Resurgence of religion in public life: expressing Christianity through public service provision

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the/an author.

Additional Information:

- A Doctoral Thesis. Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University.

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/16849

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: © Nicola Reynolds

Rights: This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Please cite the published version.
Resurgence of religion in public life: Expressing Christianity through public service provision

By
Nicola Reynolds

Doctoral Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy at Loughborough University

30 September 2014

© by Nicola Reynolds 2014
Acknowledgments

This research project could not have been completed without the help of many. I would particularly like to thank the following people who unselfishly gave their time to provide me with support, advice and tuition while completing my research over the last three years:

Dr Line Nyhagen- Academic Supervisor at Loughborough University
Professor Barbara Bagihole- Academic Supervisor at Loughborough University

I would like to thank my partner, Russ Curtis and my friends David Brook and Nicola Cunningham for their continued support and motivational speeches.

Finally I would like to thank all those who afforded me interviews.
Abstract

Research on faith based organisations’ involvement in public service provision neglects to consider the personal faith convictions of those working in this field. Using a social constructionist epistemology I investigate if and how faith convictions of employees and volunteers working for Christian based service providers impact on the work they do. Data were collected in two stages using semi structured interviews. Stage one obtained a broad overview of the role of Christian service providers from the perspective of ‘elite’ Christians representing Christian organisations that have a direct connection to welfare provision in the UK. Stage two took an in-depth look at the issues raised in stage one, seeking to understand them from the perspective of ‘ordinary’ Christians who work for Christian based service providers. Findings from this thesis further sociological understanding of Christian involvement in religiously plural public spheres, and argues that faith is an intrinsic part of the delivery of public services by people working for faith-based organisations.

Drawing on the theoretical concept of Individualised Religiosities as proposed by Luckmann, Bellah, Davie, Beck and others, and the concept of Lived Religion as developed by McGuire and Ammerman, this thesis examines participants’ constructed understanding of the Christian God and its connection with public service provision. It develops a complex, three fold sociological conceptualisation of Christian perceptions of the God figure as: 1) the Supreme Being, 2) as a parental figure, and 3) an embodied God. This broad conceptualisation illustrates how participants combine institutional activities, such as attending church sermons, with more autonomous religious activities, such as personal conversations with God, to construct a multidimensional understanding of the figure. The ‘embodied God’ position takes on further significance when understanding that participants use public service work as a form of ‘church’. Public service can be viewed as a form of private worship, but by embodying God, they also take ‘God’ to people that may not practice Christianity. These findings challenge assumptions that the practice of religion in public projects has declined in recent years and that faith organisations are reticent to push their faith when providing services.

Religious pluralism results in political expectations that faith groups are religiously neutral when delivering public services. Using Framing Theory this thesis demonstrates that participants are framing faith discourses so that they resonate with discourses deemed acceptable in the public realm. It conceptualises these discourses in two action frames, the Love, and Inclusivity Frames. There are indications of a shift towards using profane terms instead of sacred terms to explain and indirectly promote aspects of the Christian faith. Moreover, Christian teachings of love, compassion and belonging are amplified to counter criticisms that Christianity is a threat to liberal rights and beliefs. These frames, which demonstrate the accommodation of Christian discourse to a religiously plural and/or neutral discourse, have implications for how we understand Christian involvement in the public sphere.
# Table of Contents

Chapter one: introduction  

1.1 Context: Religion in Britain  

1.2 Resurgence of Religion in public life  

1.3 Resurgence of Religion in public life: areas of concern for Government  

1.4 Gaps in previous research on the role of faith based organisations in the public realm  

1.5 Political expectations of faith action in the public realm  

1.6 Structure of the thesis  

Chapter two: literature review  

2.1 Religion in the public realm  

2.2 Involvement of faith based organisations in UK welfare provision  

2.3 The social construction of religion  

2.4 Individual choice in religiosity  

2.5 Lived religion  

2.6 Conclusion
Chapter three: methodological reflections: an epistemological grounding in social construction

3.1 Social constructionism 64
3.2 The importance of social constructionism to this thesis 68
3.3 Conclusion 71

Chapter four: research methods 72

4.1 Research design 72
4.2 Research methods 77
  4.2.1 Research participants
  4.2.2 Sampling for stage one participants
  4.2.3 Sampling for stage two participants
  4.2.4 Data collection
4.3 Thematic analysis process 88
4.4 Analysis and understanding 89
4.5 Summary of research methods 91

Chapter five: the social construction of God 93

5.1 Theological understanding of faith in the God figure 96
5.2 The social construction of God 96
5.3 The significance of denominational affiliation to constructions of faith 102
5.4 The multidimensional understanding of God 109
  5.4.1 Superiority position
  5.4.2 Parental position
  5.4.3 An embodied God
5.5 Discussion of the multidimensional understanding of God 126
5.6 Conclusion 128
Chapter six: the connection between the Christian perception of God and public service provision

6.1 Translating God into action

6.2 Theological connections to issues of social justice

6.3 How participants understand their role in public service provision
   6.3.1 The benefits of Christianity: the power of God
   6.3.2 The benefits of Christianity: The Christian moral framework
   6.3.3 The benefits of Christianity: Christian values

6.4 Discussion on the connection between God and Service provision
   6.4.1 Theoretical implications of a broader sociological understanding of the Christian God

6.5 Conclusion

Chapter seven: public service work as church

7.1 Public service provision as a form of personal praise

7.2 How Christian elites and non-elites talk about proselytisation and ‘pushing’ faith

7.3 Acting in the way God would have

7.4 Public representation of God: taking God to the secular public

7.5 Discussion on the purpose of public service provision

7.6 Conclusion
Chapter eight: discourses of love, compassion, forgiveness and belonging: framing Christianity for a secular audience

8.1 Frame analysis
  8.1.1 Frame construction

8.2 Problematisations of working within religiously plural spheres
  8.2.1 “Whoa, whoa, lets back off”
  8.2.2 “It doesn’t mean you’re raving Jesus loonies”

8.3 The Inclusivity Frame: amplifications of compassion, forgiveness and belonging

8.4 The Love Frame: reframing Christian discourses in terms of love, compassion, forgiveness and belonging

8.5 Conclusion

Chapter nine: conclusion

9.1 Summary of findings

9.2 The social construction of God

9.3 The connection between God and service provision

9.4 Embodying God

9.5 Discourses of love, compassion, forgiveness and belonging

9.6 Implications for Government

9.7 Religious literacy

9.8 Reflections on research methods and conclusions

Table one: Religion in the UK, Census Data 2011
Table two: Religion in the UK, British Social Attitudes Survey 2011
Table three: number of interview by type of service

Appendix A: Research Participants Information Sheet
Appendix two: Informed consent form
Chapter One: Introduction

The broad aim of this thesis is to explore the changing political and religious landscape in England and Wales. In recent decades successive British governments have become more open to faith involvement in the machineries of politics and policy. Much of this is about forging a pragmatic relationship with faith groups; a pressing political problem is how to provide a workable welfare system for an ageing population, where increasingly, pressures on public spending are outstripping tax and other income streams. Government are looking beyond the public sector to develop and implement an affordable and cost effective mixed economy welfare system. Faith organisations, with their history of providing welfare services; their focus on achieving social justice; and a willing, if not always plentiful supply of volunteers (Jawad, 2012; Smith, 2002; Harris, Halfpenny and Rochester, 2003 and Farnell, Furbey, Shams, Hills, Macey and Smith, 2003) seem like natural allies in such a cost saving programme.

The impetus behind a state-religion partnership is not just about the practicalities of saving money. An increasingly multicultural society is changing the dynamics of the political process. What was once a Government working for a largely Christian nation is now a Government working for a plurality of faiths and none. Successive Governments are recognising the important role faith organisations can play in bridging the gap between different faiths, ethnicities, and communities (Furbey and Macey, 2005 Farnell et al. 2003; Dinham and Lowndes, 2008). They are also attempting to engage faiths in participatory government and it is documented that there is faith representation at local, regional and national level (Lowndes and Chapman, 2005; Dinham and Lowndes, 2008).

This thesis investigates what the changing religious and political landscape means in practice. In particular it attempts to uncover some of the consequences of a pursuit of a mixed economy welfare system by examining how Christians, working in Christian organisations that provide public services, are responding to Government changes to the way that public services are delivered. Previous research on faith based organisations’ involvement in public service provision tends to focus on the functional aspects of service provision such as volunteer numbers, finances and publicly stated goals. It has neglected to
understand whether the concept of ‘faith’ has an influence on public service delivery. Where ‘faith’ has been addressed, examples of which include Smith (2002) and Johnsen (2009), research has largely focused attention at an organisational level. This leaves a gap in the existing body of knowledge in that little is known about whether the personal faith convictions of those working in the welfare field has any significance on the work that they do.

Using a social constructionist epistemology this thesis investigates if and how faith convictions of employees and volunteers working for Christian based service providers has significance for the work they do. Data were collected in two stages using semi structured interviews. Stage one obtained a broad overview of the role of Christian service providers from the perspective of ‘elite’ Christians representing Christian organisations that have a direct connection to welfare provision in England and Wales. Seven interviews were conducted as part of this stage. Stage two, the main part of the research, took an in-depth look at the issues raised in stage one, seeking to understand them from the perspective of ‘ordinary’ Christians who work for Christian based service providers. 28 interviews were conducted during stage two. The participants for this research have been limited to Christians. Christianity, with all its denominations, is the largest and most established religion in the UK and, as such, warrants continued scrutiny. Limiting the study to Christianity also reflects the continuing influence of Christian based organisations in the field of welfare provision. The research fulfils the ethical requirements of Loughborough University.

This thesis seeks to further sociological understanding of Christian involvement in religiously plural public spheres. By incorporating personal faith convictions into an analysis of faith action in the public realm this thesis challenges current sociological and political understandings of the role of faith based organisations in providing public services. It demonstrates that faith is an intrinsic part of the delivery of public services for participants of this project. Throughout the analysis I developed broad theoretical concepts such as a

---

1 The plural ‘spheres’ has been used throughout this thesis in recognition of the plurality of areas that can be considered public, for example there are spheres covering politics, public education and welfare. Each of these spheres overlap and can be considered singular, as Habermas (1989) describes, however, each one is sufficiently stand alone and influenced by public action in different ways that they can be studied as separate, or almost separate entities.
multidimensional construction of the God figure; social injustice being inextricably linked with the constructed understanding of God; an alternate understanding of public service provision as being a form of church; an underlying wish to share faith and proselytise; and there being overt and covert ways of sharing faith given the challenge of working in a religiously plural public sphere. These broad concepts were developed further into an overarching theoretical narrative that is presented in the four analytical chapters of this thesis.

Chapters two to four of this thesis provide a review of the literature relating to the resurgence of religion in public life; and set out both the epistemological position underpinning the research and the research methods used to collect the data. Chapters five to nine provide an analysis of the data, set out tentative conclusions and outline areas for further research. There is a brief overview of each of these chapters at the end of this introductory chapter.

1.1 Context: Religion in Britain

What is understood as being the current UK social welfare system owes much to religion, particularly Christianity (Jawad, 2012; Beckford, 2010). Jawad (2012) traces Christian involvement in welfare provision back to the reformation period, noting that institutional care for young, old, sick, homeless and vulnerable people were largely begun by the church, during this time. These institutions later developed into poor houses and hospitals and this laid the foundations of what became known as the modern welfare state.

The historical cooperation between the British state and mainstream Christian and Jewish organisations is well documented. Beckford (2010) considers that this is best illustrated with respect to social welfare and chaplaincies in healthcare, prisons and the military. He notes that religious organisations have long been able to work alongside non-religious and state organisations to provide civic services. Indeed, religion has had a significant influence over the development of a number of public systems including the judicial system and Parliament (Habermas, 2006). It was meetings made up of religious leaders in the 11th century that formed the origins of a group that later became the UK Parliament. To this day the UK reserves a place in Parliament for unelected religious clerics.
The unelected clerics are collectively called the Lords Spiritual. There are places in Parliament for 26 Bishops, reserved for the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and the Bishops of Durham, London and Winchester with the remaining places given to the most senior English diocesan Bishops. As members of the House of the Lords, Bishops have the right to work with government to pass legislation and challenge the actions of politicians. The Bishops are not formally aligned to any political party but, instead, consider their role to be to preach God’s word; be the voice of people of all faiths and lead the Lords in prayer. (Church of England, Bishops in the House of Lords, n.d.).

Another prominent area of religious involvement in social policy is in education. Parker-Jenkins, Hartas and Irving (2005) note that the relationship between church and state has been instrumental in the historical development of schools in England and Wales. Charity schools, providing education to the poor, were founded during the 18th century, many of which had a focus on religious and moral values (King, 2010). In recent years the Muslim Council of Britain have successfully campaigned for the recognition and state funding of Islamic schools (Madood, 2012) and today, 34% of all state funded schools are faith schools (Oldfield, Hartnett and Bailey, 2013).

One of the most prominent areas of religious involvement in social policy is in the welfare field and this forms the focus of this thesis. Faith-based involvement in the public realm covers a wide variety of policy areas including homelessness, debt and working poverty, asylum, community regeneration, elderly and disability, young people and children (Jawad 2012; 2012a; Stewart, 2007; Johnsen 2009; Dinham and Lowndes, 2008; Chapman 2012; Williams, Cloke and Thomas, 2012). For Johnsen (2009) provision of services to homeless people is one of the longest standing means by which faith communities have sought to contribute to the welfare of society. This is perhaps not surprising given that the fight against poverty is deeply entrenched within much religious dogma, and the public display of such, as represented by street homeless people, may not sit well with religious conscience. While the modern welfare state has seen the responsibility for welfare provision transfer from mostly Christian organisations to statutory agencies (Jawad, 2012), the structures that Christian organisations have in place and the experience of Christians in providing such services means that Christianity continues to play a fundamental role in welfare provision.
The modern position of religion in the public realm is complex. Weller (2008) describes a religious landscape in the UK as being at once Christian, secular and religiously plural. Understanding the religious landscape in the UK as being Christian comes, in part, from the privilege given to sections of Christianity in the public realm. State ceremonies are routinely presided over by the Anglican Church (Davie, 2012). The British Monarch is the supreme governor of the Church of England and as such is a member of the General Synod (Guest, Olson and Wolfe, 2012). Davie (2012) draws attention to the Orange Order as being the ritualised religious-cultural affirmation of Protestant religion in Northern Ireland. Also British national holidays are timed in accordance with Christian ceremonies and festivals (Ganiel and Jones, 2012).

The landscape of religion in the public sphere, however, continues to change. Factors including migration, birth rates and awareness of other religions have increased the presence and visibility of faith in the UK. The Census 2011 data show that affiliation with religions other than Christianity has grown since 2001 (ONS, 2011). The biggest growth is with Islam which saw affiliation increase from 3% in 2001 to 4.8% in 2011 (ONS, 2011). There are pockets of the UK that are particularly religiously diverse. London is the most diverse region with the highest proportion of people identifying themselves as Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Jewish, but there are other areas of diversity such as Leicester and Birmingham (ONS, 2011). This, alongside high profile cases of religiously motivated actions of civil unrest and terrorism, including rioting in Burnley and Oldham; 9/11 in the USA and 7/7 in London, has made religion more visible to Government and the public (Baker, 2012; Dinham, 2012). This is all set within the context of a population that increasingly indentify as having no religion at all (Park, Clery, Curtice, Phillips, and Utting 2011).

Weller (2008) argues that this multidimensional religious landscape results in conflict, in that non-religious people feel the inclusion of the Church of England in public processes gives Christianity an unfair privilege, whereas Christians feel that they are marginalised and discriminated against, especially in comparison to religious minorities. Feelings of marginalisation within the Christian community are seemingly widespread (Premier Christian Media Trust, 2011). Senior figures in the Anglican and Catholic Churches, including Rowan Williams (previous Archbishop of Canterbury), John Sentamu (Archbishop of York), and Pope Benedict XVI, have all spoken of how faith is being relegated to a lifestyle
choice or one of personal conscience (Paton, 2012; Beckford, 2009; BBC News, 2010). Furthermore, Christians in the UK have identified secularism as being the biggest single threat to their Christian identity (Premier Christian Media Trust, 2011).

In February 2012 Baroness Warsi, in a speech to the Vatican, claimed that the UK is experiencing a rise in militant secularism and a corresponding intolerance of religious identity (Kington, 2012). In all likelihood this was a carefully constructed political speech written to appease and find resonance with parts of the Christian community who have vocalised feelings of marginalisation, rather than being a careful analysis of the current position of religion in the UK. Nevertheless, her speech can be seen as symbolic of how anti-Christian and secular discourses are perceived to dominate conversations on faith and religiosity in popular western culture, especially by people of faith.

It is not just Christians who feel a sense of marginalisation, people from many minority religions do too. In particular there is considerable literature on feelings of marginalisation within the Islamic community. Abbas (2006) discusses how Muslims have low levels of engagement when it comes to state driven initiatives, which reflects a tendency to meet their needs within a community set-up. It has only been relatively recently that the provision of state funded faith-based schools has gone beyond Christianity and Judaism to include Islam (Madood, 2012). This sense of marginalisation has been exacerbated by Government and media responses to trends of separatism and extremism (Abbas, 2006; Spalek, 2011). Spalek (2011) argues that the discourse of new terrorism has the potential to stigmatise Islamic beliefs and practices.

1.2 Resurgence of religion in public life
Religious plurality within the UK has raised awareness of the different needs of religious groups and is one of the factors to have lead to increased interest in faith groups by policy makers. Government have called on the expertise and resources of faith groups in the development of community cohesion and anti-terrorism policies (Dinham, 2012). There has also been a desire among policy makers to understand and use the way religious communities provide for the needs of their wider ethnic or cultural group to ensure social care and welfare are targeted in efficient and effective ways (Baker, 2012).
The focus of this thesis, however, is the way that successive UK Governments over the last thirty years have pursued a mixed economy welfare system which has focused attention on religion in another way. A mixed economy welfare system is a business model that sees service provision not only funded and delivered by the state but also incorporating the private and third sector. An emphasis on deregulation, decentralisation and consumer choice in services (Baker, 2012), has seen Governments, not just in the UK but across Europe, become increasingly open to a diverse set of providers, including religious organisations (Beckford, 2010; Backström, Davie and Pettersson, 2010). In other words, governments are looking to religious organisations to provide resources including time, volunteers and premises that will allow them to provide public services in such a way that is less reliant on the state (Dinham and Lowndes 2008; Beckford, 2010; Backström et al., 2010).

A stronger faith involvement in public service provision was encouraged following the election of the New Labour government in 1997 (Baker and Jawad, 2012; Beckford, 2010). A flagship policy of the Blair administration was what became known as ‘the Third Way’. Baker and Jawad (2012) relate this policy to welfare provision noting that the Third Way was designed to be a ‘happy medium’ between the excessive bureaucracies of the public sector and the deregulated markets. The Third Way placed an emphasis on using the resources that communities can offer, and New Labour made a deliberate decision to build partnerships with faith groups (Beckford, 2010). Such partnerships were strengthened throughout the New Labour administration as demonstrated by a succession of policy documents. For example, in the Labour Party’s 2001 election manifesto Labour committed to developing stronger relationships with faith communities. Upon re-election the Faith Communities Unit in the Home Office was tasked with looking at the practicalities of this, and in 2004 the Home Office published the “Working Together” report detailing how public agencies and faith communities were working together to deliver public services (Beckford, 2010).

Since the Coalition government came into power in 2010 the discourse of the Third Way has changed into discourses about localism and the Big Society. However, the political elite are still receptive to faith involvement in the public realm. As Baker and Jawad (2012: 548) note “the Conservative-led coalition Government is keen to promote the general re-
moralisation agenda of religion (in an) appeal for a return to ethics and values as a restorative component for the drive to mend ‘Broken Britain’”. As Baker (2012: 569) puts it, “Secular policy is inviting faith groups to not only provide practical resources to the social welfare of the nation but also remind society of key values, ethical norms and principles that should lie at its core”. Thus the opportunities for faith based organisations to have greater involvement in public life remains.

There are some scholars who are unconvinced that the renewed state religion partnership represents a significant resurgence of religion in public life. In particular Beckford (2010) believes that any observable increase in religious activity has only been made possible because Government has sought to utilise the resources of faith organisations. This assumes a passivity on the part of faith groups in that social change is something that happens to them rather than something they have any control over. There is, however, a wealth of evidence to suggest that religious organisations are far from passive and instead are actively becoming more involved in public life in response to moral and, what they consider to be, secularising developments in society (Barrow, 2010). Barrow (2010) in his paper “Churches and Politics: Electing to be different” argues that Christians in Britain have become significantly more involved in politics over the past forty years, citing the proliferation of lobby groups, thinks tanks and church related single issue campaigns as evidence of such involvement. Similarly, Edmunds (2010) notes that young British born Muslims are participating in a variety of political forums, at a level that was not seen in their parents’ generation. In addition the Muslim Council of Britain has successfully lobbied on getting legislation on incitement and religious hatred as well as getting recognition and state resources for Islamic schools (Madood, 2012).

In the run up to the 2010 general election there was a major campaign by the Christian charity ‘CARE’ to encourage Christians to vote. The ‘make the cross count’ message was repeated widely on Premier Christian Radio and backed by the leaders of many of the major Christian churches (CARE, 2010 , Barrow 2010). There was a similar campaign in Muslim communities, the Muslim Council of Britain launched Muslim vote 2010 as a way to encourage Muslims to engage in British democracy (Islam today, 2010). There is also evidence of other forms of political action. For example, in 2008 over six hundred Anglican priests marched through Parliament in a ‘Walk of Witness’ to remind political
leaders of their commitment to the Millennium Development goals to eradicate poverty, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development (De Santis, McCaughan, Schjonberg 2008).

What this demonstrates is that the resurgence of religion in public life is being driven, at least in part, by people of faith. This active participation by people of faith in the public realm warrants further investigation.

1.3 Resurgence of religion in public life: areas of concern for Government

The pursuit, by Government, of a mixed economy welfare system is about creating welfare services that are less reliant on the state. This is important because Government focus on religion is not just about the state outsourcing services to faith groups, although this is happening on increasing levels. Policies like 'Big Society' are also about shrinking the size of the state and developing a welfare system that is not (entirely) funded by statutory means but through private payments and charitable giving. In that sense, political reforms can be viewed as a discursive position which encourages faith organisations to become more involved in service provision to fill the gap that this shrinking state leaves behind, regardless of how that service is funded. This raises the issue of who is politically accountable for what happens in the public sphere, how welfare services are run and who has access to them.

In a welfare state, the lines of accountability are clear. The state provides the service and is held directly accountable for that action by service users and the wider public. The channels to hold government accountable are largely through elections, although some influence and pressure may also be exerted through media and other outlets. When Government grants authority for action within the public spheres to third sector parties, either directly through commissioning or indirectly through discursive action, they are essentially handing over power to an unelected, and in some cases, unregulated set of voluntary organisations. The electorate, however, continue to have a stake in those services and may still hold Government accountable as part of the democratic process. The implication of this is that even if a particular service has not been commissioned directly by Government, the state may still be seen as responsible, by the public, for the way those
services are run. This means that it is in the best interests of Government to, at the very least, understand who they are handing control of public spheres to.

A problem for Government is an accusation of religious illiteracy. “Moral, but no compass”, is a report published by the Church of England, commissioned by the then Bishop for Urban Life and Faith, Rt. Rev Stephen Lowe, which looked at the Church’s future involvement in the welfare state though interviews with 300 parliamentarians, civil servants, voluntary sector leaders, Bishops and community activists (Davis, Paulhus and Bradstock, 2008). The reports use of the term ‘religious illiteracy’ referred to the Government of the day’s alleged focus on minority religions to the exclusion of the more established Christian church. Davis et al. (2008) report how civil servants had consistently told them that no evidence base on Christian institutions existed in Government circles, yet there were specifically commissioned government studies on minority faiths (2008:49). The term also referred to an alleged belief in Whitehall that churches are dying and that even where Christian organisations were strong they were only ‘grass-roots’ based, they were likely to compete aggressively with each other for funds and were at risk of reducing social cohesion. An alleged accusation that the Church of England believe is based on outdated stereotypes of Christianity especially considering that there are examples of thriving congregations and far from being ‘grass-roots’, many Christian organisations are well structured and work strategically with other organisations to achieve effective results. For Davis et al. (2008) this lack of an evidence base on Christian organisations means that Government:

‘[...] has been planning blindly in the third sector. The Charity Commission’s data on the size, scope and nature of faith-based/religious charities in general is profoundly flawed, and the government has focused its evidence gathering so intensely on minority faiths that it has failed to develop a coherent evidence base for the largest religious body- and one of the largest third sector players- in the UK, the Christian church” (2008:50)

The term ‘religious illiteracy’ is used by Davis et al. (2008) to describe government’s alleged failure to understand the benefits of Christian involvement in the welfare sector. The term,
however, can be extended beyond this narrow definition to include a more general misunderstanding about what religious groups represent and what their involvement in the public spheres might mean for the balance between the right to have a private belief and the need to protect religiously plurality.

This issue about what faith organisations represent in the public realm is a matter that applies to the plurality of faiths acting in the public realm in the UK. This thesis specifically focuses on Christian faith based organisations given the historic and continued involvement of Christian organisations in the welfare field. In that respect the rationale behind this thesis is to investigate, from a Christian perspective, how Christians understand their role in public service provision and thus creates some sociological knowledge around their public actions.

1.4 Gaps in previous research on the role of faith based organisations in public service provision

The resurgence of religion in public life has resulted in a considerable amount of research into the role of faith-based organisations acting within the public realm. These studies are functional in their approach; they tend to look at the pragmatic elements of service delivery such as volunteer numbers, finances and publicly stated aims (see Smith, 2002; Harris, Halfpenny and Rochester, 2003; Farnell et al., 2003). There has also been a substantial body of research looking at how faith organisations balance their own uniquely religious goals with those of Government (Williams, Cloke and Thomas, 2012; Trudeau and Veronis, 2009) as well as research into how faith organisations become involved in local, regional and national politics (Chapman and Lowndes, 2009).

What they do not address in sufficient detail is the complex and nuanced nature of ‘faith’. Research in this area is superficial. For example, Smith (2002) investigates the issues and conflicts that arise from the religious nature of the organisations working in the field of regeneration. Smith (2002) concludes that faith organisations perceive themselves as excluded from secular sources of funding because of their ‘faith’ basis. Smith (2002), however, does not go into significant detail about what ‘faith’ is, except to talk about the values it represents and well established religious doctrines.
A recent empirical study by Johnsen (2009) on faith based organisations’ involvement in the provision of services for homeless people has also attempted to address this issue by “identifying similarities and differences between the ethos of faith based and secular service providers and to explore how these shape the type and nature of interventions on the ground” (2009:1). Both Smith (2002) and Johnsen (2009) understand ‘faith’ in terms of its external expression, in that they consider how organisations express the significance of their faith to people external to the religion. Neither one sufficiently addresses the issue of a personal and specific faith in a God, nor how individuals in faith based organisations understand their own faith as belief and practice. Existing studies largely investigate the connections between faith based organisations and the public realm on an organisational level. What is missing is an understanding of whether and how the personal faith convictions of those working in that field have significance for the work that they do. This leaves a substantial knowledge gap in terms of understanding what the significance is of personal faith convictions on public action. As an original contribution to the sociology of religion, this thesis investigates if and how faith convictions of employees and volunteers working for Christian based service providers has significance for the work they do. To start to fill some of these gaps in literature two research questions addressed in this thesis are:

1. **What is the Sociological understanding of the Christian relationship with the God figure?**

2. **What is the significance of the Christian relationship with the God figure with regards to public service provision (if any)?**

To understand personal faith convictions this thesis draws on the theoretical concept of *individualised religiosities* as proposed by both Luckmann (1974) and developed by Bellah et al. (2007), Davie (1994, 2007), Beck (2010) and others, as well as the concept of *lived religion* as developed by McGuire (2008), Ammerman (2003, 2007) and Stringer (2011) (see literature review). More specifically this thesis seeks to understand the extent to which the
concept of individualisation\(^2\) manifests itself in those that still hold a strong and active affiliation to institutionalised forms of Christianity. It investigates whether and how individualisation has implications for the ways that participants use or reflect on activities such as Bible study, attending church sermons, and formalised prayer, when constructing their own understandings about the God figure.

The concept of ‘lived religion’ argues that seemingly mundane acts such as gardening, meditating or chatting to a deceased family member at the graveside can be as much of a religious experience as ‘institutional activities’ and the expression of religion is an embodied act that incorporates the everyday as well as what is traditionally understood as more sacred activities\(^3\) (Stringer, 2011; Ammerman, 2003, 2007; McGuire, 2008). This thesis takes into consideration how participants use activities that fall outside the structural boundaries of institutional religion to construct their faith understanding. In particular it focuses on the ways that participants communicate with the God figure on a day to day basis. In other words, communication with the God figure that falls outside the boundaries of formal prayer or through the use of clergy as a medium.

The notion that there are different types of religious activities that fall within or outside the boundaries of dominant discourses on religion is important for this study. This thesis uses the prefix ‘institutional’ or ‘institutionalised’ to refer to activities, rituals and sources of information that fall within the boundaries of mainstream academic understanding of religiosity, such as those put forward by Bruce (2002), Crockett and Voas (2006) and Johnsen (2009) who have measured church attendance and a belief in God, but who do not look at lived religion as indices of religiosity. For example, institutionalised activities would include listening to church sermons or praying; institutionalised rituals include baptisms, funerals and church weddings; and institutionalised sources of information include the Bible, theological consultations with the clergy and church sanctioned information about saints. The terms ‘individualised’, ‘religion as lived’ or

---

\(^2\) This thesis draws on Becks' (2010) understanding of individualisation which refers to the concept that people perceive their actions and life paths to be as a consequence of autonomous and individual choices rather than because of social structural forces.

\(^3\) Day (2009) writes about the concept of belief as being an embodied experience however makes clear that she is not necessarily referring to a religious experience.
‘autonomous’ are used to describe alternative expressions of religiosity that fall outside these boundaries and do not necessarily conform to mainstream academic discourses.

1.5 Political expectations of faith action in the public realm
Despite the apparent lack of understanding about faith groups, Government has a set of expectations about how faith groups should act in the public realm. Egalitarian treatment of people with a mix of theistic beliefs requires a universalistic approach to decision making (Habermas, 2006) and it is expected by Government that faith organisations separate their ‘belief’ from public service delivery; in particular refraining from proselytising or imposing an obviously religious agenda when working with service users (Thomas 2004).

