'. 'As the years go by...I won't say it gets easier', she said:

I hate that expression. You learn to live with it...and I suppose you get used to coping with the emotion...and friends remain a huge support...as does the military...and you just, if you break down in floods of tears, well so be it, you know that you'll get through it, and pick yourself up again.

Though 'there are plenty of other times in the year which are hard', Christmas has inevitably become a particularly 'emotional time' for Hazel and her family. 'I do get very emotional when I go to church on the 24th for the midnight service', she confessed. 'It just all sort of comes

¹²⁰ Extract from a poem Hazel found particularly striking when read at a recent Christmas carol concert at the school where she works. I cite it here for what I hope will become obvious reasons.

flooding back.’ Hazel is very closely involved in her rural village and local church community, and also in the Catholic school where she has worked for some years as a drama teacher. The loving support she has received - and the sense of gratitude she feels for this support - was movingly palpable throughout our conversation. And yet, this is a gratitude that is often tinged with deep sadness. Reflecting on how people relate to her around Christmas, she commented:

Because everybody is aware of the timing...of course they hug me [pause] erm, they make a fuss of me, they ask me how I am. In a funny sort of way that actually - no, it doesn’t make it *worse*, it makes it more difficult. Because as soon as people start showing you that kind of thoughtfulness, then...you well up, and then they cry as well, and in a funny sort of way that’s singularly unhelpful.

‘I suppose it just makes it all the more apparent’, I conjectured. ‘It does’. She hesitated. ‘But on the other hand, I would hate it if people didn’t continue to acknowledge it.’ It seems that the complex feelings stimulated by this mutuality of emotional recognition sometimes just become almost too overwhelming to process. This form of emotional mutuality is likewise silently symbolized in the local church’s Christmas flowers which are now always ‘for Charlie’; a powerful material gesture of recognition by the community of which the family is a part. The large number of Christmas cards they receive are similarly ‘very carefully worded’. ‘Even if they say Happy Christmas, there’ll be a hand written note, “We’ll be thinking of you specially”, or words to that effect’. It is this ‘sort of thoughtfulness’ which really gets to Hazel. Indeed, only the morning of our interview, a work colleague had left ‘a card and a beautiful bunch of flowers’ on her desk for Mother’s Day. It’s ‘things like that’ that ‘make me well up’, she said. Recognising this outpouring of emotionality as being particularly relevant to my line of exploration, I pressed her further:

L: So when you’re saying that sort of thing makes you well up, what kind of an emotion is that? Clearly it’s a kind of sadness, but it’s not *just* sadness is it...

H: No it *isn't*, no. It's a gratitude as well I suppose for people continuing to acknowledge and recognise [pause] the fact that [pause] erm, you know, those feelings will never leave me now.

Given the very public nature of Charlie's death and the centrality of the family in the life of their communities, Hazel has it seems received a sustained level of acknowledgement for her loss. This is an acknowledgement which extends well beyond the obvious sensitivity attached to the Christmas season. The sense of deep pride bound up with this acknowledgement has come to shape her personal identity - and indeed, her corresponding sense of purpose - in profound ways. A significant part of her life has now become dedicated to enshrining the legacy of her son's memory, and it was with an arresting tone of positive tenacity that she told me about the various charity 'challenges' her elder son and friends have organised together in his honour. Hence, though occasions like Remembrance are 'obviously...hard', she feels 'fortunate' that she is able to 'take an active part in things' and is 'always very proud' to do so. Perhaps due to the quality of this ongoing community support, Hazel does not find herself feeling 'alienated' *as such* by the conflicting moods of the Christmas season. The heightened emotions just simply make it, in her words, 'more difficult to cope'.

It's difficult 'because you don't feel quite as jolly as you did in the past', and 'I suppose', she said, 'I'm very affected by music as well'. 'Any music...which for *me* is particularly beautiful...can set me off', she said. And yet, this high level of triggering emotionality does not stop her from seeking out these kinds of aesthetic experiences. Indeed, she and her husband have now for some years attended one of the Christmas morning services in Durham Cathedral for the love of the beautiful music and atmosphere. Perhaps the main reason that they feel drawn to that particular space, however, is that Charlie's funeral had been held there. 'On Christmas day', she said, 'when we are...a bit more vulnerable emotionally...then it's very unusual for us not to cry in church.' 'Do you feel that the nature of those tears have changed over the years?' I asked. 'I don't know that they *have*', she said:

I've always been very honest about my feelings, and I can truthfully say that I've never felt bitter...Charlie chose to do what he did...erm [pause] and I can't say, why *us*...I

have to think of it in terms of why *not* us...So I think I've always felt simply a very very deep sadness. So my tears have been...

She became emotional for a moment –

‘...they’ve been tears of sadness, not bitterness.’

The intensity of this sadness comes and goes. But it is at moments like Christmas that it comes more sharply into focus. As the 23rd December approaches, she admits she does find herself starting to get ‘sort of tense’ and ‘more worked up.’ ‘I’ve always loved Christmas, and still *do*’, she affirmed with some resolve, ‘but I, at the moment, still find it very difficult to think much further ahead than the 23rd December.’ The family now try to fill the day as much as they can, and ‘keep busy’ by seeing friends and doing all the things they know Charlie would have loved. He was ‘very very active’, Hazel explained:

and he loved living here, he just loved the open air and all the activities...so we have a walk somewhere, and then we have a really good lunch in one of his favourite pubs...so we, we get through the day, and I suppose if I’m honest, I then almost breathe a sigh of relief

In some ways, she pointed out, none of these things are all that different from what they would have done before. But that is just the point. It is the very maintenance of familiar activity that is - and has been - key to keeping Hazel and her family going through their grief. Hence, whilst the timing of Charlie’s death and its association with Christmas has undoubtedly *intensified* the tonal quality of their loss, it has also arguably provided a generative platform on which they might process it; or rather a set of pre-established ritual-symbolic resources from which they might draw, and fall back on. We see here a good example of the manner in which the contrast provided by the Christmas ideal becomes something of a double-edged sword. ‘There was certainly a kind of incongruity about it’, Hazel reflected as she looked back on the day they had discovered the news of Charlie’s death. ‘The Padre and the Commanding Officer arrived at 8 o’ clock in the morning. And of course, the house was decorated for Christmas, and the tree was up, and there were cards everywhere...and shopping and

presents...It was all sort of surreal somehow.’ She has never talked about Christmas with anyone else who’s been bereaved, but she can only imagine they behaved ‘typically’. ‘I think most people have a certain resilience in them’, she said, describing how they somehow found the impetus to push through, and ‘go through the motions’ that year. ‘I hadn’t wrapped all the presents up’, she said:

but having done the shopping, I was *determined* that friends would *have* their gifts, and a local friend said, “Look, tell me what needs to go where, and I’ll deliver them for you.” So that was nice. Family presents: again, because we had done the shopping, I thought well, we’ll exchange gifts as we always have done.

The first Christmas after that year was, she admitted, hard. ‘It was difficult really to find the enthusiasm’, she said, pausing to find the words:

Yes, I just [pause] I felt as though I couldn’t be bothered...I didn’t want to put up decorations. I couldn’t be bothered with cards. The thought of preparing *anything* was dreadful to me. And then I had a good talk to myself, and I thought, this is absolute *nonsense*. You have a husband, you have a son. At that time my mother was still alive. And I thought Charlie wouldn’t want us just to stop...He was too keen on life, erm [pause] so I got on with it...and again, I think that was the right thing to do. And it helped, because you *can’t* just sit and be miserable all the time. You know, whatever’s churning around inside you...I *can’t* just sit and be miserable, it’s not in my nature...so in the end we, we *did* manage to send some cards, and we *did* put up decorations, and we *did* buy a tree...

‘And I could almost imagine Charlie on his little cloud somewhere saying, “Oh for goodness sake, get a grip, and get on with it!”’, she added with a warm laugh. ‘So this was what really convinced you to make the effort?’, I searched. There was a long pause.

I think I would have felt [pause] not *ashamed* of myself [pause] erm, but not *impressed* with myself. I think if I had not bothered, and Christmas had come and gone, then I would have looked back, and thought, oh you were *pathetic*, you know, you *really*

should have got a grip, and done it. But as things *were*, I actually felt quite proud that I *had* found something that made me get on and do things, possibly partly support of people around me, probably partly tradition, and habit. My mother was with us when, the year that Charlie was killed, and she was absolutely wonderful. And it was thanks to her really that we got through things that Christmas in the way we did...She made sure that we ate...that we got *on* with stuff. But I mean, she was - she must have been 90...and I think for her to have shown that kind of strength, and support for *us* - because a lot of people said she must have been grieving twice, because she was grieving for her grandson, but also for her daughter - erm, so possibly the next time around I sort of thought, *heavens* mother's not going to be pleased if I don't get going.

'I suppose she would have been of that stiff upper-lip generation', I mused. 'Yes...because, of course, she lived through the second world war....and I think that *was* the attitude', Hazel affirmed:

'You know, life was to be lived and, yes, alright all these *horrendous* things were going on...but you jolly well keep the home fires burning, and do what you *do*...and people *did*...And I think that kind of approach has stuck with that generation.'

Upon engaging in this discussion, I began to detect a distinct implicit parallel between the tonal 'ethos' of the 'Keep Calm and Carry On' attitude which is so readily culturally associated and held up in the British context as paradigmatic of this war-time generation - and which



was indeed sometime after this interview rather strikingly resurrected in widespread invocations of war-time 'community spirit' amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic - and the tonal 'ethos' of the 'Christmas spirit' (Geertz c1973c). Whilst such parallels are in a sense of course incidental, it is I believe important to attend to the ways in which the distinct tenors of particular generational attitudes may become subliminally absorbed into compatible ongoing cultural moods. Irrespective of the precise nature of the parallel, there is no doubting the

similarly hope-driven and death-defying quality of *communitas* which ‘pervades’ these interrelated attitudes of British resilience and morale (Geertz c.1973b: 97).

It hadn’t directly occurred to Hazel until our conversation that Christmas may have actually in a strange way been part of what kept her family *going*. Yes, it had been something they just simply had to *get through*. But it had also paradoxically been the thing that had got them up off their feet and kept them connected to others. Christmas had given them a *reason* to carry on; functioning as an effective symbolic phenomenon and indeed *means* by which positive, hope-driven, life-affirming attitudes could be projected, performed, and absorbed. As time goes on, it has become for Hazel more of a time for ‘reminiscing’ and ‘reflection’; an exercise in a certain kind of integrative ‘remembrance’. Like many of those I spoke to,



Hazel remembered most fondly the years her children were young, and is filled with ‘gratitude’ for the joy of this time. She has carefully kept all the various little decorations they made at school; the ‘toilet rolls with beards and faces’, the funny little ‘Christmassy’ pipe-cleaner figures they had made with her mother. These were the things she had proudly chosen to show me, and these are the things that still come out year after year. Laughing as she gently repositioned the pipe-cleaners, she said:

I have in the past sort of had what you might call the children’s section...to Tim’s distress now, well in fact to Charlie’s as well when he was alive. You know, it was “Oh do you *have* to put out all those?!” I said, well actually yes I *do*!

She questioned herself for a moment. ‘I suppose they reflect happy times which we treasure’, she concluded, ‘and I don’t want them just stuck in a cupboard somewhere.’ As might be imagined, ‘nothing matches’ on Hazel’s Christmas tree.

I’ve got things that the boys made, things that friends have given us...things that were my mother’s...things that John’s parents gave the children...John travels a great deal

so he's brought various things back from abroad....so it's a real mish-mash. [laughs]
But they all *mean* something...I mean, an awful lot of things come out at Christmas that have *meaning* for us.

It is this generation of shared 'meaning' that ultimately makes Christmas time so important to Hazel. 'I suppose', she reflected, 'I've always believed in the celebration...of special events...and in *making* certain things special.' She is therefore insistent that she must, and indeed *does*, still 'get into' the Christmas 'mood'. However, this is a 'mood' that has now undoubtedly become 'tinged' with something else. The natural reminiscing that comes with this celebration of meaning is by its nature both positive and painful. There is 'always that...sort of mix...of both sides of the coin'. To affirm life is to affirm her son and all that he stood for. But it is also to emphasise the loss of that life. As we have seen, this sense of loss is often tied up at Christmas with a sense of a loss of the hopeful, joyful vitality of childhood, and more broadly with a felt loss of innocence. But in this case, this dynamic is itself powerfully intensified in the loss not just of a *child*, but of the *life* of that child. For Hazel, keeping the 'spirit of Christmas' alive has become tangentially tantamount to keeping 'Charlie's spirit alive'. It seems that, in her eyes, Charlie has come to shine as an icon not only for happier times, or even a positive attitude *towards* life; but for youth, for action, and ultimately, for Life itself. The deep absence that shrouds this icon can almost be directly traced onto, and over, the sense of absence implicit in the jarring timing of his death. For, as Hazel herself puts it, Christmas is ultimately about 'the beginning of new life'.

'I mean it's a birth', she said, a quiet energy building as she contemplated what the festival really meant to her. Though her Christian faith had not really become especially significant to her until after she had her children, she had very much been brought up in the atmosphere of church-going, and reported that her parents would have certainly always have attended services at Christmas and Easter. She was quietly reflective as we came to discuss the ways in which she had attempted to reconcile and understand her faith after Charlie's death. 'I have considered the fact that a lot of us *need* to believe in something outside our immediate sphere as it were', she ventured. 'I wouldn't say my faith is strong. I question a lot'. Despite this, however, she felt her faith had in fact actually become stronger since Charlie's death. Whether this is because she has more of a 'need' for it, she's not sure. But as the years have

gone by, she has become increasingly struck that it is *people* who have carried the capacity to uphold her in faith. It was *people* who had run around and supported her family after Charlie's death, and it is these 'compassionate, thoughtful' people she believes 'God is working through'.

It is, it would appear, exactly this conceptualisation of faith that becomes intensified for Hazel at Christmas, and which appeared to be represented in her understanding of the festival's central message. Indeed, as was so often the case in this exercise, there is a very real sense in which the key Christmas values of 'new life', 'giving' and, 'togetherness' Hazel identifies on her bauble act as a hopeful - if painfully implicit - reconciliation of the inevitably conflicting emotions she chooses for the other side. As for so many others, this message was closely and intimately interwoven with an idealisation of that which she reported to be most important to her in life: her family, and 'all the things' she shares with them 'in terms of emotion, activities, holidays, events...tragedies [and] joys.' If she had one wish for future Christmases, she told me, it would be that she would perhaps be able to find 'a little bit more *strength*...not to find things quite such an effort'; to 'perhaps...find...a bit more of' her 'original, natural energy for it.'



Figure A. 'Christmas Emotions'



Figure B. 'Central message of Christmas'

7. The Christmas Provider

Christmas for Claire immediately called to mind tangibly ‘visual’ images of ‘a light in the darkness’. ‘We used to live, when I was a kid, in Portsmouth and there used to be fairy-lights in all the trees. So I think I think of Christmas trees and lights and things’, and ‘probably’ she added as an afterthought, ‘the music’. ‘I guess that’s kind of superficial in a way’, she conceded, suppressing a half-nervous laugh. ‘But when I think of Christmas I think of, yeah, the lights, the music, the sounds, the kind of *feeling*, the atmosphere of it I guess’. The ‘significance of the light’ she ventured, has to do with a human need to have ‘something to look forward to in winter’. Speculating on this further, she mused:

I mean [sigh] as a child thinking about Christmas, I didn’t really think any more deeply about it than...wow they’re pretty, that’s nice...As an adult, I suppose it...probably stems from, like I say...because the days are short, and humans just like to, to mark that; to bring light into the dark months, and have something to celebrate at a time where naturally, I suppose you...you feel quite, you know [low sound], cos it’s winter.

This positive aim established, it was with an embarrassed weary-worn sigh of reluctance that Claire admitted that, if she was ‘honest’, she ‘personally’ hasn’t ‘really enjoyed Christmas massively’ since she moved to the area a few years back with her husband Ollie, and their two children, Isobel (3), and Tyler (7), who I had met personally through my fieldwork in the school.¹²¹ She explained:

¹²¹ It was indeed through this part of my fieldwork that the interview came to be arranged. That I had engaged with Tyler’s class in the school environment gave Claire and I an obvious point of connection and discussion.

I feel that because the kids are getting older...it's all about...preparing things for *them* and making it special for *them*. And it *is* lovely to see their faces, and the enjoyment that *they* have...But I find Christmas hard work. It's kind of stressful to think of everyone you've got to send a card to, and a present to. And so for me, I do kind of feel that the past few years, it has kind of lost its magic for me personally...Because I do remember as a child it was, you know, you look forward to it so *much*. And I think to be honest, I'd not say I was dre-dreading it per se [slight laughter], but it's just you think, *ohh* it's just another [sigh] bunch of jobs.

To get everything done in time, Claire starts wrapping in November, and by the time Christmas day is over and done with, she's had enough. The tree came down the day after Boxing Day this year, and she was 'like, 'let's get that away, it's over now'. I felt like it was some kind of 'exercise, like a project, like I'd handed it in, and it was done', she said:

That's how Christmas felt to me this year. You've ticked all the boxes, you've done it all, presents wrapped, everyone's happy, and I just wanted to take the tree down, and get a move on. And I like hoovered everywhere, and then was like *right* [laughs]...And the excuse - I said, "I'm doing it because we're about to spend a week with my parents over New Year", but that wasn't really it. I was doing it because I just wanted to draw a line under it I think [laughs]

Claire is certainly not alone in finding Christmas 'hard work'. Christmas-induced stress and anxiety constituted perhaps one of the most common conversational themes that arose during my fieldwork, particularly (although not by any means exclusively) amongst women, and especially amongst mothers. The extent to which people were prepared to *admit* to the existence of such stress revealed a plethora of asserted positions and attempted coping strategies. I encountered a fair few who seemed embarrassed to admit, and anxious to conceal, the underlying stresses involved in the planning and execution of Christmas. But more often than not, I witnessed the keen performance of comedic *allusions* to stress; witty, caustic asides which appeared to compensate by providing those involved with a sense of solidarity often seemingly tinged with a peculiarly British ironic black humour of shared complaint; of common fortitude in the face of a shared affliction or irritation.

A sense of this dynamic was clearly discernible as Claire eased into the conversation. In her case, however, the references to stress - as indeed to other challenging topics - were not so much shrouded in sarcastic comedy as tentatively, and often somewhat apologetically, confessed. Her adopted tone was self-critical, revealing a deep-thinking, considerate individual who clearly examines her social perspectives with some care. Our conversation was interlaced with self-conscious parentheses which readily displayed this predisposition to question and cross-check reactions and opinions for any conceivable inconsistencies and prejudices; a thinking pattern which is presumably fed by her professional training as a GP. Though her opinions were often strongly held, she remained at all times careful to re-evaluate and monitor the image she projects both to herself and to others. It felt at times almost as if she was asking my permission to admit to the multi-layered truth of some of her more latent feelings, and she was often anxious to check for reassurance that her reactions seemed fair, reasonable and - as was not uncommon amongst my interviewees- *normal* in comparison with others I had spoken to.

For some time now Claire's life - and indeed her Christmas - has, both practically and emotionally, revolved around the needs of her children. It was therefore perhaps apt that our time together was itself very much managed round the intermittent needs of three-year-old Isobel, whose concentration span was tested to its limit as her mother was distractedly otherwise engaged in answering questions. My visit had been scheduled during some of the only free time Claire had when Tyler was at school, and in fact ended up lasting most of the school day. The latter half of the interview was hence decidedly accompanied, and erratically interrupted, by Bananas in Pyjamas, super-heroes, cheese sandwich deliberation, occasional hairdressing, Sylvanian Families, roly-polies, and strained cries of 'WASH MY PANTS' - a key phrase from a game I found myself having to decipher whilst Claire made Isobel's lunch - as Isobel and I battled for Claire's attention. For the most part unfazed by this, and moving with some considerably experienced versatility between the two of us, Claire seemed to find the conversation a highly stimulating one, and was quite content to let it run on through the day. She had in fact become so engrossed that it came as quite a surprise when it came time to head back out to collect Tyler. Not accustomed to being the focus of attention, Claire was politely circumspect as she began to explore her own feelings. However, as the conversation

opened out, there was a real sense of cathartic relief present; the spirit of candid companionship growing stronger between us as she discovered the interview space as a safe forum in which to test ideas, and offload some of the burdens of motherhood she usually keeps to herself.

In many ways, our conversation was about just this. Motherhood. That most intimate of social institutions which - alongside its classically romanticised connotations of femininity and domestic nurturing - has undoubtedly come to play a vital role in the associative cultural-symbolic taxonomy and upkeep of 'Christmas'. The initiation into this parental role clearly involves a significant transition of status, outlook, and activity (Hockey & James 2003; Janusz & Walkiewicz 2018), and clearly constitutes for many an absolutely crucial experience of transition in the evolution of family Christmases. Claire feels a sense of this transition keenly, and a significant proportion of our conversation was dedicated to contrasts between life before and after becoming a mother. Bemoaning the loss of her personal enthusiasm for Christmas since having kids, she seemed anxious to justify her feelings. 'But you're sort of *providing* everything!', I eventually found myself interjecting, as I felt the growing need to offer some form of validation in the midst of these self-recriminations. The suggestion came to Claire instinctively in an excited revelation. 'YES!' she practically shouted in relieved recognition. Rather taken with this idea, Claire enthusiastically jumped to embrace the concept throughout the remainder of our conversation, and eventually expanded it into her own perceived contrast between 'Christmas consumers/enjoyers' and 'Christmas providers'.

BECOMING THE CHRISTMAS PROVIDER

Becoming 'Christmas provider' had initially been a life-goal Claire had welcomed with a determined, and perhaps even zealous, enthusiasm. As soon as she and her husband had acquired a home appropriate for hosting people, she had relished the chance to be able to put Christmas on for those who had put it on for *her* in the past:

I suppose that's part of growing up and moving on from your family...when you can actually start to take *them* out for meals and to make *them* dinner...maybe it's some kind of subconscious rite of passage of becoming an adult, you know, you have your

house now...I think I was kind of pleased to be in a position where I felt that, having been the Christmas consumer all that time, I could then now *share* and...yeah, I felt kind of like a happy feeling that I had done it all for *them*, what I wanted - to do something for all of these people who had been constantly providing for *me*.

This concern with 'position' chimes well with Claire's self-disclosed understanding of the above described transition as an extended 'rite of passage'. Though 'subconscious' and taking place over a lengthy period of time, the kind of rite to which Claire refers can still be seen to include many of the same affective dynamics classically associated with van Gennep's ([1960] 2019) three-fold pattern of (1) pre-liminal separation, (2) liminal transition, and (3) post-liminal incorporation described in Chapter 2. In this case however, the primary transition involves a much more gradually evolving - and perhaps less precisely structured - inversion of previously held reciprocal roles within the family-unit. Especially notable is the implicit reference Claire makes to the significance of being able to finally provide Christmas in the way that *she* 'wanted'. The occasion in other words affords her with an opportunity to put her own stamp of ownership on a long-established intergenerational exchange of reciprocity. 'We hadn't been in a position to invite people before then', she explained as she referred back to what she came to laughingly describe as 'the perfect Christmas'. This memory has since effectively become the benchmark standard against which Claire 'measures' the success of her subsequent Christmases, and can in a sense be viewed as a key micro-rite of incorporation within the more complex, extended rite of passage to adulthood she describes:

You kind of make that switch. And then there might be a period of time say when you're at uni, and you've left home, and you don't always go back for Christmas so you don't, you know, I suppose that that is when [pause] yeah, and then...once we...got our own house...that Christmas we had everyone round. It was really nice, you know, and I baked, and we had all the meals ready, and I felt like I did everything right, and it worked out really well. And then, then you know, when the kids were babies, it kind of focused more on *them*, and I think that now, when you have your own kids, you're the kind of, yeah, the Christmas *provider* in a way rather than the, yeah, the Christmas consumer [laughs]. D'you know what I mean?

As in most rites of passage, the degree of expectation placed upon the performance of the incorporation moment is intense. This, coupled with Claire's self-diagnosed proclivity towards a strong sense of social responsibility and mutually reinforcing comparison-making, makes Christmas an initiation rite of some considerable pressure and import. We are thus speaking here of an initiand who has made a conscious decision to embrace the socially expected rite of passage; an initiand who is anxious to please, keen to do 'everything right', to get everything just 'perfect'. Asked where she thought these expectations for 'perfection' might come from, she sighed:

I personally have a tendency to look at the best in everyone else...and compare that to me. D'you know what I mean, "Oh so and so is an amazing baker. They made a brilliant Christmas cake. *I* need to do that." Or, "So and so's presents, they need to be wrapped perfectly...So I look at things and I think, "Wow that's really great. That person did that really well", and that I'm, you know, and Ollie says that I think it's *my* fault...

The level of pressure Claire puts on herself to achieve high standards is made even more explicit here, as we are given a glimpse into complex layers of shame and self-blame which occur when socio-moral expectations are not quite met. Reflecting upon the origin of these standards, she continued:

I think it's...probably multi-factorial. You know, society has all these things that you're supposed to do at Christmas. *My* Mum is quite practical, and my Dad didn't ever help with the cooking, or the wrapping, or anything like that, so we got like a Bernard Matthews turkey roast...and frozen roast potatoes, so I can't say it comes from *her*...But my husband's family used to have the whole shebang with the roast dinner, so I think sometimes when you [pause] have a partner - that amalgamation of the different, cos I suppose everybody finds their own things that are important to them, and the things that are not quite so important. So for my Mum it's like, oh it's important to have the children having a nice time, the roast dinner's not so important...Whereas I guess that because it was our first Christmas in the new house and we had my family plus Ollie's family together, I wanted to take on everything that

was special to each family, which is actually kind of almost like doubling your workload in a way, because I guess that each individual set of parents has over time evolved what things they concentrate on and what things they don't. And that just happens to be different things for our families. So...I felt like I had kind of taken that into account and that...we'd ticked the boxes for the things that were important.

Once again, we see how Christmas comes to both mirror and accentuate the broader dynamics of people's lives. Claire's initiation into the 'Christmas provider' role is here subsumed by the broader process of initiation into her new family, and the corresponding set of social expectations which accompany this transition. Christmas is thus shown to provide a prime socio-cultural platform upon which the evolution and 'amalgamation' of lifestyle aesthetics and 'traditions' might be navigated. Whilst a strong sense of cultural expectation lies inherent in this 'multifactorial' initiation, this pressure does not appear to be solely - or even primarily - enforced from the outside. It does not, in that sense, amount to a *prima facie obligation*; at least in the classic more sociological sense of the term. Rather, this is a set of internalised expectations which Claire variously imbues from - and sometimes even projects onto - those around her. We here thus arguably see evidence of a nuanced contemporary transmutation from externally enforced *obligations* to intersubjectively constructed social *expectations* in which the force of social obligation takes on a much more ambiguous - and often more implicit - role.¹²²

THE PERFECT CHRISTMAS

This sense of ambiguity by no means equals less intensity of social pressure. On the contrary, it often appears to result in an *intensification* of felt obligation as social actors are left to navigate the emotional dynamics of social expectations in relation to their own choices and personally-derived expectations. Whilst it is unclear what the emotional and social repercussions would have been if Claire had *not* stepped up that year - if those 'boxes' had not been 'ticked' - the socio-cultural pressure to meet particular standards is nevertheless

¹²² I here use these terms loosely by way of distinguishing a conceptual difference in tonal emphasis. It is important to say that my reference to 'expectation' in a sense constitutes in itself a *form* of 'obligation' considered in the classic anthropological terminology of reciprocity explored in Chapter 3.

still a very real and strong force, and one that Claire has internalised to the extent that it is now very much her own. Asked what it was exactly that had made that particular Christmas so 'perfect', Claire considered the question carefully:

We had moved in in the October. It was a new-build house, and so it was all completely perfect...um and...we'd kind of moved in knowing we were going to start a family, but because we didn't have the kids, it had space for everyone to stay. So everyone had their own space. I had time to think about what people might like, whereas nowadays it's like, "Oh my goodness it's the week before Christmas. I have no idea what so and so's going to want" [laughs] because you're so busy thinking about the kids...I made stockings, I baked a Christmas cake, and put like brandy on it - like everything that you should, all these boxes, like: bake Christmas cake, make presents, real Christmas tree. We hadn't had a real Christmas tree before...because we'd always been in like rented flats and stuff.