James (2009) argues that most European governments still view civic development as a secular enterprise. In the UK, government is open to faith involvement in the public sphere; however public policy documents on this issue, such as “Ensuring a level playing field: Funding faith-based organisations to provide publicly funded services” published by Department for Communities and Local Government (2010), and “Voluntary and Community Sector: quick start guide to religion or belief discrimination in service provision” published by the Government Equalities Office (2011) suggest that there is a government expectation that faith groups should not act in any way that undermines the religious plurality of the public spheres. This expectation extends to non departmental public bodies such as the Big Lottery Fund (see “Equality Matters”, 2011 and “Reaching Communities”, 2013) and NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups (see “Community Innovation Fund” published on behalf of the Wirral NHS CCG, 2013).

In other words, UK government and public bodies are willing to engage with faith based organisations in order to find innovative ways to provide public services however, the principle of universality within the public realm remains at the forefront of Government expectations and thus the more spiritual or overtly religious aspects of faith based organisations are kept at arm’s length (James, 2009; Thomas, 2004). This leads to a political narrative that Christian involvement in public service provision should be limited to the resources that faith based organisations can offer and that issues of faith and belief will remain separate from service provision (Johnsen, 2009; Thomas, 2004; Cloke, Williams and
Thomas, 2009). To understand how participants respond to these expectations further research questions addressed in this thesis are:

3. **What do Christians perceive as the challenges of working in a religiously plural public realm?**

4. **What processes are used (if any) to overcome these challenges?**

With question three, this thesis draws on Bacchi’s (1999) concept of problem representation in that solutions to problems are dependent on what that problem is understood to be. The epistemological position of this thesis is social constructionism. In keeping with this epistemological underpinning the data collection phase was designed using an inductive methodology. As an atheist my own understanding and knowledge around the research problem comes from a different discursive position to that of the study population. To set aside this discursive position this thesis investigates faith action in the public realm from the perspective of the research participants rather than work to provide evidence for or against an hypothesis. This inductive approach minimises the presuppositions and constrictions on the data collected.

**1.6 Structure of this thesis**

The second chapter of this thesis reviews relevant literature within the sociology of religion. The review highlights the original contribution of this thesis by positioning it within existing literature relating to the resurgence of religion in public life; the plurality of public spheres, and the concepts of *individualised religiosities* and *lived religion*. It discusses the complexities of the religiously plural landscape of the UK; existing research on the role of faith based organisations in providing public services, including work by Smith (2002), Farnell et al. (2003) Harris et al. (2003) and Backström et al. (2010) and the theoretical connections between religion, the individual and the public realm, drawing on the concept of *individualised religiosities* as proposed by Luckmann (1974), Bellah et al. (2007), Davie (1994, 2007) Beck (2010) and others, and *lived religion* as developed by McGuire (2008), Ammerman (2003, 2007) and Stringer (2011).

The epistemological position of this thesis is social constructionism. Drawing on scholars including Berger and Luckmann (1991) and Gergen (2009) chapter three details social constructionist concepts which are pertinent to this thesis and sets out in more detail
how and why social constructionism is the right approach for understanding the interactions between religion, the individual and the public spheres.

Chapter four sets out the research method used to achieve the broad aims of this thesis. It starts by setting out four research questions that have guided the data collection and analytical process. It details the research design, including its fit with social constructionism and a discussion on the ethical implications of the research method. There is a detailed discussion on the sample used for the research including a rationale for the sampling procedure. This includes a definition of a faith based organisation and sets out the current landscape of Christians working in the public services field. The chapter then discusses the data collection process and finishes with a discussion on the method of analysis used to develop the findings and to formulate conclusions.

Chapter five develops a complex three-fold sociological conceptualisation of the Christian perception of God. This broad conceptualisation illustrates how participants blend institutional religious activities, such as attending church sermons, with more autonomous religious activities, such as personal conversations with God, to construct a multidimensional understanding of the figure that simultaneously places God in 1) a Superiority Position, 2) a Parental Position and 3) as an Embodied God.

Chapter six builds on the multidimensional understanding of God developed in the previous chapter by investigating how participants link their perceptions of God to public service provision. In particular chapter six develops an understanding of how participants draw on their faith when acting in the public realm; how they connect their understanding of God to issues of social justice; and the influence this has on how participants understand their role in public service provision. This chapter starts to discuss the extent to which the connections made between God and social justice contrasts with Government expectations of how people of faith act when working in the public realm.

Chapter seven examines how participants relate the specific work they do to their own faith. This chapter presents evidence that public service work is a form of church. Part of this is about private praise but there is a public element to it. The chapter demonstrates how participants use public service provision as a way of taking church to service users. It directly challenges the conclusions of Johnsen (2009) by demonstrating that religious
practice is still very much part of public projects and there is an explicit desire by participants to include service users in the Christian narrative. Chapter seven also builds on the conclusion of chapter six in that it provides further evidence of the mismatch between political expectations of how faith groups act in the public realm and participants’ understanding of their role in service provision.

Chapter eight addresses how participants communicate their faith in a religiously plural public realm. This concept is addressed at a discursive level. Using a Habermasian understanding of communicative action together with framing theory, chapter eight investigates how participants are attempting to find a narrative fidelity with the religiously neutral discourses present within the public realm in the UK. The chapter argues that participants of this study are framing faith discourses in terms of love, forgiveness, compassion and belonging, rather than talk about God and belief directly, so that their discourse resonates with the notion that public services should be offered on the basis of a principle of universality (i.e., equally accessible to all, regardless of their faith). The intention behind this framing is for participants to build credibility as egalitarian public actors who are working towards universalistic goals. Chapter eight conceptualises this framing into two social action frames, the Love Frame and the Inclusivity Frame.

The final chapter draws together the findings from the different chapters of the thesis and offers tentative conclusions as well as suggestions for further research.
Chapter two: literature review

This chapter highlights the original contribution of this thesis by positioning it within existing literature relating to the resurgence of religion in public life; the plurality of public spheres; individualised religiosities and lived religion. This thesis investigates Christian action in the religiously plural welfare sphere and the chapter sets the context for this investigation by discussing the complexities of the religiously plural landscape of the UK and the implications this might have for faith groups operating in the public spheres. It goes on to discuss research on the role of faith based organisations in providing public services, highlighting gaps in this body of work.

The latter part of this chapter discusses the theoretical connections between religion, the individual and the public realm, drawing on concepts of *individualised religiosities* as proposed by Luckmann (1974), Bellah et al. (2007), Davie (1994, 2007), Beck (2010) and others, and *lived religion* as developed by McGuire (2008); Ammerman (2003, 2007) and Stringer (2011). This chapter sets out how this thesis will use these theoretical concepts to build further knowledge in this field.

2.1 Religion in the public realm
This section discusses the religious landscape of the UK; it details the complexities of religious plurality and the implications of this for faith organisations that act within the public realm.

The religious landscape of the UK is complex. Weller (2008) describes it as being three dimensional in that it exhibits signs of Christianity, secularity and religiously plurality. The assertion that the UK exhibits signs of Christianity is evident in the historical and social involvement of the faith in public life which has left a symbolic mark on political, judicial and social systems (Jawad, 2012; Habermas, 2006). The Church of England is considered as part of the establishment (Davie, 2007); places are reserved in the House of Lords for senior Bishops and all legislation is given Royal Assent by the British Monarch, who is also the head of the General Synod. In addition to the structural ways that Christianity is incorporated into public life there is also evidence of a discursive inclusion, for example the current British
Prime Minister, David Cameron, has repeatedly described the UK as being a Christian nation (BBC News, 2011; Bingham, 2014).

At the same time the British Social Attitudes Survey suggests that 49% of the population identify with no religion at all (Park et al. 2010). All this is set within the context of increasingly religiously diverse communities that incorporates multiple faiths and none. The Census Data, 2011, reports that affiliation with Christianity has fallen while affiliation with all non-Christian religions (with the exception of Judaism) and people identifying as having no religion has grown in the ten years since 20014 (ONS, 2011).

This presents a complex discursive position of religion in the UK. On the one hand Christian symbolism is prominent and the Christian status of the UK is supported by political rhetoric. On the other hand the presence of people of multiple faiths and none requires a discursive approach that is much more universal. Indeed many public discourses are presented in universal and religiously neutral terms. For example a statement made by Government to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) states that:

“The freedom of religion or belief is a priority area for the UK Government. It is a broad human right which includes the right to change one’s beliefs, to question the tenets of a religion, to share one’s faith in a non-coercive manner or to live free of any religious conviction. The freedom primarily concerns individuals and their right to live free from discrimination, injustice or persecution on the grounds of their religion or belief, and their right to contribute equally to society. The United Kingdom firmly believes that international human rights law is not intended to protect beliefs themselves, but rather the freedom of individuals to manifest their religion or belief.” (UK statement to the OSCE on Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2013).

This demonstrates a commitment by the UK Government to respect the religious plurality of the nation and to not actively promote one religion over another. Of course, this statement contrasts to the privileged position of Christianity in the UK’s parliamentary processes.

4 Table one showing the percentage change by religion is included in chapter four.
A principle of universality is at the basis of a Habermasian understanding of democracy which states that everyone should have the opportunity to participate in political decision making processes at some level, particularly regarding decisions which concern that individual. In practice the concept that everyone affected by legal and political decisions should take an active part in political discussions is ruled out by Habermas (Rasmussen and Swindal, 2010) on the grounds that such a system would be difficult to implement. However, Habermas (ibid.) objects to the notion that political decisions should be left entirely to an elite group. As a middle ground Habermas argues that political decision-making should be open to the widest possible public discussion (Ibid.).

In that respect, political discussions that involve a plurality of cultures necessitate, according to Habermas, a universalistic approach to decision making (Habermas, 2006). In the public realm Habermas (1996) acknowledges the right of religious people to both have a faith conviction and to participate in civic life. However, he places a duty on religious people to translate any religiously centric claims they may make into reasoned argument that can be accepted universally. That is not to say that religion cannot have a role in the democratic process. Habermas (2006) concedes that to expect religious people to separate their faith from public discussion would result in what he calls ‘cognitive dishonesty’, however communicative action should be orientated to reaching some kind of mutual understanding or agreement. Thus, politics based on one subjective understanding of faith is inappropriate. So that one faith is not favoured over any other, liberal and egalitarian agreement on public issues must be based firmly on religious neutrality (Habermas, 2006).

The motivation behind Habermas’ work is to find ways for people to live together harmoniously. The focus on collectivity prioritises religiously plural narratives over ones that allow for only one true religion. In order to find resonance with religiously plural audiences the discourse, by necessity becomes religiously neutral. Those that consider their subjective understanding of faith to be the only true understanding may see communicating in religiously neutral discourses as challenging. It is this juxtaposition of singular and plural religious discourses that makes research into the interactions between private belief and public action necessary.
The principles of religious neutrality and universality are evident in the discourse of contemporary western political philosophy (Freeman 2004). Taking the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as an example; the concept of human rights is widely accepted yet there is disagreement on its philosophical or religious basis. In order to attract universal support for its proposals the United Nations adopted secular terminology, largely based on the Neo Kantian tradition that ethics are founded on rationality and the dignity and worth of humans (Freeman, 2004). The United Nations state that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a common standard of achievement for all people of all nations (United Nations, n.d.). Applying the Habermasian understanding of religious neutrality, a common standard that uses theocentric conceptions of human rights would be inappropriate given the plurality of nations and faiths that the declaration covers. Freeman (2004) argues that in practice the principle of neutrality means that questions of religious input into legislative vehicles are often reduced by law makers to how cultural barriers to implementation might be removed or to what extent concessions to diversity might be made.

In the UK, the relationship between religion and legislation is complicated. As discussed in the introduction the Church of England continues to hold a privileged position in Parliament. There are places held in the House of Lords for Bishops; legislation is given Royal Assent by the Queen who holds the dual position of head of state and head of the General Synod and the Church of England has special dispensation, by way of The Church of England Assembly (powers) Act 1919, to change legislation relating to the internal administration and organisation of the Church. More recent political action however corroborates Freeman’s (2004) argument in that it suggests there is little value placed by the UK Government on finding religious legitimacy for legislation. The dominant discursive structure of religion propagated by Government is one of private worship. Since 1919 there has been a lack of legislative vehicles that afford rights to any one religious group over any other. The recent exception to this is the Marriage (Same Sex couples) Act 2013. Clause 26A in this Act ensures that it does not supersede clauses in the Submission of the Clergy Act 1553. This makes it illegal for the Church of England to perform same sex marriages. Even this Act, however, does not afford the Church of England with any new rights, it only protects its existing right not to perform same sex marriages. The clause itself is opposed by many people within the Church of England (Jones, 2012) and could be said to have been
included not to gain religious legitimacy for the Act but in an attempt by Government to halt the use of the Church of England Assembly (powers) Act 1919 and thus avoid political embarrassment.

Moreover, in terms of public service provision James (2009:9) notes that most European governments still view policy and civic development as a secular enterprise; although James (2009) acknowledges that many European governments are trying to develop a more nuanced understanding of religious involvement in public life. In the UK, Government is open to faith involvement in the public sphere; however public policy documents on faith action in service provision indicate that there is an expectation by Government and public bodies, that faith organisations should not act in any way that undermines the religious plurality of the public spheres. For example, The Department for Communities and Local Government has unequivocally stated that funding should be made available to faith based organisations to deliver public services, however this funding should not be used to fund ‘religious’ activities or promote one religion over another (“Ensuring a level playing field: Funding faith-based organisations to provide publicly funded services”, 2010). The Government Equalities Office have published a document aimed specifically at the voluntary community about the need to respect religious plurality when providing public services (“Voluntary and Community Sector: quick start guide to religion or belief discrimination in service provision”, 2013). In addition non-departmental public bodies such as the Big Lottery Fund and NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups also make clear that faith based organisations are welcome to apply for funding but any money awarded should not be used for religious activity (See “Equality Matters”, 2011 and “Reaching Communities”, 2013 published by the Big Lottery Fund; “Community Innovation Fund”, 2013 published by Voluntary and Community Action on behalf of Wirral NHS Clinical Commissioning Group).

There are many more documents published by Government and public bodies, while not specifically about faith action in public service provision, that provide further evidence of the state expectation that religious plurality will be respected in the public realm. The statement (cited previously) by the UK Government to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) on Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2013 is one example of this. This statement makes clear that the freedom of religion or belief is a priority area for the UK Government. That freedom means that individuals have the right to live free from
discrimination, injustice or persecution on the grounds of their religion or belief, but more pertinently to this study there is a governmental commitment to ensuring that people of all religions have the right to contribute equally to society (UK statement to the OSCE on Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2013). Other documents include “the religion and belief core script” published by the Department for International Development (2013); “Guide on religion and belief in the Armed Forces” published by the Ministry of Defence (2011) and “Freedom of religion and belief, how the FCO can help promote respect for this human right” published by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2010).

UK Government and public bodies are willing to engage with faith based organisations and work with them to provide public services however, in order to maintain a universality to service provision there is a tendency to keep the more spiritual and religiously doctrinal aspects of religion at arm’s length (James, 2009; Thomas, 2004). Both James (2009) and Thomas (2004) note that secular donors, this includes both Government and many independent donors, are accepting of faith organisations who are inspired by the love, compassion and moral obligation their faith brings them and are willing to fund social projects along these lines but are much less understanding if a faith based organisation then uses that platform to proselytise or influence the content of policy development with overtly spiritual aspects. This leads to a political narrative that Christian involvement in public service provision should be limited to the resources that faith based organisations can offer and that issues of faith and belief will remain separate from service delivery (Johnsen, 2009; Thomas, 2004; Thomas, Cloke and Williams, 2009).

However, these kinds of political expectations and limitations placed on faith action in the public realm do not stop faith organisations from influencing public policy. Casanova (1994:5) notes that “disestablishment does not necessarily rob religion of its ability to have an impact on public policy. Religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatised role which theories of modernity, as well as theories of secularisation had reserved for them”. Here Casanova (1994) is making the point that the modern differentiation of spheres- public from private, state from church – does not mean that the state has absolute power over religion, nor does it prevent religion or religious people from having influence over the public spheres.
Religious actors can have a faith motivated input into public processes. The example of policy making can be used to illustrate this point: Policy making is not just about the mechanisms of Parliament. Policy development represents a continual dialogue between policy makers, business, the public and special interest groups. Religious actors can act as lobbyists and respond to consultations; they can draw on their religious doctrines when voting in elections and religious politicians can draw on their beliefs when making political decisions. This demonstrates that the boundaries of the political sphere are penetrable and that there are numerous ways that religious actors can engage. For example, Stopler (2005) explored the conflicts between women’s rights and patriarchal religion in liberal democracies including Israel, the US and UK, noting that religious involvement in policy development has prevented women from having access to easily available contraceptives and abortions. Also, Jeffreys (2011) theorises that the rise in political power of organised religions in the UK and Australia will endanger sexual equality, noting that religious organisations are usually discriminatory with respect to gender and sexuality.

To understand religious involvement in the political process further, Chapman and Lowndes (2009) investigate how faith groups participate in Local Governance arrangements and the legitimacy they claimed for doing so. The rationale behind the research was to understand the impact on recent local authority practices of involving community groups in the decision making process by inviting them to be non-elected representatives. Chapman and Lowndes (2009) conducted 49 interviews with national faith leaders, civil servants, religious activists and representatives from faith based organisations and the wider voluntary sector. They found that faith groups are more than willing and able to become involved in local politics in this way. Faith groups claim legitimacy for this kind of political action on a number of levels. In particular they consider themselves to be the voice of all faith groups, not just their own specific faith; they also claim that they act as arbiters on moral values that transcend individual religious doctrines (Chapman and Lowndes, 2009).

This section illustrates the opportunities religious groups have to influence political and social processes; and the ease at which faith groups can have influence in spheres that are presented in Government documents as being religiously neutral (see “UK statement to the OSCE on freedom of religion or belief”, 2013; “The religion and belief core script” DfID, 2013; “Guide on religion and belief in the Armed Forces”, MoD, 2011 and “Freedom of
religion and belief, how the FCO can help promote respect for this human right”, FCO, 2010). Religious individuals have a presence in civil society and can and do draw on their religious doctrines when engaging in the public realm. Nevertheless, faith action in public spheres has been politicised and is controversial. The religious discourse of the public realm is complicated given the historical and ongoing involvement of Christianity in the political, social and judicial systems and the personal faith convictions of public actors that have been expressed as political and public rhetoric. There is, however, also an expectation by Government and public bodies that faith organisations refrain from proselytising when providing public services; that service users are able to access help without having to partake in religious activity; and that the religious plurality of the public realm is respected (see “Ensuring a level playing field: Funding faith-based organisations to provide publicly funded services”, DCLG, 2010; “Voluntary and Community Sector: quick start guide to religion or belief discrimination in service provision” Government Equalities Office, 2013; “Equality Matters”, Big Lottery Fund, 2011; “Reaching Communities”, Big Lottery Fund, 2013; and “Community Innovation Fund”, Wirral NHS CCG, 2013).

In that respect there is a growing body of knowledge aimed at furthering sociological understanding of faith action in the public spheres. In the following section, research which looks specifically at faith involvement in public service provision is discussed. The body of work available on this subject is substantial and growing. The studies reviewed in the next section have been selected as representative of the wider literature available. The section details what is known about faith involvement in public service provision as well as highlighting gaps in the field.

2.2 The involvement of faith based organisations in UK welfare provision
Much of the research on the role of faith organisations that provide public services focuses on the practical resources organisations can provide within the welfare field. One of the drivers of the resurgence of religion in public life is the development of state strategy to achieve a mixed economy welfare system (Beckford, 2010; Jawad, 2012). This is partly about Government outsourcing core services to faith groups (among other service providers). But it is also about encouraging faith groups to provide services funded through other means so as to develop a functioning welfare system that is less reliant on statutory funding. In other words, extant research has sought to understand whether faith
organisations have the capacity and capability to provide services at the level that Government expects and the public needs. The following section illustrates this point by drawing on the work of Smith (2002); Farnell et al. (2003), Harris, Halfpenny and Rochester, (2003), and others.

Research by Smith (2002) looking at the role of faith groups in community regeneration projects presents data on the physical resources provided by faith groups such as available premises, the number and location of staff and volunteers and funding. The study looked at sixteen faith-based community development projects in London, South of England, Midlands and North of England. The sample was largely Christian based although it did include both a Sikh and an Islamic based project. Using a combination of case studies, interviews, focus groups and a postal survey Smith (2002) found that faith organisations are well placed, in terms of resources, to have an effective role in community regeneration. They have a ready supply of premises, memberships, staff and volunteers, located in areas of need. Smith (2002) also reported that people of faith consider that they have a greater level of commitment to their respective causes then their secular counterparts.

Where problems occur for faith groups is around funding. Adequate funding to provide effective public services is a major source of concern for those involved (Smith, 2002). Most funding for projects came from religious sources, a considerable amount coming from independent donors. There was some evidence that receiving funding from statutory agencies and secular funders was problematic with reports of bids for funds being blocked by ‘powerful individuals’ who felt it inappropriate to link to spiritual organisations (2002:171). Smith (2002) goes further and says that, far from receiving adequate funding from statutory sources to provide a service, many faith communities are often co-opted by the state into working for free. Relying on income from multiple small donations adds a layer of risk to faith organisations’ funding streams; especially around the long-term sustainability of funding. A lack of secure and consistent funding hinders an organisation’s ability to run projects in a strategic fashion because financial awards are usually made for between one and three years making long term planning difficult. In addition working within budget constraints and the lack of funding guarantees means that organisations will sometimes struggle to attract qualified and experienced staff leading to a loss of

36
professionalism within the field. All this has implications for whether any real, long term benefits are achieved for the local communities receiving the service.

Farnell et al. (2003) produced similar findings to Smith (2002). They completed research on the participation of faith communities in urban regeneration, capturing the experiences and perceptions of both religious and secular partners. Their research covered four areas: Bradford, Coventry, London Borough of Newham and Sheffield. It also covered a range of religions, although, like Smith (2002) had a focus on Christianity. Farnell et al. (2003) conclude that there is a considerable amount of activity in urban regeneration already happening among faith groups. Mirroring the findings of Smith (2002) they conclude that a considerable number of religious groups are well placed, in terms of having premises and a steady supply of volunteers, to create a significant amount of social capital in a neighbourhood.

Farnell et al. (2003) did find some inequalities between geographical areas in faith organisations’ ability to engage. For example in some areas they reported a plentiful supply of volunteers whereas in others a lot of regeneration work is achieved through a much smaller volunteer community, who are often made up of older people. This highlights the risks involved in relying on a largely volunteer workforce in that capacity and capability of personnel are not always guaranteed. As Smith (2002) notes, people of faith consider that they have a greater commitment to their cause than their secular counterparts, however the very nature of volunteering means that there is no legal or financial compulsion for people to become or stay involved in a community project. Project leaders are relying on the altruism of others and this, again, raises issues about long term sustainability. Similarly, Farnell et al. (2003) found there are inequalities between faith groups. The established status of the Church of England and its diocesan structure means it has a prominent role in many formal regeneration projects; other faith traditions have less experience, less status and subsequently much less influence on projects.

The research methods followed by Farnell et al. (2003) and Smith (2002) means that much of their data comes from Christian based organisations. However, their findings are not unique to Christianity. A study by Harris et al. (2003) looked specifically at the role of
Jewish based organisations in welfare provision. Many of their findings have similarities with both Smith (2002) and Farnell et al. (2003).

Harris et al. (2003) present findings from two empirical studies of the UK Jewish voluntary sector; one maps income streams of the Jewish voluntary sector and the other explores the motivations of those who serve on boards of Jewish voluntary agencies in the UK. Similar to Smith (2002) and Farnell et al. (2003), Harris et al. (2003) found that funding for voluntary projects comes, largely, from religious sources and the Jewish community have a volunteer force that shows commitment to organisations and longevity to the cause.

The studies by Farnell et al. (2003), Smith (2002), and Harris et al. (2003) support policy makers’ assumptions that faith groups represent untapped resources that have the potential to be utilised for public gain. Faith based organisations have an extensive reach in the welfare field. There are both grassroots and more structured organisations that spring up in areas of need. There is also a considerable supply of volunteers, premises and, in some cases, financial resources that can be utilised for the benefit of the public.

What is clear from these research projects is that service provision is not provided uniformly on a geographical level. Volunteers tend to work in their local communities; this means that some areas are well represented with volunteers while others do not have the necessary resources for projects to run effectively. Moreover, the organic growth of faith based organisations’ involvement in the public spheres means that there is little strategic oversight of how and where services are delivered. The Church of England, with its deeply embedded structure, might be well placed to provide this kind of strategic leadership. However the third sector is made up of organisations that are largely independent of one another, while partnership working is common place among different organisations within the charitable sector many organisations, even Christian ones, may not necessarily recognise the authority of just one particular Church.

The studies by Farnell et al. (2003), Smith (2002), and Harris et al. (2003) are functional in their approach, they look at the pragmatic elements of service delivery such as volunteer numbers, finances and publicly stated aims. As they are only looking at the practicalities of faith based organisations involvement in public service provision it assumes congruence between the goals and objectives of faith groups and those prevalent within the
public spheres. In that respect this literature does not adequately address whether there is conflict arising from faith groups operating in the public realm.

Research on the congruence between how policy makers and faith groups understand their role in the public spheres includes Backström, Davie and Pettersson’s (2010, 2011) sizeable project (Welfare and Religion in a European Perspective, or the WREP project) on how faith organisations fit with governance structures of political regimes. This is a comparative study on welfare and religion across eight Western European countries (Sweden, Norway, Finland, Germany, UK, France, Italy and Greece). A pertinent finding from the study is that churches adapt their working model to the political model in any given country. So for example, churches follow a social democratic model in Scandinavian countries, in that religious organisations tend to provide complimentary services to the core of services provided for by the state; and a conservative or Christian democratic model in places like France and Germany, where faith organisations take more of a lead in service delivery.

In the UK, Backström et al. (2010) argue that churches follow a liberal model. The UK based case study looked at the role of the Church of England in Darlington, and researchers interviewed Priests in the Church of England, representatives of the local public authorities, councillors and employees in the welfare sector and representatives of other churches and the voluntary sector. In their report Backström et al. (2010) present rather complex findings in relation to the UK. They suggest that representatives of local authorities in Darlington have certain expectations about the role of the church in that they are to represent all faiths, not just their own, and that they act in religiously neutral ways so as to maintain the religiously plural nature of the public spheres. At the same time, however, local authorities admit that they know relatively little about the church and that it would not be their place to tell the church how they should conduct their business.

Backström et al.’s (2010) findings are indicative of the complexity of faith involvement in religiously plural spheres. Local Government is attempting to respect the right of this Christian organisation (the Church of England) to practice their faith in a way that is appropriate for them but at the same time are expressing a political expectation that the Christian church respects and promotes the plurality of the public realm via a religiously
neutral approach. Local authorities also argue that the church is a voluntary organisation like any other but then go on to ascribe the church with particular responsibility for Parish communities (Backström et al., 2010). This is indicative of how the UK can still be considered a Christian country in that the Parish system is deeply embedded within political and social processes. At the same time, however, there is a distancing from faith based groups by local authorities, in that faith groups are categorised in the same way as any third sector provider.

The picture is a little clearer from the perspective of the church in that they take it for granted that they should be involved in welfare services, but they are not clear on how (Backström et al., 2010). Backström et al. (2010) highlight three areas where there is agreement between local authorities and the Church of England on what the churches’ role is. The church is expected to act as neutral ground, that is, be a communal space to be used by all, including those who do not adhere to Christianity. Backström et al. (2010) note that, in some Parishes, the church is the only shared space and thus it should be recognised that anyone can utilise it regardless of their faith status. The church is also expected to act as a mediator between the community and the authorities, especially in cases where individuals lack trust in the authorities and refrain from making contact via official routes. Finally it is expected that the church acts as a critical voice and engages in public debate over welfare issues at various political levels (Backström et al., 2010).

The WREP project provides one understanding of how faith fits with the political models of the public spheres. It suggests that faith based organisations are flexible and that they can and do adapt to fit with particular political regimes. The WREP project, however, has its limitations. In the specific example of the UK, Backström et al. (2010) only consider the role of the Church of England. This church is part of the establishment (Davie, 2007) and it could be argued that its position as such makes it more likely to present a united front with the political model of the state. Out of scope are faith based organisations that are external to the Church of England. Arguably interactions between faith organisations that are not part of the establishment and the state are where conflict is most likely to occur (if at all). The Church of England may be looking to protect their position as part of the establishment and could be less likely to act in ways that contradict the neoliberal basis of state systems. Faith groups outside of the establishment do not have the same motivation
to conform and thus may be more likely to act in ways that prioritise their own faith convictions regardless of whether they challenge state norms. Cloke, Williams and Thomas (2012) provide evidence of this which is discussed later in this chapter. The WREP project is important in forwarding our understanding of the relationship between religion and welfare but it does not consider some of the more complex ways that faith based organisations interact with the public spheres and the challenges that accompany this interaction.

A key theme to take from the Backström et al.’s (2010, 2011) project is that it demonstrates that faith based organisations’ participation in the welfare sector involves maintaining some kind of religion/ state relationship. Given the mixed economy welfare system utilised in the UK, funding for some welfare services may not be provided for by Government, however, the state may still be held accountable by the public for any action that occurs in the public realm. As discussed previously, the state will have expectations on how faith based organisations conduct themselves in public. These expectations, even if not acted on, must at least be acknowledged and, to a certain extent, negotiated if effective partnership working is to be achieved. In that respect there has been a considerable amount of research looking at the extent to which faith based organisations are working towards their own objectives or are compromising in order to meet the needs of Government.

As part of a wider study looking at faith based organisations’ position in combating social exclusion in Europe, Cloke et al. (2009) mapped the national level involvement of faith based organisations in the UK. A general finding is that the numbers of faith based organisations active in the public realm, and the wide variety of projects they are involved in (asylum seekers and immigration, housing and homelessness, poverty and debt, children and youth, elderly, disabled and community regeneration and more), means that faith motivated activity has potential to be an influential factor in combating social exclusion. This finding is compatible with the conclusions made by Smith (2002); Farnell et al. (2003); and Rochester et al. (2003), who state that faith groups are both willing and have the resources to have a deep participation in the welfare field.

In terms of faith based organisations’ fit with state governance of social welfare, the picture is more complex. Cloke et al. (2009) found that a substantial number of faith based organisations are willing participants in the neo-liberal approach to welfare provision. Their
voluntary resources fill the gap left behind by a shrinking state and many are happy to tender for state contracts to supply services, to operate within state sanctioned frameworks and work towards the goals of Government. For Cloke et al. (2009) these faith based organisations are either in the process of being secularised or are deliberately positioning themselves as a non-proselytising faith voice in social policy debates.

Other faith based organisations, however, purposely position themselves outside this neoliberal framework. Cloke et al. (2009) use the example of night-shelters, soup kitchens and drop in centres for street homeless to illustrate this point. Faith based organisations are serving people on the street, which Cloke et al. (2009) consider to be directly contravening Government policy of reducing on-street forms of homelessness. Again this view is also supported by extant research. Work by Trudeau (2008); and then later Trudeau and Veronis (2009) suggest that faith organisations understand the policy goals of state agencies and they act in ways that satisfies both Government objectives and their own objectives and values. Similarly Dinham and Shaw (2012) conclude that faith organisations are intricate and dynamic groups that have multiple goals, some of which are directed towards public service and some towards the more spiritual aspects of their services.

In their later work, Williams, Cloke and Thomas (2012) explore and critique the idea of neo-liberal co-production further by way of a case study of a Christian faith based organisation (*Pathways*) whose primary aim is to help the unemployed back into work. The organisation provides one to one counselling and self management courses. It has positioned itself largely outside of the neo-liberal framework although it has had significant funding from Government sources. Using this case study Williams et al. (2012) challenge the assumptions that top down Government objectives are automatically taken up by third sector organisations that work in partnership with them. They highlight how *Pathways* was set up in direct response to what they considered to be unjust Government policies for those that found themselves needing welfare support. The courses that they offered made no use of the sanctions (such as having benefits stopped) that were a key feature of state provided services.
The organisation did bid for (and received) Government funding; however this was done with what Williams et al. (2012) call critical pragmatism. It was critical in the sense that the organisation was aware of the likely conflicts between their ethos and that of Government. It was pragmatic in that the organisation was going to continue working with clients anyway so they may as well receive financial support from Government for their work. Williams et al. (2012) note that the ethical commitment from staff towards their clients meant that they could receive Government funding but at the same time subvert the ethical rationalities of the wider Government programme. Williams et al. (2012) report that this strong ethical core did not translate into an evangelistic or proselytising operating model, rather the work of the organisation is linked to their faith because they are building the kingdom of God by helping people overcome barriers to a more abundant life (information that Williams et al. 2012, got from the *Pathways* website).

The conclusions of scholars including Williams et al. (2012) Trudeau (2008); Trudeau and Veronis (2009) and Dinham and Shaw (2012) all point to a set of organisations that take a dynamic approach to working in the public sector. There are faith organisations that both understand the needs and expectations of statutory agencies and other actors of the public realm but also show a commitment to their own uniquely religious goals and objectives. This mismatch between Government and faith objectives illustrates the importance of completing further research in this field. The work highlighted here provides a good basis for a sociological understanding of faith action in the public spheres but more work needs to be done. A critique of this body of research is that it is largely functional in its approach. Williams et al. (2012); Trudeau (2008); Trudeau and Veronis (2009), and Dinham and Shaw (2012) all look, at a very broad level, at spiritual aspects of faith based organisations, referring simply to ‘religiously motivated objectives’. They do not seek to understand where these religiously motivated objectives come from. They neglect to address the more complex and nuanced nature of ‘faith’ and how that influences the ways in which faith-based organisations work in the public realm. To better appreciate potential conflicts between external expectations placed on faith groups and how they understand their own role in the public realm, more research into the subjective needs and desires of those involved in public action is required. One of the variables that make organisations premised on religion different from other organisations is a ‘faith’ in a God, or a specific belief system.
There is scope for a more detailed understanding of how faith in a God influences public action.

Research that does exist in this area is scant and tends to be superficial. For example, Smith (2002) attempted to understand the issues and conflicts that arise from the religious nature of the organisations he was studying. As stated earlier, some of the faith organisations felt that they were being excluded from secular sources of funding because of their ‘faith’ basis, however Smith (2002) does not go into any detail about what it is about ‘faith’ that may be deterring secular donors. In addition, Smith (2002) notes that some equal opportunities issues are problematic for some of the faith groups. In particular more Evangelical Christians, who find it difficult to reconcile their doctrines with, for example, same sex practice. Other than that, Smith (2002) found that the values of faith organisations providing services, especially those around inclusivity, were congruent with the communities that they served. Furthermore, people of faith who worked for the organisations that Smith (2002) studied, believed that their spiritual motivation meant that they were committed and more likely to persevere with community work than their secular counterparts.

A recent empirical study by Johnsen (2009) on faith based organisations involvement in the provision of services for homeless people has also attempted to address the issue of faith. Johnsen’s (2009) study had three main objectives: (1) to identify similarities and differences between the ethos of faith based and secular service providers and to explore how these shape the type and nature of interventions ‘on the ground’, (2) to consider the implications of the changing governance of homelessness services for faith based provision, and (3) to examine the difference that faith makes to the way that services are delivered and experienced (Johnsen 2009: 1).

Johnsen (2009) concludes that there is often very little difference between faith based and secular service providers, and that whether or not a service is ‘faith based’ does not appear to matter to service users. Johnsen (2009) continues by stating that religious teachings encourage followers of faiths to actively tackle social justice and provide care for vulnerable members of society. However, Johnsen (2009) argues that the visibility and practice of faith in projects has declined significantly in recent years. Furthermore the
requirement for service users to participate in religious practice has largely been discontinued. The evidence that Johnsen (2009) presents in support of this conclusion is as follows:

“Some of the faith-based projects had once required service users to participate in religious practices, by attending worship services for example. Such requirements had discontinued many years ago in all but one of the faith-based projects, and this was considered extremely atypical” (Johnsen, 2009:3).

Other religious practices that Johnsen (2009) refers to are chaplaincy services, prayer, scriptural study and the proactive promotion of faith (2009:4).

Both Smith (2002) and Johnsen (2009) suggest that there is little conflict between the subjective faith needs of believers acting in the public realm and the needs of service users. However both Smith (2002) and Johnsen (2009) only approach ‘faith’ in terms of its external expression at the organisational level. That is, how the significance of faith is expressed to those external to the religion. Smith (2002) discusses the issue of faith in terms of the values it represents and well established religious doctrines. Johnsen (2009) discusses faith in terms of ethos and traditional faith practices. Neither one sufficiently addresses the issue of a personal faith in a God, in particular how the personal faith convictions of those working or volunteering for these organisations influences the way that services are delivered. Indeed the focus on all the research discussed in this section is at an organisational level. The gap in knowledge is around whether and how the personal faith convictions of individuals working for faith-based organisations play a role in the delivery of the welfare services they offer.

Understanding faith on a personal level is important. There is a spectrum of ways that ‘faith’ is incorporated into the operating model of faith groups. Some faith groups are ‘faith’ in little more than name only. Such groups may have strategies that are not dissimilar to those of secular organisations. Other groups, however, have a more distinctive faith identity and are likely to call upon their faith when setting organisational aims or developing the organisation’s strategy. The specific strategy of an organisation may influence the way an individual works, but so too does their own beliefs and convictions.
This section sets out the importance of researching the role of faith based organisations in providing public services so to better understand the juxtaposition of theocentric discursive norms acting within religiously plural public spheres. Much of the existing research into the role of faith based organisations in providing public services looks at the functional aspects of a state/religion partnership, such as what resources faith groups can provide or how the objectives of faith groups fit with those that are prevalent in the public realm. Very little is understood about how spirituality and faith may influence public action; in particular whether any conflict arises from Christians providing services to religiously plural service users. Where conflict has been addressed it has tended to focus on an organisational level. This leaves a substantial knowledge gap in terms of understanding the ways in which personal faith convictions may be linked to forms of public action. As an original contribution to the sociology of religion field, this thesis investigates if and how the faith convictions of individual employees and volunteers working for Christian based service providers are linked with the work they do in relation to clients or service users.

The following section sets out current sociological understanding of personal faith. In particular it addresses the relationship between the individual and religion. The section is divided into three parts: the social construction of religion; individualised choice in religiosity, and lived religion.

2.3 The social construction of religion
There has been some sociological research on people’s views on the nature of God and their overall religious beliefs. Chapman, Naguib and Woodhead (2012), argue that there has been a change in the kind of God most people believe in, and make a distinction between the God of the Anglican faith and the God of Evangelical and Charismatic Christianity. They propose that the ‘Anglican’ God has changed from being a judgemental figure used to maintain order, to a much more liberal and benevolent figure that encourages social action. These scholars note that while this God has a social and congregational role, it is a distant figure rather than one with whom a person can have any sort of individual relationship. Thus Chapman et al. (2012) describe this God as a distant ideal rather than a present friend. In Evangelical and Charismatic churches, however, they (2012) describe God as being closer

---

5 Not all work in this field is specifically about Christianity although much of it can be related to the Christian God.
to the individual, more like a close personal friend, who supports that person through their own life journey.

Chapman et al. (2012) work is a good start in developing a sociological understanding of constructions of God’s character. However, the model they have developed is somewhat simplistic. At a very basic level they have separated Anglicanism from Evangelical Christians and treat them as two discrete and distinct groups that can be compared and contrasted. However, Evangelism and Anglicanism are not mutually exclusive. Evangelism is understood to be a form of Christianity that cuts across denominations, thus it is possible to be both Anglican and Evangelical. A complete distinction between the two disregards the more complex ways that Christians can construct their religious identities. An example of this complexity comes from a study by Day (2009) looking at belief among young people. Day (2009) notes how one of her participants considered themselves to be Catholic but did not internalise all Catholic doctrines, specifically on the use of contraception. This demonstrates that faith identity can be developed through multiple and sometimes contradictory discourses. Chapman et al. (2012) do not sufficiently address constructions of God that have been created through such complex ways. That is, Chapman et al. (2012) do not give due consideration to the agency of individual Christians, rather Chapman et al. (2012) suggest that it is the separate factions of Christianity that have the most influence over constructed understandings of the God figure.

Another scholar who neglects to give due consideration to agency in the social construction of faith is Smith (2007). Smith (2007) considers reasons why Christianity has endured for two millennia in spite of predictions of its inevitable demise. For Smith (2007), it is human emotions that are pivotal in religious experiences and it is the way that Christianity makes its believers feel that people find compelling and convincing. Smith (2007) starts by suggesting that having no belief in a God results in feelings of abandonment and loneliness. He uses the analogy of a terrified toddler accidentally left alone at home. Smith (2007) suggests that a belief in God assuages these feelings of terror and that it is a feeling of comfort that makes a belief in the Christian God compelling. Smith (2007) then goes on to argue that the Christian faith removes an obligation on believers to attach meaning or significance to their lives because every action is tied to a bigger Christian narrative. As Smith writes:
“For the Christian every problem, every decision, every act, every outcome can hold or reflect some larger moral, theological or personal significance by virtue of its connection to the Christian story” (Smith 2007:169).

Smith (2007) suggests that the obligation of meaning making is lifted because Christianity decentres the individual and centres God instead. In that sense life becomes less about what Christians do for themselves and more about loving and glorifying God. There is no pressure for an individual to achieve anything of significance (however ‘significance’ may be defined) because their life goals are predicated on how they relate to the God figure. Smith (2007) also talks about how a belief in the Christian God provides unconditional love, which he argues is necessary for humans to survive. He goes on to argue that Christianity provides a meaningful framework to identify feelings of guilt, regret, shame and remorse. He also suggests that having a clear moral framework frees humans from the cognitive problems of social constructionism: If what is considered moral and just is a social construction then it can also be changed, thus producing insecurity about what is considered right and wrong behaviour.

For Smith (2007) there is no appreciation of the iterative process involved in the social construction of faith. For believers, the constructed understandings of God and religion are a social reality, thus giving faith a dynamic quality from their perspective. For example, those that believe in a God would expect that figure to interact with them and change because of their involvement. Smith’s (2007) depiction of the God figure describes static properties of God that Smith (2007) considers necessary for human existence. Smith (2007) gives little consideration to how believers react to God beyond a sense of gratitude for emotional stability. Smith (2007) theorises that Christians are ‘decentring’ themselves and ‘centring’ God; however he does not consider where Christians place themselves in relation to the God figure. For example he does not address questions such as how close Christians feel to the God figure and whether different purposes of God result in different relationships between believers and God.

Smith’s (2007) work has been heavily influenced by Berger (1967) and Luckmann (1974). Berger’s (1967) work on the “Sacred Canopy” is one of the better known theories on
the sociological significance of a belief in God. In this theory, Berger (1967) frames his ideas on religion in terms of socially constructed ‘realities’. For Berger (1967) the constructed nature of our social worlds is too unstable for humans to deal with and our default condition is to seek meaning and order; humans then externalise and objectivate that meaning so that it has, at least superficially, a sense of permanence and unshakeability. For Berger (1967) the role of religion within social constructions is to provide an explanation for those things that challenge our objectivated understanding of the world, or, as Berger (1967) calls them, ‘anomies’. Berger (1967) suggests that by placing their faith in a higher power that is said to have created our world and thus, is in control of our fate, Christians are handing over responsibility for meaning creation to another form. The logic of this argument is that if God created the world and is in control of our fate, then ‘anomies’ must have some purpose. In other words, nothing happens by chance, only by God’s will or intention. Thus faith in God acts as a shield against the possibility that our existence may be meaningless. Or as Berger says, “religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant” (Berger, 1967:28).

Berger (1967) addresses the concept of agency in the development of transcendental realities but within the context of secularisation. Berger (1967) argues that constructed religiosity is not passively absorbed by the individual but actively appropriated by that person to develop an understanding of the world that is significant to them. In his book “The Sacred Canopy”, Berger (1967) argued that, over time, the appropriation of transcendental realities has become weaker and weaker as the individual also incorporates concepts of rationality and science in to their own constructed meaning systems, resulting in secularisation. Since “The Sacred Canopy”, Berger (1999) has acknowledged that complete secularisation has not occurred and that the autonomy of individuals has served to change religion rather than eradicate it.

Luckmann (1974) in “The Invisible Religion” seeks to understand how the autonomy of individual meaning construction has an influence on social forms of religion. Like Berger (1967), Luckmann (1974: 44) understands religion as being a social construction in that it is an objectivated meaning system that relates day to day experiences to a transcendental layer of reality. Again, similar to Berger (1967) Luckmann (1974) argues that humanity has created this transcendental reality to develop meaning around life events, such as natural
disasters and tragic events, which challenge other constructed realities. Luckmann (1974) notes that religion has a historical context which means, empirically, that people do not construct these realities from scratch but are born into them. Thus religion has to be internalised for it to continue to have meaning and significance for an individual.

Complete congruence between the collectively constructed understanding of religion and an individual’s subjective system of meaning assumes perfect socialisation of an individual in to the religious social order (Luckmann, 1974). This is something that Luckmann (1974) argues is implausible given that changes to an individual’s constructed meaning system happens at a much faster rate than at an institutional level. Luckmann (1974) theorises that religion will have to keep on adapting in order to remain valid and relevant to an individual, and this can happen through the construction of new themes of religion. The social basis of newly emerging religions is to be found with the individual and is removed from primary social institutions. While both Berger (1967) and Luckmann (1974) understand the relationship between agency and social structures as being dialectical in that it is the individual who creates society, with society in turn influencing the individual, Luckmann (1974: 9) states firmly that the social sciences “must not treat the fate of the individual in society as irrelevant”. This demonstrates the importance of understanding the significance of personal faith convictions of an individual working for faith based organisations.

Having said that, Luckmann (1974) notes the difficulty in understanding the influence of autonomy with respect to newly emerging religions. He argues that the traditional Christian model of religion has been so dominant that it has left an imprint on all contemporary industrial societies. In that respect the institutionalised Christian church has an indirect effect on an individualised understanding of religion. Even where constructions of faith are built through activities that are autonomous to the institutionalised church, an institutionalised understanding of religion still influences and colours these constructions because they are so embedded in individual systems of meaning. This provides an institutionalised vocabulary that hides new themes. The constructions of Christianity are internalised to such an extent that the individual uses the Christian narrative to describe their own religiosity, thus making the identification of new themes difficult. In addition, the themes of ultimate significance are internalised in significantly different ways in different
social contexts. Luckmann (1974) considers that this means developing a comprehensive description of the modern sacred cosmos is impossible.

Developing one comprehensive description of new religious themes may well be impractical; however, it is possible to develop a useful understanding of new religious themes in a given social context, for example in the context of public service provision. While the vocabulary of the traditional Christian model is still strong, understanding the dynamic, interactive relationship between individual and God will provide an alternative perspective on new religious themes that are derived autonomously to traditional understandings of religion.

2.4 Individual choice in religiosity
Since Berger (1967) and Luckmann (1974), there has been a growing body of literature looking at the influence individuality has on religion and belief. A useful starting point is Davie (1994, 2007); in particular her concepts of ‘believing without belonging’ and ‘vicarious religion’.

In “Religion in Britain since 1945”, Davie (1994) develops a theoretical understanding (Believing without Belonging) of the mismatch between the percentage of people who actively practice religion (around 15%) and those that express some kind of religious belief (70%)6. In a history of Christianity in Britain, Davie (1994) notes that the middle classes have traditionally shown a propensity for religious practice7, whereas there has tended to be disconnect between religious belief and practice among the working class population. Davie (1994) observes, however, that over time this disconnect has increasingly become the norm, regardless of class divides.

Davie (1994) focuses on affiliation with the Anglican Church in credence to its relative reach across Britain, in comparison to other Christian denominations as well as non-

---

6 The evidence Davie (1994) uses is drawn from two studies, the European Values Study which collected data in 1981 and again in 1990, the second, being a study completed by Ahern and Davie (1987) in Leeds. The 2011 Census data (ONS, 2011) shows 59% of the UK population affiliate with the Christian faith. The British Social Attitudes Survey, 2011 (Park et al. 2011) report 46% of respondents claiming some kind of affiliation with Christianity.

7 Davie (2007) notes the difficulties in defining religious practice and acknowledges that religiosity goes wider than institutional church; having said that, in her work Davie (1994, 2007) routinely refers to practices that are connected with the institutional church.
Christian faiths. Davie (1994) argues that religious pluralism has changed how the social and political spheres view the Anglican Church. On one level it can be argued that the Anglican Church is still very much part of the establishment given that the Queen is also the head of the Church of England and that religious rituals continue to have a prominent ceremonial place in political and state functions. As discussed previously, there are daily prayers in Parliament and there is religious prominence in state Remembrance Day services. However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the political process, particularly at the legislative level, privileges a presentation of discourse that is religiously neutral over one that is theocentric. This privileging has raised questions over the strength of connection between state and religion. For Davie (1994) the Church of England’s position as part of the ‘establishment’ has weakened to such an extent that religious activity is no longer viewed as a ‘duty’ by members of the public and, instead, has become a social choice.

The concept of ‘choice’ in religious activity introduces the notion that market principles may have an influence over how people express their religiosity. Davie (1994) points to instances of flourishing churches in parts of the country that attract a congregation from a geographical area that goes wider than a traditional parish. She considers this an indication of how people who take faith seriously are ‘choosing’ the types of church they belong to depending on what they feel they need for their religious development. While there are instances of church congregations that are growing, this ‘choice’ often manifests itself in a population that is less inclined to attend institutional church at all (Davie, 1994). For Davie (1994), not attending an institutional church is not a sign of lack of faith or spirituality; she contends that people still ‘believe’ but that it is no longer expressed, or, when it is expressed, it is done so in alternative ways to institutional religiosities. Davie (1994) raises the example of New Age spiritualities as evidence for this. Such alternative expressions of spirituality provide more varied products than institutional churches, and can be tailored to the individual needs of people in modern society (Davie, 1994). Thus, people still ‘believe’, but they do so without belonging to an institutional church.

On a superficial level this sounds convincing, however Crockett and Voas (2006) analysed evidence from major British Social Surveys and came up with a challenge to Davie. They found that non-religious parents pass on their lack of faith to their children and two religious parents have a roughly 50-50 chance of passing on their beliefs. They concluded
that measures of religious affiliation, regular attendance at worship and religious belief show identical rates of intergenerational decline (Crockett and Voas, 2006:11-12).

Davie (2007) accepts Crockett and Voas’ (2006) assessment of her initial theory and has developed a further concept of vicarious religiosity, that seeks to provide a better explanation of the subtle and nuanced relationship between the general public and religion. Davie (2007) has proposed the term ‘vicarious religiosity’ to describe a situation where the ‘majority’ chooses to not participate in institutional religious activity whilst allowing an active minority of people to ‘perform’ religion on their behalf.

Davie (2007) highlights how churches and church leaders perform rituals on behalf of others, pointing to the periodic interaction of religion and the public, especially with regards to births, deaths and marriages. Davie (2007) argues there is an expectation by the public that the minority will ‘believe’ on behalf of others. The evidence for this, Davie (2007) suggests, comes from public reprimanding of church leaders who openly express doubt, or are perceived as expressing doubt about their faith. The example used to illustrate this point is David Jenkins, former Bishop of Durham, who caused controversy by rejecting literal understandings of Christianity such as the virgin birth and the resurrection of Christ. There is also an expectation that the minority will uphold moral standards on behalf of the majority, pointing to the myriad of occasions where the press have published stories about clergy who fall short of the Christian moral code. Similarly Voas (2009) writes of the concept of fuzzy fidelity where many people remain interested in religious rituals, they may believe in ‘something out there’, pay lip service to religious values and may even be willing to identify with a denomination however they are less willing to be actively involved in a religious community.

Both Voas (2009) and Davie (1994, 2007) illustrate the complexities inherent in expressing religious belief. There is not a simple dichotomy between believers that are involved in ‘religious activity’ and non believers that have no involvement at all. Rather the expression of religious belief is more nuanced than this. Taking the example of Christianity, there are people who identify strongly with the faith but may not demonstrate the obvious hallmarks of that identification, such as attending church services. Similarly there are people that may partake in aspects of institutionalised Christianity but pay little credence to the
theological aspects of the faith. This adds further weight to the importance of understanding the personal significance of faith.

Individual choice of religiosity is a thread that is carried through a considerable amount of sociology of religion literature, albeit in different ways. For example, there is literature on cultural, rather than spiritual, affiliation with institutional religiosities (Davidman, 2007; Pace, 2007; Day 2009); how people accept the deistic principles of institutional religiosities but adapt them to suit their individual spiritual needs (Beck, 2010; Bellah et al., 2007) and the rise of alternative spiritualities (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Bender, 2007). In the following I discuss the theme of individual choice through these three separate bodies of work.

Davidman (2007) interviewed thirty American Jews who firmly affiliate with the Jewish faith but have chosen not to join a synagogue. For Davidman’s (2007) participants there is a reluctance to detach themselves from the historical and familial ties that are closely associated with being Jewish. Many participants described their Jewish identity as being an ascribed characteristic. This affiliation with Judaism, however, does not necessarily translate into a belief in the faith. Davidman’s (2007) participants made clear that their Jewish identity was not dependent on following particular religious doctrines, yet still demonstrated their Judaism by observing specific rituals such as having a special meal on Friday evenings for Shabbat or attending a Passover Sedar. Davidman’s (2007) findings are a clear example of how people draw on selected parts of a faith depending on what they decide is useful for their constructed realities. The participants of Davidman’s (2007) research are rejecting the institutional forms of Judaism, but are using practice as a way of constructing and maintaining a Jewish identity.

In the same way, a study by Pace (2007), looking at the influence of the Catholic Church in Spain and Italy, shows a significant majority of the population affiliate with Catholicism (84% and 87% respectively), yet a much smaller percentage of people accept Catholicism as the one true faith (27% and 32.5% respectively). Of note, much of the population of both countries have rejected the church’s traditional role in imposing moral norms, especially those around sex. Contraceptive use in both countries is high and the birth-rates have dropped significantly in recent years. For Pace (2007), this is indicative of a
Church that is “no longer capable of patrolling the symbolic boundaries of its system of belief and practice” (2007:39).

Pace (2007) argues that this is, at least in part, due to a widespread dismissal of the need to attend confession, along with a rejection of the role of clergy to act as mediator between God and humanity. This means that moral codes and teachings can no longer be transmitted via the traditional routes of confession and sermon. Similar to the findings of Davidman (2007), this refusal to conform to the Catholic Church’s traditional methods of control illustrates how Catholics in Spain and Italy may be picking and choosing aspects of Catholicism to construct their identities, while rejecting those that do not fit with their understanding of the world.

Similarly in the UK, Day presents data which suggests there is a focus on ‘family and friends, as well as other social relationships as legitimate sites for locating belief’ (2009:276). Day (2010) makes a distinction between propositional and performative belief. Day (2010) uses the word propositional to describe beliefs that represent a truth claim, such as a belief in God. However for performative belief Day (2010) draws on Mary Douglas (2003) and argues that belief is not static but responds to changing social and temporal contexts. Day (2009) provides a case study of someone who described themselves as Christian but did so to maintain familial links rather than out of a desire to actively practice Christian doctrines (i.e. propositional beliefs). In a paper published in 2010, Day presents data suggesting that some people who identified as Christian in the 2001 Census did so for political reasons. In other words, Day (2009, 2010) argues that people who nominally affiliate with a religion may do so in order to belong to family, ethnic, social or political groups.

For those that have a cultural affiliation with faith, some of the more important aspects of religion are around collective identity. Davidman (2007); Pace (2007) and Day (2009) present empirical data on people who consider faith as an important way of maintaining social, familial and community links. With these examples people may not have ‘faith in’ a God or a belief system but are choosing to be tied to an institutional religion. Works by Beck (2010) and Bellah et al. (2007) are more aligned with Davie’s (1994) theory

---

8 Day (2009,2010) asked about wider concepts of belief not just religious belief in order to take into consideration the belief systems of those that do not affiliate with an institutional religion.
on *Believing without Belonging* in that they consider people who choose to have faith, but also opt to have weaker ties with institutional religion.

Beck (2010) considers the effect of secularisation on how ‘God’ is viewed, and theorises that individualisation inherent in modernity has resulted in a demise of the collective aspects of traditional faith practices in parallel with an increased individualisation of faith. For Beck (2010) ‘faith’ is not in demise, but the collectivity of institutional religion is. The concept of choice features heavily in Beck’s work. For Beck (2010) the individualisation of modernity, which comes, in part, from the breakdown of prescribed stereotypical roles, means that people are left to find their own pathways in life. For example, with the family there is no longer the expectation that men will be in paid occupation while women look after the home. These kinds of life choices have become more about individual choice rather than prescribed behaviours. Thus, for Beck (2010) (and Davie, 1994, 2007 Pace, 2007 and Davidman, 2007, Day, 2009, 2010), individuals become free to decide for themselves what religion and belief is and how it interacts with their lives.

The autonomy individuals have over their life paths translates into an understanding of faith that links God directly to their own spiritual needs and desires, rather than to a model of faith developed and controlled by institutional religion (Beck, 2010). In modernity, religion is becoming disconnected from the institutional model as people construct faith around their own terms. People are developing ‘God’s of one’s own’ that they have access to without the need for membership of, or commitment to, an institutional church (Beck, 2010).

For Beck (2010), this disengagement of ‘faith’ from institutional religion is the reason why religion has not died out, as secularisation theorists had predicted. The concept of faith has become more fluid and flexible and is able to remain relevant to the individual. This change, however, is not without its risks. For Beck (2010), the freedom to choose, or not choose, religion means that the authority of the church is now based on personal commitment. Thus some religious people could exclude those that choose not to commit, Beck (2010) argues that this gives rise to the possibility of dangerous fundamentalism if the level of commitment expected is extreme.
Beck’s (2010) “A God of One’s Own” has echoes of ‘Sheilaism’ as put forward by Bellah et al. (2007). In “Habits of the Heart”, Bellah et al. (2007) tell the story of a woman who has named her religion after herself:

“Sheila Larson is a young nurse who has received a good deal of therapy and describes her faith as "Sheilaism." This suggests the logical possibility of more than 235 million American religions, one for each of us. "I believe in God," Sheila says. "I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." (2007:143)

For Bellah et al. (2007) this is illustrative of the radical individualism that has come to be the norm in American society. There is a privatised autonomy that has resulted in people expressing their religiosity through personal terms rather than via institutional contexts.

This idea about making ‘faith’ fit personal rather than institutional needs is a thread that runs through the increasing body of literature investigating the rise of what is often called New Age spiritualities. In “The Spiritual Revolution” Heelas and Woodhead (2005) make similar points to Davie(1994, 2007), Beck (2010) and others in that they argue that institutional religion, in particular Christianity, is being rejected in favour of holistic spiritualities. In modern life, activities such as yoga and homeopathic sessions are being used as a spiritual outlet rather than adherence to traditional Christianity. Their theoretical premise is consistent with the other scholars reviewed in this chapter; rather than living in accordance with traditional social expectations there has been a subjective turn in modernity. That is, people are living in accordance with their own unique experiences and this is illustrated in individual choices in how to express spirituality. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) conclude that modern life privileges this subjective turn and thus they predict that New Age spiritualities will continue to flourish, while institutional religiosities will decline.

In a study of the social, lived religious experience of modern mystics and spiritual practitioners, Bender (2007) presents a case study of a woman who blends New Age spiritualities with a constructed narrative of Christianity. The research subject reported how she meditated to see her Reiki master and during her meditation had seen an image of Jesus Christ. Bender (2007) argues that this blending of New Age spiritualities and Christian
imagery is demonstrative of how constructed discourses of Christianity are being modified depending on individual spiritual needs and beliefs.

These accounts of individual choice in religiosity show that the relationship between faith and the individual is complex, and in some cases contested, and that it needs to be understood within the varying political and social contexts that individuals act. While the theoretical perspectives and empirical accounts presented in this chapter address individualisation in different ways, the concepts of autonomous faith constructions and individual choice is strong. Thus when considering how personal faith convictions may influence the public action of Christians working for faith based organisations, the concept of individualisation needs to be addressed. This thesis uses the concept of individualisation as a tool to develop an understanding of how people of faith reflect on their own religious convictions.

2.5 Lived Religion
Mainstream approaches to religious belief and practice within the sociology of religion have recently been contested by scholars who forefront alternative perspectives. Ammerman (2003, 2007), McGuire (2008) and Stringer (2011) are all critical of the way that some scholars of religion analyse religiosity, arguing that the standard indices that many sociologists use to measure religiosity are based on assumptions that misunderstand or incorrectly identify religious activity. Social sciences tend to describe religiosities in terms of belief, membership and organisational participation (Ammerman, 2007).

A review of the literature highlights a plethora of research that has used a narrow understanding of religiosity. For example Gill and Lundsgaarde (2004); Wilson (1969); and Crockett and Voas (2006) have all conducted research on the extent to which modern society is becoming secularised. In all these examples, scholars have singled out church attendance figures as being the best measure of religiosity. They have taken a decline in the number of people attending church as evidence of the decline of religiosity in Western society. Bruce (2002) in his book “God is Dead”, and Startup and Harris (1999), in their work on the decline of the liberal mainstream church in Wales, go slightly wider in that, in addition to general attendance figures at church services, they also take into consideration a decline in baptisms, confirmations and the number of people who are joining the clergy.
Similarly, Brown (2009) uses church attendance figures, baptisms, confirmations and religiously solemnised marriages as evidence of the decline of Christianity in the UK. Yet another example comes from Johnsen (2009: 4) (as noted previously), who defines religious practice in terms of attendance at worship services, chaplaincy services, prayer, scriptural study and the proactive promotion of faith.