'Everyone seemed to be happy with it', she sighed. 'I mean', she continued, 'maybe I'm wrong in thinking that they were all happy with it because I has made it right.' There might well have been other reasons everyone had seemed to have such a good time. Her Dad had in actual fact been diagnosed with cancer the following year, and though he's all clear now, he hadn't been able to come the next year because he'd been going through chemotherapy. 'So I suppose looking back on it', she said:

...I think there's a tendency sometimes to take it all on yourself and think, "Oh, it wasn't perfect because I didn't do enough", when in retrospect, when you actually think about other people and their *own* lives, there are things that you can't make *that* perfect can you? You know, no matter how much brandy you put on the Christmas cake, if somebody's got a severe illness, you can't really do anything about that...You know...in hospital...we try to send everyone home for Christmas, and there's a lot of pressure in that way...But at the end of the day, if somebody has a circumstance that's...you know, your illness, your body, your physiology doesn't know it's Christmas does it!

Coming back to her review of 'the perfect Christmas', she continued:

So I think sometimes...if you're taking on all the responsibility of providing Christmas for your whole family [pause] then, yeah...you can often take things to heart and think, "Oh that went wrong" or "You didn't stay for long enough. I must have...", you know?... And that Christmas where it all went 'perfectly'...it probably *wasn't*...all to do with the Christmas cake, and the red-velvet cakes, and the, and you know, the turkey

More latterly of course, Christmas has had to revolve around the needs of the children, and in a sense not so dissimilarly to Paul, Claire has found herself in a battle to 'balance' varying expectations surrounding the festival. 'My husband loves cooking', she explained:

he loves a roast, and he likes to use every single tray in the kitchen. You know...when the kids were really little, he still used to stay in the kitchen for hours making a roast which the kids won't eat, and I think sometimes you actually have to change your own expectations? And I think that that takes time, and you can't just do that in one or two Christmases - that sometimes, it's a role you need to grow into. And I'm still kind of, I'm still struggling with the whole, it's all my responsibility to make sure everybody has a perfect time and it's my responsibility to balance your needs with your needs...

We are here offered a pertinent insight into the ultimate perceived aim at the heart of Claire's efforts to make Christmas 'perfect'; or in the words of the North Tyneside Christmas lunch campaign, to 'make Christmas special'. As per the *four key bio-social needs* developed in Chapter 3, it appears that the main ideological goal of Christmas is in many ways to be about making, and/or keeping, other people 'happy'. In Claire's case, this drive towards happiness is undeniably tied up with conceptions of perfection. Indeed, the underlying assumption across her narrative seemed to be: if only everything was perfect, everyone would be happy. Happiness is here, in other words, implicitly tied to conceptions of perfection insofar as they envisage an ideal-state of utopian satisfaction.

If happiness can be considered the primary feeling-state which characterises experience of such utopian enchantment, it corresponds that efforts to make other people happy might be conceived as a kind of reciprocal process of secular eschaton-construction. As we established in Chapter 3, such reciprocity by definition clearly works both ways. If the performance of the utopian world of ‘Christmas’ is on one level about making and/or keeping *other people* ‘happy’, it is also quite evidently about gleaning a reciprocal sense of satisfaction in the process. This is clearly illustrated in the case of Claire wanting to be able to provide for her family in return for their past provision to her. The sense of obligation which propels her to return the favour is, however, closely accompanied by a ‘happy feeling’ which presumably acts to bolster a sense of self-worth, status, and belonging on her own side of these relations. This is, in other words, an obligation which is willingly and happily embraced, which appears near-perfectly aligned with personal desire, and which thus carries the capacity to conjure up the experience of collective joy - i.e. *communitas* (Turner 2012) - so many associate with the ‘Christmas spirit’.

What rather complexifies such experiences is those instances where social obligations are *not* so fully aligned with personal desires or - as demonstrated in this case - when obligation-desire alignments do not quite *themselves* align with on-the-ground realities. It seems to me that analysis of such conflict might be well mutually elucidated not only by the Turnerian theory of ‘social drama’ we have been discussing throughout this thesis, but by Leon Festinger’s (1957) perhaps better known theory of ‘cognitive dissonance’ which has now long stimulated discussion surrounding more psychologically-oriented depictions of the feeling of emotional discomfort that experience of conflicting attitudes, beliefs, and/or situations elicits, and which in its variously developed iterations essentially attempts to provide a framework for understanding the plethora of cognitive strategies the self tends to undergo in its efforts to reduce such discomfort, to reconcile such felt experience of dissonance, and/or to restore a sense of cognitive congruence. There is, I suggest, a sense in which the attempt to make things ‘perfect’ at Christmas is to reach for what both such theories of dissonance-management conceive of as ‘resolution’, a state of perceived integration which would seem to align well with the more serene emotional concomitants of the ‘Christmas spirit’; i.e.

‘contentment’, ‘peace’, and ‘harmony’. On this model, striving for perfection may be equated to striving for a harmonic kind of equilibrium; or, as Claire repeatedly puts it, finding a sense of ‘balance’. Such ‘resolution’ - or ‘redress’, to use Turner’s terminology - may be pre-emptive, or it may be reactionary. Either way, it represents an attempt to exert control upon any potentially tricky or deviant circumstances in one’s environment, to smooth out any challenges to one’s perception of the way things *ought* to be.

‘Making an effort’ for Christmas to my mind constitutes exactly this kind of activity, whether it involves going the extra mile to make something ‘special’, or attempting to make one’s environment conform to an ideal of projected perfection. Though such tendencies can of course be observed across a variety of scenarios and times of year, they undoubtedly become particularly acute at Christmas. For this is deemed a time when - with just an extra sparkle of magic dust - dreams *can* indeed come true. Sadly, however, the attainment of such ‘wonderful’ utopia-land of wish-fulfilment is not always possible. Try as hard as we might, our environment does not always conform. It is not always possible to get everything on one’s Christmas list, or indeed to return home to the ideal family portrayed in the quintessential Christmas advert. Not everyone has a fairy-godmother, and it is a sad reality that not all dreams come true. Perhaps even more emotionally challenging, though, is the experience of disappointment that comes at the realisation that they do not. Almost all those I spoke to had some form of personal disappointment to tell, whether this was a memory of parents not being able to afford their desired gifts, a sense of rejection from those they cared about, a reminder of the things or people they had lost, or a realisation that they were somehow just not happy.

FINDING ‘BALANCE’: COMPARISONS AND EXPECTATIONS

As per the theory of Christmas sketched through Chapters 2-3, there was across my fieldwork a keen sense of the ways in which Christmas magnifies - and thus acts as an embodied reminder of - the things that aren’t going so well for people, and/or the wider social issues which need redressing. People were typically quick to point to bereavement, family breakdown, homelessness, loneliness, and financial instability in particular as life situations which make it almost impossible to have a ‘happy Christmas’, and many were often anxious to

indicate their sense of gratitude for the places where these situations had not - or at least, had not yet - affected them personally. Reflecting on this universally recognised experience of contrasted juxtaposition and comparison, it seems to me that the affective performance of 'Christmas' operates on a finely balanced, emotionally generated interface of perception between (1) idealised utopia, (2) expectation, and (3) the reality of circumstance. Applied to Claire's narrative, we can see clearly how such an interface acts to form her retrospective, nostalgic conception of 'the perfect Christmas', and in turn how this nostalgic image comes to inform the comparative lens through which she perceives her subsequent Christmases. It is meanwhile this same perceptive interface which appears to engender hints of self-reflective doubt. As Claire herself pointed out, there is a danger of looking back on such events with 'rose-tinted glasses'. Sometimes, it doesn't matter how hard one tries, there's always something that doesn't quite work out as anticipated, some person that can never quite be fully satisfied, some uncontrollable life circumstance which gets in the way.

For people like Claire who feel a burden of 'responsibility' to make everything perfect on behalf of those around them, dynamics which foster an apparent lack of control almost inevitably carry the capacity to lead to feelings of self-blame; and perhaps even hopelessness. What naturally follows is a process of reviewing one's 'expectations' to create a sense of resolution between one's evolving conception of 'perfection', and the volatility of reality. It is very much the process of pragmatic reality harnessing Claire describes when she talks about 'balance'; a metaphor she drew upon frequently to invoke the sense of tension between societal expectation and personal constraint. 'Trying to cater to your kids, and cater to your family and older relatives', she said, is 'just...like spinning plates'. The more plates that are added to the mix, the more difficult it becomes to keep the balance; the more difficult it becomes to emulate the original 'perfect Christmas'. 'We had had some really nice Christmases with the family, but it seems like every year that goes by it somehow gets a bit more difficult', she sighed:

When the children are *really* little, they're kind of unaware of Christmas if you know what I mean. So it's almost that perfect balance between, "Oh yes the *children*, how lovely" and...they're sleeping [so] we can do all the adult things too...We can sit down and have a meal and, you know play board-games, or whatever we normally do.

But...as they get older and they become more demanding, but yet they're not able to join *in*...I think it's just a tricky period cos of the age they are...

Hosting Christmas in their brand new house 'was a step' she 'had taken consciously', something she 'want[ed] to' do. 'I had planned it in that way', she said. 'The whole Christmases changing as the kids change' thing was, however, 'kind of something' she hadn't been fully prepared for.

I guess maybe with the perfect Christmas I felt like it was a choice I had made and I was in control. Maybe that's what it boils down to. Whereas now I feel like Christmases are all out of control and crazy...

The kind of lifestyle Claire and Ollie had enjoyed at 'the perfect Christmas' is, it seems, simply not 'compatible' with the demands of young children. Thinking back to that time, Claire smilingly recalled:

We played...trivial pursuit and it was really funny. I remember laughing so much, like falling off the chair, just it was so, we just had such a nice time. And um, you know, you can have a few glasses of wine and things like that, whereas with the kids, you know, you think, "Oh goodness knows when they're going to wake up in the night". I actually haven't drunk for like two years, you know, so not that I mean I suppose, I don't *miss* it, but having a couple of glasses of wine playing trivial pursuit, having a laugh...it's not really compatible with the 6am start, opening up the presents that you get with your kids...

As she explored these comparisons further, it dawned on Claire that part of the reason 'the perfect Christmas' had been so perfect was that they 'had more resources'; 'more space', 'more time', 'more money'. Since she has put work on hold to bring up the children, they have 'had to tighten the belt a little bit'. And so, whilst they 'spend a lot on the kids' at Christmas, 'lately, a lot of the adults' have 'stopped buying for each other'. But in a way, Claire reflects, that's only right. Christmas '*is* kind of for kids' after all. 'It's all about them and that that's just the nature of it'. She is quite happy to step up and be the provider. But what she finds really

challenging is the lack of support she receives from other adult members of the family who seem to have little clue as to what needs to be done, or how to manage the kids. Once again, we see here a clash of expectations. 'I feel that sometimes they don't participate', she complained:

like the kids will be playing, and they'll just be sitting, my mother-in-law will be reading a book, and my brother...he'll be on his phone, and you're just like what's the point of having you guys here if you're not going to interact with the kids...

Ollie's mother usually chooses to spend Christmas with the other side of the family, though she did come for Boxing Day this year. Much to Claire's dismay, however, she actually ended up leaving early and in some considerable haste due to concerns about Tyler being sick. 'I think he'd eaten a whole chocolate orange or something', she sighed with a hint of exasperation as she considered 'all the preparations' that had gone to waste. Claire has much higher emotional expectations when it comes to her own parents. It has thus been quite a disappointment to her that they too don't seem to have prioritised spending Christmas with the grandchildren. Though they had come for Tyler's first Christmas, she had felt 'offended and upset' that they had left almost as soon as they'd arrived. They had done the same the year before when she'd been pregnant, and she does wonder whether it had partly to do with her Dad's health.



A child's first Christmas is often a big deal for parents, and especially first-time parents. Indeed, the event has in recent years been rubber-stamped with growing commercial cache and hype, with proud parents now able to purchase a variety of special outfits and branded memorabilia. The societal 'pressure' to perform 'the perfect Christmas' with your new baby is, Claire attests, 'huge'. However, as with many other parenting goals, Tyler's first Christmas didn't work out quite as she had anticipated. Tyler himself was of course 'more interested in the box and the wrapping paper' than any of the many presents he received, and Claire just

remembers 'sitting there' until well 'past one o'clock in the afternoon' as they waded through the tedious piles, trying to painstakingly scribble down what people had sent, and get the right picture to send to the right person. They hadn't even managed to get him a special outfit, as he had been almost a year old by the time Christmas came round – 'obviously you can't get a "My First Christmas" in 18-24 months can you!'. 'My mother-in-law actually made me a bib that she'd knitted, she'd kind of like stencilled onto it "My First Christmas", so I stuck that on', she laughed.

The whole experience had come to Claire as 'a bit of a shock'. 'For ages it had been "Oh my goodness, it's going to be so lovely, *"My First Christmas"*', she said. And then 'you realise "My First Christmas" is like a bit of a, *you know*'. Looking back, she reckoned this represented 'a bit of a sea-change'. Her parents, she thought, probably wondered why on earth she was 'making such a fuss'. It had been the same when Tyler was born. She had 'expected them to turn up and help, whereas', she reminded herself, 'their last parenting experience' with *her* had been waving her off to university. They hadn't looked after a baby for over twenty-five years. 'I think sometimes you can have unrealistic expectations of other people', she reasoned:

and when you have a little baby, your world revolves around them, and...you lose sight of the fact that everyone else's *doesn't* if you know what I mean. You think, "Why haven't you come?" "Why aren't you - it's Tyler's first *Christmas* and you've only stayed for", you know. So I think...it's a mismatch of expectations.

Mismatch or no mismatch, Claire's parents 'stopped coming after that Christmas'. 'I had a mild falling out with my Mum', she admitted:

where I'd said, "Look, I'm upset you guys only stayed for less than 24 *hours* and that we'd kind of made this effort" and then my Mum had said, "Well I thought you'd want to be on your own" and bla bla...

Since then, they've 'reached a bit of an impasse on it', and Claire can't really remember whether she 'didn't specifically invite' her parents, or whether she 'alluded' they shouldn't

come. Either way, her parents stayed at home the following year, and her Mum took her turn entertaining Claire's two brothers. To Claire's surprise, this led to something of a revealing heart-to-heart:

She phoned me up that night and said, "I've had the worst Christmas ever" [whispered]..."I don't know why I bother"...She'd had the boys round and they just sat there on their phones the whole time, and she'd just got massively offended and I don't know, I think it's coming to a head maybe now they're adults. So that was when she said to me, "I've never liked Christmas, it's always been stressful". You know, I'm like, "Ooh I didn't realise that it was this big a *deal* for you..."

Heartened by this bit of mother-daughter solidarity, Claire instantly invited her Mum back to theirs. But 'that week', her parents booked to go away for the following Christmas. Claire has been pretty hurt and 'offended' by this:

I was like, so you've booked ahead, Isobel is like literally weeks old, you already know a year in advance you don't want to see her at Christmas.

'The other problem', Claire confessed, 'is I feel like if I went to stay with *my* parents for Christmas, I would then have to reciprocate to the in-laws'. This is something she thinks she, and more particularly, Tyler, couldn't deal with. The school thinks there's a strong possibility he struggles with some form of Asperger's, and concerns around this were understandably very much preoccupying her mind at the time we spoke. A fiercely protective mother, Claire is incredibly defensive of her child, and anxious to make sure that he gets all the support he needs. This makes Christmas potentially even more stressful than it might be otherwise as she is highly conscious of Tyler's tendencies for overstimulation, his dislike of changes to his environment, and in particular, her mother-in-law's apparent misunderstanding of the suspected diagnosis. All this considered, Claire and Ollie 'just decided not to have anyone' this year so as to avoid 'conflict'. Whilst this made things 'easier', it 'also kind of made it less special'. It's about 'getting that balance right between not making it too much stress and actually making it different from any other day with my husband and kids I suppose', Claire

said, 'so I kind of am finding that hard.' 'It would have been lovely to have people', she sighed as she continued:

I want people to come and to make it significant and to share in the joy. But then on the other hand when they do come, and they don't help...or they just run off or they, you know...it's hard...but then you realise you're being unreasonable because...I want you to come, but I want you to do what I want you to do.

She laughed self-consciously. 'But that's impossible isn't it, so I don't really know what I expect. I think I spend so much time thinking about how to make it right for the kids.' Asked whether she felt she was perhaps still settling into the 'Christmas provider' role, she hesitated. 'I mean', she said:

obviously, it's lovely to see them receiving the gifts...but then sometimes you feel like you've spent hours wrapping them and choosing them, and then you know, they're open within 5 minutes - *chhhhhhh* - everything everywhere. You're like, ok, now I'm gathering up the wrapping...sometimes it seems like it's a lot of *effort*. That's what my Mum said. She said she feels a lot of effort behind the scenes...isn't always noticed. I don't mean appreciated, because you don't expect people, "Oh thank you so much for wrapping my presents Mum!", but you know, sometimes you feel like it's gone unnoticed? Let alone appreciated, and you think, I've worked really hard, and I could have just shoved that stuff in a Sainsbury's bag, and they probably wouldn't have cared [laughs]. And you think, who am I doing this for? And I think, I don't know, I'm tying all little bows on the presents so they look nice. I don't think the kids care about that, so I must be doing it for myself in some way, but I don't really know why...And then because kids change so *fast*, you feel almost like every Christmas, you're catching up...Tyler is 7 now...it's like ok, so this year he couldn't even walk...this Christmas, he's got a bike, you know

This set of fast-changing pressures is highly interconnected with the evolution of wider societal expectations. 'It's not like you're choosing to provide Christmas for your family cos you *want to*', she sighed, revealing a subtle conflict in the emotional dynamics of her personal

obligation-desire complex. When there are kids involved, ‘all the pressure from *outside* starts coming on you.’ ‘I’m getting *this* for Christmas, or I got *that*’, she mimicked. The ‘pressure’ reaches right the way from ‘what presents they’re getting to what *is* the true meaning of Christmas’.

A LONELY MODERN DISSONANCE IN THE OBLIGATION-DESIRE COMPLEX

Hence, whereas Claire had initially quite enjoyed becoming the ‘Christmas provider’, she guesses she hasn’t really enjoyed becoming the ‘Christmas *parent* provider’. ‘It’s felt objectively different’, she said. The flicker of guilty resentment she harbours has not been helped by the crescendo of activities put on by the school in the run-up to Christmas. ‘I felt like each thing that came was more pressure’, she complained:

and I said to my Mum, it’s like there’s a light festival, there’s a Christmas this, there’s a Christmas that, bring this, bring you know...it kind of feels like a constant competition almost, to make a Christmas this, make Christmas perfect with your kids...and it seems like...for that two weeks there was something on *all* the time...and it’s like all this pressure to bake a perfect cake, and to enter a lantern in the light thing.

Claire finds herself feeling quite alienated by the ‘bunch of committee Mums’ who seem to be able to find ‘the spare time to do these things’. She knows she’s not currently working and she ‘should have the spare time’, but somehow it just all feels a bit much. Detecting a hint of isolation in her narration of this, I asked whether this pressure made her feel at all lonely. Her face lit up in surprised recognition. It wasn’t something she’d have ever labelled herself with, but yes, she did feel lonely:

Yes it does, because I think...if I’m going to do something, I want to do it because I’m *into* it...I don’t believe in doing things just to be seen to be doing them. But I think a lot of other Mums, they do it because they feel that *have* to...and I think that obviously some people do it because they genuinely *want* to, but I feel I *do* feel lonely because I feel like I’m probably one of the few people who say, I’m just not doing it, and I can’t face it, and I can’t *make* myself do things. And I mean, that sounds bad, I can’t *make*

myself do it, but it, yes it is lonely...and you think, I don't really know where to belong in the whole yeah, this whole [pause] thing because, I, yeah, I don't want to play. Because I don't want to be insincere and petty...I want my relationships and the events I attend to be *meaningful* to me and my family and my children, and I don't feel like these things are. I don't feel they're meaningful.

It thus appears that the lack of felt belonging and purpose generated by a dissonance in the obligation-desire complex produces a distinctive kind of loneliness. Claire admitted she had actually felt this way ever since she'd arrived in the area, and had found it 'hard to break into' the 'cliquey' dynamic of the other mums. Like the other people who found themselves 'out', she now often turned up 'late' to the playground so she didn't have to engage. 'I don't know', she said:

it's almost like, I thought I'd left that behind when I left school, you know that feeling, like you're not part of something...everyone is doing running groups as well, and I feel like people jump on all these band-wagons, and I just [pause] it's like [sigh] yeah, and it's almost...there's this kind of group-think of everyone's doing it, so I'll do it too, instead of actually thinking about well, why? And you know, do you really want to...You've only got so much time to dedicate to all of the things you have to do. And what things are going to fall off the *edge*? Is it going to be your sanity? Or is it going to be the light show, you know?!

With this telling implicit return of the balance metaphor, we here reach the crux of Claire's guilty tussle between social expectation/judgement and personal conviction/preservation; a conflict which arguably constitutes something of a prime modern complex. Claire is not someone who follows the crowd lightly. But she is equally not someone who finds it easy to bypass social convention and expectation. She is thus left with an uncomfortable feeling of dissonance; a lonely kind of tension.

BALANCING BELIEFS

This is not least true when it comes to her opinions on religion. Since moving to the North East, Claire has found that many of the groups with whom she might otherwise have engaged

are dominated by what she would consider to be pretty 'extreme' religious views. 'It's kind of hard to become part of a group, even if everyone as an individual is a nice person, if they hold a belief that you don't', she said. 'You're always going to be on the outside', thinking 'I can never share this'. Though Claire would like to consider herself open to the views of others, she has found it impossible to reconcile herself with some of the beliefs these people espouse. She reported having been quite shocked to have been confronted with preaching on 'eternal punishment' at a local church-affiliated playgroup, and quite frankly horrified at the 'retrograde' attitudes displayed by some of the other mothers in the area. 'I've got no problem with Christianity, and everyone's got to find their own way', she justified:

...some people have faith, some people don't...People go to different places to look for answers...but to say something like men are superior to women, and children are going to end up in hell, I just think that's offensive.

She doesn't 'have a problem with the schools doing a nativity'. But 'to tell two year olds they're going to be punished because they don't believe in Jesus' is in her eyes quite 'different'. She confessed she had been 'kind of slightly worried' about the 'religious angle' of the interview before signing up, and I found myself more compelled than usual in this context to share where I was coming from in relation to religion. This came as much from a personal impulse to defend and differentiate less conservative forms of Christianity as it did from the essential need to alleviate the anxiety she had in sharing the truth of her own unadulterated opinions. The result was a dialogue which felt porous in the honesty of its exchange, notwithstanding the respectful boundaries which undoubtedly remained. In comparing perspectives on the intersection between faith and doubt, Claire often alluded to an ambiguous kind of agnosticism, placing emphasis on the 'things...we can't see'. When pushed as to whether she would formally label herself an 'atheist', however, her response was quick and unwavering.

'I am an atheist', she confirmed with a resolute strength usually only outwardly detectable when she was defending her children. 'I don't believe in God.' She continued:

Yeah, I'm *clear* about that. I'm not agnostic...I also 100% believe we don't have the answers. But I do not believe in a Christian God, or a God that has been made up by people.

'D'you know?', she implored, looking for validation and reassurance in her tone, 'How can we possibly know?' Though Claire is sceptical of people bold enough to make the God claim, she is also highly disapproving of people like her Dad who assert a more 'black and white' atheist rhetoric which disregards the views of others. 'He's really offensive', she sighed apologetically:

And please don't take this the wrong way, but he's well, "Oh people who are religious are basically morons", and it's like, that's really offensive because so many like really intelligent people, this is a big thing to them, so it's actually really ignorant and arrogant of you to dismiss it like that.

As in other areas of her life, Claire is anxious to seek a refined balance when considering such matters. She has come to her worldview by 'thinking' deeply 'about a lot of things', and considers herself to be 'quite a systematic scientific kind of thinker'. Asked whether she would describe herself as 'spiritual', she responded with some due consideration:

I can walk outside and feel moved by, you know, the world as it is. I think it's amazing, it's beautiful. The more you learn about...how complex and amazing life is, you think wow that's amazing. I guess for me, I'm spiritual, but I feel like God is not necessary to how I can see the world. I'm not saying that God doesn't exist. I don't think...that anything we think exists could possibly exist, cos how could we possibly know. But I do feel sometimes that you feel a truth to things and an energy to the world that...you can't describe to anyone. But say, my Dad, I think it's arrogant that he says he knows it all, or I think when Richard Dawkins on TV challenges people who truly believe in things, it makes me cringe cos I'm like...why are you trying to take this away from this person? They've got something that you don't have? You know? I feel that...But then...why is the church telling people that they'll go to hell? And I find that is arrogant as well.

‘It’s people holding certainty isn’t it really’, I reflected. ‘Yes absolutely’, Claire said, grabbing at this interpretation with some excitement:

My friend Jacquie... [will say] “I *know*. I know I will be saved. I am absolutely certain.” And you think, you are, aren’t you! You are, and I don’t understand. As I say, the whole world is all about uncertainty to me, and that you, you just live with probability and chance and things. You don’t *know*. So I think...I’m suspicious of anybody who thinks they have all the answers...I *do* think that there is a lot of brainwashing...Whereas...I think cos my own beliefs are a bit of a mish-mash...at the end of the day...how can I argue with someone who’s 100 percent sure.

She hesitated, before continuing with what might be considered a kind of de-conversion narrative, rather ironically induced by the reading of a biblical text:

I used to be a Christian until...I read - my Mum’s got a Bible on her bedside table and she reads a bit every night and gets to the back and turns it back over. I did that cos *she* did that...and I went to a Church of England school ,and you know [pause] there *is* something about being in a church, about the atmosphere, about people singing together...I remember talking to my mother-in-law about this...and I said, “You know that feeling, that rising within yourself when you’re singing, everyone’s all singing”, and she was like, “Oh you can feel that?!” I’m like, “Yes I can feel that” [exasperated] but I might not put it down to what *you* put it down to...You don’t believe in God, you have no soul. You know, sometimes I feel like that’s what you get tarred with if you say I’m an atheist...but...I came across a passage in the Bible, and...it was about something like, there was like faithless Israel and Judah...and um, that God had thought that faithless Israel...who committed adultery under a tree was actually sinning less than Judah who did the same thing but believed with half a heart. And...I read that, closed it, put it on the shelf. That was it. That was my answer. I thought, I don’t really believe this, and I knew. And it felt like a weight off my shoulders. And...I can understand that there’s something within people - but I, I find personally the world easier to accept without all this and...obviously that’s my personal belief [pause] I think there’s more than we *know*. But I don’t believe that a book or a person can *tell*

us that, you know? So I don't *know*, and I like to find out about different, take bits from different religions, and you see that...there's truth and lies in everything.

Over the last few years, Claire has found herself feeling increasingly 'on guard' about her beliefs, and feels frequently frustrated by the apparent lack of willingness on the part of the Christian mums at the school to engage with, or even hear, her 'conflicting' point of view. 'Not one of them's bothered to ask me about what I believe', she said. All they're interested in is proselytising. When you're an atheist, she reported, people just think, 'oh you're an atheist', put one big red cross in the box and stop listening. 'I mean, I feel like I actually do have some quite complex views', she said. People assume. She recalled how one of her friends had 'jokingly' said 'oh *you* won't want to go', after telling her she and her family were just going off to a 'crib service'. 'Well I might', Claire was left thinking.