As Ammerman (2009) argues, these approaches privilege institutional affiliation over practices that exist outside commonly recognised religion. The reasons put forward as to why there is a narrow understanding of religiosity are varied. For McGuire (2008), narrow assumptions are based on a post reformation ‘Protestantism’ that limits access to religious power by lay people by declaring practices that were once widespread, such as performing healing or lay people giving blessings, as unreligious. Officially sanctioned religious practice and rituals can only be performed by clergy, thus maintaining religious power in the hands of a select few. Douglas (2003), while considering primitive religions, concurs, stating that religion was once a subjective and personal action with the sacred universe being centred on man. Magic and miracles were, once, integral to how people understood religion but are now separate from what is considered religious practice. If miracles are declared they are only done so by specifically sanctioned clergy (McGuire, 2008). This has, McGuire (2008) argues, manifested itself in a sociological assumption that there is a radical dichotomy between the sacred and profane. Activities which occur outside sacred places and times, or that occur with profane objects, are not understood as religious.

Luckmann (1974) approaches religious belief and practice in social constructionist terms. Religious plurality causes conflict, which results in theoretical efforts to prove the superiority of one religion over another. The consequence of this is that religious rituals are performed by people in specialised roles to demonstrate the importance of that specific act and there is a corresponding decrease in participation by lay people. Lay participation is limited to that of observer. Religious knowledge is held by the ‘experts’ and lay people rely on the mediation of experts in their relations with the sacred.

For Luckmann (1974), research into the sociology of religion reflects this constructionist position. Luckmann (1974), however, notes that there is incongruence between the internalization of social constructions of religion and individual constructions
based on a more autonomous understanding of faith. Thus research which only considers institutional practices as religious will miss an important part of the analysis. Ammerman (2007) provides a more pragmatic explanation for this focus. She suggests that understanding religiosity in terms of membership and institutional affiliation is a practical decision related to research methods. Social scientists privilege indicators of religiosity that are discrete and easily measurable. With regards to survey research, indicators that can be explained quickly and easily in writing are preferred over indicators that require the context to be set (2007).

As a result of the privileging of measurable indicators of religion, a considerable amount of research has focused on religiosities which are understood in an institutional sense. This ignores religious practices that may fall outside of those boundaries. Davie (2007) agrees that there is a problem with the definition of religion, acknowledging that research should include more than observations of institutional practices. However she notes that within the sociology of religion, there is no agreement about what an alternative frame of reference would look like. This raises important questions about how religious activity should be defined.

Ammerman (2007) states that, on a phenomenological level, something can be defined as religious simply because it is understood in those terms by participants and observers. Having said that, Ammerman (2007) acknowledges there are cultural, political, historical and legal contexts that frame religiosities, which means that religious activity has a cultural reality that goes beyond what any one person thinks. Douglas (2003) agrees that on an anthropological level, ideas of how people influence each other reflect cultural, political and social realities, thus, in respect to religion there needs to be a collective understanding of what is or is not religiosity.

Ammerman (2003) suggests that we pay attention to the multifaceted understanding of religion from the perspective of religious people. She notes that religious and spiritual stories are complex and they incorporate experiences of the body, spirit and the mind. She argues that the narratives of religious individuals are accounts of single instances or didactic lessons, but they do relate how religion is involved with the procession of life from one point to another. Religious people may live by moral values that have a
transcendent grounding or have had religious experiences without ever having participated in a religious institution.

Similarly, religious belief is, for McGuire (2008), as much about individual experience of religion as it is about attending church. Using ethnographic data collected over a thirty year career, McGuire (2008) relates a myriad of ways that people express their religiosity and demonstrates that religion happens as much in the home, street or garden as it does in an institutional church. For example, McGuire (2008) presents data on a woman who identifies as a practicing Catholic but who rarely attends Mass, instead preferring to meditate at her home altar. The home altar is decorated with images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, traditional candles and healing crystals. Another example is an ordained Protestant minister who has a weak attachment to a church, instead demonstrating his religiosity through political activism. A further example is of a devout Jew who expresses her faith through dance. McGuire (2008) argues that rather than trying to fit people into an existing understanding of religion, scholars should study religion as it is actually lived.

Stringer (2011) too argues that much of religious life in western societies is concerned with the mundane, every day activities. Stringer’s (2011) aim is to understand the religious practices of people who identify with what Stringer (2011) calls mainstream Christianity, that is, people who identify as Anglicans, Methodists, Catholics and United Reform Church members. Using an ethnographic methodology to collect data, Stringer (2011) develops a theory which argues that sitting at the side of a relative’s grave and chatting is as much an expression of religiosity as attending a structured service, and that religious activity is concerned with helping people cope with their day to day lives. Stringer (2011) also suggests that superstitious activity such as checking horoscopes or activities associated with spiritualism can be classed and counted as religious.

The work of Day (2009, 2010) echoes that of Stringer (2011), McGuire (2008) and Ammerman (2003). As noted previously Day (2010) argues that belief is not just about propositional belief but is embedded in social contexts and relationships. Day (2009) notes that her interviewees tend not to talk about truth claims but instead described their beliefs using examples of a person that was close to them or a specific situation that held relevance to them. This resonates strongly with Ammerman (2003) who argues that religious
narratives are often described in corporeal terms rather than as a reproduction of institutional discourse. In that respect Day (2009) suggests that the way that people experience belief is through themselves and their relationships with others. Belief is an embodied concept and is not just expressed in terms of religious doctrines. Like Stringer (2011), Day (2009) suggests her participants have a belief in continued relationships with deceased relatives, a concept Day (2009) calls believing through bereaving, arguing that people experience transcendence through everyday experiences.

McGuire (2008), Ammerman (2003, 2007); Stringer (2011) and Day (2009) make compelling cases about widening the boundaries of what activities are taken into consideration when understanding religiosities. Sociologists often talk about ‘religious activity’ as if it is something discrete and that can be compared to other activities of a less religious nature. However, religious belief is a cognitive process as much as it is an activity. Thus a better way of understanding religious activity is to consider ‘the activity of religious people’. Even for those that are highly committed to attending church, the vast majority of their religious activity falls outside the boundaries of institutional religiosity and happen in their normal daily routines. It would be wrong, however, to dismiss institutional activities as unimportant. Institutionalised religious activities continue to play a part in how people construct understanding about their faith. Nevertheless, religious activities which fall outside of institutional boundaries also need to form part of any research. This thesis draws on this methodological premise and considers both institutional and more autonomous religious activities when understanding personal faith convictions.

2.6 Conclusion
The literature reviewed in this chapter demonstrates that there are some considerable gaps in the academic knowledge surrounding the role of faith based organisations involvement with public services. In particular, there is still more to understand about the connections between the individual, religion and public action. Much of the existing research has investigated the role of faith based organisations in public service provision from a functional perspective, that is, it’s focus has been on whether faith groups have the capacity and capability to meet the needs and expectations of the public realm. While this functional focus has been useful for understanding the extent to which faith groups can act in public spheres, it neglects to address in sufficient detail how the concept of faith influences the
work that they do. Moreover, much of this work has addressed faith based public service provision on an organisational level. In that respect there is scope for understanding whether and how the personal faith convictions of employees and volunteers that work for faith based organisations has significance for action in the public sphere.

There have been two strong themes running through recent sociology of religion discourse. The first of these is the concept of individualisation; in particular there is a question about whether autonomous faith constructions and individual choice influence what people understand about God and belief, and whether this has implications for the way that services are delivered. The second theme is of Lived Religion. Scholars such as Ammerman (2003, 2007), McGuire (2008), and Stringer (2011) make compelling cases about widening the boundaries of what activities are taken into consideration when understanding religiosities; in particular activities that fall outside of the boundaries of institutional religion.

This thesis contributes to the wider body of knowledge by investigating the role of Christian based organisations in public service provision from the perspective of employees and volunteers that work for those organisations. More specifically, it considers the personal faith convictions of those employees and volunteers and what significance those convictions have on the way that they work. In order to develop an understanding of personal faith convictions, this thesis draws on the theoretical concept of Individualised Religiosities as proposed by Berger (1967), Luckmann (1974), Bellah et al. (2007), Davie (1994, 2007), Beck (2010) and others, and the concept of Lived Religion as developed by McGuire (2008); Ammerman (2003, 2007) and Stringer (2011), to examine participants’ constructed understanding of the Christian God and its connection with public service provision.
Chapter three: methodological reflections: an epistemological grounding in social constructionism

The epistemological position of this thesis is social constructionism. Social constructionists argue that rather than meaning having an objective quality that is external to human agency, meaning is constructed through a process of social interaction. How we understand the world is dependent on the social and historical context within which we live and multiple discursive positions can exist simultaneously (See Berger and Luckmann, 1991; Gergen, 2009; Kuhn, 1977). That is to say that there is more than one way to understand phenomena. Drawing on scholars including Berger and Luckmann (1991) and Gergen (2009) this chapter outlines social constructionist concepts which are pertinent to this thesis and sets out in more detail how and why social constructionism is a valuable approach for understanding the interactions between religion, the individual and the public spheres.

3.1 Social Constructionism

Berger and Luckmann (1991) are often credited as being pivotal in the social constructionist movement following the publication of their work “The social construction of reality” (first published in 1967). While social constructionist theories come from a considerably wider set of authors, with much of the development done during the 1980s (Elder-Vass, 2012), the work of Berger and Luckmann (1991) remains a useful starting point for understanding the epistemology. For Berger and Luckmann (1991), social constructionism is a way of explaining our understanding of social phenomena within the world and the meaning we attach to them. That is, it is a way of explaining how we come to know what we understand as social ‘reality’. ‘Reality’ in the social constructionist tradition is not to be viewed as objective, it does not have an existence beyond our social understanding of it, rather ‘reality’ is contingent on the social and historical context within which it has been developed. The use of inverted commas emphasises the subjective qualities of the term.

An important feature of social constructionism is that the development of the field cannot be attributed to any one scholar. What we understand about social constructionism today has emerged through a process of continual dialogue that incorporates a great
number of scholars (Gergen, 2009). An epistemology with so many contributors means that there is sometimes disagreement on its limitations.

For example, some extreme linguistic constructionists suggest that all language is arbitrarily applied, that is, it is independent of the phenomena that it relates to (Burr, 2003). Other extreme constructionists argue that there is no true individual autonomy and that all agency is a construction (Butler, 2011). More moderate social constructionists limit the epistemology to being a useful way of understanding the social world. Scholars such as Heidegger (see translations of “Time and Being” 1962 and “The Basic problems of phenomenology” 1982) and Merleau Ponty (see the translation of “Phenomenology of Perception” 1996) note the world and objects within it are there and they will continue to exist with or without human existence, however they will remain meaningless until there is human interaction. In that sense social constructionism draws heavily on the phenomenological concept of intentionality, a concept that can be traced back to Brentano (1874; translated 1995). Brentano’s (1874 translated 1995) point is that as conscious human beings our understanding is always directed towards something. Humanity cannot be understood without the phenomena that are the focus of our thoughts. Intentionality is a characteristic of all acts of consciousness and it implies a sense of agency in socially constructed meaning.

Crotty (1998) describes meaning construction as humans engaging with the world and making sense of it. That is, meaning is not just created in the human imagination, but is constructed through a process of engagement with the phenomenon. Thus reality is constructed through our subjective view of phenomena (for example the social and historical context the phenomena occupy) but informed by the objectivity held by the phenomenon itself (for example the natural function of an object or the way it looks). In that sense constructionism bridges the gap between notions of objectivity favoured by researchers following a positivist epistemology and those favouring complete subjectivity such as the understanding of the world from a post-modernist position (Crotty 1998; Gergen, 2009).

The vast number of contributors to the social constructionist epistemology means that inevitably there will be disagreement about the extent to which agency influences the
social understanding of the world. The purpose of this chapter is not to arbitrate on disagreements or make claims to a definitive social constructionist theory, rather, the intention is to pick out parts of constructionism that are useful for understanding the role of Christians working in public service provision. The main assumption of this thesis is that religion is a social construction and this chapter draws on the work of Berger (1967) and Luckmann (1974) as the basis for this analysis.

The crucial aspect of social constructionism is the process by which knowledge is produced. Crotty (1998: 44) explains the process of constructionism as: “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful ‘reality’ is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context”. Similarly, Gergen (2009: 2) says, “what we take to be ‘the world’ importantly depends on how we approach it, and how we approach it depends on the social relationships of which we are a part”. Both Crotty (1998) and Gergen (2009) are stressing that knowledge and meaning is constructed through a process of interaction. That is, interaction with the phenomena and interaction about the phenomena with each other.

The focus on social interactions places special emphasis on language as an important tool in building meaning (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Language is the tool through which ideas, thoughts, and concepts can be captured. Capturing ideas, thoughts and concepts allows for these thought processes to be objectivated; that is, they can be viewed and treated as if they were objective even though they maintain their subjective qualities (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Once objectivated, subjective understanding and meaning can be shared and made available, not only to the immediate community but across communities and across time. Thus language becomes a repository of the collective stock of knowledge.

Language is the building block of social constructions, however it is the way that language is used to talk about phenomena and the context within which those phenomena are discussed that result in the construction of knowledge and meaning. Different social and historical contexts can result in a variety of discursive elements which in turn results in alternative understanding of phenomena. A social constructionist epistemology
acknowledges that the process by which people describe, explain and account for phenomena can vary in accordance with historical, social and cultural differences (Gergen, 2009).

On an empirical basis humanity does not create these ‘realities’ from scratch; rather they are born into them (Luckmann, 1974). The temporal element of constructionism results in ‘knowledge’ becoming embedded in our collective understanding of ‘reality’. Berger and Luckmann (1991) refer to these embedded ‘realities’ as ‘institutions’, while Gergen (2009) calls them ‘traditions’. They are subjective ‘realities’ that have been maintained and reproduced to such an extent that they are viewed as if they are constant. In that sense, some constructed knowledge has an existence that is external to the individual and is accepted as fact. These ‘institutions’ are then internalised by the individual and they become part of that persons system of meaning.

While all socially constructed ‘realities’ are malleable and can be changed given their subjective production, the ‘realities’ that are embedded in our collective understanding have such an historical and social standing that they are considered to be solid frameworks of meaning and are essential to our shared understanding of the world. Fish (1980) states that, as these institutions precede us, we need to inhabit them or be inhabited by them in order to make sense of shared meanings; thus institutions serve to reinforce our constructed ‘realities’ to the point that they become reified. That is, our socially contextualised understanding of the world is seen as objective ‘truth’.

The malleability of objectivated and reified collective constructions is dependent on the extent to which individuals internalise institutions. Socialisation of institutions is required if those institutions are to maintain their status as a credible and significant systems of meaning. As discussed in chapter two of this thesis, Luckmann (1974) considers that perfect internalisation of an institution is implausible given that an individual has autonomy over how they reflect and use the knowledge being presented to them. Thus institutions are constantly adapting in order to remain socially relevant.

What this means on a practical level is that what is considered ‘knowledge’ or ‘fact’ about the social world is just one interpretation of it. There can be numerous interpretations of phenomena, with divergent interpretations existing simultaneously. Even
when interpretations of phenomena are deeply embedded in our collective understanding they can be adapted and change. These concepts of multiple interpretations and change are the premise of social constructionism. The concept of multiple interpretations does not mean that socially constructed knowledge is necessarily wrong or somehow invalid to those that hold it. Just that it may not be accepted as knowledge by everyone, nor is it necessarily static.

Indeed, Berger and Luckmann (1991) argue that having multiple interpretations is a necessary factor in achieving social change. A plurality of ideas can serve to undermine existing constructions of meaning and pave the way for new meanings to be integrated into systems of understanding.

### 3.2 The importance of Social Constructionism to this thesis

Berger and Luckmann’s account of religion has been discussed in more detail in the literature review (chapter 2). Here it is enough to say that both Berger (1967) and Luckmann (1974) understand religion as being a social construct that has been embedded into our collective understanding and internalised into an individual’s system of meaning. A transcendental layer of reality has been constructed to create stability and order to an otherwise precarious and transitory understanding of human activity. Thus religion is an institution that forms a sacred canopy (Berger, 1967) to constructed realities.

This understanding of religion as a social construction is the underlying premise of this thesis. The objective of this research is to explore if and how personal faith convictions of employees and volunteers working for Christian based service provider’s influence the work they do in relation to clients or service users. This starts with an investigation into how current Christian understandings of faith are constructed and what these constructions look like.

Berger (1967) argues that in order for religion to work as a sacred canopy, individuals must subsume themselves to understanding that the world has been created through non-human origin. Followers of faith have false consciousness (1967: 96). Nevertheless, both Berger and Luckmann (1991) acknowledge that individuals have autonomy with respect to institutionalised religion. Complete congruence between the institutionalised understanding of religion and an individual’s subjective system of meaning is implausible given that
changes to an individual’s constructed meaning system happens at a much faster rate than at an institutional level (Luckmann, 1974). Luckmann (1974) theorises that religion will have to keep on adapting in order to remain valid and relevant to an individual.

This thesis starts by examining the significance of constructions built through activities that are autonomous to institutionalised religiosity on the sociological understanding of religion. Out of scope of this research is whether the autonomy of individuals is down to agency or has been constructed through other means. This thesis does not comment on the constructed nature of subjects, only that the individual has autonomy in relation to the institutional church, and has the ability to reflect on their circumstances and make choices based on those reflections.

To understand autonomy in relation to the institutionalised church, this thesis draws on the theoretical concept of individualised religiosities as proposed by Berger (1967), Luckmann (1974), Bellah et al. (2007), Davie (1994, 2007), Beck (2010) and others, and on the concept of lived religion as developed by McGuire (2008), Ammerman (2003, 2007) and Stringer (2011) (see literature review in chapter two for more details). This ties in closely with the constructionist concept that there can be multiple interpretations of subjective realities. McGuire (2008), Ammerman (2003, 2007), Stringer (2011) and others make compelling cases that sociological studies of religion have been premised around a misunderstanding of what ‘religious activity is’, suggesting that there has been a focus on attitudes and behaviour that relate to the institutional church to the exclusion of the actual lived religious experiences of individuals that happen day to day. This thesis sets aside assumptions that religiosity only incorporates activities directly associated with institutional churches and instead seeks to understand religious practice from the perspective of Christians. This thesis investigates how participants construct meaning around the God figure and explores what the implications of this are for public service provision. This thesis also investigates how Christians give meaning to their beliefs through their public service work; what working in the public sector means for participants’ individual faith and what participants understand about their role in the public spheres. The intention behind this approach is to empirically challenge both sociological and political assumptions about the role of Christian organisations in the public spheres; and to produce a new assessment of the interaction between religion, the individual and the public.
The concept of divergent interpretations existing simultaneously is particularly pertinent for this thesis as it investigates the juxtaposition of having people who believe in the Christian faith acting in public spheres which consist of multiple faiths and none. It explores the balance that exists between these different theistic discourses.

Berger and Luckmann (1991: 110) credit discourse as being the key way to change social ‘truths’. Through discourse, meaning from one group can be made “objectively available” to another group and communicated in such a way that it becomes “subjectively plausible”. That is, it is seen as plausible enough that it is internalised into the second group’s constructed interpretation. This is significant because this thesis investigates the experience of Christians acting in a field that works within a different discursive principle, one that is no longer configured around a Christian discourse (Brown, 2009) and, certainly on a political level, is often presented as being religiously neutral (Habermas 2006, Freeman 2004).

It is important to note that the discursive differences can be quite subtle. The discourse within Christianity is theocentric and is based on a relatively common understanding of the Christian God. The discourse of the public spheres, however, is more complicated. Christians are simultaneously members of their own religious sphere and the public spheres, but so too are people of many other faiths and none. This religious plurality has resulted in the hegemonic discourse of the political sphere being presented as universal and religiously neutral (Habermas, 2006; Brown 2009; see the literature review in chapter two for a wider discussion). As such, the dominant political discourse reflects the fact that multiple theist and atheist discourses exist and attempts to treat this religious plurality in an egalitarian fashion.

As discussed in chapter one, the UK Government is encouraging faith involvement in public spheres. This is happening both directly through outsourcing and indirectly through political discursive changes encapsulated within policies such as ‘Big Society’. This thesis investigates what participants understand to be the challenge of working in the public spheres given the expectation to act in religiously neutral ways9 and what action (if any)

---

9 see “Ensuring a level playing field: Funding faith-based organisations to provide publicly funded services”, DCLG, 2010; “Voluntary and Community Sector: quick start guide to
they might take to overcome such challenges. Thus this thesis ultimately explores the potential for the public discourse to change given both the political and Christian willingness to have an increased involvement in the public realm.

3.3 Conclusion
This chapter has set out the epistemological position of this thesis as social constructionism. It has drawn on scholars including Berger and Luckmann (1991), Gergen (2009) and Crotty (1998) to present an understanding of social constructionism. It acknowledges the conflicts inherent in social constructionism given the dialectical way that the epistemology has been developed. The purpose of the chapter, however, was not to arbitrate on these disagreements but to highlight aspects of the social constructionist movement that are useful for understanding the resurgence of religion in public life. Particular concepts that are useful for this thesis are that multiple interpretations of any phenomena can exist; that religion is a social construction; and that perfect internalisation of religion is implausible resulting in social change. The following chapter applies this epistemological position to the research methodology.
Chapter Four: research methods

Using a social constructionist epistemology this thesis investigates if and how faith convictions of employees and volunteers working for Christian based service providers has significance for the work they do. This chapter details the research methods used to meet this objective. This thesis uses an inductive methodology and as such it is not working to prove or disprove an hypothesis. The chapter starts by setting out four research questions that have guided the data collection and analytical process. It goes on to provide an overview of the research design, including its fit with social constructionism and a discussion of ethical considerations. Following this there is a detailed discussion on the sample used for the data collection, including a rationale for the sampling strategy. This includes a definition of a faith based organisation, and also sets out the current landscape of Christians working in the public services field. This chapter then outlines the data collection process and finishes with a discussion on the method of analysis used to formulate findings and draw conclusions.

4.1 Research Design

In keeping with the epistemological underpinning of this study, the data collection phase was designed using an inductive approach. Inductive research is about searching for patterns from observation and developing explanations (or theories) for those patterns (Bernard and Ryan, 2010). As an atheist my own understanding and knowledge around the research problem comes from a different discursive position to that of the study population. Attempting to set aside my own discursive position as far as possible, this thesis aims to understand the research problem from the perspective of the research participants rather than work to provide evidence for or against an hypothesis. This inductive approach minimises the presuppositions and constrictions on the data collected.

The literature review (chapter two) revealed some significant gaps in knowledge regarding the role of faith based organisations in providing public services. In particular it highlighted how current research in this field has focused on the practical resources that faith groups are able to provide for the public realm. This current body of knowledge has neglected to address, in sufficient detail, some of the more nuanced questions about the implications of Christians (with their theocentric discourses) working in religiously plural...
spheres and the potential this has to result in conflict. On the few occasions this has been addressed (Johnsen, 2009; Smith, 2002; Cloke, Williams and Thomas, 2009; Williams, Cloke and Thomas, 2012) it has been on an organisational level. What is still to be addressed is how the personal faith convictions of employees and volunteers who work for Christian based service providers influence public action.

Understanding personal faith convictions is important because individuals have a certain level of autonomy from the organisations they work for. So, while the faith ethos of the organisations will influence the way that the workforce acts, so too will that workforce’s personal beliefs. To understand personal faith convictions this thesis draws on the two theoretical concepts of individualised religiosities (Luckmann, 1974 Davie, 1994, 2007; Beck, 2010, Bellah et al. 2007) and lived religion (McGuire, 2008; Stringer (2011), Ammerman, 2003, 2007), as outlined in chapter two.

While no hypothesis has been set, four research questions have been identified to guide the data collection and analytical process10. The first two questions were developed following the literature review. A consequence of an inductive methodology is that data is collected on issues unanticipated by the researcher. In that regard questions 3 and 4 were identified once the data collection process had started.

The specific research questions this thesis seeks to answer are:

1. What is the Sociological understanding of the Christian relationship with the God figure?

2: What is the significance of the Christian relationship with the God figure with regards to public service provision (if any)?

3. What do Christians perceive as the challenges of working in a religiously plural public realm?

4. What processes are used (if any) to overcome these challenges?

10 Two assumptions of this thesis are that religion is a social construction and that Christianity is premised around a belief in God.
Data were collected using a process of thirty five semi structured interviews. The topic guide for interviews is formed of broad and open ended questions to allow for research participants to provide responses that are pertinent to their own experiences. The discourse created within the interview is centred on participant understanding of the topic rather than that of the researcher or of the wider literature.

The use of semi structured interviews is widespread in qualitative analysis, often being described as a powerful way to investigate both personal and private lives (Kvale, 2006). Rubin and Rubin (2011) describe qualitative interviewing as responsive interviewing in acknowledgment of the way that researchers react to the interviewee, asking probing and follow up questions rather than just sticking to a predetermined script. This kind of responsiveness, Rubin and Rubin (2011) suggest, means that contradictory themes and concepts can be explored in depth allowing for a deeper level of understanding of the subject than a more positivist approach to research would enable.

In the social constructionist tradition interviewing is seen as dialogical, or as interactional events in which social meaning is constructed through discourse between the interviewer and interviewee (Koro-Ljunberg 2008; Holstein and Gubrium; 2008; Fontana and Frey, 2005; Kvale, 2006). The knowledge and assumptions participants make about the researcher influences the discourse that is created. This is a limitation in investigating a personal understanding of religiosity as what is said in an interview may not accurately reflect the thoughts and considerations of those being interviewed. Ethnographic observations may be better placed to limit such divergence between created discourse and personal understanding; however, such observations were not considered as an appropriate research method for the topic under investigation. Faith organisations are involved in services that have vulnerable service users and observing the interactions between Christians and the service user brings with it a difficult set of ethical considerations.

To limit interviewer bias, the amount of personal information provided before the interview took place was restricted. This process of limitation is not watertight. There are obvious visual clues as to my gender, age and race. In addition, ethical procedures that have been implemented, such as providing an information sheet detailing the aim of the research, the role of the researcher in the process and the source of funding for the
research, hint at who I am. Given the subject matter, the pertinent demographic is my faith status and I purposefully did not reveal this prior to collecting the data. That said, to maintain integrity as an ethical researcher I did reveal my faith status if asked. Not all participants asked, and those who did tended to ask at the end of the interview. It is important to note, however, that a minority of people asked whether I was a Christian before the interview started and I acknowledge that this could have an influence on the data collected.

Some constructionists make bold claims about the ‘ethicality’ of interviewing as a data collection method (Gergen, 2001; McNamee, 1994). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) draw attention to descriptions of social constructionist inspired research as being akin to “qualitative ethicism”. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) bring into play the work of McNamee (1994); Rose (1994); and Gergen (2001) who, in various ways, suggest that social constructionist interviewing is empathic, caring and similar to therapy in that the interview process is a place where new understanding can be constructed. Furthermore Borland (1998) discusses how constructionist interviewing promotes an understanding of other perspectives and thus is an important process in liberalality and egalitarianism.

Making claims of ethicism in social constructionist research lays the epistemology open to criticism (Kvale, 2006; Koro-Ljungberg 2008). The underlying principle of constructionism is that there is not just one interpretation of the world but multiple interpretations. This principle of multiplicity applies as much to ethics as it does to any human experience (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Gergen, 2001). Thus what may be considered ethical to one person is not necessarily a notion which is universally shared. As such there can be no way of ensuring that a process is entirely ‘ethical’. That said, it has been argued that an ethical position in constructionist research occurs through 1) a process of negotiation between researcher and participant and 2) a principle of informed consent. (Cottone11 2001, Borland, 1998; Gergen, 2001). As a theoretical concept this works; however, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) make a powerful point about the practicalities of carrying out research. They note that there is an asymmetrical power relation between

---

11 In the article titled “a social constructivism model of ethical decision making in Counselling” Cottone (2001) refers throughout to Social Constructivism. However on page 39 Cottone (2001) makes clear that the argument can be applied to constructionism.
interviewer and research participant\textsuperscript{12}. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) argue that the interviewer defines the interview situation and poses the questions. It is largely a one directional process that tends to serve the interests of the researcher. The researcher is also responsible for interpreting and reporting the discourse created in the interview. Thus what are ultimately presented as significant findings are controlled by the researcher. The interviewee can implement a set of counter control measures such as not answering questions; terminating the interview or withdrawing from the study entirely (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Kvale, 2006), but even with such options available the balance of power is still weighted towards the researcher.

This thesis has implemented a number of standard ethical procedures to counter-balance this asymmetrical power relation. All participants were provided with an information sheet that detailed the aims and objectives of the research; my role as a researcher; their rights as research participants as well as information on how the study is funded and what I intended to do with the information collected (see appendix A). This was a precursor to participants providing written consent to take part (see appendix B). All research participants were aged between 18 and 65 years to limit the possibility of interviewing someone who may be vulnerable and unable to provide informed consent. Data have been kept in line with the Data Protection Act 1998 which stipulates that information is used fairly and lawfully; is used for the limited and specifically stated purposes; used in a way that is adequate, relevant and not excessive; the information is accurate; kept safe and secure and no longer than is absolutely necessary. The identity of all participants quoted in this thesis has been protected by the use of pseudonyms.

The ethical procedures described here are in line with Loughborough University’s ethical standard. As such the research fulfils the ethical requirements of the University. However, it is important to note that there is a distinction between micro ethics, which are things that impact directly on the participant such as informed consent, confidentiality and being able to withdraw at any time, and macro ethics (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) describe macro ethics as being about how the knowledge produced during the research process will affect wider society. The findings of this research have the

\textsuperscript{12} For more detailed discussions on power relations on qualitative interviewing see Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Schurich, 1995; Briggs, 2002; Burman, 1997 or Gubrium and Holstein, 2008.
potential to undermine both the political strategies of existing and future governments and of faith based organisations seeking to provide public services. This is discussed in more detail in chapter nine.