She told me that though carol services hadn't really been part of her tradition since having the children, she might consider going if the circumstances were right, and the opportunity arose. However, she worried the environment might be a little 'intense' and 'austere' for the kids. They're not used to being in church and it might be a bit of 'a shock to the system', she explained. If it was up to her 'personally', she thought she probably 'actually would' go. She 'obviously' would have gone when she was at school, and she reckoned her Mum's family probably went to church at Christmas despite not going 'regularly'. 'It is nice to kind of sing with people in a group. It's kind of uplifting isn't it...It is a tradition, and it's something nice to do', she said. 'But then, I also feel kind of slightly hypocritical doing it as well', she sighed:

I'm sure my husband wouldn't mind...To be honest, it's more that we just, it's something that isn't part of our routine, and...we just don't get around to thinking about. You know, you get in your rut. You do what you always do, and to break out of what you always do requires a bit of effort...

'I guess maybe we should try it', she pondered. 'Why do you think so many people are attracted to go to that kind of service at Christmas time?' I asked.

I think that for people who are not *practicing* church-going Christians, and still *are* Christians, which I think a lot of people would identify with...it's a way of just reconnecting with their religious beliefs, I guess at a time that is significant to that religion. I think that's why people do it. I think people probably also do it because the reason I would do it is because it's something I've done in the past, and it's about reconnecting with kind of childhood memories, and that kind of Christmas constant...I think maybe it's a mixture of both.

This response matched her view of nativity plays which she likewise saw as representing an opportunity to 'reconnect' with the past. 'It's a kind of sharing and experience that *you* had with people that you love I guess isn't it', Claire agreed when I put this comparison to her. She admitted to being 'really pleased' when Isobel was cast as Mary in her nursery school nativity play. 'I was really chuffed, I was like yessss!', she laughed, adding, 'I always wanted to be Mary...I think everyone secretly does don't they, a little bit.' Our eyes twinkled in mutual recognition as she recalled her memories from her own school days:

Yeah in Reception, I had a halo that was made out of a coat-hanger with tinsel on it, and I was the Angel Gabriel because there were four of us who were angels, and I was the tallest...and I had to kind of stand at the back going like that [gesture], and then somebody held the star with a stick [both laugh]

Although Claire has 'no problem' in principle with nativity plays and considers them to be 'an important part of our cultural heritage', she has become a bit warier of them since growing anxious about the dominant influence of conservative Christian groups in Tyler's school. She never used to 'think about it seriously', but some of the things Tyler has come out with have occasionally made her worry about whether he's being 'taught about things equally across the board'. 'I don't know, I'm probably *looking* for it', she quickly retracted. 'I guess if you were a teacher, you're doing the nativity, and you really believe it's true, I appreciate that,' she reasoned. 'But then again, I have sent him to a non-church school'. 'I guess I feel conflict because Christmas is a time where people's beliefs do come to the forefront', she said. 'You've got to balance' the beliefs of your 'friends, family, older relatives, your child...it can be a bit of a tight-rope.' 'I had never really thought of it in that way until I had the kids', she

reflected. But the moment you have kids, everyone suddenly seems much more interested in having an 'input' in the way you live your life. People don't seem to feel they can 'challenge you on your *own* beliefs and actions', but they are quite happy to 'challenge you on how you parent your *children*'.

Christmas was thus, as Claire saw it, a key 'point' at which 'differences in beliefs and parenting style' became more 'obvious'. She laughed, 'I don't think anyone would say to me, "Oh my goodness, you don't believe in Father Christmas, that's terrible."' But telling your *child* Father Christmas isn't real is a very different story. She had indeed had to deal with just this issue last year when Tyler 'told the whole class that Father Christmas didn't exist.' The class teacher had 'kind of taken' her 'aside' when she had gone to pick him up. 'Just to let you know', she had politely said. 'Oh nooo! God I'm so sorry', Claire had responded in horror. 'Well the thing is', she explained:

...he had come to me, and he'd made a perfectly reasonable logical argument about why Father Christmas didn't exist. And so I just said, "you're right Tyler". And I had a lot of flak for that, and I just think [sigh] should I have told him, "Oh no, it's because of magic Tyler!" because I feel like if I'd said that, and he'd found out later that I was making it up, that that would have been almost like a breach of trust to him.

Irrespective of her determination to be 'honest' with her son, Claire still felt a clear sense of residual guilt that he'd gone ahead and told the whole class. Though she was confident she had made the right decision for Tyler, the last thing she had wanted to do was to 'ruin...things for other people'. 'I don't know', she said:

it's hard because I guess...if I've hurt other people's feelings or affected other people's Christmases, then I regret *that*, but I don't regret being honest with my son for something that he'd worked out *himself*, d'you know what I mean?

She had tried her best to remain 'ambiguous' about Father Christmas until challenged because, as on matters of *religion*, it's important to her that her kids 'make up their *own*

minds.’ She continued, ‘I mean like, if he came to me and said, “Oh I *do* believe in Father Christmas cos this this this and this”, I would be fine!’ , she said, laughing:

You know, let’s keep going with this then. But...I just felt it was wrong to say, “No *no*, all these logical and factual things you’ve just said to me, you’re *wrong!*” I don’t know, I just, I didn’t feel right doing that

Claire has generally ‘had quite a lot of negative feedback for telling Tyler’, and has been surprised at some of the differences of opinion and attitude expressed by her friends who feel it is important to ‘preserve the fantasy’ at all costs while children ‘still have the capacity to believe these things.’ “Oh so you’re one of those mums who just tells the truth to your kids at all costs are you?”, one of their friends had said. ‘I don’t know who’s right and who’s wrong’, Claire sighed, ‘*should* we be nurturing this when we know it’s not true to encourage the growth of our children’s minds’, or should we be encouraging them to ‘figure things out’ for themselves? ‘Knowing who Tyler is’ and what he as a child needs, however, she feels the answer is clear. Like everything else, she concluded, you have to ‘tailor’ Christmas to *your* children. She laughed as she reported Tyler’s reaction to Gelf the Elf:

I was like, “What does Gelf do?” and he was like, “I don’t really know, it’s just a toy!”

‘It’s just unfathomable to him’, she said. ‘I mean we’ve never really...gone down the elf route’, she explained:

...again, not cos I have any strong beliefs about elves, I don’t [laughs] you know, it kind of goes along with the whole Father Christmas thing, you know, Father Christmas, elves, that’s fine...it’s just like a funny thing to do...But some of my friends have done it and...when we lived in Bristol, one of my NCT friends...used to say to her little girl who is the same age as Tyler, “Oh I think I see something, oh I think I saw an elf up there!”, we’d be in the park, “Oh oh, *Georgie*, you’d better’, you know, and you think, it’s kind of manipulative isn’t it in a way?...I don’t know, but then, when you’re a parent, sometimes they get so hyper at Christmas that you’re so desperate, that anything that will calm them down is worth trying I suppose, so I can see *why*...but

with Tyler it never worked anyway, because he just went, “I didn’t see anything Mummy”, you know, and Beth would be like, “I’m sure [something] was there...on the cafe roof, and you threw your drink all over the floor, and I’m sure it saw you!” and Georgie would be like “*hhhhhhuuhh*” and Tyler would be like “*mmmm*”

We both laughed. ‘He just doesn’t believe it’, Claire repeated almost defiantly, making me wonder whether her defence of Tyler’s strong views might be in some way operating as a medium for the projection of the strong views she herself usually has to keep under tactful wraps. ‘So how did you actually *feel* when you got this flak from other people’, I asked. She sighed:

I kind of felt a bit *hurt* to be honest, because I felt like, well you’re the ones who are lying to your children [laughs]...As I say, I would have been happy to go along with it...I mean Tyler, there’s no there’s no middle ground...either something’s true or it’s just not true...Whereas when I was a child, I could kind of know it wasn’t true, but still think I could hear the sleigh-bells, you know...so I feel that some children can suspend that disbelief almost, and kind of, I think you get quite absorbed in the atmosphere, like I said, the lights, the music, you kind of, it almost kind of raises you into a state that you *can* almost believe things...so I kind of went along with the whole oh Father Christmas brings this and brings that...just because that’s what you *do*.

Whilst Claire made the decision to be, as she put it, ‘Santa agnostic’ with her kids, her sister-in-law has banned Santa entirely. They’re ‘quite *religious*’, Claire explained, and so they ‘don’t believe in Father Christmas cos they think it goes against the true meaning of Christmas.’ They made the decision because they didn’t want the children to ‘throw the baby out with the bathwater and decide that *Jesus* isn’t real because Father Christmas isn’t real’. Claire clearly thinks this is ridiculous. ‘Personally’, she said, ‘as a child...I remember thinking that Father Christmas wasn’t real, but never thinking that *Jesus* wasn’t real, cos you can’t really equate the two...and if you’re so worried that your child’s faith is so flimsy, shouldn’t you have more faith in *their* decision?’ ‘D’you know what I mean’, she said quickly, defending her position, ‘I don’t think you can shield your children from making their own decisions.’ ‘They always send me a nativity scene Christmas card’, she laughed.

Though she doesn't really mind this, Claire does find it a bit 'hypocritical' when she is 'always so careful' not to send them a Father Christmas card. A hint of sarcastic wit discernible, she added:

I wrapped some presents in paper, and it said ho ho ho on it, and I was like can I even give them THIS! And I said, "Oh if you turn it upside down it says, oh oh oh!" [both laugh] I was like, I don't know...Ollie laughed, and I was like, "Shall I re-wrap it", and he went, "*yeah*" [both laugh]

This bit of light, banterous internal family commentary points beautifully to the sense of bemused tension this conflict of worldview provokes amongst different members of Claire's family:

Like I say, I don't want to offend them, but then they certainly aren't thinking about *me* when they send cards and I don't, I'm not *bothered*, I really don't *mind*...I understand that different things are important to different people...but I do feel sometimes that when I'm careful not to pick a Father Christmas, to get a nativity scene you are like, you're not respecting my beliefs, you know. Not that, as I say...it's not an important thing to me, I'm not offended by any of it, I just think that if you're going to make a fuss about something *one* way then - because my mother-in-law made a massive fuss, she was like, "Oh my goodness, I can't put Santa on this, and I can't put Jesus on that", and I'm like, I don't care if you send me a card with Jesus. It's not, I'm not *offended* by it, I just think you know, that's fine, it's an important part of our cultural heritage, if not more, you know...It's just a Christmas symbol to me, d'you know what I mean? It's equally as valid as a Father Christmas...

'So it is difficult trying to juggle all these different people's beliefs, trying to respect everyone's opinion', she sighed. 'Whereas, I guess people...who do really believe, they don't feel that, because they know what they believe and they...' - she hesitated for a moment - 'they don't feel that sort of conflict.'

Claire's narrative, as I see it, offers an especially transparent window into the dynamics of mirroring and intensification which have been so central to our exploration. For here we have seen clearly how, in bringing things to 'the forefront', Christmas carries the capacity to generate an unearthing of underlying dissonances; a process which in turn compels a natural affective reassessment and renewal of the systems of worth and belonging which guide evolving identities, lifestyle aesthetics, and worldviews. Whilst this reassessment may well in some instances lead to nuanced shifts in identity formulation and positioning, where Christmas is concerned, it can more obviously be seen to *re-affirm* - or indeed, to 'sacralise' (Mol 1976) - pre-existing, and/or latent, attitudes and identities. As such, active discussion of belief in relation to Christmas provoked Claire to *reconnect* with her worldview - and ultimately to defend it - as much as it encouraged her to recalibrate it. We must of course be cautious in overemphasising such processes of self-reflection, which I suspect - even for people as naturally self-conscious as Claire - ordinarily operate on a much more subconscious level. It is I believe here important to hold in tension the highly intersubjective and introspective nature of the research context, and to bear in mind the ways in which the nature of our questioning and interaction can sometimes give a somewhat false impression of the emphasis people put on particular aspects of their lives. Indeed, the following qualification suggests that Claire's concerns regarding religion and belief in reality operate on a decidedly more implicit level than might be inferred from the weight of emphasis given to the topic in this portrait:

I'm kind of, yeah I don't think that religion is *that* much of a massive thing with us and Christmas. I think...it's just something that I have in my mind about it because I know that obviously Christians consider Christmas to be like their celebration, and the birth of Christ et cetera, whereas my *personal* opinion is that it's a kind of amalgamation of different more ancient festivals...Things like Father Christmas, Christmas trees, they're not Christian symbols. It's actually a mish-mash and amalgamation of lots of different stories, different ideas, different beliefs, and I kind of want my kids to appreciate that?

Becoming more confident in the flow of her opinions as she began to verbalise them more concretely, she continued:

I do feel that sometimes Christians, it's theirs. That's it. This is the way it is...Whereas...I want to say, actually, that's not exactly true...

She tailed off for a moment, before adding with more conviction:

...when they say, it's "the true meaning of Christmas", what they mean is Christian Christmas...They don't mean the more complex overlays, the *older* things, the *different* things...the things that have come from other religions, other cultures. You know, I don't feel people always include that, and I think that actually that must be the *true* meaning of Christmas mustn't it. Whether you believe in Jesus and God or not, you've got to appreciate that it's come from lots of different sources...and that there are lots of different influences on Christmas, d'you know what I mean...So I think that's why I feel slightly uncomfortable about one set of people kind of taking it and making it their own.

We are here once again given an especially clear view of the manner in which 'the true meaning of Christmas' comes to be moulded almost exactly along the contours of personal life-perspectives. That this can be seen depicted so clearly even in the case of perspectives as nuanced and complex as Claire's only serves to underscore our broader understanding of the integrative role Christmas plays in this context. In the midst of her attempt to seek a sense of authenticity in the historical trajectory of the festival, we are given a decided glimpse of Claire's own distinctive worldview. Her portrayal of Christmas as an 'amalgamation of lots of different stories, different ideas', and 'different beliefs' mirrors closely the way she describes her own personal beliefs as being formed by a range of different ideas and influences. Hence, Christmas is a 'mish-mash' just as her own beliefs are a 'mish-mash'. Whilst mish-mashed beliefs are of course in many ways much harder to pin down and encapsulate, the set of dispositions which bind them together, and guide their flow are perhaps a little easier to trace in their consistency.

At the heart of Claire's reading of the *true* 'true meaning of Christmas' we find the subtle - though nonetheless powerful - emphasis of her general predilection for fairness, for balance, for weighing evidence, and for respect. This code of respect is closely connected to broader western liberal reference-frameworks of tolerance, which stem from an increased valuing of the privatisation of belief. It is hardly surprising therefore that Claire aligns absolutist claims regarding 'the true meaning of Christmas' with an 'extreme' view that unnecessarily imposes itself on others in a way that is quite alien to the precepts of the liberal relativism to which she ascribes. 'I think the true meaning of Christmas...is truly to do with your own beliefs isn't it, and that's a personal thing', she said, summing up something of this postmodern reality. 'I suppose it's funny to think that...my true belief about Christmas is on so many levels...a conflict,' she added.

'In what way a conflict?' I asked:

Well I don't know, er your beliefs versus other people's beliefs, religion versus Father Christmas, versus family versus children versus, d'you know, I think it's, or maybe...conflict might be the wrong word: balance?

Trying to imbue the sense of nuance she was reaching for, I suggested, 'It sounds like you're aware of the tension...but you're not *conflicted* about it necessarily.' 'No, I think that's it', she voraciously affirmed:

Yeah, I feel like I'm caught in the *middle* of a lot of different opinions and values and that I'm trying to make it all nice and happy and for everyone...whereas that's not how...everyone else approaches it.

'What would you say the true meaning of Christmas *was*?', I asked, realising I had never asked her the direct question. 'Erm', she paused doubtfully, '*honestly*?' I gave a nod of encouragement. 'It's just that', again she paused, this time with frustration:

I feel like it's kind of grown out of proportion. I feel like I don't really know what the answer to that question is...It's a day that has somehow become significant, erm that

the whole world gears up to, you *should* be...what I *should* say is, "Oh it's a time for you to spend loving time with...family and friends and show them how much you love them." That's what I *want* to say. But I don't even know if that's the right answer. I feel that it's a day, one day of the year, with so much pressure, and you know if you love someone, you should show them *every* day...but there's adverts on TV of toys and build-up and...

She sighed. Isobel was becoming impatient by this point. Trying to cut to the chase, I decided to challenge her just a little bit more. 'I mean, if you're honest', I said, 'would you actually be fine if it was just done away with, and we just didn't have it?' She laughed.

I think...it would be sad for the kids. It would be sad because I've got lots of really lovely childhood memories...about Christmas, and I wouldn't want my children not to have that. But I think that actually, the true meaning of Christmas has either been lost, or there never was one in the first place [small laugh], and everybody's just [pause] projecting onto this one day. We're looking forward to this day, "Oh we won't see Grandma this month, we'll see her on Christmas", we'll, we'll, "Oh we'll save up for *Christmas*." Well I think that sometimes, yeah, that...maybe you *should* be doing these things all the time, but maybe that's impossible...I think we project a lot of *hope*, a lot of expectation. A lot of things are projected onto that one day...

Once again, we are plunged into the dynamics of the emotional interface between (1) idealised utopia, (2) expectation, and (3) the reality of circumstance. Claire was not unusual in her expression of hesitation over the authenticity of Christmas morals. Several of my participants struggled as they tried to express whether and why obligations might be stronger at Christmas than any other time of year. It seems that Claire is perhaps right in her diagnosis that Christmas is really about projected 'hope'. The Christmas period might crystallise all those things that people want to be able to do, or indeed *have*, in an ideal world. But practically - in 'the real world' as some might say - such a lifestyle, such morality, is just impossible to maintain on a regular basis. Christmas ideals, in the end, remain ideals. If Christmas is a time for envisioning such hopeful ideals and/or standards of living, it stands to reason that it is also a time when it's realised that these ideals either cannot, have not, or

have not yet been reached. The gap between fantasy and reality thus becomes greater, and often more painful, inducing nuanced corresponding shifts in the character and intensity of 'hope', and indeed, of despair.

THE MINCE-PIE CONSPIRACY THEORY

'It's funny how that one day encompasses all of that isn't it', Claire reflected; reaching for a medical metaphor to describe the phenomenon as she saw it:

Actually, these are issues that are kind of chronic all year round, but then kind of become acute at Christmas time

'You know', she continued, 'all these things that you put up with all year suddenly become...' She tailed off, before telling me how, 'with all the hype and excitement at school', Tyler becomes quite challenging to manage around Christmas. He 'often gets quite amped-up', she said, 'and often I get taken aside at Christmas about his behaviour, because I think he just finds it hard to process all the excitement.' Managing a child with issues of this kind can she reported make it 'harder' to feel like you're joining in 'that mass excitement' so readily associated with the festival. 'I think that to *me* at Christmas', she smiled, 'that was kind of part of it almost, just being, feeling that feeling with everyone else, the *hhhhoooo* you know'. She continued:

I suppose you draw on your *own* childhood Christmases to share that with your children, but if your child is different then...you're in uncharted territory...

Tyler's recent Father Christmas challenge had, it turned out, 'all started' with him getting into a fix over the mince-pie they would usually leave out on Christmas Eve. "Mummy Mummy, it's just not fair about the mine-pie", he had cried. 'I'm like, what are you going on about Tyler', Claire recounted with a hint of amusement. 'And as it turns out', she explained:

he...thought it was all a massive like you know, cover-up so that we could just eat a mince-pie, and not share it!...I guess that was the only thing he saw, the only material thing we gained.

‘Ollie and I have been referring to Christmas as the mince-pie conspiracy theory’, she laughed, before telling me how she had chosen to respond:

I was like, “To be fair Tyler, I don’t even like them that much!” I said, “You’re right about Father Christmas, but you’re wrong about the mince-pie”...“the reason that we do it Tyler is because it’s traditional. It’s a time of year to show your family and friends how much you love them by giving gifts”, and you know actually one thing that he didn’t *get* that I think he did after I explained it, I said, “It’s actually joyful to see how happy someone is when you give them a gift...and that’s kind of what it’s *about*! It’s about making other people happy isn’t it.” And he was like “oh *ok*”, cos I don’t think that had naturally occurred to him...Sometimes things that other people take for granted, you need to kind of explain to him.

THE CHRISTMAS JIGSAW

Asked what she hoped her children are being taught about Christmas in school, Claire said:

I mean almost every major religion has *some* kind of festival around that time. I do understand that because as a country, Christianity is...an important part of our cultural heritage, and you know...that’s a big part of the jigsaw puzzle. But I would like to think that my children are being taught about the *whole* puzzle...and personal beliefs aside, I think that it’s important to learn about every *aspect* of it, rather than just one piece in isolation...which is why I disagree with the whole, let’s forget about Father Christmas, and why I would never ever say to anyone *don’t* send me a nativity scene, because I think it is important that everybody learns about Christmas as a *whole*, if you know what I mean. And they can focus in and place their own importance on whichever puzzle piece they like...but you can’t ignore the rest of the puzzle. D’you know what I mean? I think that’s irresponsible...

Hence, though Claire has 'mixed feelings' about the teaching of the nativity, she thought she would feel 'a bit sad' if nativity plays ended up being banned from non-faith primary schools on the grounds of some of the concerns she herself had raised. 'I think I'd personally feel a little bit like, naww...', she said:

...like it's something that was kind of special about Christmas...To me, it would be similar to saying we've banned Christmas trees, d'you know what I mean, something symbolic about Christmas. I say it doesn't have a deeper meaning for me, but it's something that's a tradition that will have been taken away...so it's a part of the whole being taken away which lessens the whole slightly, if you know what I mean

Reflecting further on this, she added, 'yeah to be *fair*, nativity plays were a...bit of the Christmas routine as well, so I've got a bit of a soft spot for them.' Remembering back to Isobel's recent debut once more, she continued:

I have to say, the other Mum at the nursery who came in was like, "Ooh Ben you didn't tell me you were Joseph!" and I was like "Aaa Mary!" and we were both "aaaaa"! For some reason it kind of makes you a bit proud, you know, when your child has a starring role [small laugh] in the nativity play...It's the first time you get to see your kids on *stage*, and all the little out of tune singing, and you know, it just, d'you know, it's just aww, it's a bit of an *aww* moment, it's a bit of a milestone as a parent as well somehow?

Of course, she said, she would think it absolutely 'fair enough' if a 'secular school' decided to take a different line. She could completely appreciate why some people, and particularly those belonging to different religious traditions, might be 'offended' by nativity plays. At root however, it appeared that, despite her scepticisms, she did still harbour fond sentiments towards the tradition. 'I think it's been part of the...whole Christmas experience growing up in this country and culture', she said, '...it's kind of interwoven and it's like a part of the puzzle isn't it.' It was indeed this connection to her own past that she felt marked nativity plays out

from other experiences of watching her children perform. 'On one level...it's the same seeing them in any kind of a production', she said:

...you feel proud, and "Oh wow, he remembered his lines" or, "Oh she did the dancing", you know...but on another level, it's a connection between you and your child because, I'm pretty sure most parents in the audience have been in a nativity play *themselves*...and it's a story everyone knows, um so unless you had been in exactly the same production that they were in and you knew the story off by heart, there's a little bit less of a connection, so not on a more spiritual level per se, but more in a shared experience kind of thing...

Hence, though she really enjoyed going to see both her children in nativities this past year, Claire did think 'it would have kind of been nice' if they had used 'more of the traditional songs'. 'I don't know why they're doing that', she said. 'Isobel's was like some kind of samba style, you know, nativity music and they were all dancing like that, and honestly', she laughed, 'I almost got the giggles and had to leave cos she was going so into it, and all the little kids were like *hhhh*, it was so funny!' 'I suppose', she reflected:



Figure A. Nativity Play performance at Tyler's school

it would have been a bit *more* of a shared experience if they kind of shuffled up and sang "Little Donkey" like we all did, you know?... I do wonder why they don't just do the traditional thing. Why *do* they go and get some kind of modern amped-up...you know...Are they doing it *to* cater to people from different religions and backgrounds to say, oh look it's not the traditional nativity story. Cos then you think, well that's a bit of a halfway-house, so either you do it or not.

It seems like a bit of a ‘fudge to cover everything’, she continued. ‘People who are not happy with the nativity full-stop are probably not going to be happy with that anyway’, she reasoned, and it seems a little pointless to attempt to make what is an ancient story more ‘up to date and relevant’. For an open, progressive, and eclectic individual such as Claire, this kind of implicit conservatism was striking. Her desire for the rooted connectedness and reassuring familiarity of the ‘traditional’ to my mind tallies rather closely with the theory of Christmas-specific *communitas* we mapped out in the earlier chapters of this study, and can be seen to reaffirm not only the social-functionalist reading of Christmas ritual as a key rhythmic and authenticating social mechanism by which both (in)dividuals and core values are positively re-incorporated into society, but Miller’s theory of the ‘centripetal’ dynamic of contemporary Western Christmas ‘cosmology’.

CHRISTMAS AS AN ‘ANCHOR-POINT’ FOR IDENTITY

The sense of social connectedness at the heart of this intensified experience of incorporation can, I suggest, be seen to operate along two axes which correspond rather clearly to Grieve and Weiss’s depiction of the ‘synchronic and diachronic configurations of community’ invoked in the emic concept of ‘tradition’ (2005: 5): (1) a *horizontal* sense of connection between members coming together to share in the rite itself, and (2) a *vertical* sense of connection between past, present, and future generations and moments joined together by a sharing of experience across the boundaries of time. This intensified experience of *communitas* - or ‘sharing’, as Claire puts it - can be channelled in various directions along the ‘flow’ of time (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; 1997). It is hence with a forward-flowing motion that Claire feels a ‘happy feeling’ at the moment of initiation when she finds she can now ‘share’ in providing for those who had once provided for her at Christmas, whilst it is with a backward-flowing motion that she ‘projects’ onto the experience of watching her children’s enjoyment to share ‘happy memories’ of her own childhood Christmases. When asked what her childhood Christmases had been like, Claire replied with enthusiasm:

Ooh, yeah I mean...I went to a Church of England school, so...the school was next to the church, it was an Anglican church and...*that* was also kind of part of it, singing the Christmas hymns, the atmosphere of the church. We did Christingles and things like

that...it's all kind of melded into one a little bit, but...advent calendars, the excitement of counting *down*, you know...the anticipation. And my Grandma lived close to us, and she used to come for Christmas dinner, and that was always really nice. I had two younger brothers, so we used to, you know, get excited and wake each other up and go down together, and it was just, I just really, when I think back on my childhood...which I have done a lot more since having children of my own, it tends to actually be Christmas is the anchor-point

Stumbling into this revelation with excitement, Claire continued with some momentum:

It's kind of almost like an anchor-point for memories isn't it in a way, because it's a significant event. So here's me saying I'd just do away with it, but then, maybe...you *need* an anchor-point in your life - a reference-point - when you're looking back on things. Maybe that *is* important, and maybe that's part of the reason that we have it, d'you know what I mean?

The idea of Christmas constituting 'an anchor-point for memories' is an image which resonates powerfully with the distinctive societal phenomenon this thesis has been attempting to describe and evoke, and can be seen to speak directly into the conceptualisation of 'tradition' formulated in our opening chapter. Indeed, the subject of our core exploration might in many ways be well summarised as an analysis of the cultivation and transmission of 'Christmas' as a contemporary 'anchor-point' for identity. The impulse to 'make memories' and/or 'traditions' at Christmas was for the majority of those I spoke to both conscious and explicit, and became especially relevant for those who desired - and/or felt they needed - to create something of lasting legacy for their children. In short, *memory-making* was often about *memory-gifting* (Waugh 2005; Engler 2005: 366-374). Hence, whilst Claire recognises Christmas as a key anchoring 'reference-point' for herself, she also recognises its potential as an anchoring 'reference-point' of meaning for her children. The 'pressure is on', therefore, for her to ensure she makes their Christmases special *now* so that they can refer back to the experience as a key 'anchor-point' for their identity in the future.