4.2 Research Method
Data were collected in two stages. The main thrust of the research is an understanding of personal faith convictions of those working or volunteering for Christian based public service providers. A smaller set of interviews took place early on in the research process and were designed to obtain a broad overview of the relevant issues related to this study from the perspective of ‘elite’ Christians in the field. This was a necessary step given that I am external to the Christian faith and my initial understanding of the faith was limited. Here I conducted a series of interviews with representatives from a range of organisations that had a direct connection to welfare provision and that largely reflected the broad structures of Christianity in the UK. My decision to interview ‘representatives’ made dual use of their strategic knowledge of the issues under study and of their Christian identity. The data collected during stage one were used to revise and refine the topic guide for the second stage of data collection.

Stage two took a more in-depth look at the issues raised in stage one and sought to understand them from the perspective of ordinary Christians who work for Christian based public service providers.

4.2.1 Research participants
The participants for this research have been limited to Christians. Christianity, with all its denominations, is the largest and most established religion in the UK. Despite a steady decline in affiliation with the Christian faith, the 2011 Census data shows 59% of the UK population affiliate with the Christian faith, down from 71.7% in 2001 (ONS, 2011)-Christianity is still the largest religious group active in this country.
Table one: Census Data 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>2001 Number</th>
<th>2001 Per cent</th>
<th>2011 Number</th>
<th>2011 Per cent</th>
<th>Change Number</th>
<th>Percentage point</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>37,338</td>
<td>71.7</td>
<td>33,243</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>-4,095</td>
<td>-12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No religion</td>
<td>7,709</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>14,097</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>6,388</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>1,547</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2,706</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>1,159</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>817</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>423</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other religion</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion not stated</td>
<td>4,011</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>4,038</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>-0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table one, source: ONS: Census data 2011

Even taking a different measure, for example the British Social Attitudes Survey, Christianity is still the single biggest religious group, with 46% of respondents claiming some kind of affiliation with the religion (Park et al, 2011). Even if, as has been suggested by various researchers, (e.g., Crockett and Voas, 2006; Brown, 2009), this affiliation is cultural rather than a reflection of religiosity, the figures still demonstrate the significance of Christianity as a potential driver of cultural and social change. Thus, as this is an exploratory study it is worth focusing on the dominant faith of Christianity in the UK. More specifically this thesis focuses on Christians and Christian organisations in England and Wales.

Limiting the study to Christianity also reflects the continuing influence of Christian based organisations in the field of welfare provision. On an historical level, Christianity has been instrumental in the development of welfare provision in the UK13. While the modern

---

welfare state has seen the responsibility for welfare provision transfer from these mostly Christian organisations to statutory agencies (Jawad, 2012), the structures that Christian organisations have in place and the experience of Christians in providing such services means that Christianity continues to play a fundamental role in welfare provision which has yet to be explored fully.

4.2.2 Sampling for stage one participants

While no claims of representativeness are made in this thesis, participants for stage one largely reflect existing structures of Christianity in England and Wales. The table below demonstrates that the biggest Christian group is the Church of England/Anglican denomination. Other significant groups are the Roman Catholics, and Christians who do not identify with any particular denomination.

In the sampling process I targeted the four major Christian denominations of England and Wales (Anglican, Roman Catholic, Baptist, and Methodist) as well as organisations that cut across denominations to reflect the 8% of the population that do not identify with any specific denomination.

Table two: Religion in British Social Attitudes Survey 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>2010 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian no denomination</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of England /Anglican</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian/Church of Scotland</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No religion</td>
<td>49.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not answered</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table two: Source: Park et al. British Social Attitudes Survey 2011.
I secured seven interviews with representatives of policy offices connected to the Church of England/Anglican; Methodist, Baptist and United Reform Church\textsuperscript{14}; two policy offices that cut across denominations, one of which specifically represents Evangelical Christians, and senior clergy connected to the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. Direct contact was made with each of these groups via publicly available contact information, usually by email. Most interview participants were self-identified although some participants were nominated by a colleague.

\textbf{4.2.3 Sampling for stage two participants}

Participants for stage two are Christians who work, either in a paid or voluntary capacity, for a Christian based organisation that provide public services. There has been considerable debate on what exactly constitutes a faith-based organisation. The term ‘faith-based’ is particularly vague and can be used to refer to multiple ways that an organisation can be connected to a religion, ranging from its historical context through to the religious affiliation of its staff and management. Jochum, Pattern and Wilding. (2007: 8) note that the term itself is a relatively recent addition to the lexicon of terms used to describe faith groups and the words ‘faith-based’ make defining it particularly difficult as the term “allows for inclusion of organisations that might be shaped by faith but do not necessarily involve activities that are explicitly religious”. Examples of this sort of organisation are \textit{the Children’s Society and Action for Children}; both organisations started off with a distinctly Christian ethos but are now regarded as indistinguishable from other secular organisations that provide a service in a similar welfare area (Furness and Gilligan, 2012).

In developing a definition of a Christian-based organisation for the purposes of this study I drew on the work of Jochum et al. (2007) (who themselves draw heavily on the work of Sider and Unruch, 2004); Cloke et al. (2009), Williams et al. (2012) and Petterrson (2011).

Jochum et al. (2007) have produced an eleven point framework to classify faith based organisations that is, in turn, based on a typology developed by Sider and Unruh (2004). The typology recognises that organisations can incorporate religion in a variety of different ways and is initially split into two sections: the religious characteristics of the organisation and the

\textsuperscript{14} There is considerable overlap in priorities of the Methodist, Baptist and United Reform Churches they work together in the Joint Public Issues Team. One interview was conducted with a representative of that organisation who identified as Methodist.
religious characteristics of the programme(s) the organisation delivers. For Sider and Unruh (2004) this is particularly important because it reflects the fact that the religious characteristic of the organisation may be different to the programme or programmes that it implements. Further categories detail whether an organisation or programme is ‘faith permeated’; ‘faith centred’; ‘faith affiliated’ etc. and catalogue the ways that this faith identity is externalised, for example through a mission statement, criteria for selection to the board or content of a programme.

Sider and Unruch’s (2004) typology is US-centric and, as such, Jochum et al. (2007) have drawn on this typology to produce their eleven point framework that they think is more appropriate for the UK experience of faith-based organisations. The eleven points that Jochum et al. (2007) argue should be taken into consideration when deciding whether an organisation is sufficiently faith based are:

1. “The place of faith in the organisation’s identity and purpose”
2. “The connection of the organisation with a faith heritage and the continuing relevance of this heritage”
3. “Whether the organisation is affiliated with a faith entity”
4. “The role of faith identity in the selection of board members”
5. “The role of faith identity in the selection of staff and the commitment to faith as a requirement of employment”
6. “Financial and non-financial support from faith sources”
7. “Whether the activities of the organisation or programme are aimed, exclusively or not, at people of a particular faith”
8. “The integration of faith practices within the organisation”
9. “Whether the activities of the programme take place in a building whose main function is for religious purpose; whether objects with religious meaning are present”
10. “Whether the content is explicitly religious”
11. “The extent to which religious/spiritual experience is considered significant for the programme’s desired social outcomes.” Jochum et al. (2007:8)
It is important to note that Jochum et al. (2007) acknowledge that not all of these points are going to apply to every organisation, and researcher judgement is therefore required. I have used the first three points in my own framework for identifying Christian based organisations. My research is concerned with understanding the influence of Christian constructed discourses and, therefore the Christian identity of the participants and the organisations they work for are important criteria for inclusion in my study. I initially assessed whether potential organisations had met this criteria though information available on their websites and then confirmed this once I had made contact with participants. I disregarded the following three criteria suggested by Jochum et al. (2007) on the basis that this kind of information was not always available. In particular the Genuine Occupational Requirement\(^\text{15}\) often makes it illegal for employers to discriminate on the basis of faith affiliation when recruiting. So even if an organisation wanted their staff and board members to have a particular faith identity they would not necessarily be in a legal position to enforce this desire. I overcame this methodological difficulty by specifically requesting research participants that worked for Christian-based organisations and identified as Christian.

The final five points on Jochum et al.’s (2007) framework (points which are clustered around issues of religious practice) are not particularly useful for identifying organisations to be part of this thesis. Going back to Sider and Unruh’s (2004) initial typology, they separated religious characteristics of the organisation from those of the programmes being delivered to reflect the fact that the religious characteristics of these two categories may differ. As one of the aims of this thesis is to find a fresh understanding of ‘religious practice’ excluding participants on the basis of preconceived ideas of what is or is not religious practice would be counter-productive.

This thesis researches volunteers and employees of Christian-based organisations that provide public services. On this basis, in addition to a definition of what a faith based organisation is, I have also determined what a ‘faith provided public service’ looks like. In Cloke et al.’s (2009) study on faith based organisations and social exclusion they have used the EU-7FP FACIT Project definition of faith based organisations which is any organisation

---

\(^{15}\) The Equality Act 2010 permits discrimination in favour of a particular protected characteristic (race, gender, religion, age, sexuality, disability) in the recruitment, transfer, training, dismissal or promotion of certain roles but only if an employer can show a ‘genuine and determining occupational requirement’ (GOR) and show that it is a ‘proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim’.
that refers directly or indirectly to a religion or religious values and that functions as a welfare provider or as a political actor. By Cloke et al.’s (2009) own admission this definition is vague. They provide clarification with the adoption of a more robust definition of the functions of a faith based organisation. Drawing on the Religions and Development Research Programme (see rad.bham.ac.uk) Cloke et al. (2009) define faith based organisation’s functionality as being generally, but not exclusively philanthropic, in nature, that is it is made up of both charities and non-profit organisations, and as delivering many services to the public including care for the elderly, fighting social injustice and playing a major role in humanitarian aid and international development efforts (2009:5-6). This definition of functionality is supported by Pettersson (2011) who states that faith-based organisations have a variety of functions including highlighting new areas of need, enhancing existing welfare provision and defending and advocating human rights.

From this it is clear that faith-based organisations provide a variety of roles in the public sphere, however given that this thesis is primarily concerned with public service provision, the criteria for involvement in stage two has been limited to organisations that provide some kind of welfare service.

Although I do not claim that my findings are representative of all Christians and Christian organisations working within the welfare system, I explicitly wanted the field of work research participants are involved in to broadly reflect the landscape of Christian organisations operating in England and Wales. Much of the literature I use in the following discussion refers to faith based organisations in the plural. To focus the discussion on Christianity I have supplemented the data from that literature with examples of Christian organisations that operate in these areas.

The role of faith based organisations in the provision of welfare services has been discussed widely (for examples see Jawad 2012; 2012a; Johnsen 2009; Dinham and Lowndes, 2008; Chapman 2012; Williams et al., 2012). Williams et al. (2012) note that faith-based involvement in the public realm covers numerous policy areas including homelessness, debt and working poverty, asylum, community regeneration, elderly and disability, young people and children. A report from the Think Tank ‘Demos’ entitled ‘faithful providers’ notes that faith organisations are particularly adept at providing welfare services
because their ‘faith’ is an effective motivator for charitable provision (Birdwell, 2013). Birdwell (2013) argues that faith providers are motivated by their desire to ‘live their faith’ and ‘love their neighbour’. While Birdwell (2013) does not provide much clarity about what those two statements mean he concludes by saying that almost all religious institutions consider one of their key objectives to be providing support to the most vulnerable and excluded members of society. This conclusion is backed up by some of the more visible Christian organisations operating in the UK such as Christians against Poverty; the Salvation Army and CAFOD. Birdwell (2013) goes on to say that this focus on the vulnerable and excluded, equates to providing basic services such as food and shelter. Indeed Johnsen (2009) notes that faith based organisations play a particularly significant role in tackling the problems of homelessness in the UK. Johnsen (2009) concludes that most basic services, that is things like night shelters and soup kitchens, are provided for by faith based organisations. Again, well established Christian charities such as the Salvation Army operate in this area but so too do many much smaller local charities.

The concentration of effort in providing these very basic necessities of life is due to a combination of limited resources and a policy of focusing those resources on the greatest need; however helping the vulnerable and needy manifests itself in other ways too. For example organisations such as Christians Against Poverty and SPEAR (Primarily a provider of a homeless shelter in South West London) provide help for getting people back into work; there are numerous organisations that provide Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation for example the Matthew Project; Betel of Britain; Teen Challenge; Yeldall Manor and Overcomers Outreach; and well as services for Sex Workers such as The Joanna Project; The Magdalene Group and Women on the Front Line Ministries (part of the Salvation Army).

Another key area that faith based organisations get involved with is education and youth services (Jawad, 2012; King 2010). Jawad (2012) states that youth activities, both leisure related and academic, are central to the work that faith based organisations do in the UK. This statement is supported by the report from Birdwell (2013) who also state that youth work is an integral focus for faith based organisations. Parker-Jenkins et al. (2005) note that the provision of educational services, particularly schools, is a defining feature of religious engagement in the public sphere. This is supported by the fact that in the UK 34% of school age children attend a faith based school (Oldfield et al., 2013). Perhaps the most
well-known collaboration between government and faith based organisations occurred with the advent of ‘Free Schools’. Free schools are non-profit making and state-funded. They are independent of the local authority and can be run by anyone including parental groups, teachers and faith organisations (Oldfield et al., 2013). Despite the rules allowing anyone to run free schools it appears that it is religious organisations that have taken advantage of this relaxation within the state education strategy. The majority of the free school proposals between 2011 and 2013 had a religious ethos (British Humanist Society, 2013).

Finally, Christian organisations work on local, regional, national and international levels. Out of scope of this study are international organisations, unless they have a specific UK focus as part of their remit. In scope are national, regional and local organisations with a bias towards local organisations specifically in England and Wales. The reason for the focus on local organisations comes from the experience of Cloke et al. (2009). In their study on social exclusion they focused only on national organisations, excluding the work that faith based groups do on a local level. They considered this to be a significant oversight on their part given that faith based organisations primarily work on a local level. Cloke et al. (2009) note that faith based organisations infrastructure of buildings, the networks of local capital and the motivations of local leaders make this level the ideal platform for helping socially excluded people. This is supported by Hope’s (2007 cited Cloke et al. 2009) assertion that a significant factor in the success of third sector organisations is their proximity and closeness to the people they serve. I have taken this into consideration when choosing participants.

With this in mind I have targeted participants that mirror this broad landscape. Interviews took place with paid employees, volunteers and management within organisations that covered the following areas of public service provision:
Table Three: Number of interviews by type of service provision

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service Description</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Regional</th>
<th>Local</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and Drug rehabilitation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food bank</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless outreach</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soup Kitchen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex workers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community work/urban regeneration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/Parenting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elderly/Vulnerable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports outreach</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>18</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table three, data from thesis interviews

Participants from two of these organisations operated on a national basis, two more operated on a regional basis and the remainder worked locally. One organisation (marked support services) was indirectly connected with public service providers. Specifically it provided housing support for Christians who work in the charitable sector. Almost all of these organisations are not for profit and are registered charities. Funding comes from a combination of Government and private donations. One organisation works on a for profit basis, however this organisation is still funded by Government in the payment by results scheme. Most organisations were small with five employees/volunteers or fewer. Typically between one and three people were interviewed from each organisation. The high number of participants from the national level organisation providing services to families reflects the size of that organisation in that they had in excess of 30 employees/volunteers.

Participants were identified through a number of different processes. The majority were found through direct contact with organisations, others through a process of snowball sampling and two participants were self-identified from an advert placed on a church social networking page. The church is a very large charismatic church based in London. It has
connections with churches across the UK. In this second stage specific denominations were not targeted. This was a deliberate decision to understand the significance of denominations from the perspective of participants. During the interview participants were asked if they identified with any particular denomination and this has formed part of the analysis.

4.2.4 Data collection

Stage one
In stage one, data were collected via semi structured interviews with ‘elite’ participants from Christian faith-based organisations. In this stage, participants were asked to speak from the perspective of their organisation rather than on a personal level as a Christian. The lengths of interviews were between one and two hours to allow for understanding and meaning to be explored in depth.

The questions used during the interviews in stage one were structured around the four research questions. Participants were asked questions about what Christians were trying to achieve in providing public services; what their motivations were; how services were funded and how this was changing in light of the challenging economic climate; what role Christian organisations play in service delivery; how they differ from other third sector providers; how important faith and religious teachings are to their work; what kind of response they got from service users, in particular people of different faiths and no faith; what ways Christian organisations seek to influence service provision and how relevant Christianity is in a secular society.

Through a process of thematic analysis (discussed later in this chapter) more focused research areas emerged that required further scrutiny. In particular, how Christians overcome the problematisation of religious neutrality and communicate to a secular audience with the goal of building credibility as public speakers and public actors.

Stage two
Again data were collected with semi structured interviews. In stage two participants were asked to talk about their own personal experiences of God, faith and providing public services rather than to speak as representatives of their particular organisation. The data collected from stage one confirmed this as being the right approach to take. Participants in
stage one often found it difficult to separate their official status from their own personal experiences as Christians. The data collected about personal experiences was richer and more complex than the data provided when they were speaking as representatives of an organisation. Answers given by Christians acting as representatives of their particular organisations sometimes seemed a little rehearsed and formal and I suspect are not entirely accurate portrayals of the experiences faced by their employees and volunteers.

To understand the individual experiences of Christians who provided public services in stage two I asked very broad open ended questions that allowed data to be collected. Again interviews typically lasted from between 1 and 2 hours. This time participants were asked questions about whether they identified with a particular denomination, what it means to be Christian, how important their faith was in relation to the work that they do; how their faith may influence the work that they do; what their relationship with God is and what it means for their public service work. As well as whom the service recipients were, how they (service users) responded to their (participants) faith, how they would communicate about their faith with service recipients.

4.3 Thematic analysis process
Bernard and Ryan (2010) note that the process for conducting thematic analysis is to first identify themes, compare and contrast themes, identifying structure among them and then building theoretical models from that structure and, where applicable, link themes into theoretical models. The analysis in this thesis followed this broad process.

The process of thematic analysis starts with transcribing the data. All but two interviews were recorded. One participant declined to be recorded but gave me permission to use that interview as part of this thesis. Another interview took place in a location where the acoustics made recording the interview very difficult. On both of these occasions extensive notes were made both during and immediately after the interview. Where the interviews were recorded the data were transcribed verbatim.

The initial analysis was coded on a line by line basis. The objective of this detailed approach was to identify all possible incidents related to the thematic framework. Codes are described by Boyatzis as “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (1998:}
Codes form the building blocks to develop and understand the identified themes. It is from this initial coding process that I develop the properties of themes as well as subthemes.

A process of constant comparative analysis between and within data sets was utilised to build up a set of properties relating to these themes and develop them into theoretical concepts. This comparative approach started after the completion of the first interview and continued throughout the remainder of the data collection and analytical process. This allowed me to explore themes, subthemes and the properties of these during subsequent interviews. With this process I developed broad theoretical concepts such as a multidimensional construction of the God figure; social injustice being inextricably linked with the constructed understanding of God; an alternate understanding of public service provision as being a form of church; an underlying wish to share faith and proselytise; the overt and covert ways of sharing faith given the challenge of working in a religiously plural public sphere. These broad concepts were developed further into an overarching theoretical narrative that is presented in the following four analytical chapters.

### 4.4 Analysis and understanding

The data have been analysed using a thematic analysis that is set within a theoretical framework combining theories of *individualised religiosities* (Berger, 1967; Luckmann, 1974; Bellah et al., 2007; Davie, 1994, 2007; Beck, 2010) and *lived religion* (Stringer, 2011; Ammerman, 2003, 2007; McGuire, 2008) (see Chapter two for a wider discussion) with *framing theory* (Snow and Benford, 1988, 1992; Benford and Snow, 2000; and Bacchi, 1999).

The themes of *Individualised Religiosities* and *Lived Religion* were identified through the literature review. The inclusion of *framing theory* occurred during the analytical process. The consequence of an inductive research methodology is that the data includes themes that had not previously been considered. Only once the analysis had started did the concept that participants were framing faith discourses so that they resonated with those prevalent in the public spheres become clear. A wider discussion on framing theory is included in chapter eight.

In the identification of the theme of *framing* I drew on Opler (1945) who noted that the most important aspect of any theme is how often it appears and how pervasive it is
across different ideas and practices. In that respect in the very initial stages of analysis I searched for repetitions of ideas and concepts. Through this process I identified some very basic concepts that were pervasive throughout all the data sets. These concepts included translating faith into a set of values; wanting to share faith with service users and finding alternate ways to do this without alienating their intended audience.

At its most basic level thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting themes within data. However, Ryan and Bernard (2010) note it is much more versatile than that. It is a process that can be performed within numerous analytic traditions and thus can be used to interpret meaning and understanding from within that tradition (Boyatzis, 1998; Ryan and Bernard, 2010).

The exploratory nature of the research makes thematic analysis an appropriate analytical technique as it seeks to identify implicit and explicit themes within the data. In particular I use thematic analysis within the social constructionist epistemology. Thus here I use thematic structures identified from the data to understand meaning as experienced by the participants and then to examine the way that this meaning and experience is operating between the discourses of religious and public spheres. The research questions seek to understand the strategies behind Christian based organisations’ increased involvement in the provision of public services and the significance of the belief in God in how services are delivered. This requires a level of analysis that goes beyond simple theme identification to a deeper level of understanding that takes into consideration historical and social context.

The themes of individualised religiosities and lived religion were understood within the context of participants’ individual religious experiences. All participants identified as Christian and reported that they attended an institutional church at least once a week. Thus the analysis took into consideration this institutional participation and sought to understand how participants combined concepts of individualised religiosities and lived religion with institutional religiosities to construct understanding around their faith. The theme of framing was understood within the context that frames are a response to problems, in particular problems as perceived by the social actors who use the frames (Bacchi, 1999). The way that participants frame their public discourses is thus dependent on how they problematise working in religiously plural spheres.
4.5 Summary of research methods
This thesis uses an inductive approach to understand whether and how personal faith convictions of volunteers and paid employees of Christian based organisations influence the work that they do. Data were collected in two stages using semi structured interviews. Stage one obtained a broad overview of the role of Christian service providers from the perspective of ‘elite’ Christians representing Christian organisations that have a direct connection to welfare provision in England and Wales. Stage two took an in-depth look at the issues raised in stage one, seeking to understand them from the perspective of ‘ordinary’ Christians who work for Christian based service providers. While the range of organisations included in this study were specifically chosen to mirror the broad landscape of Christian based action in welfare provision in England and Wales, this thesis makes no claims to be representative of the Christian based organisation community.

Data is not being collected to provide evidence for or against an hypothesis four research questions have been set to guide the data collection and analytical process. These research questions are:

RQ1. What is the Sociological understanding of the Christian relationship with the God figure?

RQ2: What is the significance of the Christian relationship with the God figure with regards to public service provision?

RQ3. What do Christians perceive as the challenges of working in a religiously plural public realm?

RQ4. What processes are used (if any) to overcome these challenges?

The data have been analysed with thematic analysis using a theoretical framework combining themes of individualised religiosities; lived religion and framing theory. Themes were analysed using a constant comparative technique that started following the completion of the first interview and continued throughout the research process. Using this technique themes were developed into a set of theoretical concepts. These concepts form the basis of the following four analytical chapters: the social construction of God; the
connection between the Christian perception of God and public service provision; embodying God; and discourses of love, compassion and belonging: framing Christianity for a secular audience.
Chapter five: the social construction of God

The popular understanding of Christianity is that it is a faith centred on a belief in the Christian God. Accepting this assumption, a useful starting point for understanding the significance of personal faith convictions in relation to public action is to investigate what Christians understand about the God figure. This chapter develops a fresh sociological understanding of perceptions of God among Christians who work within faith-based organisations in the UK and provides empirical evidence for the theoretical concepts of lived religion as developed by Ammerman (2003, 2007), Stringer (2011) and McGuire (2008). It argues that participants combine institutional religious activities, such as attending church sermons, with religiosities that are autonomous to institutionalised religion, such as personal conversations with God, to construct a multidimensional understanding of the figure that simultaneously places God in 1) a Superiority Position, 2) a Parental Position and 3) as an Embodied God. This three-fold conceptualisation has a narrative fidelity with popular theological depictions of God but at the same time, participants engage with God through more profane activity, and thus attribute God with more immediate qualities.

This multidimensional understanding of the God figure builds on the current sociological understanding of religion as it applies a social constructionist epistemology to a social realist understanding of theocracy. For believers, religion is social fact, thus giving faith a dynamic quality. Those that believe in the Christian God would expect that figure to interact with them and respond to their involvement. This then has an iterative influence on how believers construct their faith. This chapter develops an understanding of how participants of this study construct perceptions of the God-figure through engagement and interaction with the figure.

Both Berger (1967) and Luckmann (1974) acknowledge the agency of individuals. However more work is required to better understand how the concept of agency influences the social construction of religion. Berger (1967) theorised that agency in the social construction of religion would result in secularisation as people increasingly draw on non-religious institutions to develop their own system of meaning. Luckmann (1974) theorises
that agency, or at least individual autonomy in relation to institutionalised religious activity, would result in the development of new religious themes. However, he concludes that identification of these themes would be difficult for two reasons. One, traditional Christian rhetoric is so dominant that adherents of faith will continue to use the vocabulary of institutionalised religiosity to describe new themes, essentially hiding new themes from the researcher. Two, new themes will be internalised in significantly different ways in different social contexts, making the development of a comprehensive description of the modern sacred cosmos challenging.

As a methodological solution to the problems of autonomy in constructed understandings of religion this chapter draws on the theoretical concept of individualised religiosities as proposed by both Berger (1967), Luckmann (1974) and developed by Bellah et al., (2007) Davie (1994, 2007), Beck (2010) and others, as well as the concept of lived religion as developed by Stringer (2011), McGuire (2008) and Ammerman (2003, 2007) (see chapter two for a wider discussion). More specifically, this chapter seeks to understand the extent to which the concept of individualisation manifests itself in those that still hold a strong and active affiliation to the institutionalised form of Christianity. It investigates the ways in which individualisation relates to participants’ use of or reflection on activities such as Bible study, attending Church Sermons, and formalised prayer, when constructing understanding about the God figure.

The concept of lived religion argues that the practice of religious belief can be an embodied and corporeal act. Seemingly mundane acts such as gardening, meditating or chatting to a deceased family member at the graveside can be as much of a religious experience as ‘institutional activities’ (Stringer, 2008; Ammerman, 2003, 2007; McGuire, 2011). Using this principle as a methodological basis this chapter takes into consideration how participants use activities that fall outside the structural boundaries of institutional religion to construct their faith understanding. In particular it focuses on the ways that participants communicate with the God figure on a day to day basis. That is, communication with the God figure that is other to formal prayer or through the use of clergy as a medium.

Using this approach this chapter demonstrates that part of the Christian perception of God, in particular the first two positions of the three-fold understanding, find a narrative
fidelity with popular theological depictions of the figure and are constructed through an institutional understanding of religion. However, the simultaneous perception of God in an embodied position represents a sociological theme where participants relate to God through profane activity and, correspondingly, understand the figure in more, everyday, corporeal and immediate terms. Where the first two positions maintain the God figure as being a sacred entity that is separate from and greater than humanity, the third position understands the figure as being personified. Invariably participants describe God as being a friend or a confidante and depict a relationship with God that is relaxed, egalitarian and with no expectation of reverence or submission to God’s power. Constructions of faith through both institutionalised and autonomous religiosities have explicit consequences for how participants understand their role in the public realm.

This chapter starts with a brief discussion of popular theological understandings of Christianity. I am a sociologist and not a theologian, and as such I am not in a position to represent the numerous theological standpoints on Christianity. Theology is a discourse that has multiple influencing factors (Scott and Cavanaugh, 2008). However, the longevity of Christianity has given rise to a relatively stable and deeply embedded understanding of the beliefs that underpin the more popular understanding of the Christian faith in the UK. For that reason I consider the brief theological discussion presented in this chapter to be useful for understanding the sociological concepts that I cover.

The following section discusses interview data on the extent to which participants use institutionalised religiosities to construct understanding about their faith. In particular it investigates whether and how participants reflect on institutional religiosities through an individualised lens. The extent of this reflection is illustrated with an analysis of the significance of the Christian denominational framework to participants.

The chapter then develops the complex, three fold sociological conceptualisation of Christian perceptions of the God figure. It demonstrates how institutional religiosities are blended with autonomous religiosities to construct a multidimensional understanding of God that builds on the existing body of knowledge.
5.1 Theological understanding of faith and the God-figure.
For many theologians the fundamental premise of Christianity is to have faith in and to worship the one and true God as all powerful creator of the Universe (Betz, 1991). The Church of England website states that a Christian life is lived in relationship with God through Jesus (Williams, n.d.). Thus, at the centre of Christianity are teachings on the figure of Jesus Christ who is worshiped as the son of God (Guess, Ollsen, Wolff, 2012) and who was said to have been sacrificed in atonement for the sins of humanity. Many Christian teachings consider sins to be the cause of separation between God and humans thus the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is purported as being the act which reunites the two (Betz, 1991). Jesus Christ is considered to be the one human being who knows what God wants and what God is doing (Williams n.d.); thus the concept that Jesus Christ continues to love humanity despite being betrayed and executed is proof of the love of God.

Religious teachings state that Christ offered himself for sacrifice voluntarily and thus the crucifixion is claimed as being a joint act in which God the Father is united with Jesus the Son. It is this collaborative act which is the expression of God’s love for humanity” (Betz 1991). For many theologians, the action of Christianity is voluntary self-dedication to God. The emphasis on voluntarily dedication of lives is so that Christianity is an appropriate response to the ultimate sacrifice that God and Jesus Christ made, that being the voluntary sacrifice of Christ’s life (Betz, 1991). Thus the popular theological understanding of the Christian God is ‘God the creator’ and ‘God the father’.

5.2 The social construction of God
In McGuire’s (2008) lived religion, she writes about how subjects of her study often blend institutional religiosities with, what she terms, popular expressions of faith. For example, McGuire (2008) provides a case study of Loralee who attends church services on a regular basis but also constructs her religiosity using religious ideas expressed through Christian radio and books bought from a Christian bookstore. McGuire (2008) is acknowledging that, while individual expressions of religiosity are important (in this case through private learning from radio and books) so too are more traditional ways of understanding faith (church sermons).

The subjects of my study all self identify as Christians and attend at least one institutionalised church on a regular basis. In that respect an empirical observation of this
chapter is that institutionalised religiosity is a significant factor in how participants of this study construct their understanding of the God-figure. At the same time this chapter acknowledges that due to participants’ autonomy with respect to institutionalised religion, participants may interpret these activities in ways unintended or unexpected by an institutional church.