Whilst such emphasis on the focused cultivation of shared memories pertains most obviously to families and other close relations, broader focus on the sharing of happiness, love, and/or gratitude can be traced across almost all social exchanges at Christmas. For as we saw clearly in Chapter 3, whilst Christmas is in some sense about dreaming of alternative - and in Claire’s case, ‘perfect’ - worlds, it is also very much about affirming, or as many of my participants put it, giving thanks, for what is already there. In a very real sense, Christmas thus becomes about the decoration - and *intensification* - of ordinary life. This can of course most obviously be seen in the literal decoration of both public and private spaces and objects. But it can also be seen - as we have now explored at some length - in the intensification of relational dynamics. Time and time again I found this kind of intensification expressed via the notion of making things - or indeed, making *Christmas* - ‘special’, and it is this particular phrase that I wish to spend some time considering before we turn back to a more explicit discussion of Claire’s notion of Christmas as ‘anchor-point’.

To make something ‘special’ is - as I explored with a number of the children who participated in my focus-groups - to make it *significant*. As many of the children identified, this usually means making something ‘stand out’, making it ‘different’, appreciating it more closely, changing something - whether physically or perceptively - in the environment. Cast in Durkheimian language, this process of making something ‘special’ is ultimately about making it ‘sacred’; about setting it ‘apart’ from the ‘profane’ ([1915] 1976: 47). It was, of course, the movement *between* these foundational categories of ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ - this so-called ‘shift’ of category perception - that so occupied van Gennep in the formulation of his classic rites of passage classification. Perhaps rather less explored within such theoretical trajectories, however, is van Gennep’s conceptualisation of the ‘pivoting of the sacred’ as a spatialised movement between oppositional spaces ([1960] 2019: 12-13). A notion which I believe might significantly enhance our understanding of the flow of movement between these classically labelled categories of experience, van Gennep’s interpretation of this concept foreshadows subsequent attempts to move towards a more process-centred understanding of phenomenological experience (see e.g. Angel et al 2017) by reenvisioning Durkheim’s categories of ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ as part of a process of perception driven by

the constitutive shifts in experience and identity rites of passage seek to mediate (Hockey 2002).

As a person pivots from one position to another, the theory suggests, the 'magic circles' of 'sacred' and 'profane' also 'pivot'. Whilst experience of the sacred is still always inversely related to experience of the profane, this understanding of the relationship between these categories emphasises the phenomenological process by which these boundaries are shifted in relation to the shifting position and perspective of those who come to define them. In van Gennep's words:

the categories and concepts which embody them operate in such a way that whoever passes through the various positions of a lifetime one day sees the sacred where before he has seen the profane, or vice versa ([1960] 2019: 13).

If 'pivoting' constitutes the structural mechanics of this process of transformation, the experiences of *hierophany* and *communitas* we have characterised as especially productive frames through which to describe experience of Christmas enchantment and 'tradition' construction might, I suggest, correspondingly be understood to constitute a key affective means by which it is perceived. Though *hierophany* intensifies experience through the revelation of a force which arrives from *beyond*, where *communitas* intensifies experience through a magnification of social-bond which is drawn from *within*, both experiences generate a form of transcendence which is paradoxically achieved through an intensification of intersubjective interiority and intimacy in which the self becomes aware of itself in relation to the world. Both concepts thus ultimately seek to capture experiences of immanent transcendence in which intensification of the present moment and/or embodied form makes the experience in question feel not just 'significant', but more seemingly 'real' and/or 'authentic' (Eliade [1954] 2005: 11).

If to make something 'significant' is to reify a particular kind of appreciation of an aspect of the world - in other words, to experience the pure essence or meaning of something afresh - it makes further sense that the cultivation of such appreciation might be best generated by liminal states which enable participants to re-connect with, or even re-enact, such

experiences of prelapsarian wonder. The desire to make something 'special' for *someone else* is, as I see it, reflective of a desire to bestow upon them something of this experience. Indeed,



Figure B. Teacher orchestrating rehearsals of school nativity play

it seems notable that the operative verb in the key idiomatic phrases which emerged from my fieldwork had to do not just with *giving*, but with *creating*, i.e. making memories, making traditions, 'making an effort' to 'make Christmas special'. Central to this discussion is hence the flow of reciprocity which can be found at the core of the creative act.

Whilst the sense of obligation to make Christmas happen and/or indeed to 'make Christmas *special*', tends to be felt most readily by people in more obvious positions of social power and responsibility - i.e. the key 'providers' of Christmas who are variously required to, and/or choose to 'make an effort' for, or on behalf of, those who are in some way less able, e.g. teachers, parents of young children, carers of the elderly, befrienders of the socially isolated - the notion of stepping up and 'making an effort' clearly constitutes a dominant socio-cultural aspiration at Christmas. This is an aspiration which can, I suggest, be linked directly back to the four bio-social needs discussed in Chapter 3, and which can in turn be mapped directly onto the impulse to 'make memories' and/or 'traditions' we see so readily at this time of year. Seen from this perspective, 'making an effort' to 'make Christmas special' can be seen as an attitude of 'intensive living' which is not only about keeping the momentum of - and motivation for - social life going through the symbolic means of particular cultural forms, but about innovating new ways to find meaning in the midst of such aspirational flourishing.

This can clearly be seen in Claire's attempts to create memories and 'traditions' which might come to be later unwrapped in new forms of significance and meaning. Such wrapping of course takes effort, and now that she appreciates how much work her own Mum put into it, Claire is keen to let her know it was 'worth it'. This admission of gratitude has apparently

'meant a lot' to her Mum; something Claire now likes to hold onto in those stressful moments when she's thinking "Oh *Christmas!*" "We never knew", she said:

It was always a good thing for us. And I think...as a Mum, that's what I want...it to be. I want my kids to look back and be like, "Yeaaaah, we loved that", you know.

'So you want to know that you've given them a good time, that you've made them happy', I clarified: 'Is that it?' She paused. 'I think in life that...you know, days can go by that are all the same, and you don't remember them', she reflected:

but sometimes you can have, I think of it as like...snapshot memories, that sometimes there's something that sticks out, and you think, "*Oh.*" And it's not often at the time that you *know*. Often you look back, and in hindsight you say, "Oh that was significant", or that thing that happened that year or that week, I always will remember that one point in time. Whereas Christmas, you *know*. It's one of those rare occasions where...you know it's significant at the *time*. You *know* you'll remember it so, that's a *good* thing. But I guess it kind of means the pressure's on, like your wedding day...the pressure's on for it to be amazing [laughs]...or the day you have your kids. You know these are significant times, and Christmas is a significant time in the year. Like, on the one hand you should be nice on every day of the year, but then if you *were* there would never be anything special about it I suppose...

We here once again see the notion of memory-making taking on a central role in Claire's sense of the significance of Christmas; the dominant emotional expression being one of anticipatory nostalgia in which feelings and actions come to be governed by an intensified awareness of their potential future meaning and significance. This apparent intensification of anticipatory nostalgia is, in part, naturally generated from the way Claire herself has come to feel about her own Christmas memories. 'I remember how much I loved it as a child', Claire said, '...it's a happy kind of anchoring memory that I kind of want my children to have...too.' So 'do you still feel that sense of anchoring now', I asked. 'Not any *more*', she said:

I don't think I do now. I think...now I'm an adult with kids of my own, other things are more significant and special to me, um [pause] but I try not to lose sight...that it means something different to the children...because I guess...whereas right now, it's something that's not massively important to me in that it tends to be more of a stress than a pleasure...I appreciate that it is important to other people...and I don't want to kind of, not ruin, it's not the right word - I don't want to feel like I'm not recognising the significance it has for other people

'Maybe as you get *older*', she mused:

it becomes more important again because it's a time that you can go back to your family...But for *my* time in life, when very little is about you *personally* - and I'm not saying that as a bad thing...but it is a *thing* when you've got kids...I feel it's my responsibility to create that for other people. So I feel like in a way that when you're the middle, with the children and the older [relatives]...when you're that *mid-point*...it's kind of up to *you* to make it special for other people

'And you could just walk away and be like, "D'you know what?! We're not having Christmas this year!"', she jokily added: 'Which, you know, sometimes, you think *well*.' '*Tempting*', I laughed. '*Tempting!*', Claire confirmed. 'But', she paused thoughtfully:

I think you owe it to, you know, the sacri - I want to say sacrifice, it's not really a sacrifice...I'm making it sound all dramatic, but you owe it - you know, the effort that your *own* parents made to make it special to you. You kind of owe it to your past self and your future perhaps. You know if...Christmas isn't a special thing for *now* and your children grow up thinking, "Ah it doesn't really matter"...when [pause] *you're* older, you might not have that opportunity to touch base, because *they'll* be the ones with the busy lives and the children...and that's a window...a significant time of year, that you can...join in with *their* lives. And if you make it not significant then you will lose out on that?...So personally [pause] although it doesn't have a *personal* significance to me at the moment, it has done, it *might* do

‘TOUCHING BASE’ WITH THE CHRISTMAS ‘ANCHOR-POINT’

What do you mean when you say ‘touching base?’, I probed. ‘I guess what I mean by that’ she frowned, ‘is...kind of two aspects, I suppose:

It’s like an access-point for a family to come together, and that’s *one* form of touching base, so with relatives you might not see that much...and even friends...But another way of touching base is I think it can...

She paused again, searching for the right analogy. ‘You know how some people take a photo of their child every single year first day of school?’ she said:

I think Christmas is also a little bit like that, in as much as it’s...a single day, a single point where you’re always going to take photos, you’re always going to, you know, so it’s a...yeah, a way that you can touch base with the past and future as well.

‘So I think’, she said, ‘having not realised I felt that way before talking to you about it, I think I do feel that maybe that to me is the true meaning of Christmas...’

...it’s something constant...It’s always a day when you’re at home with your kids or you’re with family, the shops are closed...you always know what you’re going to be doing...It’s something, again I guess that’s reassuring in a way amongst all the stress too...

‘Yeah’, she affirmed, ‘I guess I’ve never really thought about it in that way before. It *is* kind of...’ Again, she paused:

I suppose that maybe it would be easier if...I *did* say, “Oh it’s significant to me because I’m religious, or it’s significant to me because, yeah, it’s harder to articulate...

We in other words here see clearly evidenced a process of meaning-making which transcends traditionally perceived boundaries of the secular and the religious, and focuses instead

around a heightened valuing of moments of *significance* as they relate to ongoing narratives of autobiographical identity (Fivush & Haden 2003). Christmas, it seems, offers a particularly generative culminating space in which - and occasion upon which - such moments of significance might be collected and admired. Indeed, as Claire sees it, Christmas 'almost makes the other events of the year significant' by anchoring them all together into that one 'day'. She listed as examples, 'our first Christmas being married, our first Christmas in our first house, our first Christmas with Tyler', reflecting:

You do tend to feel that way on Christmas, so if something significant has happened during the year, you kind of almost revisit the significance of it at Christmas don't you... "It's Tyler's first Christmas", you know, somehow you do *do* that don't you.

Looking back on our conversation and contemplating afresh the sense of meaning she identified with Christmas, she commented:

...you think, "When I was their age" and you'll think to that *Christmas*. And you'll think, "Oh that was the Christmas that x y z", and that also puts in context the rest of the year and I think, "Ooh because Adam was a baby, that was the year he was born"...or "I got *this* this year, that means I must have been in *this* year at school"...you know what I mean, so you can always put other things in context by being able to remember that Christmas...it's like a reference-point or an anchor-point because it is an event without fail that occurs every year

In much the same way as Liz described Christmas as holding a kind of 'timeline' up to the events of her life, the festival can thus here likewise be seen to constitute a kind of orienting memory-tool which enables Claire to gain a greater sense of integrative perspective on the different, self-defining chapters of her evolving life-narrative (Williams & Conway 2009). Where she used to use the Christmas 'anchor-point' to 'look *forward*' to what she might be doing and where she might be 'next Christmas', since having children she reckons she uses it more to 'look back' to compare her own childhood with theirs. 'I think it kind of helps you maybe to see it through their eyes a bit', she said, though she guesses this shift must also have something to do with growing older. 'I suppose...when you've got most of your life ahead

of you, you look forward', she surmised, 'whereas I guess when you're older, and most of your life is behind you, you look back'. At the moment, however, she finds herself in an uncertain kind of 'middle-ground'. In this context of shifting change, 'Christmas' appears to represent something of a stabilising force of 'reassurance'. In Claire's words:

...the day is the same, whatever purpose you believe in is the same, Christmas is the same. *You're* the one who's different...And that's what hits you every year, I suppose especially if something significant has happened in your life...Christmas is the same, but you're *not* the same. Whereas most other days of the year, you don't think of it that way I guess

'I suppose most other days of the year, you don't have *time* to reflect', I suggested. 'You don't, Claire agreed. But 'I guess', she said, coming back to her theory, 'maybe you also don't have the reference-point':

You don't think, "Gosh, when I was doing the school run with the kids when I..." – well I wasn't doing the school run with the kids when I was 7, so you...can't refer back can you. But Christmas is something you can always refer back to, whether you're a child, whether you're a parent...or a young adult...and it's always something you can kind of think *forward* to in a way as well, like when I have my *grandchildren*, it's still going to be *Christmas*...Who knows what the world will be like, but we'll still have *Christmas* probably

This depiction of the 'Christmas constant' maps clearly onto our own interpretation of Christmas as 'active mirror'. Indeed, the two forms of 'touching base' Claire describes trace almost exactly the contours of horizontal and vertical connection along which we earlier mapped such incorporative ritual activity. In its capacity as a prime cyclical rite of passage which provides both a horizontal 'access-point' for social gathering, and a vertical 'anchor-point' for the integration of memory, identity, and values, Christmas hence comes to operate not only as a magnifier of the key dynamics and transitions of the life-course (Hockey & James 2003; Janusz & Walkiewicz 2018), but as a liminal platform for expression of the various affective dissonances such reflection reveals.

A COMPLEX EMOTIONAL MATRIX

Forms of inter and intra-personal tension between emotions, relationships, life-stages, ideals, expectations, and the constraints of lived reality were clearly discernible across all my ethnographic conversations. In keeping with this sense of tension, the emotions Claire described associating with Christmas were undoubtedly mixed, and often - as we have seen - directly conflicting. This sense of conflict appeared both in her descriptions of her emotions in the present, and in her comparisons of emotions felt across different stages of her life. 'When I was a child, I used to like the kind of anticipation', she said, adding:

I think even still, there's always a kind of build-up and an anticipation isn't there - that kind of feeling of, "Day One on the Advent Calendar. Here we go!" And I think when you're a child, that's a massively positive thing, it's like anticipation-slash-excitement, whereas I feel now, it's more

like, dread isn't the right word, but anticipation-slash, um, yeah feeling a bit yeah, not dread, reservation, you know, like mmm, anticipating all the work, and what could go wrong...as you become older, emotions just become more complex...But I think anticipation is something that is always there. It's the feeling of build-up to something...and that's kind of exciting isn't it. It is exciting, even if it's stressful, it's still exciting... even, you know, as an adult you still, when you wake up in the morning, you think, "*It's Christmas!*" ...you still think that don't you!...I don't know if that excitement ever goes away. I don't imagine it does



Figure C. Year 2 children (aged 6-7) engaging with interactive advent calendar which teacher allowed a different child to open each morning in December

Claire here highlights with some eloquence the degree of difficulty involved in our task of dissecting the ever-more intertwined layers of feeling which make up the 'complex' emotional matrixes of adulthood. In this narration we see quite clearly the ways in which Christmas

comes to subtly reflect the evolution - and perhaps even integration - of emotional experience as it pertains to different stages of life. The perceivedly childlike core of positive 'anticipation' and 'excitement' perhaps most obviously associated with Christmas is here identified as a constant base-emotion amidst the changing layers of emotional tone that develop as different experiences and transitions are accumulated across the life-course. Whereas Claire characterises the 'anticipation' of the 'Christmas consumer' as a form of purely positive 'excitement', the kind of 'excitement' experienced by the 'Christmas provider' is, as she sees it, imbued with a much more negative tinge of 'reservation' and impending anxiety. Such negativity is not necessarily straightforward however. For these more practically-induced emotions are often experienced in the matrix of a much more complicated set of affective responses; not least those more existentially-tinged feelings of 'significance', 'momentousness' and/or 'intensity' which accompany the sense of 'anticipatory nostalgia' with which Claire identifies so strongly (Cheung et al 2020), and which appear to foreshadow the affective tendencies and existential positioning of the next life-stage. As would seem in-keeping with recent psychological research on the 'future-oriented' nature of this complex multi-layered emotion (Fiorito & Routledge 2020),¹²³ the quality of bittersweet loss implicit in Claire's nostalgia can thus fascinatingly be seen to flow both backwards and forwards.

PRESENTS VS PRESENCE: IN SEARCH OF THE 'CHRISTMAS SPIRIT'

Whilst a sense of loss was in this sense clearly present, Christmas has in Claire's case not - or at least has not *yet* - inspired feelings of particular 'upset', 'sadness', or 'regret'. Rather, as I suspect for a good many at this particular mid-stage of life, the more dominant negative emotion tends to be one of 'stress' 'to get it all done and to get it all *right*' in the 'race against time'. Memories of childhood emotions and flashes of anticipatory nostalgia have, it seems, only so much redemptive weight when applied to these fluctuating levels of anxiety and dulled perspective - and more pressingly, to the pragmatic, practical demands of 'putting on' Christmas - and it was for this reason Claire felt she had more recently lost her personal sense of the 'Christmas spirit'. To feel truly in the 'Christmas spirit', Claire reflected, you have to be

¹²³ Routledge and colleagues have indeed identified what they refer to as a 'redemptive sequence' in affective experiences of nostalgia (2016: 17).

‘caught up’ in the ‘feeling’ of the ‘atmosphere’ she described right back at the beginning of our conversation. ‘Maybe it means something different to people who are religious,’ she said:

but...for me...it’s kind of the combination of all the sensory input...singing along to Christmas songs in the car, you know, ‘Now That’s What I Call Christmas’, watching like ‘The Santa Clause’ baking...the Christmas cake

Though the ‘Christmas spirit’ had waned in the wake of becoming ‘the Christmas parent provider’, she did admit to feeling a flicker of it this last year as she wrapped her children’s presents, and wondered what they’d think of them. She had put on ‘Four Christmases’ whilst she was doing it to get herself in the mood, and remembered telling Ollie that she was ‘feeling kind of Christmassy’. It hence seemed that Christmas had in fact not *quite* lost *all* its ‘magic’. It just lay a little more latent under the dissonance of adulthood, the burdens of motherhood, and the weary cynicism that so often comes with the onset of middle-age. In childhood, ‘Christmassy’ feelings flowed effortlessly. But in adulthood, Claire concluded, they had to be worked for. ‘I guess I do try and actively make myself feel Christmassy’, she said:

Yeah, I think I *do*...I think it happens by accident when you’re a child, because you’re exposed to all of that stuff, and you have all of these raw emotions, and it’s all so exciting. But when you’re an adult, I think you are trying to recapture it, but it takes more effort

Despite her own rather more ambivalent feelings towards the inculcation of this mood, Claire takes her responsibility for conjuring the ‘magic’ of Christmas for her children very seriously. As we have seen, this is not just *simply* about enveloping them in imaginative make-believe worlds of magical fantasy, or even *particularly* about inculcating them with a specific belief-set, but about painstakingly choosing, wrapping, and ‘tying the bows’ on the memories that she believes might, in time, keep the ‘magic’ alive. ‘So if you had one wish for Christmas *next* year’, I asked, ‘what would it be?’ ‘Oh I’d kind of like...’ She paused. ‘I would like to enjoy it as much as everyone else’, she resolved:

I feel a bit guilty...I haven't actively - I've done a my Mum, and prepared it all, provided it, but I haven't really participated in the enjoyment of it. I would like to...be more present, instead of thinking, "Oh what do I need to do now" and "when do we need to take the tree down". Do you know? I feel that I get lost in the detail, instead of actually just sitting back and -

'How much do you think this is a women's problem?' I interjected, concerned that my questions may just be providing her another means by which she might berate the quality of her Christmas performance. 'Well', Claire laughed:

my husband doesn't seem to stress out about it...and my Mum said my Dad never bothered, so from the n = 2 [both laugh]

Stress and work aside, the one thing Claire said she would really miss if it wasn't there at Christmas would be 'the people'. 'I would be *really* sad if I was on my own', she said. 'So if you *did* find yourself on your own, *would* you bother doing any of it?', I tried again.

I don't know, would I bother decorating, or listening to the music, would I -?

She hesitated, clearly intrigued by the question. 'I probably would actually', she concluded. 'Yeah, I think I would, which is weird, because logically you think well, if they weren't there, there'd be little point'. 'Yeah I think I would', she said again, excitement mounting in her voice as she turned the thought over in her mind:

I don't know if I would maybe make like a half attempt at a tree...but I think I *would* do something just to make it a bit special for myself somehow.

This issue of whether one would 'bother' to make an effort to 'make it special' or get into the 'Christmas spirit' by - or indeed for - *oneself* proved to be a revealing question across my conversations. Indeed, in a curious half-inversion of the individualism customarily attributed to Western postmodern cultures (DaMatta 2017), the intrigue with which this question was greeted amongst those I spoke to appeared to reveal that it seemed somehow easier - or at

least, more natural - to want to make an effort to 'make things special' for *others* at this time of year than it did for *oneself*. Viewed from this perspective - i.e. from within the cultural taxonomy of the context into which I posed this question - 'making an effort' to 'make it special' for *oneself* at Christmas easily came to be framed among my conversation partners as an act of *self-care*. A notion which has recently gathered some considerable socio-moral cachet within this context - not least in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic through which much of this thesis has been written - this is an act which simulates a sense of worth and belonging from the self *as* imagined Other, and which essentially represents an attempt to keep the self *alive* in the face of *apathy*; to keep a sense of *identity* and *meaning* going in the face of *anomie*. We will explore the implications of this further in our next and concluding chapter. In Claire's case, however, it seems to me that we have seen an apt example not only of an apparently 'non-religious' Christmas worldview which provides an interesting parallel to the complex ambiguities of the more ostensibly 'religious' Christmas worldview with which we opened these vignettes, but of the manner in which the dialogic liminality of the interview space itself can come to act as something of a renewing - and perhaps even cathartic - forum for the reflexive recapturing of meaning (Tyler 1986); or in this case, of 'spirit'.

BAUBLE MUSINGS: A CODA

As is the nature of interviews, opinions fluctuate, emphases come and go, and one conversational moment does not necessarily reflect another. Coming back to questions and asking them in alternative ways, I have found, acts to prod for consistencies and/or inconsistencies where they may lie, and importantly allows time and space for the interviewee to further develop and/or re-revise their perspective in the wake of the conversation. It is in this vein that I came to see my 'bauble exercise' playing out as a consolidating activity for both dialogue partners. In this concluding coda, I thus offer a window into this exercise not only by way of drawing together the themes of this somewhat lengthy case-study, but by way of depicting the more general themes which appeared from the exercise across my interactions in the field.

Intermittently called upon to help Isobel draw bits of holly, Claire strained as she mused upon what to write on her bauble:

Emotions, I'm going to say anticipation...comfort I guess, because I said festive, giving, complex, but that's not an emotion is it...it's about not just spending time with people that you love, it's about, *showing* the people that you love, showing, oh how can I fit that into something that will fit in this, and that actually makes sense? Showing people, appreciating...I don't know, does like preparation or planning does that, like is that an emotion, not really is it...I know I've got anticipation, that's something that that's more of a feeling

'And you wouldn't be prepared to put down stress?' I asked, wondering whether she might show a similar reticence to the teachers who had engaged with this task. My instinct served me well. We had spent the whole conversation talking about stress, and yet Claire did indeed display transitory qualms about putting it on the bauble:



Figure D. 'Christmas Emotions'

I don't really want to put stress on your bauble. Maybe I'll put stress if you like [Laughs]. Shall I put it? Cos it kind of sums things up...I think it, it um [pause] kind of if I don't put it, it's not a fair summary of the conversation is it

After a while, I began to regard the bauble activity as a kind of triangulation exercise which allowed me to repeat my key questions by means of an alternative engaging method, whilst allowing my participants more of a role in consolidating and analysing the themes of their own stories. There appeared to be something final about putting things down in writing that caused a certain pause for thought. Having to summarise what had been a long sprawling conversation into so few words really seemed to focus people. Stripping back all the detail

and employing this more kinaesthetic approach allowed us to pare down the essence of the conversation, and to look at it with a greater sense of perspective in a way that often led to a nuanced re-reviewing of themes and attitudes. The exercise thus frequently acted to differentiate idealised visions of the topic from the more complex realities that had been explored during the rest of the discussion. This subtle disjunct seemed to only further highlight the kinds of symbolic associations and societal expectations which have come to be invested in 'Christmas'. Perhaps the most significant discrepancy here came when one particularly cynical woman who had really only mostly negative memories and associations surrounding the festival which she had not personally celebrated for many years - having lived in an abusive household as a child, and having subsequently experienced her husband leaving her at this time of year - surprised us both by writing about 'redemption' when it came to this more formal exercise [Figures E; F]. It hence seemed that, when asked to write the central message of Christmas on a *bauble* (i.e. a distinctive Christmas symbol), even the most sceptical of folk appeared to feel more compelled to narrate the socially accepted ideal, and/or the vision of the festival for which they most *ideally* longed.

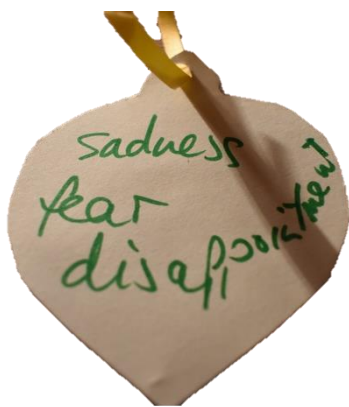


Figure E. 'Christmas Emotions'

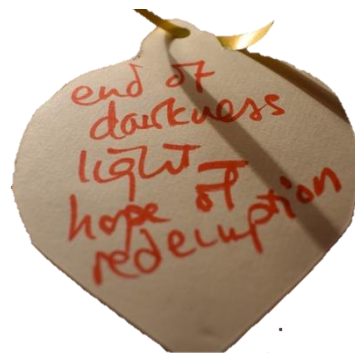


Figure F. 'Central message of Christmas'

'Ok', I said, glancing at Claire's finished bauble, 'so you've gone for "anticipation", "love", and "stress", and "being able to show people that you love them." So it's like an opportunity.' 'Yeah', Claire replied:

I think sometimes we're not able to in this society to fully, you know, show people, and it doesn't just mean, I suppose...it's giving to charity, strangers as well as, as well as family members...

This very much mirrored her earlier response regarding the central message of Christmas. 'I guess if the one thing that I wouldn't want to be is on my own', she reflected:

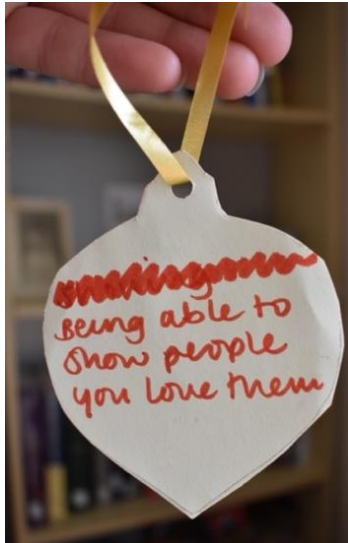


Figure G. 'Central message of Christmas'

I guess that it's about, I don't know, like I said to Tyler, I think it's an opportunity, despite the fact that you should be doing it throughout the year anyway [slight laughter] to kind of to show people that you care about them isn't it, um, and that can be by inviting them round, giving them a gift. And then I suppose it also has the opposite effect, cos if people *don't* come round you can get offended, and you know, there's another side to it, but I think it's an opportunity - it *should* be taken as an *extra* opportunity to show people how much you care about them

8. Conclusion: The Varieties of 'Christmas Magic'

A KEY LIMINAL 'ANCHOR-POINT' FOR CONTEMPORARY IDENTITY & WORLDVIEW

It is the contention of this thesis that '*Christmas*' has become an effective socio-cultural symbolic shorthand not only for indulgent escapism and covetous wish-fulfilment, but for redressive life-affirmation and hope. For in its shimmering ideal form, this is a time - and we might even say, 'time out of time' (Falassi 1987) - when our lives become not just momentarily decorated, but momentarily *enchanted*; a time when we are supposed to be able to indulge for a little while not only in a world of escapist fantasy, luxury, and free abandon, but in a world which celebrates and embodies that which we hold most dear. Whilst the decidedly Christian ethos of the festival and its inheritance still clearly has a vital part to play in its contemporary mood and praxis, and remains a significant - and for many, fundamental - aspect of its celebration in Britain as elsewhere across the world, the stories painted across this study have aimed to show that Christmas has in this context taken on an almost conveniently generic capacity as a broadly 'secular' and/or 'culturised' public ritual and national holiday which is seemingly able to accommodate a whole host of differing religious, non-religious, and/or cultural perspectives.

As we have seen however - and as Klassen & Scheer's recent (2019) volume on the 'public work of Christmas' also well illustrates - the nature and degree of such accommodation is often far from simple. For just as Christmas acts to accentuate dissonance, so too does it act to accentuate *difference*. We thus find that the manner in which people relate to Christmas comes to denote something of a key marker of the manner in which they define and position

themselves in relation to the dominant ‘values’ and ‘interests’ of the society in which they live (Turner 1982a: 10). This is as much true for those who make an active decision *not* to participate in Christmas celebrations (often ethnic and/or religious minorities, though not always) as it is for those who can’t get enough of it (Werbner 1996; Reimers 2019; Mo 2019; Weiner 2019). Hence, whilst at one end of the spectrum we find people who feel in some way alienated by the Christian connotations of the festival’s cultural inheritance, and by the often overtly Christian ‘affordances’ which dominate the public sphere at this time (Klassen & Scheer 2019a: 5), at the other we find people of a variety of denominations, shades, and persuasions who feel alienated from - and/or take active pride in defining themselves *apart* from - the perceivedly dominant tones of a ‘commercial’, ‘secular’, ‘mainstream’, ‘multicultural’, and/or ‘foreign’ culture they variously fear is increasingly threatening to erode the ‘religious’ aspect, the rich ‘cultural heritage’, and/or the ‘true’ moral meaning of the festival not just for themselves, but for future generations. It is thus in a sense not just despite, but *because* of its attempt to affirm a socio-moral consensus that Christmas can also somewhat paradoxically be identified as a site of public conflict and contestation.

In drawing this understanding of the underlying conflict contained in Christmas ritual together with Turner’s ritual theory of ‘social drama’ outlined in Chapter 2, this study has sought to explore the dynamics of such socio-moral contestation as they play out in relation to the more personal conflicts which arise for distinct (in)dividuals as they travel through the life-course (Hockey & James 2002; Janusz & Walkiewicz 2018). Seeking to capture the manner in which the intensification of such conflict acts to both integrate and disintegrate (in)dividuals as they come to define themselves in relation to the ideals of the society in which they live (Etzioni 2004: 10-26, 34-35), I have attempted to show the ways in which Christmas comes to hold a ‘magnifying glass’¹²⁴ up to the dynamics of self and society, and have ultimately proposed that this process of ‘mirroring’ comes to facilitate a ‘time of reckoning’¹²⁵ in which the dissonances of the ordinary everyday life-world are brought to a focus, and personal identities and values are re-collected, re-assessed, and/or re-affirmed. Viewed in relation to this Turnerian frame, the sense of alienation and lamentation implicit in such forms of socio-moral

¹²⁴ Participant’s phrase.

¹²⁵ Participant’s phrase.

positioning and critique can, I suggest, be seen not only to hold an 'active mirror' up to the tensions of contemporary society, but to constitute an active form of socio-moral 'metacommentary' which acts to affectively process and/or regulate various forms of loss and dissonance through a juxtaposed 'intensification' of the values, desires, and/or 'habits of the heart' that are deemed most important to people's ongoing sense of self-definition (Bellah et al 1985).

The intensification of socio-moral reflexivity that takes place in this context is, I argue, strongly undergirded by both highly personal and highly public forms of the so-called 'Christmas lament' (Armstrong 2010: 2-11); a phenomenon which encompasses both bio-cultural and socio-cultural forms of dissonance and loss. This concluding chapter aims to draw together these varying forms of dissonance to explore the manner in which this re-energising moment of renewal in the 'lifestream' of contemporary British culture (Falassi 1987: 3) comes to act as an annual 'anchor-point' and/or 'collective focus' for people in the midst of the flux and anomie of ordinary social life. Whilst I first and foremost intend to emphasise the ostensibly positive orientation of Christmas' character as a rite of death-defying and incorporating renewal which acts as an affectively integrating *reaffirmation* of the systems of worth and belonging which sustain social life, my overarching focus on dissonance seeks to draw out its role as a magnifier not only of *differentiation* and/or *integration*, but of those rather more anomic forces of *alienation* and/or *disintegration*. In exploring people's experiences of the festival as they move through the various undulations and transitions of the life-course, I have thus attempted to highlight the ways in which the anticipations, expectations, anxieties, obligations, and/or ambivalences of the Christmas 'anchor-point' variously carry the capacity to disintegrate as much as they do to integrate, to alienate as much as they do to incorporate.

Our recourse to Turner's ritual metaphor of 'active mirror' has to this end sought to illustrate the manner in which Christmas comes to magnify not only feelings of intensified *gratitude* for the *presence* and *profusion* of all that is good in our lives and for all that is 'worthy' of celebration, but those rather more negative feelings of *displacement* or *disenchantment* over the things that *don't* feel quite so good; those feelings of *longing* for that which feels *absent*. Of course, just as no one Christmas is ever *quite* the same, no one person moves through the life-course in quite the same way, and it is important to acknowledge the highly varying levels

of conscious and/or unconscious significance people of differing backgrounds, personalities, and persuasions invest in the holiday. However much its pervasive public dominance clearly acts to constitute *some* form of cyclical constant in a good majority of lives in this context, it is equally important to bear in mind the complex nature of ambivalent fluctuation which characterises feelings of attachment towards the festival as people progress through the different complexes of their lives, and as the occasion perhaps rather inevitably comes to take on different meanings and associations. This picture of heterogeneity is, I suggest, as crucial to understanding Christmas in this context as it is for understanding the diverse make-up of contemporary Britain more generally, and it is this picture of complex (in)dividuality which shines through the stories of the people who participated in this study. As Paul rather concisely put it, 'Christmas is what people try and make it.' Such allusion to the highly *personalisable* nature of Christmas has of course been key to our exploration. It was however in a point rather later in my conversation with Paul that he offered up an interpretation of the festival which I believe encapsulates rather well the actively dynamic manner in which such personalisation comes to relate to a wider sense of societal and/or public consciousness. I here thus cite this part of our conversation at some length, before returning back to a consideration of how this interpretation might relate to our developing understanding of the placement and ethos of the festival in the wider lifestream of contemporary Britain.

A 'UNIQUE' TIME 'COLLECTIVE FOCUS'

Despite his clear ambivalences around the 'religious' aspect of the festival, in the midst of reflecting on his experience of Christmas at Durham Cathedral, Paul suddenly said:

It's good that there's something there that's been created from something that gives...everyone a collective focus

Pausing for a moment as he developed this thought further, he continued:

it's probably the only time the whole nation [pause] are looking at the same thing, maybes apart from a royal wedding, Princess Diana's funeral, England being spectacularly good at football...or something horrific to give you national focus, even

though it's a local event [pause] like, you know, a terrorist attack that affects the national psyche or, you know, Grenfell tower...what else have you got nationally [pause] to make everyone pull in the same direction? Which unfortunately just means loads of people losing their blob in city-centre shops [pause] you know [laughs] really, but everyone's got the same focus, to have a good Christmas. That's all everybody wants to do, "*have a good Christmas*". And however you feel...you're going to have a good Christmas is up to you as an individual or a family...whether that's loads of nights out, loads of drink...having nights out, having nights in, Christmas dinner, going out spending loads of money, getting stuff as a recipient maybes for kids...or your partner may be genuinely really excited about something you've said you might be going to be able to get them or, you know, I don't know. But yeah I'd say Christmas, yeah funnily enough, is potentially the only event where nationally everybody in their own way [pause] wants to have a good Christmas, so it is incredibly unique the more I think about it

This notion of everyone wanting to 'have a good Christmas' 'in their own way' speaks rather directly into our central discussion of the manner in which Christmas comes to act in this context as a 'malleable' collective platform for the 'crafting' and/or 'reflexive commemoration' of personal 'traditions' (Rytting 2005: 19; Mason & Muir 2013), and of evolving identities and worldviews (Klassen & Scheer 2019: 4). The reference to an underlying sense of shared common value and purpose implicit in this statement meanwhile correspondingly depicts the manner in which this intensified performance of individuality comes to relate to a wider sense of collective consciousness, or as Paul puts it, 'collective focus'. We are here given something of a glimpse as to the way in which the relatively 'loose requirements' of the standardised ritual-symbolic repertoires of Christmas come to allow for the maintenance of idiosyncrasy (Johnes 2016: 73-112), whilst simultaneously bonding individual members into a moment of *communitas* which acts in Turner's words to:

reassert and reanimate the overarching values...common interests and moral order of the widest recognised cultural and moral community...despite the conflicts of norms and interests on ground level (1982a: 10; 1982c 75).

Paul's allusion to this sense of *communitas* offers an especially clear depiction of the genre of reflexive 'intensification' we have been seeking to capture throughout this study; his understanding of Christmas as a rare occasion which 'make[s] everyone pull in the same direction' rather effectively serving to underscore our overarching - and loosely Durkheimian - framing of the festival as a deeply integrative rite of incorporation for the positive affirmation of social bond and value. Perhaps more implicitly however, it provides a rather fascinating window into the foundational - and almost subliminally gravitational - kind of role the church and/or the Christian 'Christmas story' (e.g. Figure A) has come to play in this context as a latent symbolic repertoire of mythic origin (Turner 1982c: 22), and background civic sanctifier of this wider sense of 'collective focus' (Davie 2007).



Figure A. Primary school teacher teaching her Year 2 Class (aged 6-7) 'the Christmas story' ahead of their highly anticipated Nativity Play performance

Paul's sense of the manner in which each personalised version of Christmas comes to embody a rather larger ideal - and/or comes to take its rightful place as part of something bigger - not only carries clear resonances of Daniel Miller's depiction of the 'centripetal' dynamic which shapes Christmas ritual in this context, but hints directly at the sense in which this dynamic of incorporation comes to constitute its own particular genre of transcendent experience. For just as the 'paradigmatic' image of ideal 'holy family' depicted in the condensed symbol of 'the nativity' represents a rather attractive bio-cultural symbol for the embodied 'microcosm' of people's own families, so too does the 'microcosm' of each individual or family's Christmas

come to be drawn up into - and in a sense *sanctified* - by a wider sense of endorsing collectivity (Davies 2009; Miller 1993a: 29). His discussion of the similar kind of 'collective focus' generated in the event of a tragedy, meanwhile, likewise expresses the way in which the flow of this dynamic simultaneously works back the other way as the 'national psyche' comes to feel a sense of solidarity with the plight of the 'local' as it attempts to 'redress' the sense of 'crisis' triggered by the event (Turner 1982).

It is this dynamic interaction between the 'local' and the 'global' which Miller posits as central to the 'centripetal' dynamic of contemporary Western Christmas 'cosmology', and it is this same co-mingling of the particular and the universal which I want to argue makes the festival



Figure B. This sense of particularity in relation to collective participation in a larger universal community of belonging was perhaps most evocatively displayed in one Father Christmas 'grotto' I visited which allowed children to plot the location of their house on 'Santa's Route Planner' which depicted a local map, shown next to a map of the UK, which was in turn framed on the wall above a traditional globe.

such a prime site of emotional appropriation and immanent transcendence. Especially well encapsulated in the magical story of Santa personally visiting every child across the world in one night, this dynamic of suspension between 'local' and 'global' - and indeed, between time and eternity - can be understood as the fundamental mechanism of societal incorporation around which the Christmas rite revolves, and can, I suggest, in many ways

be seen to constitute the key dynamic of intimate immanence around which forms of Christmas transcendence tend to germinate. As we have seen - and as Miller also indicates in his analysis of Trinidadian Christmas (2017: 426) - this intensified sense of the particularity of the *personal* and of *place* often comes to be closely entangled with an intensification of the particularity of *time*, and we might say of *space*,¹²⁶ and it is in this sense of the *locatedness* of

¹²⁶ This closely interwoven relationship between 'place', 'space' and 'time' connects closely with now long-held discussions across human geography, and other related disciplines (e.g. Lawton 1983). For a parallel analysis of the intensification of 'place' as it relates to the 'sacred', see Miles-Watson (2016).

Christmas that I particularly want to focus in on as we consider the genre of emotional appropriation this form of cultural intensification precipitates.

The significance of this intensification of locatedness was made abundantly apparent throughout my fieldwork, and was especially noticeable in the recurrent - and often highly hope-laden - references to '*this Christmas*' I observed to be rather frequently invoked in commercial advertisements surrounding the season, as well as in more colloquial discourse. More often than not tied to assertions of territorial identity, this key emic phrase essentially conjures up notions of 'Christmas' entering afresh into specific locales and/or particular situations. This to my mind not only brings us back to the rather hierophanic like nature of Christmas' charismatic entrance



Figure C. 'Christmas Lights Switch On' in Durham city centre (2017) which featured the dramatic entrance not just of Santa Claus himself, but of a plethora of Santas projected over the buildings in the market square by way of announcing the arrival of Christmas into the city. This was followed by a profusion of fake snow (only faintly discernible here) which rather literally signalled not only the change of landscape, but the change of climate.

into the ordinary everyday life-world, but to the sense in which it comes to compress both the domestic and the historical into a singular sense of the 'timeless' (Miller 2017: 423).

Though the degree and nature of transcendence felt in such a moment of apparent *communitas* and/or *hierophany* inevitably varies between different people and personalities, this is a societal performance of reflexivity which is clearly intended to act as something of an integrating 'anchor' which roots people *spatially* through references to the particularity of place as it relates to the wider globe, and *temporally* through references back to the historical inheritance and legacy of the occasion as it has come to be celebrated in that particular setting. It is, I suggest, exactly this meeting of the horizontal with the vertical that comes to underscore the experience of 'magical' anticipation and/or nostalgia many appear to feel at Christmas as their 'story' comes to be drawn up into the wider collectivity and/or a sense of the larger whole with the passing of another year (McAdams 1993), and as the cultivation and

performance of personal 'traditions' come to act as something of an 'indexing' and/or orienting 'anchor-point' not only for the memories of all that has passed, but for a sense of anticipation for all that is to come (Mason & Muir 2013: 608-609, 625).

THE 'MAGIC' OF CHRISTMAS LIMINALITY: A PROPOSED SKETCH

Whilst such 'moments' of *communitas* and/or *hierophany* can quite clearly be felt at any time of year, the majority of those I interacted with as part of my fieldwork readily identified Christmas as an occasion which provided an important and highly anticipated 'opportunity' for the active cultivation and/or remembrance of such 'magical' moments. Where memories of other special gatherings take much of their 'magic' from the spontaneous and one-off nature of the event, the 'magic' of *Christmas* is evidently a much more universally anticipated affair. Indeed, for many of the people I spoke to, 'Christmas' itself appeared to constitute something of an intrinsically 'magical' moment in time; a moment which acted, or was at least in some way *intended* to act, as (1) the redressive culmination - and we might even say, sanctification - of all that had passed personally and collectively during the intervening time, (2) an affectively regulative space for the reflexive evaluation of the systems of worth and belonging by which people construct their identities, and order the pattern of their embodied lived lifestyle aesthetics, (3) an especially apt occasion for the active creation of 'memories' and 'traditions' which might ground and sustain social bonds into the future (4) a fertile liminal platform for the escapist, hope-driven, and/or imaginative entertainment of variously conceived 'ideal' dream-worlds, alongside (5) a corresponding willingness to suspend 'belief' (and/or 'disbelief') in the intervention of external - and often supernaturally-imbued - forces or entities which might provide some means of transformation and/or wish-fulfilment.

In constituting a moment both in and out of time, I want to suggest that Christmas carries with it an air of liminal potentiality the subjunctive mode of which allows for a temporary suspension not only of the ordinary routines of the everyday life-world, but of the customary modes of thought and expectation by which people come to make sense of the realities of their lives, and of that which lies beyond their control. The festival might in this sense easily be seen to carry a quality of what Turner (1982b) later referred to as the 'liminoid'; the category he develops to discuss the transmutation of the liminal in the modern context in

which we see previously 'religious' - i.e. obligated - ritual activity coming to be manifested in actively chosen leisure pursuits, sources of entertainment/artistic performance, and self-constructed rituals which take on their sacrality by virtue of their demarcation from the mundane world of 'work'. Given that Christmas can in many ways be seen to run along the lines of a much more classic ritual schema of so-called obligated activity, it would to my mind be misguided to identify Christmas as a *purely* liminoid activity. I have hence here chosen not to especially distinguish as Turner does between the categories of 'liminal' and 'liminoid'.¹²⁷ That said, it is important to bear in mind the significance this trajectory of thought carries for our developing understanding of the role of liminality in the contemporary context.¹²⁸

Whilst the notion of the temporary ritual suspension of everyday norms has constituted a topic of extensive anthropological discussion in relation to the typical instances of inversion which tend to be facilitated during such periods of so-called 'sacred time' (e.g. Turner 1982g: 27; Miller 1993a), rather less attention has been paid to the ludic modes of belief such liminality facilitates. Here, Turner's later work on liminal genres of per-formance as creative spaces for the facilitation of subjunctive modes of reflexivity, and/or 'as if' performances (1988a: 169) of 'serious' - or indeed, 'deep' (Geertz c1973d) - play, becomes an especially enlightening conceptual toolkit, and it is this understanding of the playful and reflexive dimensions of liminality which has come to underscore my own developing understanding of the modes of performance and belief made manifest in the midst of contemporary Christmas ritual. This avenue of thought as I see it not only carries clear relevance for the study of ritual and/or celebratory behaviour in contemporary contexts more generally, but acts to rather problematise the nature of Deacy's (2016) depiction of Christmas as evidence of widespread sustained postmodern 'belief' in supernatural and/or fantastic entities.

Drawing these strands of thought together, I contend that re-framing our analysis of such activity as it arises within the highly charged and ambiguous context of ritual liminality described above might enable us to paint a more accurate picture of the meaning-making behaviours which can be found in the morally redressive cultural 'metacommentary' of the

¹²⁷ See critique offered by Szokolczai & Thomassen (2019b: 184).

¹²⁸ For further exploration of the wider role of liminality in the contemporary context, see Thomassen (2014); Horvath et al (2015).

‘Christmas lament’ (Geertz c1973d; Armstrong 2010: 2-11), and in the ‘magical’ modes of ‘belief’ - and of ‘make-believe’ (Turner 1982g: 28) - which tend to be evoked at this time of year. As discussed in Chapter 3, experience of the ludic and/or ‘magical’ suspension of belief (and/or disbelief) has in the British context, as I’m quite sure elsewhere, come to be rather intimately entangled with notions of enchanted wish-fulfilment, and of the harmonious and/or redemptive dissolution of pain and dissonance (Deacy 2013: 200). For many I



encountered across my fieldwork, this identification of Christmas as an inherently ‘magical’ time of year was not only about the felt ‘magic’ of a particular aesthetic ‘atmosphere’ (Anderson 2009; Mason & Muir 2014: 614-615), but about the sense that this was a time when ‘magical’ things were supposed - and/or expected - to happen.

In the midst of such an atmosphere of liminal imaginings, the affective dynamics of anticipation take on a uniquely intensified quality of abundant possibility as hopeful excitement builds, stress gathers, and doubt festers, and it is as I see it precisely this hotbed of *anticipation* which acts to provide especially fertile ground for manifestations of Christmas ‘magic’ and/or transcendence. As Deacy’s (2013; 2016) rich analysis of Christmas media indicates, expectation of such transcendence is reinforced at this time of year in the re-performance of key rituals involving ‘magical’ figures and atmospheres, and in the widespread re-sharing of paradigmatic narratives of re-birth, and/or of the redemptive transformation of cynical, down-trodden, or selfish adults (significantly, often males) who are in one way or another inspired to put aside the shackles of their sceptical modern rationalism and/or loneliness to freely embrace the ‘Christmas spirit’. In expanding their perspectives, and indeed their ability to love, by becoming vulnerable and/or imaginative enough to open themselves to the possibility that there might be more to this world than first meets the eye - in allowing themselves to see the world through this new wonderful ‘Christmassy’ lens - such characters are redeemed in the midst of their new-found ability to see and enter (often with and/or led by children or other similarly angelic-like figures) an enchanted world of ‘magic’ and ‘miracles’ in which anything is possible; and in which the world, life, and/or Christmas is given back its ‘true meaning’.

It is this notion of the temporary transcendence of dissonance which I believe constitutes the core machinery of cultural redress by which Christmas ideology and ritual has come to operate in the contemporary Western context, and much of this study has thus come to revolve around an exploration of the qualitative dimensions of this affective and highly aesthetic experience of escapist and/or redemptive Christmas transcendence. As we explored especially closely through the prism of Heather's narrative in relation to the interrelated, and yet distinct, anthropological concepts of *hierophany* and *communitas*, experience of such affective states appears in its most essential form to amount to often spontaneous and unexpected moments of surprise or revelation in which an external



Figure D. Images taken from famous scene in popular British Christmas film *Love Actually* (2003) in which Christmas is posited as a time for the redressing and/or accentuation of interior dissonance and the revelation of 'truth' (i.e. authentic feelings); which in this case involves a declaration of unrequited love on a doorstep

- almost grace-like - force of power, truth, and/or benevolence breaks in to in some way transform and/or enchant experience of the ordinary everyday life-world, and to connect those who experience it closer together with each other, with the universe and/or humanity, and with their wider sense of cosmology. We are in other words here talking about 'peak-experiences' of transcendence, enchantment, and/or effervescent 'ecstasy' (Turner 1982g: 11, 14, 23) which might easily be seen to parallel those classic affective depictions of the 'varieties of religious experience' described by the likes of William James ([1902] 1982), and which can rather crucially be seen to resonate across a wide spectrum of religiosities, backgrounds, and worldviews.

Such experience can be described with varying levels, and degrees of overlapping tonal emphasis, as constituting: (1) moments of humility and/or vulnerability in which we are reminded of our dependence upon others and/or forces outside of ourselves; (2) moments of effervescent joy, mutual belonging, and/or reflective gratitude in the midst of intensified

reciprocity and/or recognition; (3) moments of 'grace' (Bateson [1972] 2000: 137-161; Bateson & Bateson c.1987) - i.e. of all-encompassing connection and/or aesthetic beauty - which grant a temporary glimpse of eternity in which all experience is suspended together in peace and harmony; (4) moments of 'feel-good' escapism, hedonistic release, and/or playful frivolity in which transitory enjoyment and/or indulgence transcends the dissonance of life realities (Gilhus & Mikaelsson 2018); (5) moments of 'bittersweet' longing and/or 'poignancy' in which we commune with and/or express our desires for ourselves and/or the world (Cain 2022); (6) moments of life-affirming appreciation and/or affective identification which grounds - or we might say, 'anchors' - the self with a deep-seated sense of well-being, worth, pride, and/or belonging; (7) moments of intensified gratitude for life and/or for what one has, or has been given; (8) moments in which some authentic truth, 'inner meaning' and/or 'ultimate concern' (Turner 1982g: 19; Tillich 1957: 1-4) is made manifest [e.g. Figure D]; (9) moments of intensified vitality and liberation in which the self feels a stimulating sense of itself in free-wheeling 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; 1997); (10) moments of positive uplift and/or redemptive renewal which act to heal and/or transcend experience of dissonance and division with hope-laden expressions of life-giving joy and momentum.

Though the experience of collective intensification Christmas stimulates undeniably leads to positive - and even purportedly 'magical' - feelings of transcendence for many people, when coming to interact with the varied 'prisms' of people's lives, the pressure of this incubating vortex of intensification quite clearly comes to generate what is in reality a much more complex spectrum of ambivalent feelings. Hence, where at one end of the spectrum we find *identity-enhancing* experiences of *connected rootedness* and/or *joyful satisfaction* - positive experiences of pure sociality and mutual reciprocity which we might easily etically identify with Turner's depiction of *communitas*, and which often comes to be emically associated with culturally idealised notions of 'the Christmas spirit' - at the other end of the spectrum we find rather more negatively valenced *identity-depleting* experiences of the felt contrast of dissonant disconnection which often acts to produce the sense of *disconnected un-rootedness* and/or *disillusioned disappointment* so many report feeling at this time of year (Davies 2011: 68-94). If Christmas can be seen to act as a kind of 'anchor-point' and/or seasonal meta-rite for the culmination of the varying emotions and dissonances of the present-feeling self, there is I suggest an intensified sense in which the genre of liminality it facilitates comes to

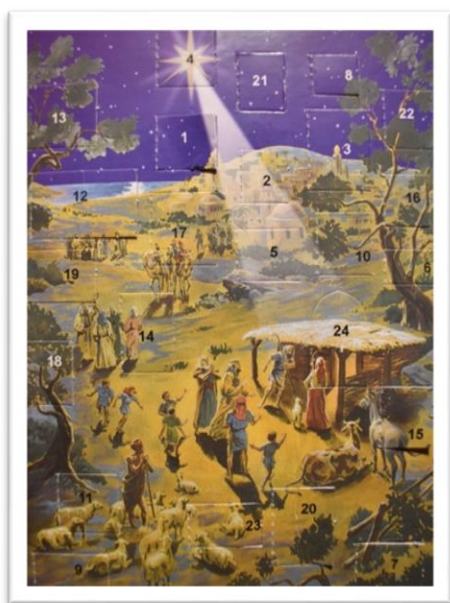


Figure E. Advent Calendar depicting the Christian narrative of Jesus' birth

symbolically re-present not just the various stages of change implicit in a single transition (Janusz & Walkiewicz 2018), but for the life-course as a *whole*. The festival can thus, I argue, be understood to function as a fertile contemporary socio-cultural platform for the evaluation of perspectives and life-goals; an atmosphere of socio-moral and intra-personal reflection which is propelled by the natural liminality evoked by its 'Janus-faced' placement between the end of one calendar year and the beginning of the next (Miller 1993a: 25).

This seasonal positioning is powerfully accentuated by various symbols of new beginnings and rebirth, by manifold references to journeying (e.g. Mary and Joseph journeying to Bethlehem, people travelling home to their families, Father Christmas journeying across the world, the Wise Men following the star), and by the pervasively resonant symbolic image of light coming into the midst of the darkness of winter; life-affirming natural symbolism which has of course long characterised the ethos of various manifestations of mid-winter festivals of this kind. Throughout my fieldwork, experience of fairy-lights, Christmas trees, and candles was frequently referred to as 'magical', sacred,



Figure F. Advent Candle



momentous, and/or uplifting; a set of designations that appeared closely interwoven with a sense of warm familiarity, positive vitality, comforting security, peaceful harmony, and/or an optimistic sense of anticipation which more often than not related directly back to the symbolic 'cluster' of images surrounding the warmth of the ideal domestic family setting (Turner 1982g: 19, 22). The seemingly timeless and much-loved 'Christmassy' feeling evoked by this 'symbolic field' was thus for many as much about a steadying sense of equilibrium and nostalgia, as it was about hope.