All but one\(^{16}\) of the participants of this study has a strong affiliation with Christianity. This showed in the way that interviewees referred to institutional activities and sources of information when explaining their faith convictions and practices. The institutionalised sources of information mentioned by participants include the Bible, church sermons; consultations with clergy, words of hymns; and stories of Saints. Institutional activities were largely understood to be prayer and praise. The discourse formulated through the interview process suggests that participants of this study continue to draw on institutionalised activities and sources of information to understand their faith and to make connections between this understanding and events that happen in their personal lives. For example, one interviewee, Denise referred to a particular hymn that made sense to her when she explained why she was motivated to volunteer. During the interview she sang the particular part of the hymn that resonated with her and she explained that the words acted as a guide for how she conducts herself in public. Another participant, Stacey, spoke about how she drew on the lives of Saints when deciding how to act:

“God doesn’t want people to be put off when you talk to people about Christianity. He wants people to be won over and that is why I believe that lifestyle is more important than what you say. St Francis of Assisi is reputed to have said go to all the world and preach the gospel, where necessary use words. And that is a lovely maxim to live by.”

\(^{16}\) One participant’s faith identity was significantly more complex than the others. He had a belief in God and affiliated himself with Christianity in that he attended a Christian church and identified as Christian, however he did not believe the New Testament nor believed that Jesus Christ was the son of God.
Stacey explained that the words of St Francis of Assisi are what inspired her to get involved in her field of work, saying that going to church was not enough for her; she needed to act out her Christian principles as the Saint suggests.

Another participant, Hannah related a story about how she deals with difficult questions about her faith by asking members of the Clergy for help:

“I constantly have arguments, well not arguments but discussions with my best friend because she is an atheist and she always has some witty thing to say and I don’t have the answers for everything so a lot of the time I am like ‘oh yeah, I don’t know’ I’ll ask the Priest about that on Sunday and get back to you.”

Here, Hannah is drawing in the knowledge and expertise of official arbitrators of institutionalised religiosities to understand some of the more tricky elements of her faith. Later in the same interview Hannah spoke about her difficulties in working out the right occupation for her. She referred to the importance of sermons and praying in making these kinds of life choices:

“The work I do now, working with the children, that wasn’t originally what I was going to do. I went through the process to go to Sandhurst, and then I applied to the police force. Initially I wrote to a lot of magazines in London but it has just been constantly praying about not what I want me to do, but what I am supposed to be doing. And these things don’t just come to you. I have been through a lot of failed processes and a lot of praying about it and watching a lot of sermons on youtube. One of the ones that I watched, it was directed at people who choose their next direction and it said you need to think about what are you good at, what is important to you”
Again, Hannah draws on the words of official representatives of the institutionalised church. Her methods for accessing these sermons are not traditional. Hannah views her sermons online, rather than by attending a physical church; however she is still constructing her faith using an orthodox method of knowledge transfer.

The discourse discussed in this section suggests that there are some institutionalised religiosities that have an influence on the way that participant’s understand their Christianity. Scholars including Beck (2010), Bellah et al. (2007), Woodhead and Heelas (2005) all write about the decline of institutional religiosities in favour of more individualised forms of spiritualities. Beck (2010) and Bellah et al. (2007) argue that the autonomy individuals have over their understanding of faith links God directly to their own spiritual needs and desires, rather than to a model of faith developed and controlled by institutional religion. Similarly Heelas and Woodhead (2005) argue that people are living in accordance with their own unique experiences, rather than institutionalised religiosities, and that these results in the advancement of New Age spiritualities to the detriment of the traditional church. My interview data, however, suggest that if the individualisation inherent in modernity is influencing the way that adherents of Christianity practice their faith, it is only having a partial influence.

Most participants appeared very comfortable talking about their faith using an institutionalised religious vocabulary. This suggests that participants have given their faith considerable thought. But more than that, it is indicative of how referring to institutionalised religiosity is a normal part of their individual faith discourse. Many interviewees were unaware of the researcher’s faith status17 and this suggests that a faith narrative that incorporates references to institutionalised religiosities is not just reserved for conversation with like-minded people; it is used in discussions more widely. Only two participants had difficulties discussing their faith in this way. Both of these participants had trouble articulating their faith at all beyond stating a belief in the Christian God. This suggests that they had previously not been questioned about their faith and thus, had not had the opportunity to develop a suitable narrative around what they believed.

17 As noted in chapter four I did not reveal my faith status to participants unless they asked. Some asked before the interview took place and would have been aware of my atheism when providing answers, many did not ask or only asked after the interview had been completed.
Of the institutional sources of information that participants referred to, the Bible came up most frequently. For example, one interviewee, Julia, talked about how she has attended churches belonging to a variety of denominations. During this part of the interview Julia was asked, hypothetically, what would happen if she went to a particular church and she disagreed with the religious doctrines that particular denomination represented. In response to this she drew on what she understood about the Bible:

“Well I think there is a verse in the Bible that talks about working out your own salvation and it is the idea that everyone has their own way of responding to things, their own way of working things out”

The fact that she refers to the Bible to provide an answer to the question is interesting. There is a two-step process occurring with this response. Firstly Julia draws on the Bible to develop her own conclusions about what might happen if she attended a church where she disagreed with what was being taught; secondly she makes reference to the Bible to convey her understanding of this hypothetical situation to the researcher. Observances of Julia during this exchange noted how easily she referred to this passage of the Bible. In this respect ‘easily’ means she appeared comfortable with responding to the question in this way. This ease of using Bible references to explain aspects of her faith indicates that Julia has experience, or a history, of referring to the Bible for this purpose and that using this kind of Bible narrative in conversation was a normative process for her.

Stacey also quoted the Bible when talking about why it was important to her (and her husband’s) faith to live out her Christian principles:

“Quite often church is a place where people go on a Sunday and they express their Christianity together and then they forget about it for the rest of the week. And we are saying that this is not right because Jesus said you are to be salt and light. And a salt that stays in the salt cellar is not doing anything.”
Again Stacey seemed very comfortable with using Bible references to convey her understanding of what it means to be a Christian. If anything Stacey creates a more definitive normativity about the Bible in her response. Julia prefaced her answer with the words “I think there is a verse in the Bible”. This made clear that what she was about to say came from a particular source that the researcher could reference and form independent opinions about. Stacey on the other hand did not qualify her response in any way and simply stated, as truth, that Jesus said we are to be ‘salt and light’. The two examples here, as well as others in the data collected, suggest that there is a normalcy for participants to use aspects of institutionalised religiosities to understand their faith and then convey that understanding to others.

It is interesting that the Bible came up as the most frequent source of information about the Christian faith. The Bible itself is an institutionalised source of information. Armstrong (2007) describes the Bible as a canon within a canon in reference to how the Catholic Church has dictated which of the ancient texts have been included. Interpretation of the Bible however can be considered either institutional or autonomous depending on whether it is the Church or the individual doing the interpreting, and these two understandings are intertwined. Discourse created within the interviews suggest that some of what participants understand about the Bible comes from interpretations of the text provided by the institutional church, such as those given through church sermons or through private conversations with members of the clergy. However, participants also report a considerable amount of private Bible study. This is sometimes done collectively with others but often it is external to the institutionalised church. Thus participants are drawing their own conclusions on, what they consider to be, a primary source of information, rather than relying only on the ‘secondary’ interpretations of the institutional churches. Parts of the participants’ narrative structures of faith have thus been developed through their own study rather than via a third party.
5.3 The significance of denominational affiliation to constructions of faith

The previous section is evidence of some individualisation in how participants reflect on institutional religiosities. Further evidence of individualisation comes from participants’ understanding of denominational affiliation. A popular understanding of the Christian faith is that it is broken down into different denominations which include Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists and Catholics. This structure of Christianity has had an influence on some of the work of scholars within the social sciences; for example Stringer (2011) talks about how he wanted to understand the religious experiences of Methodists, Baptist, Anglicans and the United Reform Church; Chapman et al. (2012) specifically refer to Anglicans; and McGuire (2008) talks about Baptists as if they are separate to other types of Christians. Davie (2007) too makes a point of explaining the denominational framework of Christianity in the UK. This denominational framework is largely accepted as fact in mainstream academic discourses about Christianity. For example Lord Carey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, recently made a statement that the Church of England will be extinct within a generation (Riley-Smith, 2013). The British Social Attitudes Survey (Park et al., 2011) also breaks down Christianity into the denominations of Roman Catholic, Church of England/Anglican, Baptists, Methodist, and Presbyterian/Church of Scotland.

The existing denominational framework is not reflected in how participants of this study understand their Christianity. One of the criteria set for taking part in this study was that all participants must identify as Christian. However, in setting this criterion no attempt was made to define what ‘being Christian’ is. This was a deliberate decision to avoid researcher bias in the data collection process. With the exception of two participants who explicitly stated they were Catholic, participants of this study simply stated that they were Christian and that denomination was unimportant to their faith identity.

For example, Carolyn said:

“Well we go to a Church of England church but that is immaterial really to being a Christian”.

102
Another example comes from Felicity. Felicity was asked if she associates with a particular denomination. Her response was:

“Not really, no. I was bought up by an Anglican. I used to be taken to an Anglican church by my mum and dad. My dad was a church warden. Yeah so I was brought up Anglican and rebelled against it in my teens and didn’t go. Then sort of went back to church when I was about 19 and went to a more fellowship, Christian fellowship type church. Like a house church, Non-denominational. We used to meet in a school. There are a lot of them around”

Furthermore to denomination being unimportant, going to more than one church was a theme among participants. As Maria says:

“I go to a Pentecostal church, but also on a Sunday night I go to a Baptist church. I started off in an Anglican church, and the reason that I go to the churches that I go to is I find I have more freedom. It is not so set in traditional rules and regulations. Denomination isn’t important to me.”

Maria was asked if she thought that it was the case that other people in her church also took a ‘multi denominational’ approach to their faith. Maria said:

“I think it probably is because I know that we will go to meetings where there are all various denominations there and just spend time sort of worshipping and fellowshipping together so I think everyone feels the same. Yeah, I would have to ask them that question but knowing what they are like they are inclusive, very inclusive.”
Julia also goes to more than one church. She spoke about the importance of going to different churches in order to receive an holistic understanding of her faith:

“I wouldn’t be able to say I am any kind of particular Christian. I have been in lots of different church like settings. So I have done the high Anglican thing, I have done other smaller Evangelical churches that are much more like the typical 80s and 90s kind of a Christian vibe with rainbow coloured guitar straps that you see, although I never actually went that far because I hate them! I think it’s quite healthy to go to lots of different churches at different stages because it might be that at one time you really need to have a bit more structure, so going to a church that plays out that way is good, also it gives you a whole different perspective about things. So different denominations will have different emphasis on certain parts of Christianity [...] so if you go to the Catholic Church there will be emphasis on different things in the Bible and the different stories of Mary and the different Saints and things like that. Whereas if you go to a different church it is much more looking at the Holy Spirit.”

Julia also explained that thinking less about denominations made for a more united Christianity. This was something that was particularly important to her:

“There will be some people who say you should just go to one and stick to that but I think it is good to move around. I like the idea of all churches being united and if you only stick to one and say that I don’t like this and I don’t like, that you can very easily become kind of in the zone of clashing with people when you don’t agree with what they say. The last thing you want to do in Christianity is have places where people are battling against each other because they are not thinking exactly the way that you think”.
While participants are presenting an image of a unified Christianity there is some evidence that parts of Christianity are still ‘othered’. Of particular note Denise said:

“Denomination is not important to me. I have always gone to a Protestant church and there are some things that Catholicism, you know, that Jehovah’s Witnesses etc. would believe in that I wouldn’t share but it wouldn’t stop me being a Christian. If someone said you can’t go to a Church of England Church you know you’ve got to go to a Catholic Church or something I would just have different opinions I think, but you’re allowed to have different opinions.”

This quote suggests that, at least for Denise, there is still some tension between Catholicism and Protestant denominations and that there is also some tension with less mainstream churches, in this instance Jehovah’s Witnesses. Another participant, Michael, also identified Catholics and Jehovah’s Witnesses as being different to other Christians. Indeed it is telling that the only two participants that identified with a specific denomination were Catholic.

Stacey spoke about how she and her husband purposefully consider themselves non-denominational because of these kinds of tensions. Note that Stacey refers to these tensions on an international level rather than to tensions that occur in the UK:

“The reason that I don’t consider myself to be any one particular denomination is that it can constrict the work that we do. The work that we do in [town] is not the only work we do. We work abroad as well. In some countries if you declare yourself to be Baptist it shuts doors. In some countries if you declare yourself to be Church of England it shuts doors. So we don’t say that we belong to any one denomination.”
Having said that, Stacey was asked if her non-denominational status was purely a functional choice and she said that it was not. She and her husband go to whichever church they feel comfortable in:

“Er... No, because I think that there is such grey areas as well with people saying are you Evangelical? Are you Pentecostal? Are you Charismatic? Are you happy clappy? And you know people go off like that. And we go to the church that we feel comfortable with and what we feel may be lacking in that particular church we may find elsewhere, we find that feeding from elsewhere.”

This demonstrates that the Christian denominational framework may be less significant than social scientists (Chapman et al. 2012; Stringer, 2008; McGuire, 2008) and other commentators (Lord Carey) claim it to be, especially within the Protestant tradition. Indeed, the fact that many participants seemed to pick and choose from a range of denominational churches, often blending their denominational influence depending on what they felt they needed for their unique faith identities, is representative of the agency that participants have over their constructed understanding of the God figure. Some interviewees stated that they did not go to a traditional church at all. One participant talked about attendance at ‘house’ fellowships; another attended church in a pub; one more ran their own church designed to appeal to the Asian community. This latter church is decorated with both Hindu and Christian symbols. This is indicative of an autonomy with respect to institutionalised religiosity when constructing faith identities and giving their faith meaning.

This autonomy over faith constructions raises questions about who sets parameters on what God represents or how Christians relate to the figure. As McGuire (2008) notes, the centralisation of authority into the hands of the institutional church reduces the ability for there to be religious practices or ideas originating from “lay people”. Of course, the denominational splits of the Christian church represents a rejection of sorts against a mass centralisation of authority over Christianity, however the Christian denominational framework still places power over who decides what God represents into the hands of a
select few. The flexibility over denominations that participants have shown indicates that institutional churches are no longer in a position to dictate to Christians how they understand their faith (if they ever were). Instead it is ordinary Christians who are taking more of a leading role in how their own faith develops. This links in with the concepts of individualisation as discussed by Beck (2010) and Bellah et al (2007). and others, in that participants are showing a level of autonomous choice and individual agency in how they relate to and reflect upon existing social structures. The next section on the multidimensional understanding of God makes clear that this individualisation is not a total rejection of institutional religion. Participants have not found a ‘God of One’s own’ (Beck, 2010), they have not developed a system of belief based upon themselves such as with the concept of ‘Sheila-ism’ (Bellah et al, 2007) nor are they substituting Christianity for New Age Spiritualities (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). However they are not taking for granted the authority of institutionalised church, rather they are constructing their faith identity through blended faith discourses. This is supportive of Day’s (2009) findings which suggest faith identity can be developed through multiple and sometimes contradictory discourses. It also provides empirical evidence of how Chapman et al. (2012) are mistaken to demarcate different types of Gods according to denomination.

It is important to note that this flexibility over faith construction does not necessarily represent friction between autonomous faith constructions and institutional churches. For example, the Anglican Church can be thought of as encouraging, or at the very least accepting of, autonomous ways of understanding Christianity. The Church of England has introduced a particular method of churhing called ‘Fresh Expressions of Church’ (Fresh Expressions, n.d.). *Fresh Expressions* recognises that institutional church is not a relevant method of religious practice for some people and encourages ‘church’ to happen in alternative ways. The *Fresh Expressions* webpage states that there is a surfer church on Polzeath beach, Cornwall; a youth congregation based in an Essex skate park, as well as churches in cafés, pubs, schools and gyms (Fresh Expressions, n.d.).

The significance of denomination put forward in this chapter is distinct from attempts by Christian churches in the UK to reach an ecumenical unity. As Davie notes (2007), the ecumenical movement is largely political rather than theological and is used by institutional churches to present a united front on social and political areas where they
agree. For example, the Baptist, Methodist and United Reform churches have a ‘Joint Public Issues Team’ which help the three denominations work together on issues of justice and inequality. For participants in my study, the opposite seems to be the case, as they are picking and choosing denominational doctrines depending on their autonomous theological needs. In that respect, participants’ understanding of denomination mirrors religiosities that are seen in the United States. As Levitt (2007) notes, Americans are increasingly switching denominations to find personal spiritual satisfaction in a similar way to the participants of this study.

This presentation of Christian denomination needs to be understood within the context of the demographics of the Christians taking part in this study. Participants were largely white, middle class women from England and Wales. Denomination takes on additional significance in places such as Northern Ireland and Scotland due to the connection locals make between denomination and national identity (Brown, 2009, Davie, 2007). In addition the British Social Attitudes Survey (Park et al., 2011) demonstrate that many people continue to self identify with specific denominations. More research needs to be conducted on how participants of this study fit with those that responded to that survey.

The understanding of denomination presented in this chapter might be a consequence of the qualitative sampling approach taken during this research. Firstly, studies have shown that Evangelical Christians are more likely to be involved in third sector work (“21st Century Evangelicals”, 2011) and, given that participants were self-identified it can be argued that Evangelical Christians are more likely to come forward to talk about their faith. As the Evangelical movement cuts across denominations it follows that such Christians might see less difference between denominations and are therefore, less likely to define themselves in such terms. Having said that, few participants of this study openly identified as Evangelical and the majority spoke about Evangelism as if it were something different to their own Christianity.

The evidence presented in this section portrays a complex picture of how participants construct meaning of their faith through institutionalised religiosities. The secondary interpretations of the Bible and the Christian faith by institutional churches are still important sources of information for participants. However there is also a focus on the
“primary” sources of information for example, personal Bible study. In addition participants are rejecting the authority of the Christian denominational framework, instead they are picking and choosing religious teaching depending on their own unique faith needs. This suggests that participants consider interpretations of Christianity by institutional churches as being a useful guide to their faith but they also formulate their own faith constructions independently. In other words, institutional churches are influential in faith constructions but are not authoritative. Individualisation manifests itself in independent interpretations of institutional religiousities, particularly with regards to the denominational framework. This leads to the question as to whether there is space and scope for understandings of the God figure that go beyond those put forward by institutional religiousities. This question is addressed in the following section.

5.4 The Multidimensional Understanding of God
This section argues that the interviewees imparted a three-fold understanding of God, which I have labelled the ‘Superiority Position’, the ‘Parental Position’, and the ‘Embodied Position’. The analysis assesses whether and how institutionalised religiousities, including those that have been individualised, are used to construct an understanding of God and investigates whether and how religiousities that are autonomous to institutionalised religion are linked to the ways in which participants perceive the God-figure.

5.4.1 Superiority Position
The first descriptor by which interviewees talk about God, and which I have labelled the Superiority Position, is representative of an understanding of the God figure that is most disparate to humanity. With this descriptor participants are placing God and themselves at oppositional positions, superiority and inferiority. God occupies the most superior position and participants place themselves in a comparative position of inferiority. During the interviews participants were asked who God is to them. One theme that repeatedly occurred was that God is ‘the supreme being’ and ‘the creator of the universe’. Participants also described God as being ‘the most powerful entity’ and ‘the leader of all mankind’. The use of the definitive article is suggestive of a ‘being’ that is superior to any other. It is especially the case that participants consider the God figure to be superior to humanity. Participants routinely used superlative phrases such as ultimate creator, and most powerful.
Such phrases alone would indicate a hierarchical relationship between participants and God given that, by definition, God would always rank the highest. However this hierarchy of superiority and inferiority is further supported when comparing these descriptions of the God figure with the way that participants describe themselves. During the interviews participants made frequent references to their own fallibility. For example one participant, Carol, worked at an organisation that provides, among other things, parenting classes. Carol spoke often about how she was not a perfect parent and made mistakes with her own children and that it was important to the way that she worked to recognise these failings and to share them with service users. Another example, Maria spoke specifically about her failings in relation to God. Maria spoke about how she believes that the Bible is the word of God but that sometimes she struggles to understand it. Maria went on to say that she would never understand the entire Bible until she goes to heaven because she is not God, thus being explicit about her inferiority to the figure.

A third example comes from Tom who said outright that all humans fail:

“When I believe that humans fail, and that people really do have their own free will. I believe that God cries over the world that he has made sometimes, but I think that I have had situations and God has used those situations to make me stronger and get me to point of doing what I am doing. But I don’t blame him for anything and I think in lots of ways my life is better because of the things that I have gone through although at times it has been hard. For example losing my last job and the funding going and everything and at the time I thought what am I going to do and he has brought me something better.”

Tom’s quote is interesting because of the way he attributes success and failure. He begins by saying ‘people really do have their own free will’ and with this statement he is placing responsibility for any failure firmly with humanity. But he then goes on to credit God for his successes. In other words he is saying that it is his fault if he fails but down to God if he
succeeds. This quote is a clear example of the deference to the superior powers of God expressed by participants in this study.

By believing that there is no greater power than that of God, participants are placing the God figure in a position that is beyond their reach. This clearly marks an inequality between God and humanity. Thinking of God, and consequently themselves, in these terms is representative of the separation between God and participants. In that respect the Superiority Position has echoes of Chapman et al.’s (2012) assertion that (at least for the Anglican God) the God-figure is seen as a distant ideal.

The Superiority Position takes on logic when considering macro level questions about the existence of the universe and humanity. When talking about God in the Superiority Position, participants are maintaining a belief that the God figure has created the universe, and rejecting the discourse that the universe is here by chance. This conforms to institutionalised discourses about God (as creator) and is indicative of how institutionalised religiosities are internalised into participants’ individual constructions of faith. As Luckmann (1974) notes, the traditional Christian model remains a dominant force in the social construction of religion. It can be argued that the vocabulary of institutionalised Christianity has been reproduced by participants through this particular understanding of God.

The Superiority Position serves a purpose for participants in that they are constructing an understanding of the universe in such a way that relieves anxiety about the function and duration of our existence. Support for this assertion comes from the way that participants talk about people outside of the faith. For example, Christine spoke at length about how she could not understand how people could not have any faith at all:

“My biggest thing for people that don’t have any faith at all, you know, if this is all just totally random, the earth is random, there was just an explosion, we’re all sitting here randomly because if there is no God and everything is just random then what’s the point? What is the point in anything [...] But if the earth is to end one day just like it began there is no point loving people or trying to make a difference. You always
get stuck with ‘what’s the point’. Well the point for us is the fact that this earth is as it is and the point is that we need to show people the fact that this isn’t all that there is. This isn’t just a big accident and at the end of it we are going to be a nothing just like we started. This is not all that there is, there is something afterwards and this is just a tiny little blip, dot of what is to come”.

Christine spoke passionately about how she felt that there would be some kind of existence after her death. This quote conveys the sense that believing that she is part of something that has wider significance gives her considerable comfort with regards to unanswered questions about our universe and being.

This assertion echoes that of concepts put forward by Berger (1967) in “The Sacred Canopy” where he theorises that the role of religion within social constructionism is to provide an explanation for those things that challenge our ordered understanding of the world. The constructed nature of our social worlds is too unstable for humans to deal with and our default condition is to seek meaning and order; humans then externalise and objectivate that meaning so that it has, at least superficially, a sense of permanence and unshakeability. Berger (1967) suggests that the formation of a transcendental ‘reality’ that is said to have created our world provides the stability that humanity craves. Thus faith in God acts as a shield against the possibility that our existence may be meaningless (Berger, 1967).

The interviewees’ understanding of God as occupying the Superiority Position provides empirical evidence for Berger’s (1967) notion of the social construction of religion and is indicative of the continuing relevance of Berger’s work. The Superiority Position is a simple concept which makes clear that participants view the God figure in a way that has a narrative fidelity with institutional theological teachings that place God as creator\(^\text{18}\). By itself it does not further our sociological understanding of God. The Superiority Position, however, is just one part of the multidimensional understanding of the God figure imparted

\(^{18}\)It is important to note here that none of the research participants talked in terms of ‘creationism’ in that no one denied the process of evolution; they simply suggested that the world as we know it came into being because of the presence of God.
by the research participants. The second position of their multidimensional understanding is the Parental Position.

5.4.2 Parental Position

While participants consider God in stark contrasting terms with themselves by placing God in the Superiority Position, they also routinely frame the narrative of God as creator in terms that depict the figure as a nurturing character. For example, one participant, Carolyn said with little hesitation:

“He is my father, and he made me and he has designed me and he has given me one of the biggest blessings. He has blessed me with three fabulous children and he has always been there.”

Carolyn went on to say:

“You know, we are his children. We are told he knows how many hairs there are on our head and he has made us uniquely”

What is interesting about this quote is the juxtaposition of the themes Carolyn talks about. She provides a narrative fidelity with the discourse of ‘God as creator’ in that she firmly asserts that God has made her, and that God is responsible for the creation of her children, thus adding support to the Superiority Position. However, she prefixes the first phrase by saying ‘he is my father’ and ends with ‘he has always been there’. These two phrases suggest not a God that is distant, but one that is intimately involved in this participant’s life. The phrases ‘he is my father’ and ‘he has always been there’ place God in a more supportive and nurturing role.

The Parental Position has similarities with the Superiority Position in that it considers God as an authority figure, with humanity taking on the role of the subordinate. Participants
talk about God being their ‘guiding light’ and their ‘moral compass’. They also continue to refer to God as being their Lord, but participants frame this understanding in terms which suggest the God figure has more empathy with individual fallibility than the Superiority Position. The Superiority Position is framed with a clear dichotomy of superiority and inferiority, whereas the Parental Position invokes an image of a more compassionate and accepting figure. For example, Fran spoke about some of her communications with God:

“God can talk to me through my husband. I don’t always want to hear what God says through my husband but I know that he uses him because he loves me and I know that some of the things he says to me, I know that it is said in the right way.”

In this quote Fran is talking about the way that God leads her by saying that she does not always want to follow God’s orders but does so because, ultimately, she considers God to be in a commanding position to her. This quote conveys a sense of deference to the God figure as well as a sense of compliance to God’s demands. In other words, she is accepting the Christian God as an authoritative figure within her life. However she frames this deference in compassionate terms. She talks about how God’s requests come from a place of love and that, while she may not understand them, they are for her own benefit. This is indicative of an understanding of God that is simultaneously in the Superiority and Parental Positions.

With the Parental Position, anthropomorphic characteristics are ascribed to God’s character. Specifically, (as the name of the descriptor suggests) God is described with parental attributes. As noted above, participants refer to the God figure as father or sometimes protector, and they refer to themselves as his children. Thus, while there continues to be a hierarchical divide between God and humanity, it is not a definitive one in the way that the Superiority Position infers. In the Superiority Position the God figure is described in terms of a supreme being. That is, God is something other than human. Not just a different species but something that transcends all other species, both real and imagined. Participants’ descriptions of God place the figure in a transcendental position to humanity, but also, given that the God figure is credited as having created the universe,
participants are suggesting that God transcends all life forms, should any more exist. Parents, however, can be both equal and authoritative. This means that while there is still a separation or an inequality between God and humanity, in that God is still considered in a position of leadership and commanding, there simultaneously exists a more equalised relationship.

When imparting an understanding of God as occupying a Parental Position, participants view the God figure as being in a role that is much closer to themselves but at the same time is still finding a strong narrative fidelity with established theological understandings of the Christian relationship with the God figure, that of God the father (Betz, 1991). As noted at the beginning of this chapter, a prominent teaching of Christianity is that the figure of Jesus Christ is worshipped as the Son of God (Guess, Ollsen and Wolff, 2012). Religious teachings stress the voluntary sacrifice of Christ and thus the crucifixion is claimed as being the way that God the Father and Jesus the Son unite to express their love for humanity (Betz 1991). In that respect this relationship between father and son forms the premise of Christianity, and for many theologians, the action of Christianity is voluntary self-dedication to God as an appropriate response to the ultimate sacrifice that God made in regards to the figure’s son (Betz, 1991). In other words the parental narrative is strong in institutionalised depictions of God, and this has been internalised and recreated in individuals’ understanding of the figure.

The Parental Position indicates a more intimate God that knows and cares about each participant on a very personal level. This God is akin to what some people might consider as being an interventionist God. This is the God that has an omniscience about it (previously, Carolyn had said that God knows how many hairs we each have on our head). This God serves a purpose for participants when they are trying to understand the significance of personal challenges and tragic events that occur in their own day to day lives. For example, Christine spoke about how her faith relieves her of the burden of the challenges of daily life.

“The back bone of the Christian faith being that we are only on this earth for a vapour of time and there is this after life, this kingdom of God in which everyone will live in for eternity and in that regard it changes things. I think that for a lot of people
their life aim or life objective is to just kind of coast down the road and do as well as they can and to think that everyone that they love is safe and happy and healthy and they have money in their wallet and they are fine and they are just doing ok. And that becomes problematic when that can be snuffed out in an instant. When someone gets ill, loses a job, things like that. Whereas when you’re a Christian, as devastating as those things might be, it does not snuff out your life purpose. You might lose a loved one or you might lose a job (but) we have a hope for seeing these people again, we have a hope for the future, we also have a lack of burden because if I lost my job or got rejected from a job as I have been I know enough to say these things aren’t meant to be, this isn’t the plan. This isn’t what I’m meant to be doing so it takes the burden off”.

Many participants spoke about how Christianity has changed their lives and they framed their discourses in terms of difficult times and tragedies. The following quotes are examples of the kinds of things participants said:

“I find it difficult to understand, how people get by without a belief in something, a higher power whatever that power might be. For me it has brought me through some very dark places, it has brought me through some situations where at the time I thought how am I ever going to get through this? But I got through it with the peace of having a belief in something that is greater than myself” (Patricia)

Another participant said:

“There are days when I get angry and I question the injustice of some of the things that happen in the world. But Christianity is very, very important to me” (Felicity)

In addition, going back to something Tom said:
“I’ve been through some difficult times but I don’t blame God for anything. I think in lots of ways my life is better because of the things that I have gone through although at times it has been hard. For example losing my job and the funding going. At the time I thought ‘what am I going to do?’ and he brought me something better.”

Other challenging circumstances that participants spoke about included miscarriage, depression, relationship breakdowns, mental health issues, and bereavement. The way that participants spoke about these issues suggest they credit Christianity, and particularly God, as being their personal saviour. Participants were thus using what they understand about Christianity to construct and apply meaning to these challenges. This echoes both the work of Berger (1967) and Luckmann (1974) who argue that humanity has created this transcendental reality to develop meaning around life events, such as natural disasters and tragic events, which challenge our objectivated understanding of the world.

Having so far discussed how participants’ multiple understanding of the God figure demonstrate that God occupies both a superior position and a parental position, the next section of this chapter will examine how participants understand God as an embodied figure. The first descriptor, the Superiority Position, places God as being a separate entity to humanity; one that transcends humans and is superior to humanities’ inferiority. With the second descriptor, that of the Parental Position, participants continue to place God in a hierarchical position to humanity, in that they place the God figure in a position of authority, with humans taking on the role of subordinates. Yet they frame this hierarchy in more compassionate and less contrasting terms referring to God as being a parental figure.