It does not take a huge conceptual symbolic leap to see why the notion of new beginnings - and ultimately of new *birth* - comes to be bound up with this particular constellation of redemptive symbols (Davies 2015: 377-378). Quite irrespective of the relative cultural positionality the ostensibly 'religious' narrative of Jesus' birth brings to bear upon the nature and nuance of its symbolic centrality in this particular context, the weight of its continuing cultural symbolic influence and tonal traction as a prime 'paradigmatic scene' of 'Christmas' is undeniable (Needham 1981: 89; Davies 2009). The somewhat warm and fuzzy symbolism of the vulnerable 'baby asleep on the hay' - of that intimate, quietly miraculous, and distinctively maternal moment of new life being nurtured into the world - finds a notable sense of cultural resonance not only with the widespread ideology of familism and corresponding positioning of the nuclear family as a prime sanctuary of welfare and security in the context of Western capitalist societies, but with the broadly humanistic and worldly valuing of the sacrality of human life which reigns increasingly triumphant as a collective value that carries the capacity to mirror and modulate a range of disparate worldviews, faith, and non-faith backgrounds. As one of my participants put it, 'everyone can get behind a birth'.



Figure G. Gelf the Elf looking out from window of Crook Hall

meaning' of Christmas which made them feel rooted to the places, people, and/or values to whom they felt they could belong. In the context of contemporary British Christmas, this cultural ideal of *rootedness* has come to be symbolically tied to images not just of origins and of intimacy, but to conceptions of the warm security of home and hearth as contrasted

with the cold and threatening nature of the harsh outside world and/or the dark and bleak mid-winter (Miller 1993a: 32-33). Such symbolism clearly attests to Christmas' broader function as a seasonal rite of passage which acts to affirm life in reassertions of fertility, and ultimately, of *survival* (Falassi 1987: 2). For here, we find a ritual-symbolic schema which locates conceptions of 'rootedness' not just with the warmth of abundance, but with notions of safety and protection as contrasted with notions of danger and isolation. This assertion of the psychological need for rootedness in the midst of adaptation and flux once again brings us back to our central idea of Christmas coming to act as a prime societal platform for the bolstering of identity in the midst of the threat of loss and change; a theme which not only underscores our own conceptualisation of Christmas as a key seasonal rite of passage for the regulation of identities and worldviews in this context, but which, from another theoretical frame, also speaks rather directly into Hans Mol's (1976) conceptualisation of the bolstering process of integrative incorporation whereby identities come to be 'sacralised'.¹²⁹ A theory which speaks rather directly into the dynamics of incorporation we have been seeking to capture, it is with this notion of the 'sacralisation of identity' in mind that I now turn to a closer consideration of the manner in which the ecology of Christmas meaning-making might relate to the 'centripetal' dynamic of the 'Christmas anchor-point' Claire described as being so central to the festival's contemporary import.

WEAVING THE ROOTS OF CHRISTMAS COMMUNITAS: A GLIMPSE INTO A COMPLEX ECOLOGY OF WORTH & BELONGING

The territorial bases of family, of place, and of the ultimate idealisation of 'homecoming' can be seen as key to the process of sacralisation so evidently stimulated in Britain at this time of year.¹³⁰ In this context, homelessness quite clearly becomes something of a key symbolic opposition - and ultimate threat - to the societal ideal of a warm, safe and 'rooted' family

¹²⁹ As Adam Powell (2017) helpfully articulates in his recent analysis of Mol's contributions to the study of contemporary religion, Mol's conception of the sacralisation process circulates around what he takes to be a fundamentally biological - and to some extent territorially-imbued - dialectic between (1) identity as an anchoring place of security and constancy, and (2) the creative and/or destructive processes of adaptation and/or differentiation which threaten to destabilise, expand, and/or in some way change the composition and/or orientation of the organism.

¹³⁰ Chris Rea's popular (1986) festive hit 'Driving Home For Christmas' captures this theme especially evocatively in its depiction of the longing of being reunited with loved ones at Christmas, and ultimate portrayal of homecoming as getting one's 'feet on holy ground.'

Christmas, and was a theme which came up repeatedly across my fieldwork conversations with people of all ages. Intensified awareness of homelessness is made practically apparent in increased annual campaigns around the subject, and in correspondingly increased support for homeless charities and/or efforts to provide shelter for those without a place and/or



Figure H. 'Crisis at Christmas' advertisement for donations

people to celebrate with on Christmas Day, e.g. 'Crisis at Christmas'. In my own quest to find a place to volunteer, I soon discovered Christmas Day volunteering of this kind is in fact an oversubscribed activity. Indeed, it seems that, where such charitable organisations often struggle to find people to cover

such occasions at other times of the year, at Christmas they have volunteers bursting at the seams; a situation which in some locales sometimes even leads to 'volunteers' outnumbering those for whom the event was originally intended.

Whilst the Christmas lunch I eventually helped volunteer on was aimed at those who found themselves in some way 'socially isolated' as opposed to 'homeless' as such, the theme of *rootlessness* was still clear. In fact, the more time I spent with the community of people charged with organising this event, the more I came to realise that the line that lay between 'volunteer' and 'guest' was often rather intriguingly ambiguous. Though people became involved with the scheme for a vast variety of complex reasons, many of those who either chose or were recruited to volunteer at the event were, like Liz, often to some degree - and/or felt in some way - socially isolated themselves. Almost all those volunteers I interacted with



Figure I. 'Guest' unwrapping her Christmas gift at the 'Make Christmas Special' event on Christmas Day

appeared to volunteer - and/or were encouraged to do so by paid community leaders - to gain a sense of *connection* with their wider community at a time when they felt and/or were perceived to be in some way personally *disconnected*. Where some sought to escape the difficulties and dissonances of their own family Christmases, and/or a mediating neutral space where family members might commune on 'safe' territory, others sought more obviously to



Figure J. Bauble filled out by one of the participants on the day

'give something back' and/or to care for those they deemed more vulnerable than themselves, while others were rather more simply just glad of the opportunity to be able to make other people happy at a time where they themselves feared and/or knew they could not be.

This multidimensional act of reciprocity, fascinating in its nuanced layers of implicit power play, was often (though not always) performed in direct lieu of other family members those volunteering might otherwise have cared for - whether in the past, or in some imagined ideal world where their care was not denied, rejected, deemed irrelevant, or in some way not good enough - and bestowed, rather noticeably in some instances, a sense of purpose and belonging upon volunteers as recognised and valued 'givers'; as worthy societal contributors, and upholders of collective 'virtue'. This same sense of pride in giving, and perhaps more fundamentally, in the ability to care for and make others happy, was discernible right the way across the spectrum of people I spoke to as part of my fieldwork, and was clearly associated - even by children as young as six and seven - as constitutive of the very core of Christmas. Whilst the 'joy' and 'love' of 'giving', of 'sharing', and of 'friendship' constituted a clear set of inalienable values actively taught as part of the school's Christmas celebrations - and was made most especially apparent in the Headteacher's weekly candlelit 'Advent Assemblies' on Christmas values - the sense of genuine pleasure



Figure K. 'Advent Assembly' in which a new candle was lit each week which pertained not to the parallel liturgical referents employed for this practice by the Church of England, but by secular Christmas values of 'hope', 'love', 'peace' and 'friendship'

children gleaned not only in wearing such virtues as badges of pride and reward-worthy recognition, but in the active praxis of such generosity was often viscerally palpable in our interactions.

Many of the children I interviewed in small focus-groups spoke thoughtfully of the power of 'giving' at Christmas, and of that 'happy feeling' they got in seeing other people happy at their presents. Likewise, though a good number of them reported feeling 'embarrassed' or 'nervous' having to stand up and say their lines as part of their nativity plays, a good majority



Figure L. Children performing their nativity play

of children also felt a sense of pride not only at being able to remember and perform their lines *well*, but at being *recognised* by their teachers and parents for doing so. Though the majority articulated this sense of pride in terms of its perhaps more obvious affective framing of the sense of personal satisfaction and self-worth gained in response to reward

for good behaviour - a framework which could rather notably in many ways be seen to regulate the emotional and behavioural dynamics of school life as it did the narrative of Father Christmas gifting presents to children as rewards for good behaviour assessed by his watchful elf helpers - some verbalised more explicitly the manner in which their pride in their own good performance stemmed from the knowledge that they had made their parents and/or teachers happy.

This comparison of the above two field-sites takes us directly back into the sense of fluidity we have been attempting to capture in our depiction of Christmas reciprocity. Once again, we here see the line between giving and receiving becoming somewhat fascinatingly affectively porous as carers and dependents come to be swept up in the midst of the intensified exchanges of recognition and virtue by which people come to re-establish and/or renew their own sense of rootedness in relation to the festival and its 'true meaning', and correspondingly to the wider ecology of relationships and values - the systems of worth and

belonging - in which they situate themselves. Whilst such affirmations of identity are clearly cultivated across a vast variety of the key 'star groups', relationships, and/or possessions with which people come to measure and situate their core sense of self,¹³¹ it was rather undoubtedly in relation to people's varying conceptions of 'family' - but most especially the nuclear family - that the majority of my participants came to measure their evolving sense of worth and belonging at this time of year. Thus, even in those instances where a person's natal and/or adopted kinship group did not constitute their most significant 'star group' - i.e. the group in which 'one looks most for love, recognition, prestige, office, and other tangible and intangible benefits and rewards' and in which one achieves the greatest sense of 'self respect' and 'a sense of belonging with others for whom one has respect' (Turner 1982c: 69) - the socio-cultural intensification of the practical, moral, and symbolic importance of 'family' at Christmas came to generate for most of those I engaged with a renewed subjective evaluation of their present relation and/or sense of obligation to this original intimate group of allegiance. Though some of those I spoke to had since looked for alternative roots with which to ground their core sense of self-worth and belonging,¹³² the clear socio-cultural emphasis on children and families at Christmas perhaps rather inevitably drew people back, if not to practical obligations towards one's kin, to reflective considerations of the intimate domestic environments in which they were raised, and to which they felt varying degrees of obligation to belong (Kuper 1993; Hauri 2011).



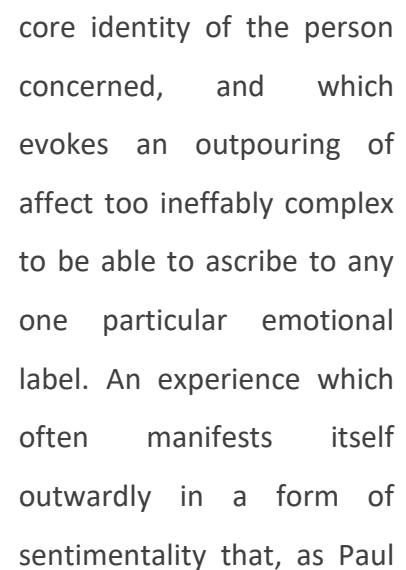
EXPLORING THE CHRISTMAS ANCHOR-POINT

If the ultimate aim of the Christmas rite is one of incorporation and renewal, central to the experience of its performance is a form of life-review. Hence, just as change in this context comes to be measured - or to use our mirror metaphor, reflected - against the Christmas ideal, it is, I suggest, those dissonances that *cannot* be incorporated with the ideal - or that

¹³¹ I here expand upon Turner's useful notion of the 'star group' as that 'group to which we owe our deepest loyalty and whose fate is for us of the greatest personal concern', or as the group 'with which a person identifies most deeply and in which he finds fulfilment of his major social and personal strivings and desires' (1982c: 69).

¹³² Where this was the case, the adoptive redefinition of such groups as 'family' was notably strikingly common.

Reference to feeling 'emotional' appears to function in this context as an emic tool for expressing an experience of poignancy or significance that likely relates in some way to the



The attempt to perform such unity in the face of intensified awareness of the reality of loss - if it does not ricochet into pure escapism - can, of course *itself* constitute an experience of acute dissonance. Even in those cases where escapism prevails, it is only a matter of time before a glance is exchanged, or a world collides to bring the dissonance of reality back into

view. Hence, if Christmas does indeed constitute a performance of utopia, to be ill, lonely, homeless, or dying in the midst of it does *indeed* seem jarring. It thus seems that the dissonance generated by the Christmas ideal *itself* propels a heightened awareness of comparative social contrasts, and needs. Responsive to this theme, Claire commented:

I saw a really interesting thing...I think it was on social media, about some Mums who had been divorced and whose kids were with their Dad for Christmas. And I thought to myself, "How awful. How lonely would you feel if, you know, your kids and...your ex were all together for Christmas, and you were kind of on your own." ...I kind of felt a bit tearful thinking about it, you know, again people who live alone and don't *have* family, it must be hard for them. And yeah, I think maybe actually, maybe people should be more generous at Christmas because there are, there's a kind of subset of people who are more in *need*...and maybe *these* are the sort of people we should be thinking about...and when people say we've lost the true meaning, true spirit, maybe they think, actually we should be helping *these* people instead of buying another plastic toy for our children

Considering further the kind of 'bittersweet' comparison-space Christmas generates, she continued:

I think that it must be a horrible thing to be on your own like that *at* Christmas...because it's so hyped *up*...I guess you can't help but feel extra lonely, cos you think probably almost...everybody else isn't on their own today and [pause] I don't know, I think it's when you think about yourself in comparison to what other people are doing...I think also, the whole, what we said about Christmas being a reference-point - if you *do* revisit your past Christmases, and think of all the happy times you've had, that must be quite bittersweet to think, "It's all over now and here I am on my own" ...There are pros and cons to something being a constant in your life, that it's not changing, but *you're* changing, and then you change so much that it's left behind, then there's no going back and again [pause] I guess it's just a marker of, like I said, it's a way of putting in context how your life is over the whole year in a *way*, and if you have ended up, say your partner died, you're on your own, your family live far away, it just

almost concentrates all that on the mundane, especially in retrospect, if you think of all the happy times that you've had. So I guess it just focuses, it's like a focus isn't it, almost of your life in general...and when you put it in context of Christmas being the constant, and you being the change, it can just bring home to you how much change has happened for better *or* for worse...and if sometimes the change has been for worse it makes it obvious, if you know what I mean...and I think that's why people, maybe why they feel more lonely at Christmas.

We here see an interesting parallel illustration of the manner in which Christmas comes to act as a kind of 'focus'. Unlike Paul's notion of Christmas as 'collective focus' however, Claire speaks of the more internalised manner in which Christmas comes to act as an affective 'focus' for all the events and dissonances of the life-course, whereby all the anxieties and concerns of the present-feeling-state are swept into an intensifying vortex of memories and 'concentrated', as she puts it, into the 'mundane'. This extended passage usefully elucidates the manner in which the 'Christmas constant' comes to hold up a 'bittersweet' mirror - or in Claire's terms, 'marker' - to the changing dynamics of the self, and indeed of society. We are here once again given a window into the intensifying effect such a 'constant' can have on personal and collective evaluations of dissonance, as Christmas comes to be shown to act as a magnifier not only of worldview, but of social position and need. The 'true meaning' or 'true spirit' of Christmas in this sense becomes bound up with an appreciation of one's lot in relation to the Other, and a corresponding humanitarian - and perhaps even guilty - awareness of those less fortunate in the pecking order.

THE 'MAGIC' OF CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Framed in relation to Lévi-Straussian perspective outlined in Chapter 3, we should, I suggest, view the reassertion of this 'spirit' of generosity and gratitude as a strategy for the ritualised conquering of varying forms of social death and/or alienation. This often finds its outlet in a moral-symbolic 'focus' on the young and the vulnerable. As was indeed already clear to me as I came to choose my field-sites, Christmas is seen by many in this context as a fundamentally children-centric festival (Cross 2004). Key to its contemporary performance - and accompanying ideology - is not only the experience of raising children, but the cultivation

of one's own memories of the experience of childhood, alongside an idealisation of the perceived qualities of childhood per se. It is therefore no accident that it is children who came to dominate my fieldwork, and who have alongside - and in their love of - Gelf the Elf continued to act as a reviving reminder of what it is all deemed to be *about*. For it is undeniably children who appear to express - and indeed *create* - the most exuberant excitement for Christmas, children who light up people's faces as they participate in Christmas activities; children around whom many of these activities are indeed centred, and 'for the sake of' whom 'Christmas magic' tends to be performed. It is in turn children who are often missed when they are *not* present, children who are longed for long after they have grown up and left home. For it is children who are popularly believed carry the capacity to enter most fully into the world of Christmas magic and make-believe, children who call to mind those images of the baby 'asleep on the hay'; children who supposedly most personify the joyful and innocent vitality of the 'Christmas spirit'.



Figure M. Gelf the Elf enjoying the company of one of my youngest participants

There is hence a sense in which Christmas appears to put on hold the experience of growing up; to suspend adults in a timeless state where they too are enabled to become children again



Figure N. Gelf the Elf & I pictured together with Father Christmas in his grotto at Crook Hall

as they enter into the same magical enchanted world of sleigh-bells and fairy-dust. This is only intensified when people come to watch their own children engage with the Christmas dream-world, and as they come to look back with renewed perspective on their own experiences of growing up. Such a dynamic

rather naturally shone clearly across my interactions with children and families as an elf at Crook Hall. Indeed, the more time I spent there, the more I came to recognise that what we were really engaged in was not only the performance of Christmas fantasy-land, but a process of 'sentimental education' (Geertz c.1973d: 470). As I carefully spooned out sparkly reindeer dust for each child, I found myself naturally telling the Father Christmas story in the form of questions; implicitly testing and teasing out cultural knowledge in the midst of attempting to foster a momentum of excitement. 'If you're very good, who might come and visit you on Christmas Eve?', I'd prompt, 'And how might he get there? And which one has the shiny red nose?' With the donning of my bright red and green elf costume, I found myself suspended in a mode of concentrated play with the parents, working overtime to maintain the fantasy-world for the children; a performance which was often subtly acknowledged and transgressed by the knowing twinkle of parental winks or the exaggerated backward silent-mouthings of 'THANK YOU'.



Figure O. My fellow elves pictured in character at Crook Hall

The more time I spent in the role, however, the more I came to see that the line between (1) maintaining the fantasy-world 'for the sake of the children' and (2) taking a real sense of personal joy in the midst of this fantasy-world was for the majority of parents in this context pretty blurred. Indeed, watching tiny faces light up with gleeful excitement as they glimpsed Frosty the Snowman padding towards them, or glow with bashful delight as they gazed inquisitively up at me whilst I ceremoniously spooned out their special reindeer dust, I too could somehow not help but be swept up with a sense of the numinous. For many of the children, this was simply a haven of magic; a fantasy-land which they were able to freely explore for themselves, and which their parents were for the most part delighted to join them

in.¹³³ Most of these parents hence weren't *just* acting their roles. They were suspended in total magical belief *with* their children. They weren't just excited *for* their children; they were excited *with* their children; and we might even say, *as* children.

This was an experience which thus seemed to be as much about enabling parents to commune with their *own* memories of childhood as it was about enabling them to provide



Figure P: Children introducing their elves to Gelf the Elf in school a few weeks before Christmas

for their children what had once been provided for them. Indeed, in some cases, the whole experience seemed rather more about parents anxious to pass on the fantasy to their children than it was about the children's actual enjoyment of the activity. For some children, the experience of having to go up the mysterious stairs to meet Father Christmas was in fact rather more overwhelming than it was pleasurable; more likely to end in tears than it was in presents. That said, there was absolutely no denying the intensity of excitement generated by Christmas amongst the children I encountered as part of my fieldwork; the anticipation for the coming of Christmas - and the almost synonymous anticipated arrival of Father Christmas - creating an electric buzz of momentum which pierced through my recording devices in literal shrieks of

euphoria, and genuinely touched and uplifted my soul in its apparent force of purity and joy.

¹³³ This it should be said seemed to constitute an important emotional dynamic in and of itself, for there was a sense that this was a time of year when parents perhaps had more time and inclination to be able to join the children in their play; a source of considerable delight for many of the children for whom this time thus became about being able to play with the grown-ups.

The seriousness with which the majority of them took their belief in and engagement with the magical world of the North Pole and its elves never failed to amaze me, and often operated on a level of intensity which was undeniably transcending. That said, alongside the moments of sheer unbridled joy, apparent purity of belief, and distinctive build in excitement and momentum, lay a plethora of other emotional responses; of fear, sadness, overwhelm, outrage, and, disappointment. In fact, the children I observed more closely displayed a much more complicated and nuanced mix of emotions than might have been anticipated, many of the focus-group responses surprising me in their similarity to some of the adult responses concerning the mixed emotions of the festival.



A good number of children reported feelings of sadness and anxiety alongside the dominant emotions of happiness and excitement when filling in their Christmas emotion baubles; several of them writing about the feelings of nervousness they felt in anticipation of Father Christmas' impending arrival. Likewise, whilst the majority of adults I spoke to were united in their generally positive nostalgic idealisation of their own childhood experiences of Christmas, there were notable exceptions to this aspirationally normative portrayal of the idyllic childhood Christmas. Negative impressions of childhood experiences perhaps unsurprisingly tended to follow the same pattern of inter-personal comparison as expressed in relation to adulthood, and shared at their root a sense of retrospective dissatisfaction with some aspect of the circumstance in which people had been raised. Sometimes this presented in the form of a dissatisfaction with the seeming lack of practical and/or emotional effort people's parents had put into provisions for the festival, or more generally with the negative emotional dynamics which had coloured their enjoyment of the occasion. Perhaps the most common disappointment expressed, however, revolved around the lack of money parents had had to spend in comparison to other families; a dynamic which often tended to result in an increased effort to overindulge the next generation by way of providing for them what had not been provided by the previous generation.

INTRODUCING THE CHRISTMAS ENTHUSIAST: CHRISTMAS AS A PRIME 'OPPORTUNITY' FOR CELEBRATION

This resolve to make up for lost provision was meanwhile reflected from quite a different perspective in the narrative of one participant who had always felt left out of Christmas celebrations as a child due to her parents being Sikh, and who had in adulthood almost consequently become something of a self-proclaimed Christmas enthusiast. Determined to provide her children with the most elaborate fantasy-filled celebrations imaginable, stay-at-home Mum Anita was always looking for new ideas to enhance the delivery - and indeed legacy - of her family's Christmas experience. We had indeed first met in the midst of my performance as an elf at Crook Hall, and it was Anita's enthusiastic response to my invite for shared photos and interviewees which first ignited what eventually became one of the most sustained associations of my research. Laughingly reporting a joking jealousy of my work as a 'Christmas researcher', Anita was keen to support my research endeavours, and much-intrigued to hear about other people's responses. Indeed, there was a real sense in which participation in my research project appeared to become for her another way of extending and enhancing her Christmas celebrations, as well as providing a platform for the showcasing of all her Christmas efforts and creations.



Figure Q. Anita's hand-made Christmas cake decorations made in the shape of the family's favourite Christmas characters

As someone who professed to love celebrations of any kind, Anita absolutely relished the chance Christmas afforded for her to be able to make things 'magical' for her two young girls, and to provide for them what she felt she had missed out on in her own childhood. A thoroughly creative soul, she spends hours planning out decorations each year and hand-making individualised Christmas memorabilia for her children, determined to make each Christmas bigger and better than the last. It was the same with birthdays, Halloween, anniversaries. Whatever the celebration, Anita was in her element. An active member of her local community, she has more recently managed to combine her love of celebrations with increased involvement in organising community events, which included the putting on of mini

family-friendly festivals for Christmas and Easter; occasions which I was eventually myself invited to take part in. This was something she clearly took much pride in, and though at times of course stressful, provided a key opportunity for her to share and showcase her creative skills with a wider audience. A theme which carries clear resonances of Paul's conceptualisation of Christmas as constituting a kind of 'collective focus', this notion of Christmas coming to act as an '*opportunity*' for the performance of key aspects of identity was a refrain which came up consistently across my fieldwork, and it is to a consideration of this recurrent theme that I now turn as we begin to draw our study to a close.

CHRISTMAS AS A PRIME 'OPPORTUNITY' FOR REMEMBRANCE & THANKSGIVING

It has been the contention of this thesis that one of the things which makes Christmas so unique in the context of contemporary Britain is that it offers people an '*opportunity*' to affirm and embody the central values and aesthetic lifestyles by which they live their lives, and in so doing, to reflect - whether consciously or unconsciously - on whatever, and whoever, it is that is most important to them. Christmas can thus, I have argued, be viewed in more purely functional terms as an annual ritualised opportunity to renegotiate and reaffirm the boundaries of collective belonging and value which form the aspirational contours of our lives. A good number of those who engaged with my project described the festival as in some way constituting an important positive '*opportunity*' to celebrate during what would otherwise be some of the bleakest winter months of the year. Sometimes this was about taking the opportunity to have a bit of well needed time off from work, and from the stresses and strains of everyday life. Sometimes it was about making the most of a good opportunity to '*get together*', '*spend time*', or '*catch up*' with friends and family who might have remained out of contact through much of the rest of the year. Often, it was about the opportunity to show people how much they were cared for, or to provide for them things that might have felt impossible at other times of year.

For many, Christmas was about being given free licence to indulge in luxury goods, foods and activities; about taking the opportunity to '*have a bloody good time*' without fear of consequence or limitation. For others still meanwhile, it was an opportunity for the creation of '*special memories*' which might bring them closer to the people they loved. More broadly

however, it was about taking an opportunity to *reflect* on, to *remember*, and to *give thanks* for what - and indeed who - was most important in life; a reminder to pause, take stock, and



to reaffirm the values and relationships which continued to shape the contours of their longing and belonging. For the vast majority of those I spoke to during the course of my fieldwork, Christmas provided not just an 'opportunity' to celebrate what was most important to them, but a vital 'reminder' of what it was that *was* important to them. The extent to which this 'reminder' was experienced as an enforced obligation and/or unrealistic societal pressure, and

the extent to which it was experienced as a more freely felt desire varied considerably from person to person, and often created some sense of ambivalent tension for those who already felt a sense of despair in life, those whose values and/or aspirations had only usually led to disappointment, or whose filial relationships were in some way fraught or absent. It was however ultimately the celebration of *relationships* - and kin relationships most especially - which people tended to associate most directly with what they perceived to be the 'true meaning of Christmas', and which often came to overlay - or sometimes underlie - the other values and meanings which people ascribed to the occasion.

One of the most dominant emotions that tended to be inferred across my discussions was that of *gratitude*. Christmas - at least in its ideal form - hence appears to be perceived by many as a time for giving thanks for all that is good in life, for what one has, and for all the significant things that have occurred during the rest of the year. It is, I suggest, in this regard that the festival comes to hold an 'active mirror' up to the narrative of people's lives and lifestyles. That this ideal festive mirror also had the capacity to reflect and/or shadow



whatever it was that *didn't* feel so good, what one *didn't* have, or had somehow *lost* was conversely a highly recognised social trope, and one which tended to make people more alert

to social contrasts and comparisons. It was furthermore for many this very heightened sense of social comparison that helped to emotionally reinforce and give energy to the core Christian-infused values of 'peace and good-will' so associated with Christmas. As Liz put it, we should of course 'be kind' all year, but it's surely *good* to have an occasion which gives us an opportunity to be 'reminded'.

Whilst this process of qualitative evaluation sometimes remained more tacit, people were generally speaking keen to discuss this more functional aspect of the festival as it pertained



to their lives. To this end, several of my participants conceptualised Christmas as a time for 'reflection', and for the reviewing and renewing of personal goals and values. As we saw rather explicitly in the case of Hazel meanwhile, others referred more directly to the festival as a time of 'remembrance'. As was particularly well exemplified in the case of another of my participants who now takes fond pride in putting up a dedicated remembrance tree in memory of

her Dad alongside her ordinary Christmas tree as a reminder of the happy times they had spent putting up the tree together, acts of 'remembrance' for those loved and lost constitute a common set of ritual practices around this time of year. Many of my participants described taking wreaths to graves, toasting 'absent friends' over their Christmas dinner, sharing funny stories, and reminiscing as they got out special family decorations, well-worn photo albums, or much-loved Christmas china. This sense of 'remembrance' was often not just about the remembrance of people who had died however. It was also about remembering and/or calling back to mind other parts of one's identity that had perceivedly been lost or forgotten; and in turn, about actively creating memories that might be remembered into the future.



Figure R. Specially dedicated Christmas remembrance section in greetings cards shop

THE 'MAGIC' OF MEMORY-MAKING & THE LEGACY OF 'TRADITION'

The 'magic' of Christmas for so many of the people I spoke to was indeed captured in exactly this; in the enjoyment and apparent time transcendence of re-experiencing special memories, and in the felt momentousness of making and re-making new 'traditions' which might draw and sustain their loved ones closer together, and/or create a sense of ongoing continuity and legacy. Whilst such experiences of ritualised belonging were often spoken of or alluded to in loose and ambiguously overlapping terms, the frequent semantic employment of the notion of 'tradition' as it arose in the context of my fieldwork certainly seemed to tap into a well-recognised - and often highly sought after - collective phenomenon. Indeed, the seemingly oxymoronic concept of the 'modern' and/or 'new tradition' is in fact quite commonly conceived - and indeed, commercially marketed - in this context as an experience worthy not just of passive participation, but of active innovation and selection (see Figures S & T).



Figure S. 'Elf on the Shelf' merchandise encouraging families to 'adopt a new family tradition this holiday season'

This notion of the personalisation of 'tradition' in other words appears to constitute a syncretic 'bricolage' of ritual activity which pertains not only to affective repertoires passed down from generation to generation, but to repertoires which are made actively available - and in some cases, even purchasable - for conscious construction and/or adaptation (Rytting



Figure T. 'Christmas Eve Box' for sale marketed as 'A New Christmas Tradition'

2005: 20; Pleck 2004: 52-58; Mason & Muir 2013: 617, 626). In the context of my study, talk of the importance of constructing and maintaining 'tradition' was perhaps unsurprisingly most readily applied to various designations of the family and intimate domestic sphere; the primary social unit and corresponding setting which the festival's

popular core cosmology undoubtedly acts to celebrate and affirm (see esp. Golby & Purdue 1986; Miller 1993; Hauri 2011; Gilhus & Mikaelsson 2018). However, it was notably also frequently spoken of and/or inferred in relation to other key and often overlapping social groupings and/or institutions such as schools, churches, neighbours, workplaces, friendships, larger family networks, and community groups; alongside broader - and often more implicit - conceptions of local community, nation, and wider world.

Reference to conceptions of 'tradition' invoked in this sense were in other words effectively tantamount to the felt continuance and legitimation of community; and more particularly, to a sense of connection with the shared experiences and values by which the boundaries of community come to be etched and entrenched.¹³⁴ Whilst offered in a seemingly much looser sense which most often related more directly to (in)dividual experience of *relationship* and/or *time* as opposed to notions of community per se, references to 'memory-making' - and/or 'proto-tradition' making (Rytting 2005: 19) - represented a perhaps even more frequent trope within this constellation of meaning-making activity as people spoke of making a conscious effort to cultivate and preserve the 'special memories' which might allow precious moments and/or relationships to live on. This appeared to be as much about constructing a sense of *destiny* as it was about the sacralisation of relationships and/or precious things in the here and now. Rather, what people seemed to be trying to capture in this conscious process of 'memory-making' was a snapshot of eternity; and more particularly, a snapshot of eternity in the *midst* of a simultaneously - and inevitably often highly emotional - heightened awareness of the ephemerality of time, the uncertainty of changing circumstance, and the grief of loss.

'Memory-making' was thus for many of my interlocutors about the sacralisation not just of relationships, but of time itself. *Time* was, as far as they were concerned, rather literally of the essence. It was *time* - whether it was time with their loved ones, time when their children or grandchildren were still young, or more simply 'time off' to relax - that many of them seemed to most fear losing or compromising. It was *time* that they felt slipping away all too

¹³⁴ I use the term 'community' here - as opposed to the perhaps more abstract notion of 'society' - as an effective shorthand for organised social bond which ties into Durkheim's more specific classic reference to 'moral community' ([1915]1976: 47) and more latterly, to Bellah et al's (1985) depiction of 'communities of memory' and 'hope' emotionally melded by the act of storytelling.

quickly; *time* that they felt they were often not able to prioritise enough throughout the rest of the year. For some, it was *time* that they felt they had perhaps wasted on Christmases with family members they *struggled* to spend time with, or in situations which had somehow made them unhappy. For others, it was *time* they felt they had not quite appreciated enough during those Christmases when they didn't - or weren't in a position to - step up and 'make an effort'. For others still, and particularly for women, it was *time* that they felt needed to be reclaimed when the stress and pressure of trying to create 'the perfect Christmas' against the clock had distracted them from 'what it was all really supposed to be about'. It was meanwhile, for many of these *same* people, *time* that they felt they were preserving in all their efforts to put on a good show that might be remembered as a special 'magic moment' in future years to come.

Such qualitative assessments of how time should best be spent, and *who* exactly it should be spent *with* dominated my fieldwork, and appeared to rather more broadly reflect an evaluative existential awareness of the ephemerality not only of time, but of life itself. It was indeed, in the *face* of such ephemerality that 'efforts' to 'make Christmas special' came to represent a defiant performance of hope-saturated exertion. In its most dramatic form, this is about the defiance not just of social and/or emotional adversity, but of change and decay; and ultimately, of death (Levi-Strauss 1993). For many, I hence contend that Christmas has come to function not simply as a transition-point between one season of the year and the next - or even, between one phase of life and the next - but as an escapist temporary transcendence of loss; and more fundamentally, of the loss which lies implicit in the very concept of *time*. As Anita put it when reflecting upon the 'emotional' ending to '*The Snowman*' (1982) film she loves watching every year with her children:¹³⁵

I guess with the snowman melting, it's like, well Christmas doesn't last forever

'It'll come back again next year', she added, 'but it's a long time to wait', laughing as she told me how disappointed she always was to take down her decorations each January. Connecting

¹³⁵ The family love the film so much that watching it has now become something of a special family tradition, and Anita and her husband both relish in swinging their children around in front of it in simulation of the Snowman's magical flight.

this to the sadness of ‘relatives passing away’ as Christmases changed across the years, she concluded:

I think that’s what makes you so sad, the snowman goes away, and it shows you Christmas doesn’t last forever, and that nothing lasts forever

This rather telling comment offers a rather clear window into the dynamics of loss which pervade the affective repertoire of the festival, and which underscore its simultaneous symbolic function as a time in which time stands still, children remain children, and precious ‘moments’ are captured. As much as she is delighted to observe her children come to understand and appreciate the ‘magical’ traditions she has constructed for their family, Anita is also filled with palpably melancholic anticipation for the time when they will no longer ‘believe’. She has therefore made it her mission to make sure they get the ‘fullest’ possible experience whilst there is ‘still time’; telling me she thought she would likely start ‘saving up’ to take them to Lapland the moment she felt the first trickles of doubt set in. Asked why this was so important to her, the theme of loss returned once more, but this time in distinct relation to the ideals of love and happiness we have identified as being so central to the Christmas worldview:

cos I didn’t have it, and when you grow up, everything’s doom and gloom, and miserableness, and being a grown-up, and stress, so I just think it’s a good foundation. I want my children to think back, we had good Christmases...I’m thinking of the legacy of Christmas. I want them to [pause] *remember* what it was like as a child and how nice it was...

Reportedly ‘stumped’ as I attempted to question her about the ‘values’ she was trying to pass down to them, Anita eventually blinked back at me:

I just want them to remember that they were loved, do you know what I mean?

Despite the clear difference in their positioning to the festival, this sentiment surrounding the importance of securing a ‘foundation’ for Christmas ‘legacy’ clearly corresponds with Claire’s

emphasis on Christmas as an 'anchor-point' for memories, and as an important resource for her children to draw back on in the years to come. Nodding as I put this idea to her, Anita confirmed she felt it was about passing on 'something to pull back on to sort of make you feel good.'

The more we spoke, the clearer it became that this resource was not just about the gifting of a happy childhood - or her hope that these 'traditions' would bond her two children and their family together for life - but about the securing of a legacy which might carry the memory of their present family life into the generations that followed. Showing me the personal letters from Santa she had specially crafted for her children, Anita explained how she had consciously made sure to include things her grandchildren might appreciate - e.g. stamps with the Queen on them - and which might make for 'an interesting relic for the kids to show their children.' This focus on the cultivation of family 'legacy' corresponds closely with Mason and Muir's work on the 'generational consciousness' which surrounds people's 'positioning in the changing generational order of their families', and which often comes to be wrapped up in the conscious construction of 'intergenerational eras' that might allow the ethos of particular family 'atmospheres' to be 'treasured and remembered by descendent generations' (2013: 619, 621). In her own words however, Anita's careful construction of 'happy memories' was rather more simply about the gifting of *love*, and of a bond which she hoped would not only ensure her children wanted to come back home after they had grown up, but which would act to sustain them when she and her husband were no longer around to offer them protection and support. Christmas in this sense comes to be utilised as a key 'anchor-point' of incorporation not just for the values and memories these parents want to pass down, but for the sense of love and security they want their children to be able to draw back on as they continue to travel through the life-course.

If the Christmas rite is at its most fundamental level about the re-affirmation of social bond and belonging in the midst of the uncertainty of change, such experiences of harmonious connectedness and/or intensified reciprocity can quite clearly be seen as central to its ideal expression. Indeed, the 'magic' many identify around the 'spirit' of Christmas can, as I see it, in this sense be found in its capacity to *endure* in the face of all that carries the power to divide the societies in which we live, and ultimately, to transcend - or even overcome - those

thanatonic forces of loss and change which threaten our ultimate survival and flourishing; or in the more emic terms of the Christmas worldview, which threaten to destroy *love*. At its heart a manifestation of the popular redemptive trope of good overcoming evil - of light shining in the darkness - the hope-saturated positivity contained in the 'spirit' of Christmas has come to operate in this context as a prime redressive symbol of life-affirming vitality and of harmonious sociality. The 'spirit' of Christmas in this sense becomes tantamount to the 'spirit' of *life* which provides a thread of constancy across the generations, and which must be kept 'alive' at all costs if the 'chain of memory' is to be maintained and the so-called 'hau' of reciprocity left unbroken (Hervieu-Léger 2000; Mauss [1925] 2016: 72-73). Whilst such a 'spirit' was often felt in the midst of the active construction of 'memories' and/or 'traditions' discussed above, it was also just as equally felt in the sharing of key significant 'moments', and in the collective cultivation of key symbols of vitality and endurance. I with this in mind now draw my study to a close with a postscript which describes the performance of Christmas into a context in which we see these dynamics coming to take on a perhaps rather more urgent tone.

I'M DREAMING OF A 'NORMAL' CHRISTMAS: KEEPING THE 'SPIRIT' ALIVE

As I came to write up the findings of my fieldwork, Britain was suddenly plunged into a crisis which threw the above-described need for constancy into rather dramatically stark relief, and which I cite here not only by way of its clear illustration of the dynamics of intensification that have been central to this study, but by way of providing some important context as to the cultural atmosphere into which - and indeed, out of which - this piece of research has been produced. As we approached the autumn of 2020, Christmas was placed under direct threat as we found ourselves once again at a critical stage of the nation's fight against Covid-19. If the celebration of Christmas is about the blessing and protection of the core values of the group, in this instance it was not just religion, love, family, morality, or tradition that was at stake, but 'normality' itself. As the hope of a fully rolled-out 'vaccine for Christmas' receded into the distant vista of a masked and uncertain future, the question of what on earth Christmas 2020 might look like - and how on earth it might be managed - became something of a pressing public and private concern. The seemingly untouchable force of the festival's affective-symbolic weight in the end perhaps only gave policy-makers so much choice

however, and it was indeed only a matter of time before Father Christmas was assured a free sleigh-ride pass as a 'key worker', and government strategies were carefully managed around the negotiation of a green-light go-ahead for scaled-back celebrations.

No such exception had been made for the likes of other key religious celebrations. But where Christmas was concerned, this was apparently deemed a price worth paying. Unlike everything else, it seemed that Christmas was just too important to be cancelled, too widespread to control; too special to be compromised. So special in fact that one contemporaneous tabloid newspaper reported some elderly people would 'prefer death to spending Christmas without family' (Paget 2020). As doubtful and sensationalist as this claim may seem at first glance, it seems to me that this particular headline presents us with something of a striking statement of sentiment, and a sentiment which taps rather directly into the tonal pulse of the cultural phenomenon this thesis has attempted to evoke and explore. For here we see a rather extraordinary example of the manner in which Christmas comes to act as a symbol of hope which must go on in the face not just of death, but of *social death*. The decision to go ahead with Christmas under such circumstances can in other words be seen as symptomatic of an ultimate attempt to reassert the continuance of social life, and to protect the maintenance of well-being in a way that clearly parallels the key themes of 'making an effort' and 'making it special' which emerged out of my fieldwork, and which can, I suggest, be seen to shed an alternative kind of light upon the dynamics of reciprocity we have explored throughout this study.

If Christmas is, as Claire says, understood to be about 'doing something special for the people we love', then it seems it is really, at its core, about the affirmation and renewal of life appreciation; and consequently of self-worth, and mutual belonging. For those who find themselves on their own, the societal message hence becomes that no-one 'cares'; that no-one can be 'bothered' to 'make an effort'. Such rupture in the ecology of societal reciprocity essentially amounts to a kind of social ostracisation in which a person is no longer considered - or no longer *feels* they are considered - to be of any worth to belong to the group, no longer considered to have anything worthwhile to contribute; no longer considered as a valuable giver, or indeed as a worthy recipient. In instances where a person cannot find any purpose or meaning in living, 'making an effort' thus becomes constitutive of any remaining will to

reassert control against the forces of loss and destruction, to reinject colour into the grey, life into lifelessness, motivation into apathy; 'spirit' into 'dispiritedness'. As we saw so clearly in the dynamics of contestation which manifested themselves through its performance during the pandemic, the emic moral injunction to 'make an effort' to 'make things special' for *Christmas* can in this sense rather more fundamentally be seen to be about 'making an effort' to keep self and society going, to keep life, joy, significance, and abundance alive in the face of absence; to keep a sense of 'spirit' alive in the face of anomie.

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APPENDIX A: THE ADVENTURES OF MY ELF GELF

Once upon a time, there was a little elf, named Gelf
She dreamed and dreamed that one day, she'd arrive on a little girl's shelf
A happier little Christmas elf the North Pole had never seen
She loved to play with snowflakes, and paint toys with extra sheen
Christmas after Christmas, she displayed bounteous Christmas mirth
But sadly Father Christmas somehow failed to see her worth
Last Christmas though was different
Gelf decided then and there
If Christmas magic was to spread
She'd have to visit anthropologists instead
So a shelf she did arrive on
But not a *little girl's*
As by now you may have guessed
She decided mine would be the best





Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Oct 27, 2017
Have now developed extra fast bag packing skills after a day of raising money with @NTCouncilTeam for #MakeChristmasSpecial #TheFestiveLog



1 2 6 3



Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Oct 28, 2017
@MyElfGelf and I enjoy xmas all year round. But when do YOU start feeling in the xmas spirit? Tweet us using #TheFestiveLog to have your say



1 1 1 3



Gelf The Elf @MyElfGelf · Oct 30, 2017
Hehe 🤪 Well done @NTCouncilTeam! Shout out to the youth councillors too! #TheFestiveLog

Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Oct 30, 2017
Congrats @NTCouncilTeam for raising £483 for #MakeChristmasSpecial at Friday's bag pack! @MyElfGelf so excited she can't stop climbing in 🤪



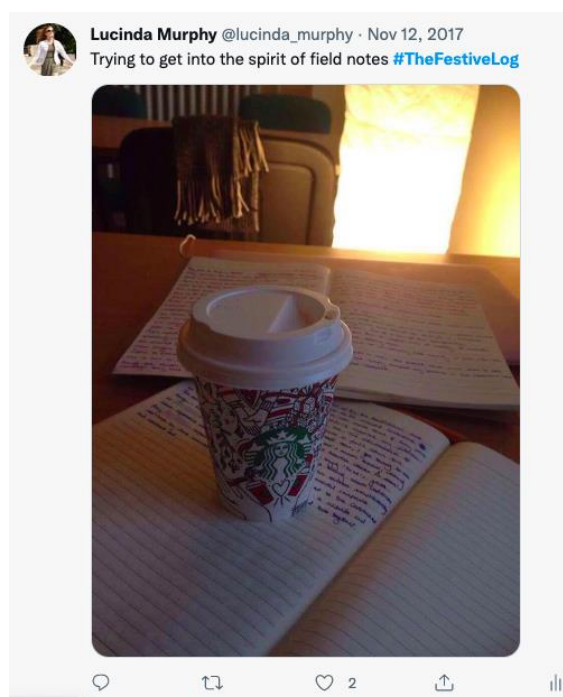
Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Nov 3, 2017
@MyElfGelf just back from an epic time @fenwicknew #Christmas window unveiling. Big shout out to all the fab people we met! #TheFestiveLog

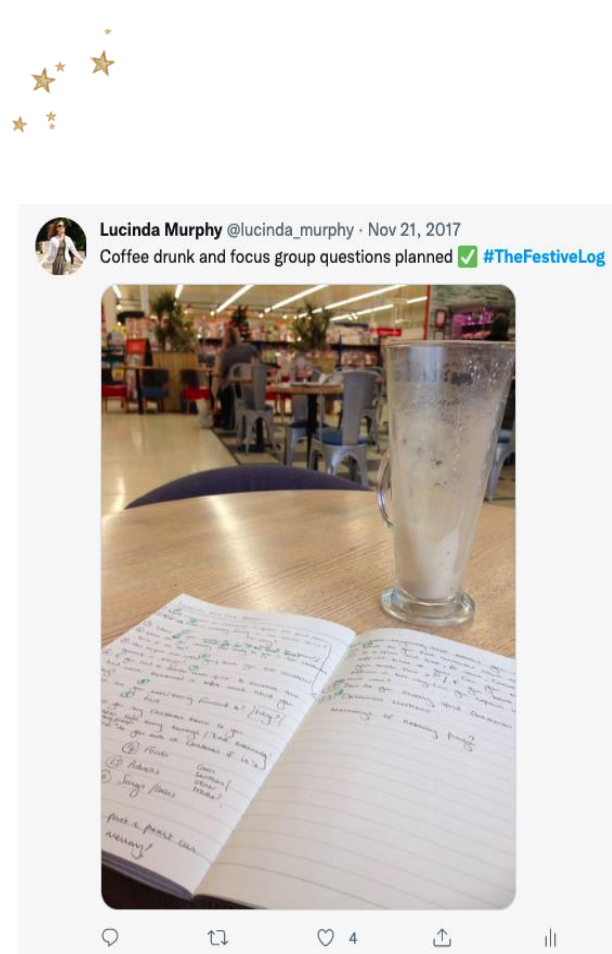


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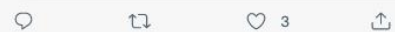
Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Dec 1, 2017

1st December & it's all systems go: great meeting with @durhamcathedral this morning talking carol services, followed by a surprise decoration frenzy and @MyElfGelf entrance @NevillesCrossPS, before rushing to @CrookHall to welcome #FatherChristmas in #elfstyle! #TheFestiveLog



Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Dec 2, 2017

The trainee elf outfit awaits! #TheFestiveLog



Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Dec 2, 2017

In the longest queue ever to get into the Cathedral! Feeling the anticipation with the anticipation with these bells 🔔 #stnicholasprocession #TheFestiveLog



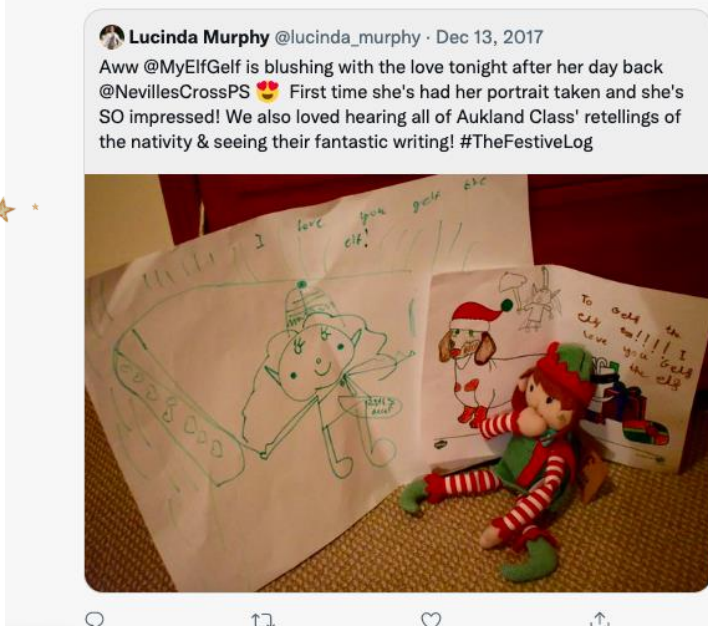
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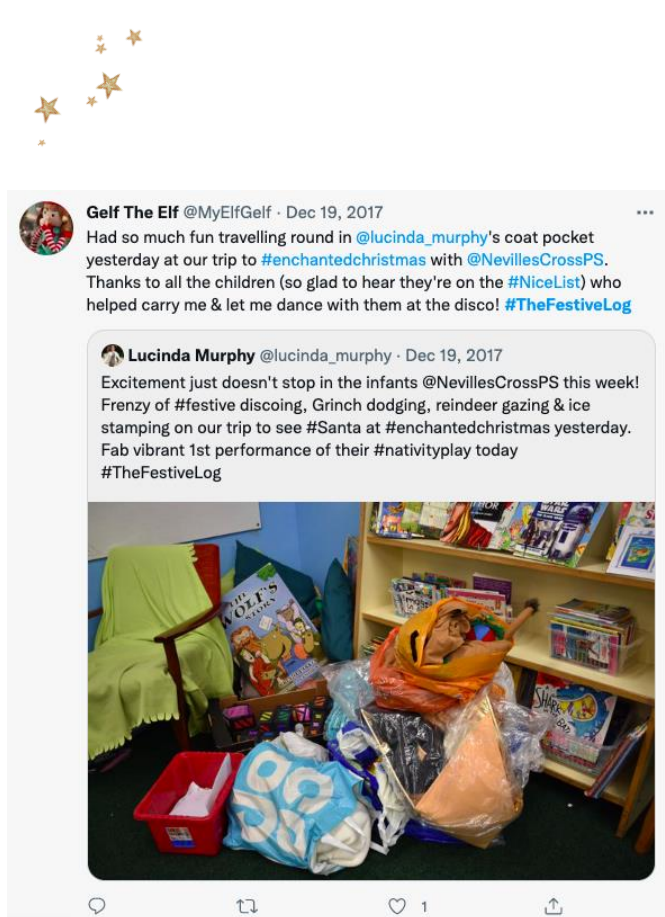












Gelf The Elf @MyElfGelf · Dec 21, 2017
So good to spend time with children who actually understand these things
😊 #elfmagic #TheFestiveLog

Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Dec 21, 2017
Sorting through our growing collection of #Christmas emotion/meaning baubles with @MyElfGelf after a great few days of discussion groups @NevillesCrossPS in the midst of carol concerts galore! Have particularly enjoyed exploring the inner workings of #elf #magic #TheFestiveLog



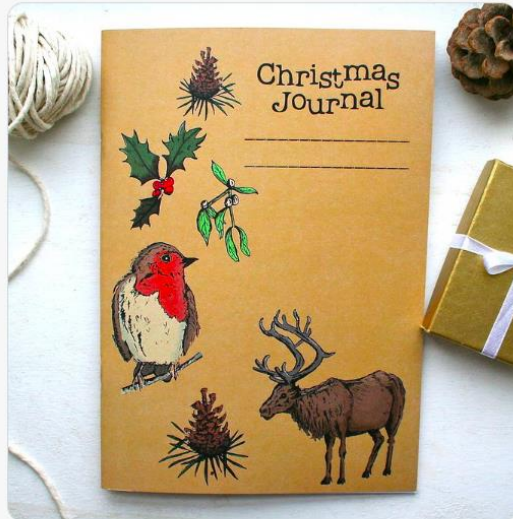
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Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Dec 22, 2017
Primed for #NineLessons @durhamcathedral 🎄 #TheFestiveLog



1 2

Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Dec 23, 2017
Happy #ChristmasEve everyone! To #logyourstory in #TheFestiveLog #research project, go to: goo.gl/rT5Bkn



1 10 5

Gelf The Elf @MyElfGelf · Dec 23, 2017
Will SO miss those Yr 2 children @NevillesCrossPS 😭 Never before have I felt so much #love or SO much appreciation of my #ChristmasMagic ❤️ Loved my time exploring their classroom & playground, watching their #Nativity & being given MANY #hugsandkisses #goodbyes #TheFestiveLog

Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Dec 23, 2017
Massive thanks to @NevillesCrossPS & @CrookHall for all their support this #Christmas Wonderful sendoff at school yesterday [thanks Auckland Class for the fab card & decoration!] & fun time feeling the anticipation rise today during my last hurrah as a trainee #elf #TheFestiveLog



1 3



Gelf The Elf @MyElfGelf · Dec 23, 2017

We're FAMOUS @lucinda_murphy! #Santa WILL be impressed 🌟
#Christmaseveryday #TheFestiveLog



1



10



Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Dec 24, 2017

Just off to get sorted for 3pm #ninelessonsandcarols @durhamcathedral.
Thinking of #choristers everywhere today preparing for the big moment!
Really enjoyed pj party talking to Durham choristers last week about what
it's like being a #chorister at #Christmas #TheFestiveLog

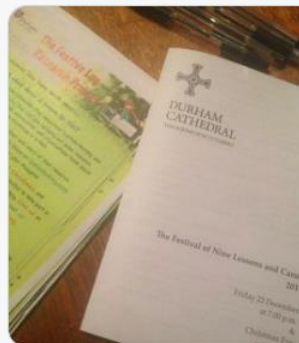


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Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Dec 24, 2017

Cathedral covered ✅ [will probs be dreaming of gift aid envelopes tonight
😂] Ready and waiting for #NineLessons @durhamcathedral 🎄
#crowdsbuilding #excitedchatter #TheFestiveLog



8







Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Mar 1, 2018

It seems the #snow has brought #elf mail with it! @MyElfGelf and I so thrilled to receive this sparkly letter and #gingerbreadmen from a 4 year old friend of ours (with just a little help from her Mum!) - office staff @AbbeyHouseDU pretty excited too! #TheFestiveLog



2



Gelf The Elf @MyElfGelf · Mar 15, 2018

Can we do every interview like this please @lucinda_murphy ?! 😊 #funtimes #TheFestiveLog



Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Mar 14, 2018

Just wanted to pay especial tribute to these lovely folk who laid on such a fabulous #Christmas extravaganza for me and @MyElfGelf this afternoon complete with delicious panettone & special homemade sloe gin - nothing like interviewing in #style! #impressiveeffort #TheFestiveLog



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3



Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Mar 2, 2018

She's waving the green flag from my bookshelf already #Chadsians! #bestelfoutfityet #ChadsDay #TheFestiveLog 😊



Gelf The Elf @MyElfGelf · Mar 2, 2018

Proud & excited to be representing #research students & crazy #researchmethods (aka freedom in intellectual experiments) as part of @StChadsDurham procession @durhamcathedral tomorrow. Happy Chad's Day to all and to all a goodnight! #TheFestiveLog #ChadsDay #Greenoutfitsorted



4



Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Mar 28, 2018

Travelling back down south for #Easter and still writing notes on #Christmas with @MyElfGelf still resolutely in my handbag - my life is so confusing sometimes! #TheFestiveLog



6





Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Apr 22, 2018

Now collapsing after a week of intensive #elf theorization. @MyElfGelf as helpful as ever...except when she was sunbathing (a new favourite hobby!) or distracting me with her Easter gift sent from North Pole - we are STILL waiting to see if it will crack! #TheFestiveLog #research



6



Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · May 24, 2018

106 data protection emails SENT ✓ @MyElfGelf is having the evening off! #TheFestiveLog #ethicscontinues #lastchanceforinterviews



5



Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Apr 30, 2018

Exciting news. At 1.37am, I think I might have just finally cracked what I've been trying to say about #ChristmasSpirit for the last year and a half @MyElfGelf and I currently punching the air in procrastination filled middle-of-the-night delirium #TheFestiveLog #lightbulbmoment



21



Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Jul 7, 2018

Top lesson learned today: if you need a pick me up, go out & buy a pretty new table & get your #elf to take care of your #transcription workload - thank you @MyElfGelf #durhammarket #comfortbuy #thefestivelog #phdlife



7





Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Aug 19, 2018

It seems doing #Christmas all year round might be more exhausting than first anticipated - still @MyElfGelf is encouraging me to get going again with the help of a trusty cup of tea & healthy #custardcream supply...