Previously, this chapter has demonstrated that participants construct their understanding of faith through institutionalised activities that are seen through an individualised lens. The two understandings of God presented so far, however, have such a strong fidelity with the institutionalised Christian narrative that, arguably, the impact of individualised reflection on institutional religiosities has not been felt. This institutionalised understanding of Christianity is so embedded that it continues to be reproduced within the
individual meaning systems of those that follow the faith. Understanding of the God figure as creator and father continue to be internalised by the individual and they remain fundamental to perceptions of Christianity among the interviewees. However, the construction of God suggests that while participants use institutionalised religiosities as a guide they also exhibit signs of autonomy in relation to these religiosities. Participants’ understanding of denominational differences and belonging are particularly illustrative of how institutionalised churches do not have complete authority over how participants understand their faith. This is further evidenced by the third way in which interviewees talk about and understand God, which is based on religious activities that are autonomous to institutionalised Christianity.

5.4.3 An Embodied God

Construction of God through religious activities which are autonomous to institutionalised religiosities
This section foregrounds a distinction between prayer (asking for help, advice or forgiveness) and the way that participants spoke about ‘talking to’ or ‘communicating with’ God (talking to God as a friend). Participants imparted a relationship with God that was external to institutionalised religiosities. In the interviews, participants were deliberately asked questions about how, when and why they talked to God, as opposed to how, when and why they prayed. This was to avoid any misunderstanding about the type of information that was being collected. The intention was not to limit participants’ responses to a narrow definition of communication that would, perhaps, incorporate dialogue that happened in a sacred place or at a specific time but which may exclude communications that occur in a less formal way. Indeed participants made their own distinctions between ‘praying to’ and ‘talking with’ God. Participants referred to ‘prayer’ when they spoke about calling on the power of God, but would talk in terms that evoked images of ‘conversations’ when sharing their lives with the figure.

For example one participant, Clive, worked at a rehabilitation centre for men with alcohol and drug addictions. He relates how difficult it is for clients to end their addictions and then said that Christian rehabilitation centres are more successful than those that fall
outside of the faith because they can “pray together”. This evokes a sense that Clive calls on the power of God to help his clients overcome their addiction. Similarly Julia, mentioned previously in this chapter, talked about how she prayed for guidance on the direction of her career, again evoking the sense that, through prayer, she is asking for God’s help.

Fran spoke about how she would talk to God on her commute into work in the mornings. Of particular note she said:

“I talk to God like I would talk to my husband. I talk to him a lot on the train in the morning on my way into work. I maybe don’t talk to him as often as I could do. I won’t say should because it is fine, it is not a problem because the day gets very busy. I talk to him in my head because I know that sometimes people of faith can be thought of as being loopy if they are hearing voices. Yeah, I just talk to him as I would a best friend.”

Here she is not asking for anything in particular, she is not calling on the power of God in anyway. Rather Fran is conveying a sense of normalcy to her relationship with the figure. She is just talking to God, in her words, as if he were her best friend, and she is communicating with God during her commute to work. There is nothing particularly sacred about this activity. Fran makes no mention of any sacred ritual that she invokes with her conversations with God; she just states that they happen for her on a daily basis.

Another example comes from Deborah who said that her conversations with God happen throughout the day. There is no set routine with them, whenever she feels the need to speak to God, she will. Deborah made the point of saying that she speaks with God during really normal activities such as when she is washing up or out shopping. For Deborah, talking to God is not just reserved for conversations about really significant events but also captures all the routine elements of her life.

A further example comes from Stacey, who spoke about how she enjoys having a personal, one to one relationship with the God figure:
“I try to have personal time with God every morning. It is always nice to have that time by myself. So each day, that is when I feel closest to God. I call it meditating on him. That is the Middle East meditation which is filling the mind rather than the Far East meditation that is emptying the mind. Thinking about him, who he is, what he has done, laying the day before him. Things like that is usually where I feel closest. I feel like it is just me and him.”

The example from Stacey differs slightly from the examples of Fran and Deborah. For Stacey, there is an element of ritual about her autonomous communication with the figure. However the example has been included in the analysis because, like Fran and Deborah, Stacey’s communication with the figure is not about reverence or evoking the power of God. Stacey is not asking for anything in particular with her meditation. She is merely sharing her life with the figure.

A further nuance between prayer and the more conversational ways of communicating with the God figure comes from whether the communication is mutual or unidirectional. In prayer, participants reported that their prayers were ‘answered’. So for example, Clive’s clients may beat their addictions or Julia would be surer about what she wanted from her career. However, contact with God through prayer was always talked about as initiated by participants, never by God. In contrast, communications between God and participants that happened on a day to day level was described as reciprocal, in that God would respond to or even initiate communication. In such conversational communication, the participants thus depicted a high level of interaction between God and humanity. For example Michelle said:

“He talks to me in a dream. I have dreams. I don’t have pictures; a lot of people have pictures. I rarely have pictures but it is more a thought, a feeling and an emotion. I have heard audible words, but not very often”
Another example comes from Julia, who said:

“Some time ago I was going for a job interview and I had only just become a Christian and I had been driving around for an hour trying to find this place where I had this interview. Could not find it. It wasn’t an audible... it is hard to explain. It wasn’t like someone had shouted in my ear but in my head I heard ‘stop’. I put my foot on my break, looked up and that was where I had to go for my interview.”

While Julia’s example brings to mind the power of God, it is still distinct from prayer in that the help she received was unsolicited. Julia does not mention anything about asking for God’s assistance in finding the location of the job interview. Rather she conveys a sense that God noticed she was in trouble and intervened.

The way that Fran, Julia, Stacey, Michelle and Deborah describe their relationship with God is representative of the wider sample of participants. The notion that interviewees had personal conversations or interactions with the God-figure that are autonomous to institutionalised religiosities was a consistent theme of the data collected. The conversations that participants have with God can be considered autonomous to institutionalised forms of religion because they happen without the need for the clergy to act as mediation. There is also no sense of formal Christian ritual about these conversations. There was a ritual with Stacey’s communication however this it is not necessarily recognised both within or outside of the Christian community, as a Christian ritual. With all other participants there was no formal ritual invoked when they spoke about their conversations with the God-figure. Conversations and interactions just happened whenever and however the participant thought appropriate.

This ‘however’ is important. These conversations and interactions are different to how participants understand prayer, they do not happen at a sacred place or time; participants reported having conversations with the God figure on the bus, or on the train, when driving or in the kitchen over breakfast. If there was a particular time of the day that participants conversed with God this was out of convenience rather than it having any
symbolic significance. For example, many participants, including Fran noted above, reported having conversations with God in the morning on the way to work because this is the only time of the day that they had little else to do.

These conversations are happening in very profane ways and form part of participants’ normal day to day lives. This links directly to the concept of lived religion as put forward by McGuire (2008), Stringer (2011) and Ammerman (2003, 2007) and the concepts of Belief as discussed by Day (2009, 2010). These scholars all suggest that religious narratives (or narratives of belief in Day’s case) incorporate experiences of the body as much as they are about the cognitive understanding of the sacred elements of faith, or as Day (2010) describes it, propositional belief. Ammerman (2003) argues that as sociologists we should pay attention to a multifaceted understanding of religion from the perspective of religious people because the narratives of religious individuals are complex. They do not just include indices of institutionalised religion but form a much more involved part of their everyday lives. Both Mcguire (2008) and Stringer (2011) discuss the mundane ways that people express their religiosity, suggesting that religion happens as much in the home, street or garden as it does in an institutional church. The evidence in this section is supportive of this understanding of religion. Fran, Julia, Stacey, Michelle and Deborah all relate Christian narratives that are independent of institutionalised religion. Their conversations with the God-figure are through very ordinary means, for example on the train or over breakfast in the morning and they form part of participants’ everyday lives.

Much of Day’s (2009, 2010) work argues that people understand belief through relations with their family and friends or through other significant social relationships. Many of Day’s (2009, 2010) participants had a cultural affiliation with Christianity rather than having a propositional belief in the Christian God, hence Day’s focus on belief as opposed to religious faith, however the principle that faith/ belief is understood through significant social relations still applies to my data. To participants of my study God is a social reality and thus their relationship with the figure is significant to them in the same way that their relationships with their family members are significant.

Participants are describing their belief in the Christian God through their embodied relationships with the figure. The informal or everyday conversations and interactions
participants report having with the God figure also showed no sense of deference or reverence to God, and they are initiated as much by the God figure as they are by participants. Participants are not calling on the power of God to improve their lives in any way. With these interactions there is no sign that God is in a position of superiority or authority, rather God is thought of through profane experiences, someone to chat to about ordinary, mundane things. With the evidence presented here the only hint that the figure is sacred at all is the process by which participants communicate with the entity. Fran talks to God in her head, Stacey meditates, Michelle communicates with God in dreams and Julia describes a non-verbal interaction. Only with these descriptions of process are participants indicating an understanding of God as a transcendental figure. For this reason I have termed this third perception of God as an Embodied God.

**An understanding of God through conversation**

A relationship with God that happens through every day, profane activity forms an important part of how participants understand the God-figure. In particular, participants understand the figure in ways that are different to the sacred entity that is distant to them and has superiority and authority over them. This chapter has already demonstrated how participants understand the God figure as a best friend, someone who they can have a one to one relationship with. This ‘best friend’ narrative was recreated among many of the participants of this study. A standard answer from participants when asked who God was to them was that God is the creator, father and best friend, thus indicating a tri-partite understanding of God. Clive made a very simple but telling statement which was that “You confide in God don’t you?” Clive went on to say:

> “I know that I can tell God anything; that he is always going to be there for me and not judge me, he’s my friend”.

This best friend narrative provides further evidence of an understanding of God that is distinct from the Superiority Position and, to a lesser extent, the Parental Position, because it conveys a relationship that is based on trust and mutuality rather than dominance and control.
This chapter had previously noted that Fran had said “I talk to God like I would talk to my husband [...], I just talk to him as I would a best friend”. This is a simple statement, but it expresses strongly the idea that Fran does not defer to God when interacting with the figure on a day to day level. This assertion is supported by what Fran says in between these two statements: “I maybe don’t talk to him as often as I could do. I won’t say ‘should’ because it is fine, it is not a problem because the day gets very busy”. Here she is conveying the sense that there is no obligation to talk to God. With this position, Fran is not describing God as an authority figure that demands communication from her. Instead she states that she decides when to converse with God. The way she describes interactions with God is very relaxed in that there are no expectations on either side of the relationship.

This concept that humanity has agency over their relationship with God reoccurred throughout the data. For example participants were asked whether they thought God had a ‘plan’ for each of us. The answer to this question was an unanimous yes which prompted questions about how God communicated this plan with us and why some people could ‘hear’ and ‘understand’ the plan when others could not. A theme among the responses was the idea that humanity will only know about God’s plan if they decide they want to. Typical responses from participants were along the lines of ‘you have to invite God into your lives’ and ‘he won’t just barge in, he waits till you’re ready’. These responses are all suggestive of the idea that the relationship between God and humans is driven by us. It is humans that decide if they want a relationship with the figure and it is humans that decide what the terms of that relationship are. Like any friendship, there is a requirement for both sides to enter into a relationship willingly. As the theological depiction of God is of a figure that is supposed to love each person equally, it is the individual that has the power in deciding whether that relationship happens.

The multidimensional understanding of God bestows the figure with a status of power and sacred significance. The God figure is understood as being the ultimate power in the universe, and a figure which has authority over humanity. With the Embodied God, however, God is not thought of in these terms. In this context, participants made no mention of its powerful status or sacredness. Rather, with the Embodied God, it is humanity that has agency over their relationship with the figure. Humanity as the ability not to accept God into their lives, and the power to initiate conversations with God as a friend.
The three positions of the multidimensional understanding of God (Superiority, Parental and Embodied) are not independent of one another. God is thought of as being in each of these positions simultaneously. God is considered sacred even if the figure is being invoked as a partner or a friend in conversation. What the Embodied God indicates is that there is no temporal or locational distinction between the three understandings of God. God is at one and the same time revered and worshipped as a separate entity but also forms part of participants’ bodily and lived experiences.

This section has argued that the way that participants communicate with God on a day to day level suggests an understanding about God that places the figure in an embodied position. The routine communication with the figure and the sense of agency that participants have over their relationship is indicative of an understanding of God that is personified. With this position there is not the separation between God and humanity that is evident in the Superiority and Parental position. Nor is there a sense of reverence or worship. Participants interact with the figure as if it were equal to them. They talk with this position throughout the day and thus with this position participants understand God as being intimately involved with their everyday lives. Participants report an affinity and closeness to this God.

This is an understanding of God that is, in one sense, removed from the sacred understanding and built, instead, through religiosities that are autonomous to institutionalised religion. Of course, the sacred element of God remains because of the other two positions of the multidimensional understanding. However, there are no boundaries to the Embodied God. There is no need for ritual or the help of clergy for communication to happen. In that sense there is an immediacy with the Embodied God. Arguably this position is not just used to construct understanding about existence and identity, but could be used to inform agency too, given that this is the God that participants confide in, spend most time with and take their routine problems to. The consequences of the multidimensional understanding of God will be further discussed in chapters six and seven.
5.5 Discussion of the multidimensional understanding of God
The multi-dimensional understanding of God is representative of the complex ways that the interviewees construct their faith identities. Chapter two of this thesis gave an overview of social constructionism and cited Crotty (1998: 44) who said that “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful ‘reality’ is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world”. Participants’ constructions of realities are not only contingent on human practices; they are also contingent on a belief in the existence of God. To atheists ‘God’ is a human construct. To Christians, God is a very real entity. Thus to the participants of this study ‘meaningful reality’ is not only contingent on human practices but has a layer of complexity that incorporates God as a real entity. As far as participants are concerned this God as a real entity can be engaged and interacted with, leading to an iterative effect on participants’ social construction of religion, whereby they are not just constructing an understanding of faith through religious doctrine that they are told about and which they learn but also through their own bodily experiences of faith.

The multi-dimensional understanding of God developed in this chapter conceptualises participants’ perceptions of God into three positions, the Superiority Position, the Parental Position and the Embodied God. The first two positions have a strong narrative fidelity with popular theological depictions of God as a creator and father. These two perceptions of God are indicative of how institutionalised religiosities are internalised and reproduced in the individual meaning systems of Christians. However, by taking into consideration the Christian understanding of God as a social reality and by exploring how participants construct perceptions of God through bodily experiences this chapter has highlighted themes that support the theoretical concept of lived religion.

Participants relate to God through everyday activity and, correspondingly, understand the figure in embodied terms, in that it has an immediacy and normality about it. This supports the work of McGuire (2008), Stringer (2011) and Ammerman (2003, 2007) and Day’s (2009, 2010) understanding of belief, in that participants are describing an expression of their faith that is removed from institutional religiosities. Instead it demonstrates a multifaceted understanding of faith that incorporates both institutionalised activities and everyday bodily encounters with the figure. Where the first two positions of the multidimensional understanding of God maintain the God figure as being a sacred entity
that is separate from and greater to humanity, the third position understands the figure as being personified and more akin to humanity. Invariably participants described God as being a friend or a confidante, and portrayed a relationship with God that was relaxed, egalitarian and with no expectation of reverence or submission to God’s power. Participants are describing their faith through their communication with God which happens by way of mundane, everyday activities.

Chapman et al. (2012) talk about the Embodied God when they described the Christian understanding of God as being a close personal friend in addition to be a distant ideal and a benevolent figure. However, Chapman et al. (2012) argue that only some fractions, in particular the Evangelical and Charismatic churches, understand God as being a close personal friend. My research demonstrates that Christians who do not identify with or partake in Evangelical and Charismatic churches also understand God in a complex way that includes relating to God through embodied practices and as a personal friend. The interview data indicate that a broader set of Christians understand God as being a close personal friend, in addition to a superior figure and a parental figure. Among the participants in my study, only two specifically identified as being Evangelical or Charismatic, while the majority of participants deliberately distanced themselves from the Evangelical/Charismatic label.

While the theme of the Embodied God has been developed through investigations of activities that are autonomous to the institutionalised church, it does exhibit traces of institutionalised religiosities. The beginning of this chapter noted how, for many theologians, the action of Christianity is voluntary self-dedication to God. The emphasis on voluntarily dedication of lives is so that Christianity is an appropriate response to the ultimate sacrifice that God and Jesus Christ made, that being the voluntary sacrifice of Christ’s life (Betz, 1991). This has been replicated in the Embodied God by participants stating that their conversations and relationship with the figure are voluntary, just as being a Christian itself is depicted as voluntary.

As Luckmann (1974) notes, the traditional Christian model of religion has been so dominant that it has left an imprint on contemporary societies. Even with an understanding of God that has been developed through activities that are autonomous to institutional
religiosities, the institutionalised Christian church is continuing to have an indirect, as well as direct, effect on individual constructions of faith. That said the theme of ‘Embodied God’ is indicative of how religion is adapting to remain valid and relevant to the individual. While institutionalised religiosities still have influence over individual constructions of faith they do not have complete authority. This is illustrated by how participants view denomination. Participants are picking and choosing denominational doctrines depending on how they understand their individualised spiritual needs rather than relying on denominational doctrine to tell them what their spiritual needs are. Participants are making faith relevant to their lives by not just understanding God in sacred terms but by invoking the God-figure through profane activity.

5.6 Conclusion
This chapter has demonstrated that Christians working for faith-based organisations invoke a multidimensional conceptualisation of God that places the figure in the following positions; the Superiority Position, the Parental Position and as an Embodied God. The first two positions have a narrative fidelity with popular theological depictions of God and are indicative of how institutionalised religiosities continue to be internalised and reproduced in an individual’s systems of meaning. This chapter has presented evidence that institutionalised religiosities are viewed through an individualised lens in that participants regard institutionalised religiosities as a guide to their faith rather than representing an ultimate authority. The first two positions of the multidimensional understanding, that of the Superiority Position and that of the Parental Position, exhibit few signs of individualisation given that the narrative fidelity between these descriptors and popular theological depictions of God is so strong.

The multidimensional understanding of the God figure imparted by the research participants can be said to give credence to the social constructionist understanding of religion. For believers, religion is social fact, thus giving faith a dynamic quality. Those that believe in the Christian God would expect that figure to interact with them and respond to their involvement. This then has an iterative impact on how believers construct their faith. This chapter has investigated these interactions and has developed a third understanding of God. This third understanding is indicative of a God that is not just engaged with through sacred activities but also through profane and everyday activities, that is embodied
practices. In that sense the third perception of God gives the figure an immediacy and normalcy about it. Arguably this position is not just used to construct understanding about existence and identity but could be used to inform agency too, given that this is the God that participants confide in, spend most time with and take their routine problems to.

Constructing understanding about faith using a blend of institutionalised and autonomous religious activities has implications for the sociological understanding of Christian involvement in the public realm. These implications are discussed in the next two chapters.
Chapter six: The connection between the Christian perception of God and public service provision

This chapter builds on the multidimensional understanding of God addressed in chapter five, and investigates how participants link their perceptions of God to public service provision. The previous chapter set out how participants of this study perceive the God figure to be a multidimensional entity. This multidimensional understanding of God has a narrative fidelity with popular theological depictions of the God-figure as Creator and Father, however there are also indications that God is understood through embodied practices. This third aspect of the multidimensional understanding of God supports the theoretical concepts of lived religion as developed by Ammerman (2003, 2007), McGuire (2008) and others. Participants are communicating with the God-figure in mundane and profane contexts and this has resulted in an understanding of God that has an immediacy about it, that is personified and that participants relate to in non-deferential ways.

This chapter develops an understanding of how participants draw on their faith when acting in the public realm; how they connect their understanding of God to issues of social justice; and the influence this has on how participants understand their role in public service provision. This chapter then goes on to discuss some of the implications this has for Government expectations of how people of faith act when working in the public realm.

6.1 Translating God into action

Understanding how participants connect their perceptions of God to public service provision started with a more holistic question about ‘what it means to be Christian?’ The responses to this question placed the God figure as the pivotal point of Christianity. This may seem like an obvious point to make with regards to Christianity however the way that participants express this meaning is significant for understanding how they connect perceptions of God to public service provision. All participants responded in a similar way. The following two quotes are broadly representative of the types of things that participants had to say:
“(Being Christian) means putting God at the centre of everything I do. It means maintaining a relationship and having a relationship with God. It’s all about having that relationship with God and other people as well and knowing that because of what Jesus did, I can have that relationship” (Deborah).

And

“(about being Christian) it means having a relationship with God that impacts on my life on a daily basis. Knowing that there is a purpose to life. Knowing that my sins are forgiven, knowing that, yeah, there is a bigger purpose to what I do.” (Hannah).

For Hannah, ‘being a Christian’ means linking her own life directly to a wider Christian narrative. She states that having a relationship with God gives her a purpose and focus to her life. Her reference to ‘a bigger purpose’ suggests that the ‘purpose’ of her life is not just about her own personal existence but goes wider, fitting with a more transcendental understanding of ‘reality’. This has echoes of Smith’s (2007) understanding of religion where he suggests that believers link their problems, decisions and actions to the Christian story and this provides them with the sense that their life has a “larger moral, theological or personal significance” that goes beyond their immediate existence (Smith 2007:169).

Deborah also links into a wider Christian narrative. She gives her life significance by expressing her faith in terms of her own personal relationship with the God figure. Both Deborah and Hannah convey the importance and centrality of the God figure to their individual constructed meaning systems. This was a theme that was common to all participants’ understanding of Christianity.

Both of the participants quoted here refer to religious teachings to express the meaning of Christianity. This suggests that the significance of faith is constructed, at least in

---

19 This is a term borrowed from Smith, (2007) and is used in reference to the broad and common understanding of Christianity that is premised on a belief in the Christian God. The singular use of the word narrative does not negate the multiple understandings of the Christian faith.
part, through institutionalised religiosities. Deborah refers to the figure of Jesus Christ who has a fundamental role in the institutionalised Christian narrative; Hannah refers to ‘knowing that her sins are forgiven’ which links directly to institutionalised teachings on the nature of God. This is indicative of a popular theological basis to participants’ understanding about their own Christianity.

Arguably, there is an element of individuality here. Instances of institutionalised religiosities were not used uniformly to express the meaning of Christianity. The two examples cited above show that participants draw on different aspects of institutionalised religion depending on what is relevant to them on a personal level. Deborah refers to Jesus Christ; Hannah links into principles of forgiveness. Other interviewees link to teachings on love, joy and other values closely related to Christianity such as peace and inclusivity. However, this individuality is only manifest in terms of which aspects of institutionalised religion are drawn upon. Such individuality does not detract from the underlying premise that institutionalised religiosities are used to construct meaning around faith.

An interesting factor in the quotes by Deborah and Hannah is that they both insert agency into their understanding of Christianity. Deborah uses the words ‘putting God at the centre of everything I do’; Hannah talks about the ‘bigger purpose to what I do’. This demonstrates that, for these participants, their understanding of God does not just have significance for how they understand themselves, but it also influences how they act. Just as with the multi-dimensional Christian relationship with the God figure, there is a dynamic aspect to participants’ understanding of Christianity more broadly. That is, Deborah and Hannah are not just believing that God exists; they translate that belief into action.

This sense of agency in Christian belief is a frequent theme among the data collected, as these quotes illustrate:

“Being a Christian is my life. It makes me who I am. I find it difficult to understand how people get by without a belief in something, a higher power whatever that power might be” (Sarah).
Sarah makes a commanding statement saying that being a Christian is her life. Christianity is not just a belief system for her, but is more fundamental to how she understands herself and her actions.

Similarly Chris said:

“It changes your life, being a Christian” (Chris).

Chris is expressing Christianity as being a motive force in his life, a driver of change. Again, this puts across the concept that Christianity is not just about the belief in God, it is not just a cognitive process but there is also a sense of embodiment about it too.

Further evidence of the desire to translate faith into action comes from Carolyn; centering God within her own life is so fundamental to her faith she suggests that all actions should be supportive of Christianity. Carolyn was asked how she made sure that God was the basis of her every action. She responded by saying that she translated her understanding of Christianity into a set of values that can be expressed publicly and that she lived by these values:

“Love, joy, peace, kindness, patience, goodness, gentleness, self control. These things should be evident in everything we do. Just acting in a way that is consistent with belief.”

This statement by Carolyn invokes aspects of the multidimensional understanding of God. The values highlighted have a narrative fidelity with the Parental Position which depicts God as a nurturing and caring character. But the action of expressing these values in ‘everything Carolyn does’ brings into play properties of the Embodied God, in that the expression of faith occurs through everyday activities. What is clear from this statement is that while there may not be a conscious reflection on God through every thought process, living by a
set of values means that all actions should, ideally, be consistent with Carolyn’s understanding of Christianity.

What these quotes demonstrate is that for the Christian faith to have meaning for the individual it is not enough to simply observe religious teachings, rather ‘being a Christian’ requires active participation in a Christian narrative. Christianity is something that is all consuming. The translation of faith into action is a fundamental part of participants’ faith, as one participant said; not acting on Christianity would be a form of hypocrisy. This has echoes of Day’s (2009, 2010) understanding of performative belief in that participants’ faith in God is not just about the truth claims of the existence of God but they make their faith significant through their actions. In other words participants’ understanding of God combines both propositional and performative beliefs about the figure. The data presented in this chapter also resonates with Ammerman (2003) and McGuire (2008), participants understanding of what it is to be Christian is firmly placed within embodied practices that, in many ways, are separate to institutional church.

6.1.1 Expression of faith through altruism

As might be expected with people who have chosen to work in public service provision, translation of faith into action is often expressed among participants in terms of doing something for others. For example Phil spoke about the volunteer work that he and others in his church are involved in, suggesting this was an active expression of the Christian faith:

Part of that (translating faith into action) is about identifying the needs in the local community. We encourage the church to be more outward looking, not just inward but to say if our faith is to mean something we need to express that in terms of doing something for those around us” (Phil)

Tom, Caroline, Audrey and Lilly all make similar points:
“If our faith is to mean something we need to express it in terms of doing something for others”. (Audrey).

“It is about love in action. It is not about sitting on pews and all Christians being together. It is about going out and making a difference” (Lilly).

“God said love your neighbour, so I see that as a clear expression of my faith. If there is a need in my local community I want to address that”. (Tom).

And

“...the ethos of the whole organisation and the values go along with the Christian faith” (Caroline).

Other participants drew on what they understood about God and Jesus to explain why they chose to work in the public service field, for example:

“helping people, seeing families supported is something that I think God would want us to do as a Christian” (Keith).

And

“Jesus didn’t sit in church, did he? He didn’t spend much time in the synagogues. And when he was in a synagogue he was throwing the tables over. Jesus was out there in a community. He wasn’t sat in a church; he was out there with the people” (Denise).
Keith stated that he works in a particular field because he believes this is what God wants him to do. Denise on the other hand prefers to use Jesus Christ as an example of how to act. The idea expressed by Keith, that some actions are the explicit desire of God is an important theme from the data. The selection of simple statements detailed below were answers given by participants when asked what motivated them to volunteer or work in their chosen field.

“It’s about where God wants me to be, really” (Carolyn).

“(I am) motivated by faith, what Jesus calls us to, working in the name of God” (Felicity).

“It’s about expressing God’s will on Earth” (Sarah).

The common factor between each of these statements is that participants understand God to be the driving force behind their action. Participants said they work in their chosen field because this is ‘where God wants me to be’ and they are expressing ‘God’s will’. The simplicity of these statements and the speed and ease at which participants provided these answers suggest that working for God is a deep seated part of their Christianity. They see public service provision as an opportunity to implement God’s will on earth.

The words participants have chosen to describe their motivation for working in public services convey a sense that they are deferring to Gods authority. They are drawing on the constructions of God that place the figure in a position of superiority to them. By allowing their actions to be ‘lead’ by the God figure, participants are accepting that God holds some kind of strategic plan of which they are a part. The quotes above are indicative of how participants understand the plan to be personal to the individual and at the same time have overarching aspects that map out a future for humanity as a whole. For example,
Carolyn’s comment that “It’s about where God wants me to be” is indicative of a personal plan for individuals. Other comments such as those of Sarah are suggestive of the more overarching aspects of God’s plan. They imply a belief that God has strategic goals that encompass everyone.

Many participants spoke openly about how they believed they were called by God to right ‘injustice’. This calling was described in a variety of ways. Some participants spoke about how working in public services was a personal journey, one that they knew was right for them but acknowledging that other Christians may be called to express their faith in alternate ways. Other participants talked about this calling in terms of collective action, describing all Christians as forming an army, personally selected by God to battle inequalities and social wrongs. However the calling is described the underlying theme within these responses reveals a direct link between constructions of ‘God’ and social justice. This is important because it has implications for the way participants understand the role of Christian based service providers in the public spheres.

The data presented above suggests that, for these participants, giving their faith meaning means working to provide public services. Participants are clear that an important part of being Christian is to place God at the centre of everything they do. In that sense a cognitive understanding of the theological doctrines underpinning Christianity does not sufficiently convey the meaning of Christianity to research participants. Participants impart that they need to do more than just recognise that God exists; there is also strong desire to give their faith meaning within their everyday activity.

While there is a need for embodied practices with faith, the link between theological understandings of religion and action remains strong. Participants are linking the issue of social justice to a Christian narrative. The discourse from interviews indicates that this is done in two ways. Firstly their understanding of Jesus Christ is of a man who worked for the helpless and the needy. Jesus Christ then acts as a role model for participants’ own actions. Secondly participants believe that God wants them to become actively involved in altruistic action.
This link between social justice and Christianity is further strengthened when participants explained how they thought the Christian faith adds value to the work that they do.

6.2 Theological connections to social justice
The interview data highlights a significant theme indicating that participants draw theological linkages between social injustice and God. The following selection of quotes largely reflects how participants set the context for how Christianity adds value in the welfare field: “God did not intend for us to be separate from him.” (Catherine); “Bad things happen to people because they do not have God in their lives” (Clive) and “Sin is a barrier between God and us communicating” (Lilly); “Evil happens because people do not let God into their hearts” (Michelle); “the poor will always be with us because we fell in God’s favour.” (Hannah). Such quotes demonstrate that participants understand social injustice as being a consequence of the separation of God and humanity.

The existence of social injustice is challenging for some participants as such injustice can be a source of doubt for their faith. A number of participants openly said that they struggled to reconcile their understanding of the God figure with blatant examples of inequality and unfairness. The Superiority Position not only credits ‘God’ with having created the universe and everything within it, but also credits the figure with having an overarching strategic plan for the universe’s development. A purely logical conclusion of such consuming accountability would be that not only did ‘God’ create social injustice but did so as a deliberate act.