#thefestivalog #thiselfknowsmetoowell #phdlife #slowandsteady



1



10



Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Sep 2, 2018

Well after a bit of last minute prepping & packing we're on our way to #Belfast for this year's @TheBASR conference - still a little concerned we haven't finished our powerpoint but think @MyElfGelf is more excited we might meet a #leprechaun #thefestivalog #basrisar #phdlife



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15



Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Sep 2, 2018

And we've landed - seems like sleepyhead @MyElfGelf got a little too comfy on the flight 🐼 🍵 🌿 #thefestivalog #BASRISAR #PhDlife



3



Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Sep 6, 2018

Well would you look at the mug which was left in our Airbnb - they obviously knew @MyElfGelf was coming! #thefestivalog #onehappyelf #tea



2



6



Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Sep 7, 2018

Waiting for flight after fab conference week in #Belfast - @MyElfGelf particularly excited to sample tasty pancake with @TheBASR friends @MaggieMaysCafe yesterday #thefestivalog #conferenceseasonover #yummyfood #eggcellentcompany

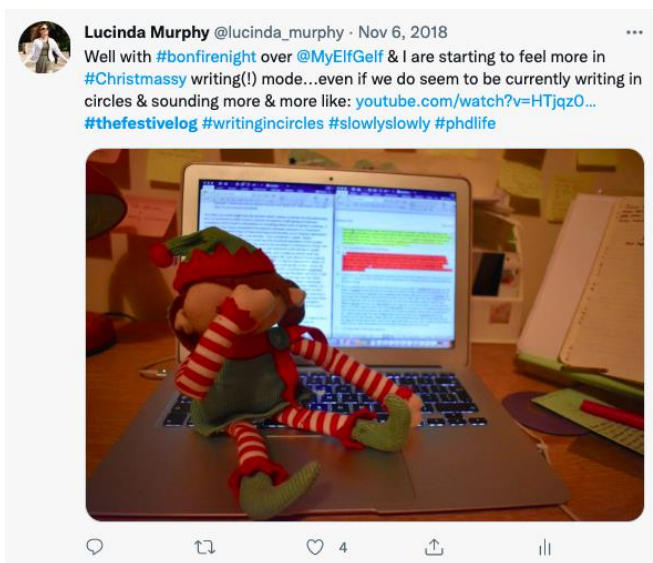
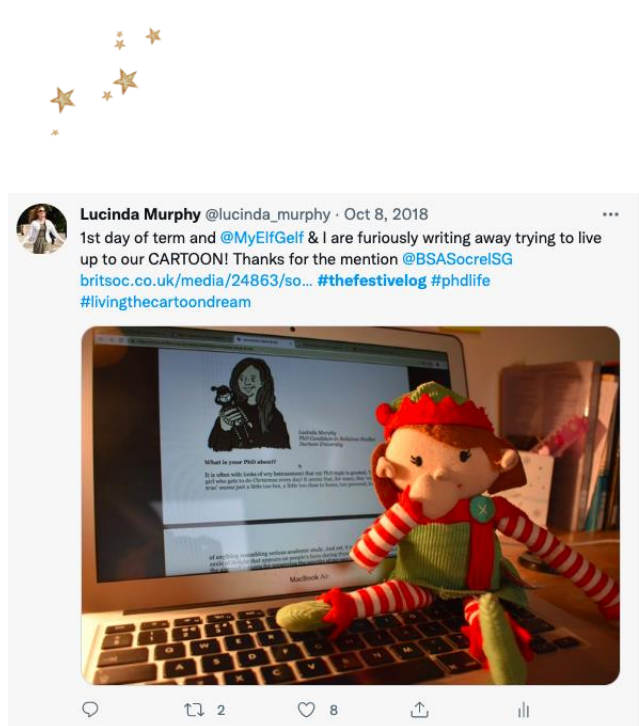


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Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Nov 29, 2018

Aaand it's about that time of year again - @MyElfGelf is back to #bauble cutting duties ready for our #CommunityEngagement #research stall at the Neville's Cross Christmas Festival tomorrow where we'll be sharing our findings on #Christmastrees #thefestivelog #writeonabauble



Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Dec 3, 2018

As December has come round again I have found my own emotions to be as mixed & intensified as so many of the #thoughtbaubles generated through my #PhD - an apt reminder of the importance of considered #reflexivity in emotions research #thefestivelog #mixedemotions #adventhope



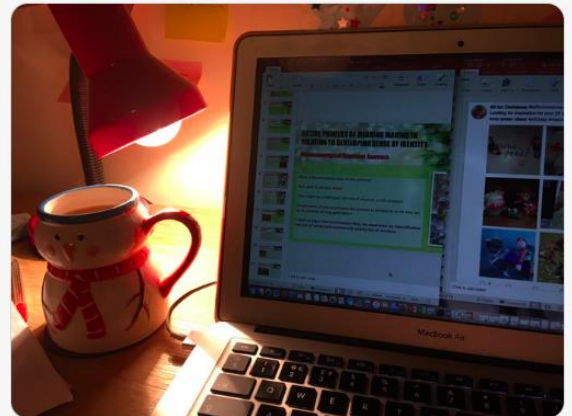
Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Dec 11, 2018

Amidst a sea of #thoughtbaubles as @MyElfGelf & I prepare for a #SofRielecture appearance & #Chadsresearchforum tomorrow - if you're free & fancy more mince pies/mulled wine do come along for a fun evening of Christmas emotion #mindmapping at 7.30pm! #thefestivelog #baubleprep



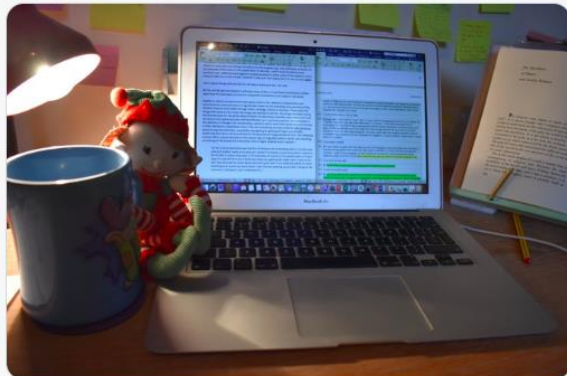
Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Dec 11, 2018

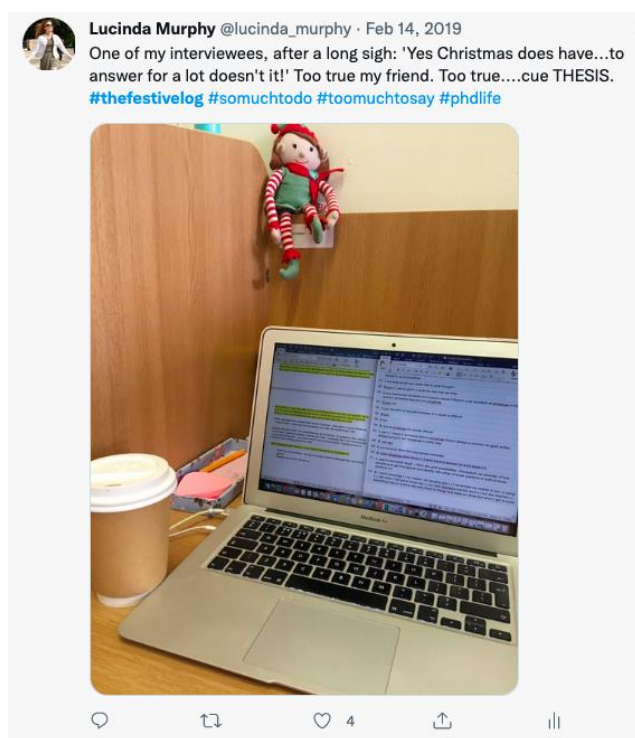
Ahhh more late night prep. When will I learn?! 🤖💡 @MyElfGelf now sleeping soundly in protest #thefestivelog #channellingproductivity #latenights #phdlife

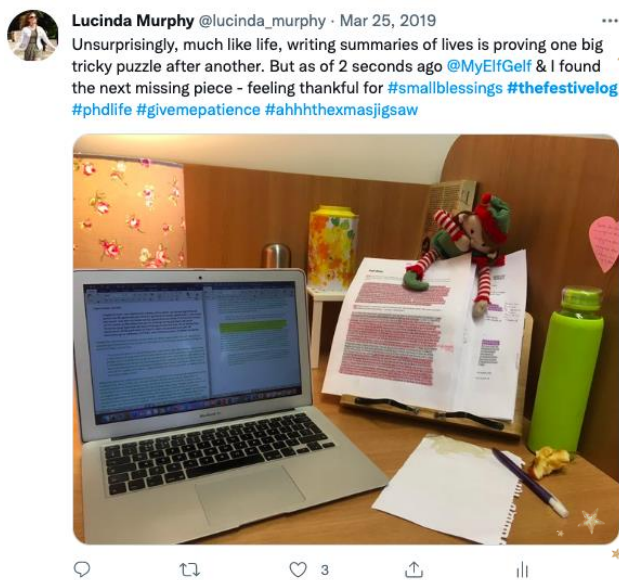
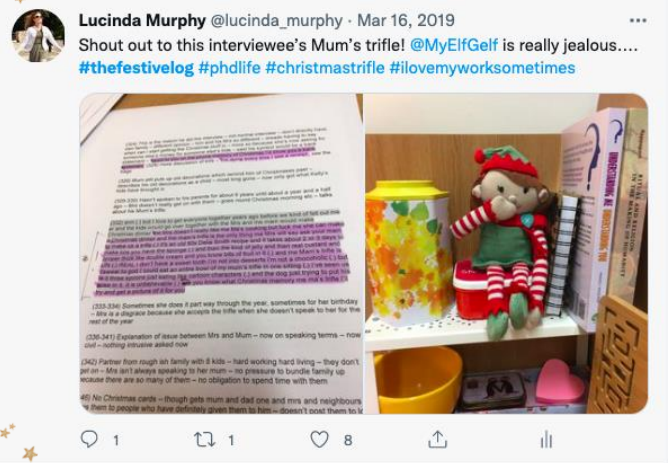


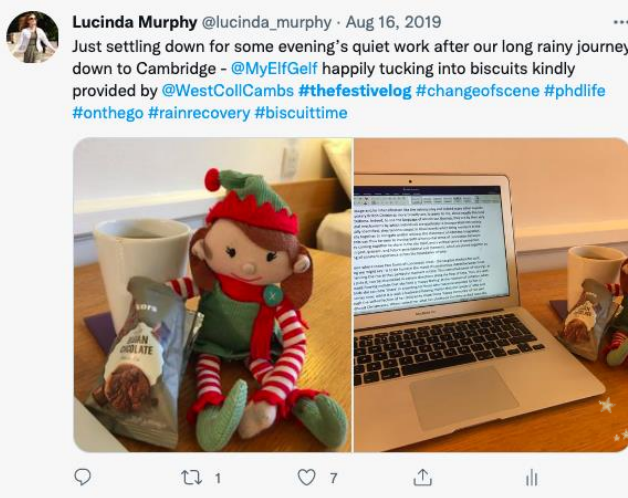
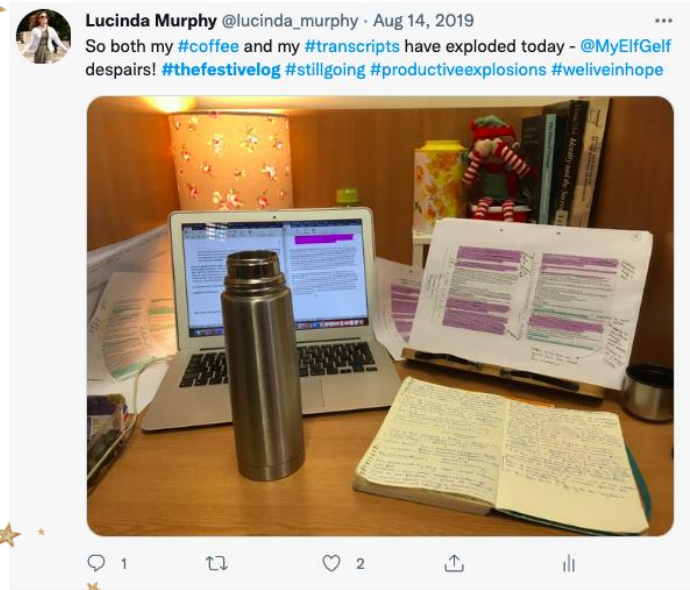
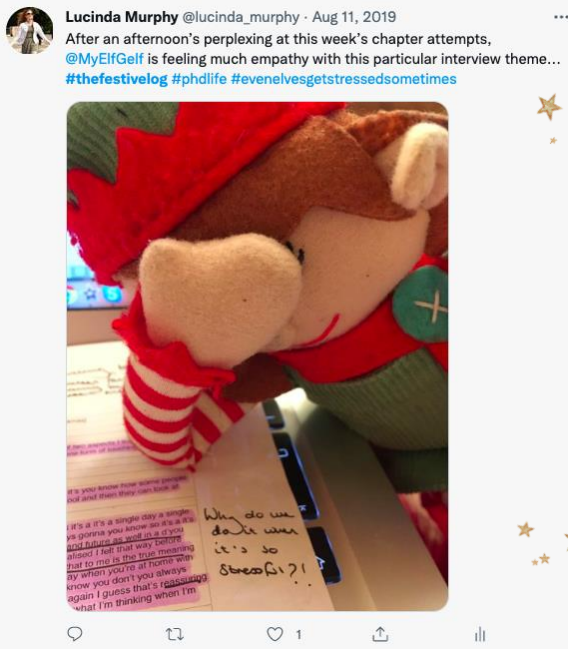
Lucinda Murphy @lucinda_murphy · Jan 16, 2019

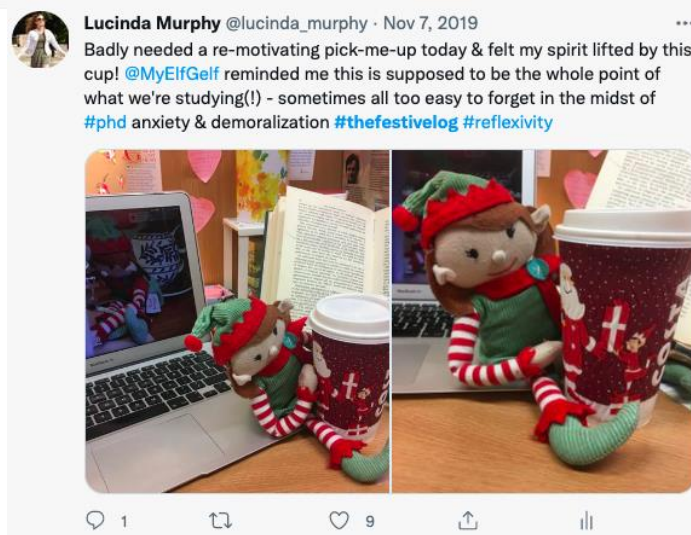
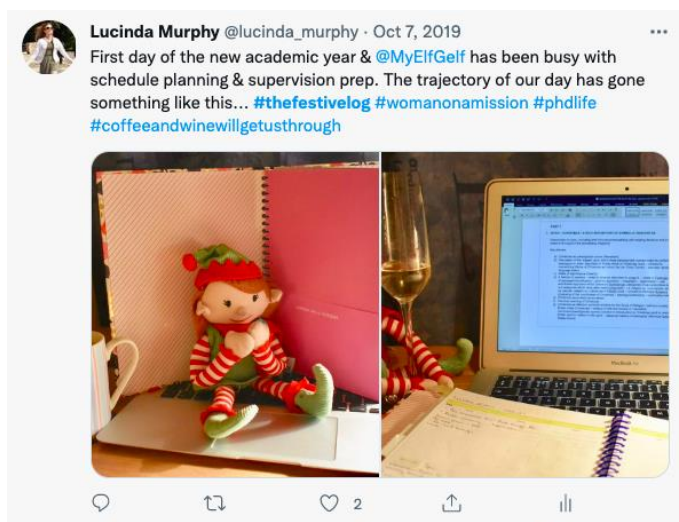
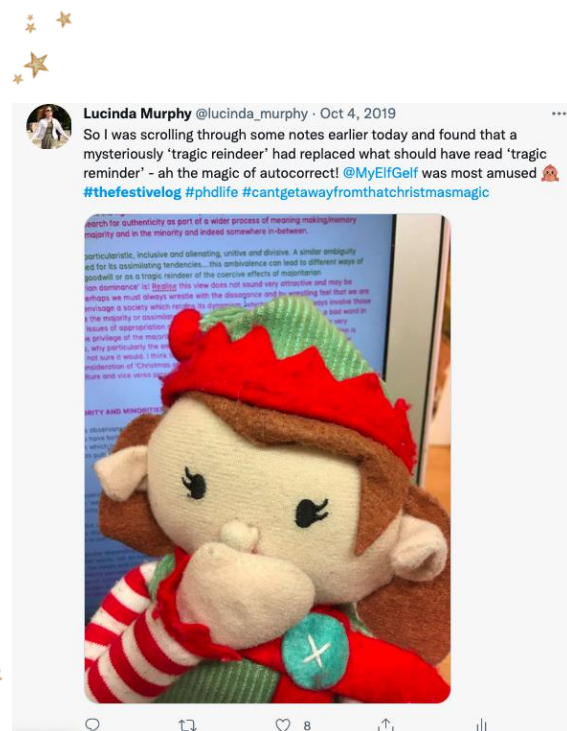
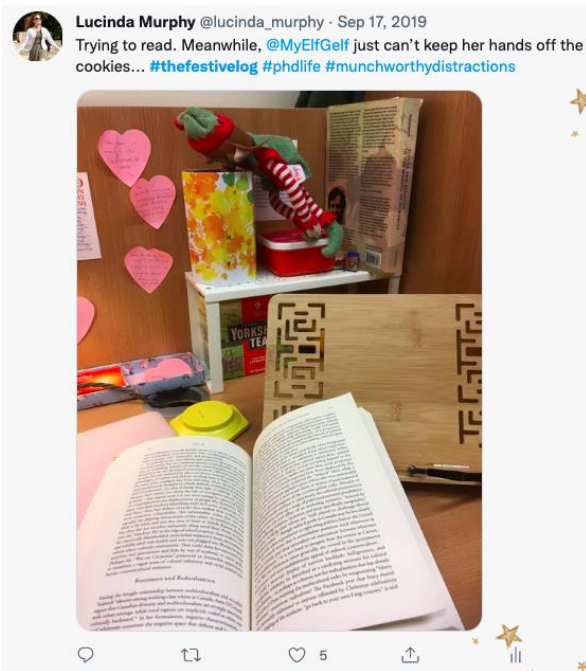
Another new term begun, another #Christmas over - @MyElfGelf & I were struggling to find our groove. Feeling inspired this afternoon by a wise interviewee who said: 'Life is about living until you die, it's not about waiting to die' #thefestivelog #hushjanuaryblues #phdherewecome

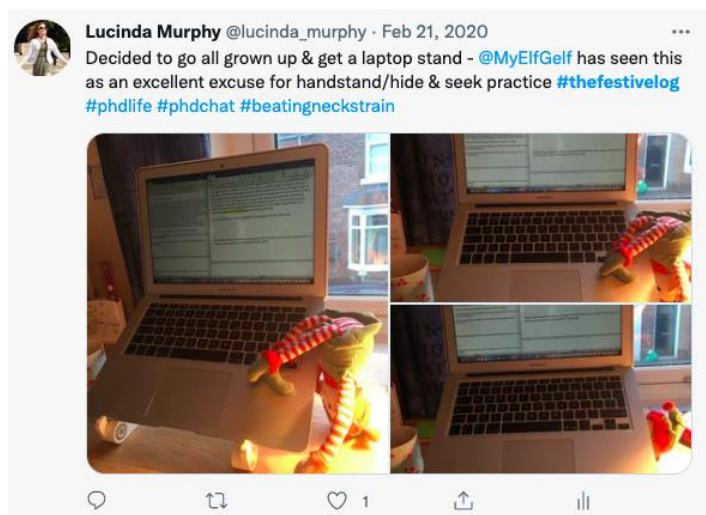


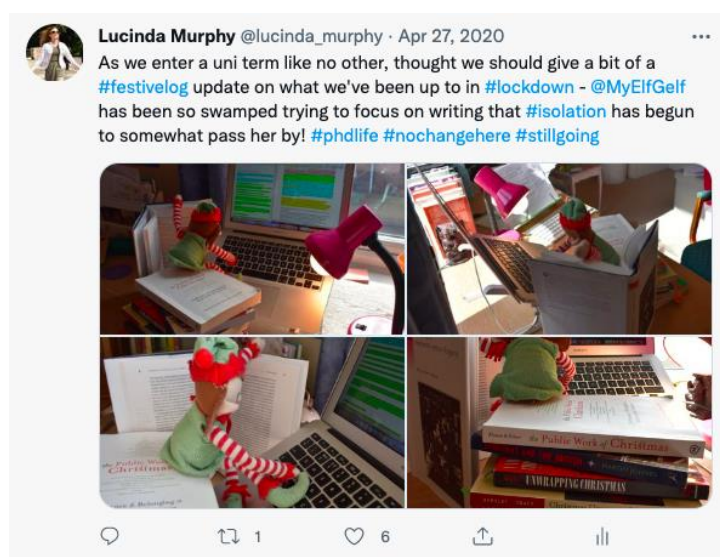
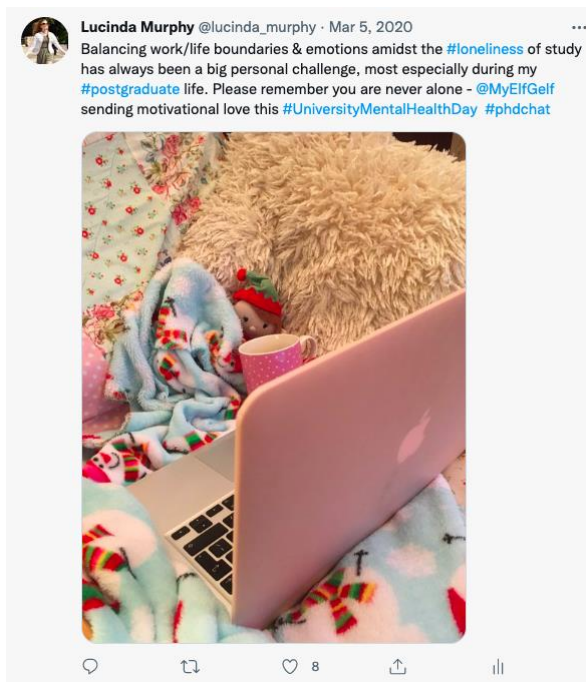


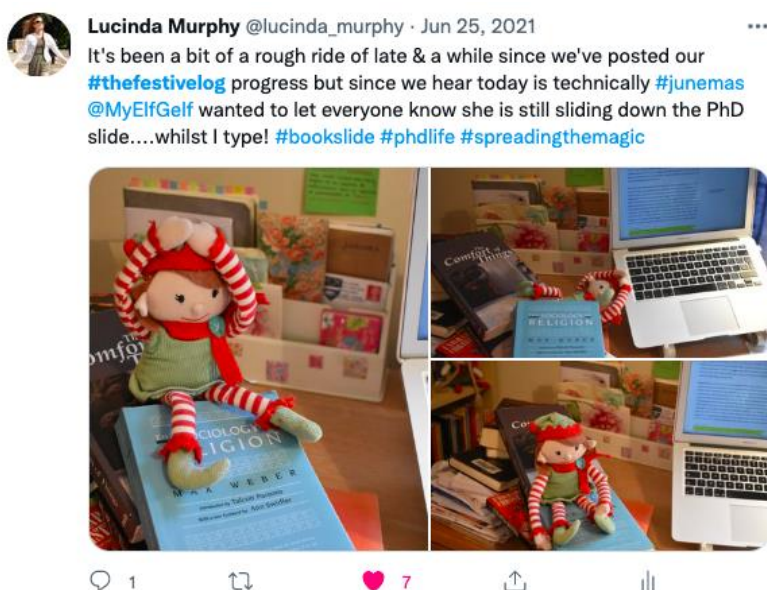












APPENDIX B: ETHICS & DATA PROTECTION

ETHICS STATEMENT

Full ethical permission was granted by Durham University, Department of Theology and Religion ethics committee well in advance of the extensive fieldwork and interviewing which took place as part of this project. As per standard disciplinary guidelines for research of this kind (ASA Ethics Guidelines 2011), every precaution has been taken to respect and protect the identities and sensitivities of those involved, and has been continually and rigorously reviewed at every stage of the research process. Given the public nature of my research, I also provided a clear ethics statement on my project website [see: <https://lucindaslog.com/ethics-and-data-protection/>]. The main sites involved as part of my fieldwork - Durham Cathedral, the local Primary School,¹³⁶ Crook Hall, North Tyneside Council's 'Care and Connect' team, and VODA (the local charity closely involved with this community project) - all gave their permission to be publicly named as part of the project, and to be included in my online posts during my fieldwork. All to varying degrees had a hand in the planning of the activities I was allowed to be involved in/carry out, and took an active role in helping me to identify interviewees.

All active participants were fully informed as to the nature and purpose of the project, and there was also a sense in which my highly public researcher identity acted to reiterate the nature of my role in the communities I worked with. Meanwhile, as indicated in Chapter 2, Gelf the Elf became a useful tool for navigating issues of consent when working with children. Indeed, by the end of my time working in the school, many of the children frequently referred

¹³⁶ Where possible, I have chosen to keep the school's identity implicit.

to Gelf as a 'research elf'. All interviewees and photo subjects (and/or their parents/legal guardians) included in this text gave their full consent prior to participation. As specified in Chapter 2, the identities of those represented (including those mentioned in other people's stories) have been protected as far as possible by the use of pseudonyms, and in places, some other slight changes of detail. Photos have likewise been presented in a way that aims to maintain the anonymity of the people whose stories I have shared, and have been blurred where necessary (especially where children are involved). Furthermore, all personal data has been collected, stored, and managed in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act (2018).