Such reasoning, however, ignores the multidimensional understanding of the God figure. Not only is God seen as a distant and powerful creator but the figure is also ascribed with having a nurturing and supportive role. The understanding of God as a parental figure creates a narrative of love, caring and affection. Thus, for participants a ‘God’ that deliberately creates ‘injustice’ is not congruent with a ‘God’ that is depicted in these alternative ways.

To resolve this inconsistency participants’ reject the idea that God is the cause of injustice and instead place responsibility with humanity. This links in with the Embodied God, where participants report a sense of agency with their relationship with the figure. This
is illustrated by the selection of quotes presented above. Catherine said “God did not intend for us to be separate from him”. This implies that the unification between God and humanity is the goal of ‘God’ and separation is being driven by humanity. Clive said “bad things happen because they (service users) do not have God in their lives”; Michelle made a similar point “evil happens because people do not let God into their hearts”.

The use of the pronoun ‘they’ places the issue of ‘separation’ with someone other than God, similarly the use of the possessive pronoun ‘their’ suggests that it is humans that have the agency in this particular action. Participants create meaning around social injustice that positions it as a by-product of the human rejection of the God-figure. In other words, accountability of social injustice rests firmly with humanity. Indeed some participants made a strong link between injustice and personal failings. For example Phil, spoke about how some of his service users would ask him why he did not suffer from the same bad luck that they had. He said that in response to these kinds of questions he would be ‘honest’ and tell them that it is because he accepts God as his saviour and that if they did the same they would see their lives change. By attributing humanity with responsibility for social injustice, participants construct an understanding of such issues that is compatible with and maintains the integrity of the three-fold understanding of God.

The connection participants make between social injustice and the God-figure may lead to conclusions that conversion to Christianity is necessary if the problem of social injustice is to be solved. In that, if social injustice is caused by a separation between God and humanity, only unification will solve the problem. The connection, however, becomes more complex when taking into consideration the wider web of meaning that has been created around Christian involvement in public service provision. As demonstrated at the beginning of this chapter, participants consider the cognitive recognition of the existence of God as only one part of ‘being a Christian’. What makes their faith socially significant is the act of translating belief into social action. Arguably, separation between God and humanity is not just about whether or not service providers and users believe in the existence of the God-figure, but also about whether their actions are compatible with Christian teaching. The implication of this wider meaning construction is that social injustice happens, and will continue to happen because people choose to live in ways that falls outside Christian principles and ideals.
The discourse created during the interviews suggests that a theological understanding of the connections between God and injustice have been internalised into individual systems of meaning. The way this belief is expressed is different depending on the individual, however the underlying premise remains, that, for participants there is a theological basis to their understanding of social injustice. Taking a fresh look at personal faith convictions of people working for Christian based service providers demonstrates that faith is an intrinsic part of how they understand the field they work in. Creating meaning about social injustice using theological depictions of God as a basis has consequences for the ways that participants view their role in public service provision.

6.3 How participants understand their role in public service provision
The following section demonstrates that inextricably linking the concepts of the Christian God and social justice is indicative of an understanding among participants that Christians are better placed than those external to the faith for tackling social injustice. While there is acknowledgement by participants that secular and non-Christian organisations may have some successes in the field of social justice, such groups are not considered to be in a position to reconnect humanity to the Christian moral framework and thus complete efficacy of outcomes will not be achieved. The inference is that only Christian involvement in public service provision will result in more effective social change.

The benefits of Christianity to tackling social injustice are purported, by the research participants, to be three-fold. The first centres on the theological understanding that God is an all powerful entity and participants feel that they are able to draw upon and harness that power for the benefit of their service users. The second is around moral principles, particularly the belief that the Christian moral framework has an objective quality unmatched outside of the faith. The third is the belief that there is a set of values required for good service provision that are better if they stem from Christianity.

6.3.1 The benefits of Christianity: the power of God

Clive, who works in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre, spoke about how he would not do this kind of work if he were not a Christian. Clive was asked to elaborate on this and to explain what it was about his Christian faith that made his work possible. In his response he talked about the difficulties that some of the men who use the service face and how
challenging it is to make a difference when confronted with people with severe addiction problems:

“I don’t think this place would run at all without God being in the centre of it all because it is such a tough nut to crack”.

Clive seems to convey that addicts would only be able to get ‘clean’ with God’s help. Clive goes on to say:

“Some people have had a life time of addiction and I think for some of them they have tried everything in their power. They must have tried it 5 or 6 times. They get into the frame of mind that God is there to help and with God’s help they will come throughout”.

The organisation that Clive works for has always been ‘Christian based’, in that it was set up and run by Christians. However, until recently it would have fallen into the category of organisations that are loosely based on Christianity. For many years this rehabilitation centre had an operating model that was closer to that of secular organisations rather than one that was firmly based on principles of Christianity. Clive reported that during that time staff were not allowed to talk to the residents about faith or partake in activity that could be considered overly religious.

A few years back the operating model of that centre changed and became one that was more explicitly linked to the Christian faith. Clive felt strongly that this change had a positive effect on the work he did. He said that being able to talk about the Christian faith and engage in prayer with service users is the key variable that has made the current operating model so successful:
“I believe the success rate is better from a Christian rehab without a doubt. We sit here and talk, we can pray together, you know, we can pray and that makes such a difference”.

Stacey, who also worked at the same rehabilitation centre, agreed that the operating model based firmly on principles of Christianity is fundamental to the success of the organisation. Stacey likened secular rehabilitation work as ‘taking something away from addicts’ in that they were being asked to give up the very things that they believe supported them through life. Stacey felt that the Christian faith could fill this gap, so instead of taking away an addicts’ emotional crutch Christians could swap their addiction for something else:

“Secular rehabs don’t often work. Sometimes rehab can feel like you are stripping stuff away from people. We approach them in a family centred way and that comes from Christianity”

The sacred understanding of God ascribes the entity with considerable power. That is power to create the universe, as seen in the Superiority Position, and the power to direct our individual lives, as seen with the Parental Position (see chapter five). The themes discussed by Stacey and Clive are around attempts to harness this power in order to help service providers. The data discussed above is illustrative of how, for many participants, being able to call on the power of God through prayer is how Christian service providers add value to the field of welfare and social justice. As far as participants are concerned this gives Christian based service providers an edge over their secular counterparts because they are unable to do the same.

6.3.2 The benefits of Christianity: the moral framework

Another key theme from the interview data is that justice should be based around a Christian understanding of morals and ethics. Participants felt that while secular organisations can do good work, the moral framework used by such organisations is not
strong enough to fight injustice in a sustained and entirely effective manner. The value of theistic morality over secular morality is that it is said to have an objective quality. The Christian moral framework, from the Christian perspective, is solid and absolute as it is set by God and is not influenced by personal feeling or opinions.

Many participants talked about ‘the truth’ of what they know about God and how this truth applies to everyone. For example Denise worked at an organisation that provides marriage guidance counselling and parenting classes. During the interview she talked about what she understood as being the truth about family. In particular she spoke about how the ideal family set up is for parents to raise children together and that separated couples cause long term damage to a child’s development. She was asked where her ideas on family came from and she said it came directly from the Bible:

“The truth of what we stand for in family is the truth for everybody”. (Denise)

She went on to say:

“I believe that having a healthy relationship is a matter of social justice”

This is illustrative of how participants project their understanding of the world, which is influenced in part by institutional religiosities, onto the wider public. Just as Denise believes that her Christian based understanding of family is right, so too is there an assumption among the wider sample of research participants that their Christian based understanding of justice is also ‘right’ (because it is connected to their faith).

Indeed, participants often expressed the idea that secular sources of advice and welfare, while well-meaning, were lacking a core belief that human life is sacred and that without the moral framework provided by faith, services are contributing to the demise of humanity. Some participants suggested that Christians are being called to action because
“God is disappointed in the mess we’ve made” (Tom). All participants felt that an increased Christian presence in service provision will ultimately be better for everyone. It is viewed as part of God’s plan, and the interviewed Christians are actively looking at ways to convince the wider public, be it directly or indirectly, that their way is the right way.

6.3.3 The benefits of Christianity: Christian values

Many participants of this study implied that they hold specific values useful for service provision that stem from being Christian. For example one participant, Michelle, spoke about how she needed to have patience to do the work that she is doing and compared herself to people who work in the same sector but outside of the Christian faith. Michelle said of secular service providers:

“Some people have less patience than others. It is a lot to do with Jesus’ way of life; Jesus’ work; carrying on Jesus’ work”.

While falling short of saying outright that people who are not Christian do not have the necessary patience to provide a good service, the words that Michelle uses imply that patience is a specifically Christian virtue. For Michelle, ‘patience’ comes from what she knows about Jesus and about how Jesus operated.

The notion that there are some values that are better expressed within Christianity is an important theme in the interview material. For example Caroline who works at an organisation that provides services to women, predominately sex workers, spoke about the ways that Christianity influences the work at the centre:

“The staff aren’t all Christians. The women who come here definitely aren’t all Christians by any means. So there is no compulsion on anybody to be anything. But the underpinning is from the Christian faith, you know sort of dignity and respect”.
Here Caroline is directly linking the values of dignity and respect to the Christian status of the organisation. Caroline explicitly states that the values of ‘dignity’ and ‘respect’ are linked strongly with Christianity. While Caroline recognises that not everyone who works at the centre is a Christian and she does not seem to find this to be a matter of concern in the way that the centre is run, she firmly believes it is the Christian underpinning that ensures the centre adds value over and above that of secular organisations.

Sarah works at the same centre as Caroline and spoke about how the presence of nuns influences the service that is provided:

“The sisters are here every day. So they bring that element of calmness and peace which is nice”.

Sarah makes a link between ‘calmness’ and ‘peace’ and the Christian narrative. Like Caroline and Michelle, Sarah does not say that the virtues of calmness and peace only come from Christianity, however the link between the two is clear.

The value most often equated to Christianity is love. The quotes presented below are typical of the responses participants gave:

“If I wasn’t a Christian I don’t think I would have that love to be able to give” (Maria).

Like other participants Maria is not saying that love only comes from Christianity but she is implying that Christianity makes it easier to give love to others.

Caroline also spoke about love saying:

“It is a very special place here. It really is and yet you couldn’t explain to someone why it is so special. I think it must be the heart and the faith and the love and everything else”.
Caroline was asked if she thought that an organisation that sits outside of the Christian faith could provide the same kind of service as the one that she works for. Her response was:

“Any faith, well no, not any faith, but I like to think that a belief and faith in a God no matter what that faith might be. The most important element is love”.

Her response is interesting in that she gives consideration as to whether other faiths could provide the same kind of service that Christians do. This quote demonstrates that Caroline is specifically equating ‘love’ to a belief in a God, albeit not necessarily a Christian God. It is important to note that Caroline was the only participant who gave consideration to Gods of other faiths, thus she is the only participant to diverge from the theological understanding of the Christian God being the one true deity.

The concept that love has some added value within Christianity is further emphasised by Sarah when she spoke about some of the women that use her service:

“Clients find it a little bit daunting when the first come in, but usually after they have been here for a little while they don’t want to go because they know that they feel that sense of love and belonging [...] the clients experience that love first and foremost and a lot of the time it is love that they have never experienced before”.

While Sarah does not explicitly state that love cannot exist outside of Christianity, her words supposes that there is something special about the love of Christians. Sarah says that the love service users experience as part of the service she delivers is a love ‘they have never experienced before’. Sarah is inferring that love outside of Christianity is an inferior sort of love, or it is perhaps less abundant. The particular nuance that makes ‘Christian love’ better than any other is unclear. What is clear from Sarah’s statement is that she understands
Christianity to represent and embody a love that has a ‘higher quality’ than non-Christian forms of love. Thus, for participants, there is a special quality of Christian love that is unmatched outside of the faith.

In the interview with Stacey she spoke about the importance of acting on her Christian faith. She started by talking about how she knows what God’s plan is for her but makes a revealing statement at the end, suggesting that action not stemming from God is going to be unsuccessful:

“If we ask him he will reveal his plan for us although he does not reveal that whole life plan for you. He only reveals part of it otherwise you are going to be racing ahead of him. So I think you can start out by, when you start doing things, asking is there peace in it? Is it fruitful? Because if it is not from God it is not going to be fruitful. You are not going to be reaching the goals that you set out at the beginning.”

The evidence presented here demonstrates that participants believe that particular values are needed, or are at least beneficial, when providing an effective public service. The predominant value is love but also the values of calmness, peace, dignity, respect and patience were identified. For participants these values largely come from Christianity. While none of the participants explicitly said that people who are not Christians could not hold such values, participants did suggest a clear link between their understanding of these values and their own faith.

All of this is indicative of a belief among participants that there is something special about Christianity which leads to Christian service provision being best placed to provide good and effective services to users. There is an understanding that conditions of love and kindness are of poorer quality outside of the Christian faith. In different ways participants have described life that exists outside of Christianity as a place that is lacking in love, in hope, calmness and peace and is a place where family life has difficulty flourishing.
This makes sense as a conclusion when understanding constructions of God that are premised on popular theological depictions of the figure. One of the fundamental things participants believe to be true about the God-figure is that he created the world. Participants then draw the conclusion that if God created the world then the entity must also have created everything that is good about the world. Thus moral and ethical behaviour, as far as participants are concerned, come from God.

6.4 Discussion on the connection between God and service provision
The evidence presented in this chapter demonstrates that there is a desire among participants to take an active part in the Christian narrative in order for their faith to have significance in their daily lives. This means translating their perceptions of the God figure in ways that can be incorporated into their day to day actions. For participants the mere belief that God exists is not a sufficient expression of their faith. Their everyday lives must also act as a representation of their belief in the Christian God. In particular, for participants translating faith into action means working to tackle injustice and there is a strong desire among them to act within the public realm.

Faith action in public spheres, however, has been politicised. The religious discourse of the public realm is complicated given the historical and ongoing involvement of Christianity in the political, social and judicial systems; and the personal faith convictions of politicians which have been expressed as political rhetoric, for example the current Prime Minister, David Cameron, repeatedly describing the UK as a Christian nation. The literature review (chapter two) argues that the official discursive position of Government is religiously neutral and universalistic. Numerous policy documents have articulated the importance of respecting the religiously plural nature of the UK. That is people of all faiths and none should be able to practice their faith convictions free from discrimination. Thus, in order to avoid the criticism that one religious belief is favoured over any other the political expectation is that religious people who have a public role should keep ‘religion’ separate from their public action.

Arguably the contentious part of this expectation comes with what is understood by the idea ‘keeping religion separate from public action’. Recent publications by Government and public bodies outlining policy on funding for faith based service providers state that
statutory money can be given to faith groups as long as it is not used to proselytise or try and convert people to that particular faith (see “Ensuring a level playing field: Funding faith-based organisations to provide publicly funded services”, DCLG, 2010; “Voluntary and Community Sector: quick start guide to religion or belief discrimination in service provision” Government Equalities Office, 2013; “Equality Matters”, Big Lottery Fund, 2011; “Reaching Communities”, Big Lottery Fund, 2013; and “Community Innovation Fund”, Wirral NHS CCG, 2013). Other publications talk about the need to respect religious plurality, that is to allow people to follow any faith conviction that they want, no faith conviction at all, and switch between faith convictions, as long as they do so without external pressure (see UK Statement to the OSCE on Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2013; “The religion and belief core script” DfID, 2013; “Guide on religion and belief in the Armed Forces”, MoD, 2011 and “Freedom of religion and belief, how the FCO can help promote respect for this human right”, FCO, 2010). Thus it can be said that in practice keeping religion separate from public action not only means refraining from proselytising and allowing service users to access services without having to take part in overtly ‘religious’ activity. It also means that people of faith need to work in a way that respects and maintains the religious plurality of the public spheres. In other words, while participants may have a desire to link their public service work to the Christian narrative, they must do so without drawing service users into that narrative.

Some recent sociological studies have argued that faith groups are successful in separating their own faith convictions from their actions. Johnsen (2009) concluded that there is often very little difference between faith based and secular service providers. In her study of faith based organisations’ involvement in the provision of services for homeless people, she found that, while religious teachings encourage followers of faiths to actively tackle social justice and provide care for vulnerable members of society, the visibility and practice of faith in project programmes has declined significantly in recent years. Some scholars conclude that the requirements for service users to participate in religious practice have largely been discontinued (Johnsen, 2009; James, 2009).

The discourse presented in this chapter has uncovered a more complex relationship between the belief of those who work in Christian faith-based organisations and the services they deliver. My research participants talk about Christianity as a fundamental part
of their everyday life at work, and they frame their actions within faith-based organisations, including how they work with clients, as infused by the Christian narrative. My findings thus run counter to previous research findings by suggesting that people working for faith-based organisations impart Christianity in less direct ways to service users, but they still impart Christianity. In turn, these findings have implications for governmental expectations about how faith-based organisations in receipt of public funding should act in the public sphere.

6.4.1 Theoretical implications of a broader sociological understanding of the Christian God

The evidence presented at the start of this chapter is congruent with Johnsen’s (2009) conclusions about religious teachings encouraging activity in the social justice and welfare fields. However, the inclusion of a multi-dimensional understanding of God in the analysis raises questions about whether faith and public action can remain separate. The expanded sociological understanding of Christian perceptions of God raises questions as to the extent to which participants can work in public service provision without including service users as part of the Christian narrative and therefore also as potential converts.

The Superiority and Parental Positions of the sociological understanding of God are transcendental constructions. As discussed in chapter five, these two perceptions serve a purpose for participants. The Superiority Position maintains a belief that the God figure has created the universe and thus participants are rejecting the discourse that the universe is here by chance. In that sense the Superiority Position serves a purpose for understanding our existence. The Parental Position is the more interventionist understanding of God; this God position knows each individual intimately and is the architect of every individual’s life plans. This understanding serves a purpose for participants when they are trying to make sense of personal challenges and tragic life events that occur in their day to day lives.

The perception of both of these positions is that God is superior to humanity; has authority over humanity and is a separate entity. These understandings of God come from narratives which have been developed external to the individual and are imposed on that person’s constructed system of meaning. The positions are observed, revered and worshipped. Any interaction that takes place is directed from humanity to God in the form of prayer and praise. Participants report that ‘prayers’ are sometimes ‘answered’ but this is
done through a complex system of signs and symbols as opposed to direct communication. In that context these positions provide a wider web of meaning that participants internalise and link into, to understand their own existence and life trajectories. They have a more indirect effect on action through how participants understand themselves and their relationship to the God figure.

This links closely to the work of Habermas (2006) who argues that as long as religious people act in public spheres there will never be a complete separation of faith and public action. To expect people of faith to separate their beliefs from how they act would be the same as asking them to perform cognitive dishonesty. This type of link between a transcendental understanding of faith and action is not a threat to the political expectations held by Government and public bodies, as outlined previously. Participants are linking their personal lives into the Christian narrative because their faith is a motivating factor for their action, but there is not necessarily an expectation on service users to do the same.

The Embodied God adds a layer of complexity to the connection between faith and action. This perception of God is the most personified of the three. Participants interact with this figure as if God were equal to them (God as a friend). They talk with this position throughout the day and thus, with this position, participants understand God as being intimately involved with their everyday lives. Participants report an affinity and closeness to this God; and this position is deeply intertwined with their routine decision making. Where the Superior and Parental Positions are external depictions of God, which are taken up, or not, by the individual the Embodied Position is constructed and maintained through actions of the individual. Making the Embodied Position the more tangible one of the three.

In that sense it can be argued that understanding God as an embodied figure could have a more direct influence on participants’ actions. The Superiority and Parental positions purport a sense of distance between God and humanity, whereas the Embodied Position has immediacy about it. Given how much this understanding of God is embedded into participants’ lives, it raises the theoretical question about whether it is possible for participants to interact with service users and not expect them to be included in the Christian narrative.
The discussion presented in this chapter demonstrates that participants make a direct link between social injustice and God. The theological understanding that social injustice occurs because of the separation between God and humanity was expressed by all participants. Thus for participants the phenomenon of social injustice, that is the field within which they are working, is inextricably linked to the Christian story. This understanding of the welfare field as being part of the Christian narrative has implications for how participants understand their role in public service provision. The evidence indicates that participants believe that Christians are better placed than secular organisations to provide public services. Participants believe that the qualities that are required to provide services with efficacy can best come from Christianity.

Habermas’ theory of communicative action (1992) argues that while religious actors have a right to play a role in public action and they can argue from a position of faith, public discourse must be based on religious neutrality. However, as noted in chapter two (the literature review), this prioritises religiously plural narratives over ones that allow for only one true religion. The evidence in this chapter demonstrates that participants consider their subjective understanding of social injustice being linked to God as being the true understanding of social injustice. This indicates that accepting religious plurality is a cognitive challenge for participants.

In that respect an understanding that religious singularity is the best model for tackling social injustice acts as a direct challenge to political expectations that faith groups act in ways to maintain the religious plurality of the public sphere. A statement made by the UK Government to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe in September 2013 states the freedom of religion or belief concerns individuals’ right “to contribute equally to society” (“UK Statement to the OSCE on Freedom of Religion or Belief”, 2013; my emphasis). The discussion presented in this chapter indicates that, for participants, it is not possible for non-Christian welfare providers to contribute equally to the field. That is not to say that non-Christian welfare providers cannot contribute and that they cannot have some successes but that they are not as well placed as Christian services. While there is acknowledgement that non-Christian service providers have some success, the overriding assertion by participants is that social injustice will only ever be eradicated if there is unity between humanity and the Christian God. The theological belief that the welfare field is part
of the Christian narrative suggests that participants may not recognise the status of other belief systems (including having no belief) when it comes to delivering public services.

**6.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has taken a broad look at the connection between the Christian understanding of God and public service provision. In particular it has addressed what it means to be Christian from the perspective of participants. For participants, being part of the Christian narrative is important for the expression of their faith. The cognitive recognition that God exists is important however faith needs to be translated into action if their faith is to have significance in their day to day lives. Given the complex understanding of the God figure presented in chapter five this raises theoretical questions as to whether participants can deliver public services without expecting *service users* to also become part of the Christian narrative. In other words it casts doubt on current sociological thinking, purported by social scientists such as Johnsen (2009) and James (2009) that the visibility and practice of faith in public projects has declined in recent years and faith groups are reticent to push their faith onto service users. The participants who work in Christian based organisations are immersed in Christianity in their everyday life and their work is firmly embedded in their faith. They are in effect dealing with service users from a Christian perspective with the aim of indirectly making service users ‘realise’ the ‘truth’ of the Christian narrative.

For participants in my research, the phenomena of social injustice and God are inextricably linked. This has implications for how participants understand their role in public service provision. Participants have indicated that Christian service providers are better placed than their secular counterparts to act in the welfare field. This undermines the political expectation that faith groups operate in ways that respect the religious plurality of the public spheres. It also suggests a mismatch between the Christian understanding of action in the public realm and the expectations of Government.

The next chapter (chapter seven) further investigates the connection between God and service provision. In particular it examines how participants relate their own work to their faith and what this means for how they interact with service users. The next chapter provides an empirical challenge to current sociological thinking on religion and the public spheres.
Chapter seven: public service work as church

Chapter five shows that participants construct a multidimensional understanding of God using both institutionalised and autonomous religiosities. Institutionalised religiosities are evident in perceptions of God which continue to have a narrative fidelity with popular theological depictions of the figure. The influence of autonomous religiosities manifest in a more embodied understanding of God that is constructed through everyday activity.

Chapter six starts to address some of the consequences of constructing an understanding of God in this way for public service provision. In particular it demonstrates that participants draw on a popular theological understanding of God when constructing knowledge about social injustice. Specifically, participants understand social injustice to be caused by the separation of God and humanity. This theological understanding of social injustice has implications for political expectations of Christian action in the public realm. Due to the inextricable linking of social injustice and Christianity, participants believe that Christian service providers are better placed than their secular and other faith counterparts to act in the welfare field. This undermines the political expectation that faith groups operate in ways that respect the religious plurality of the public spheres.

This chapter (seven) continues to investigate the connection between God and service provision. It examines how participants relate their specific field of work to their own faith. The chapter starts by developing an understanding of what public service provision means for private faith. It presents evidence that public service work is a form of church and it is a way for participants to consolidate what they have learned about Christianity, to give thanks and praise to God, and give their faith meaning in their daily lives.

Understanding public service work as being a form of church has implications for a sociological understanding of how Christian and service users interact. This chapter argues that participants utilise the concept that public services are a form of church as a way of ministering and proselytising to service users. This is partly done in an overt fashion in that participants look for opportunities to explicitly talk about their faith. However participants
also communicate their faith in non-verbal ways. Participants draw on their understanding of God as being Embodied, to act in the way that God would have and give God human form. By embodying God, participants are able to take God to people that may not ordinarily attend church and can teach people about Christianity, by example. The findings discussed in this chapter pose a direct challenge to the conclusions of Johnsen (2009) by demonstrating that religious practice is still very much part of public projects and there is an explicit desire by participants to include service users in the Christian narrative.

This chapter also builds on the conclusions formulated in chapter six, in that it provides further evidence of the mismatch between political expectations of how faith groups act in the public realm and participants’ understanding of their role in service provision. The current chapter also shows the complexity of theological understandings among participants of how God is presented on earth. When understanding God as the creator of the universe and holder of a master plan, participants referred to God directly. When relating God to actions on earth participants invoked the understanding of God as the holy trinity (in that God is the father, son and Holy Spirit) and referred to both God and Jesus, often swapping between the two.

7.1 Public service provision as a form of personal praise
The previous chapter discussed how working in the public service field is an important part of participants’ individual faith narrative. Not only is public service provision seen as an appropriate way to express the Christian faith but it is also seen as a duty. Participants understand Christians to be better placed than their non-Christian counterparts to provide such services because of the belief that social injustice and Christianity are inextricably linked. The benefits of Christianity are understood as three-fold. Christians are able to draw on the power of God for the benefit of their service users; there is a moral framework unmatched outside of the Christian faith and some values that make public service work effective have a grounding in the faith. The evidence discussed in chapter six suggests that participants understand public service work as ‘working for God’ and participants referred often to the concept of fulfilling God’s plan.

This chapter starts with a discussion of what ‘working for God’ means for participants’ personal faith. That is, what is the function of public service work for the
individual? Many participants responded simply by saying that public service work is a form of praise. For example Maria said that “Every action is a form of praise for God, it is a non verbal way of witnessing the Gospel”. Participants were then asked, does that mean public service work is a form of church? The answer to the question was a resounding ‘yes’. For example, one participant said:

“Our understanding of church is not just Christians that meet on a Sunday, but much wider than that. So a lot of the work that happens here (at the public service), we would see that as an expression of church.” (Penny).

A key theme from the data is that participants feel people outside of the Christian faith have a misunderstanding of the definition of ‘Church’; that is what ‘church’ is for, where it takes place and how it can be recognised. Usually, the word ‘church’, at least for many people external to Christianity, invokes images of a sacred place and time. It is an event that is presided over by a member of the clergy and is the site of formal religious rituals. As discussed in chapter two and throughout this thesis, attendance at this institutionalised understanding of a ‘church’ has been used by a number of sociologists as a key indicator of religiosity (Crockett and Voas;2006; Gill and Lundsgaarde, 2004; Wilson, 196; Bruce, 2002) but according to scholars including McGuire (2008); Ammerman (2003, 2007) and Stringer (2011) this only tells part of the story about religious expression, in that religious activity happens as much in everyday lives as it does through institutional religiousities.

The participants of my study report a much wider definition of ‘church’ than the institutionalised form. Prayer meetings, praise and learning about Christian doctrines take place in a range of settings including pubs, private homes and community activities. One participant even cited 5-aside football as a way of conducting outreach with people who do not necessarily identify themselves as Christian. Discourses of ‘church’ that limit the event to institutionalised religion feel antiquated to many of the participants. Participants are taking a less institutionalised and more individualised approach to religion by worshipping God in places and ways that are more relevant to them, their multidimensional understanding of God and what ‘being a Christian’ is.
That is not to say that institutional churches have no relevance for participants. Chapter five discusses how participants use institutional religiosities to construct, in part, their understanding about their faith and to build meaning around their relationship with the God-figure. For example, chapter five notes how Julia got direction for her faith through conversations with the clergy and through listening to sermons; it also noted how many participants referred to passages in the Bible for rationales of action. Moreover all participants went to at least one institutional church on a regular basis. From interviewees’ discourse it is clear that there is value in going to an institutional church; although the value was not always expressed in terms of their relationship with God. More often it was expressed in the sense of community that they felt from attending an event with people who understand the world in the same way that they do. For example Sarah said:

“it is nice being with people who are like minded. Being together with like minded people just kind of lifts you and encourages you and builds you up again”. 

Similarly Fran had this to say:

“The value of going to church is being together with other believers”.

Drawing on the work of Berger (1967); Ammerman (2007) and Douglas (2003) it can be argued that the social aspect of church is a necessary function of the construction of religion. Berger (1967) notes that group activity is necessary to mitigate against the complete individualisation of objectivated ‘realities’; Ammerman (2007) acknowledges there are cultural, political, historical and legal contexts that frame religiosities, which means that religious activity has a cultural reality that goes beyond what any one person thinks. Douglas (2003) agrees that on an anthropological level, ideas of how people relate to each other reflect cultural, political and social realities, thus, in respect to religion there needs to be a collective understanding of what is or is not religiosity.
Being with like-minded people is an important way of maintaining the plausibility structures (Berger 1967) of religion. Without that social aspect, religion runs the risk of losing its collective meaning due to it being completely individualised. Thus from a social constructionist perspective attending an institutionalised church serves a purpose that is wider than being part of a community. For participants, who consider religion to be a social fact rather than a construction, the institutionalised church has less significance. Many of the things that take place at a traditional church, such as worshipping God, prayer and learning about Jesus can happen in participants’ day to day lives as much as it can happen at a specific time and place. Moreover given the emphasis participants place on translating their faith into action for it to mean something, it can be argued that worshipping God through their daily activity is more important than attending a traditional venue.

The data suggest that attending an institutional church is not necessary for participants to have a relationship with God. Some participants explicitly said that attending an institutional church was not a requirement of being a Christian. For example, Michelle said:

“It is possible to be a Christian and not to go to church as long as you are a good person and know what is right and wrong. It is more about how you live your life”.

Some participants indicated that institutional church was not only unnecessary but also irrelevant to them. For example Michael says:

“I did youth work. I learnt as much doing that as I ever would have done going to church because even now I do get bored with church”.

Michael went on to discuss how he attended an institutional church more out of habit than anything else, and much of the religious activity that was significant to him happened in his daily life. This links directly to a key theme of this thesis that being a Christian is not just about observing particular doctrines and rules but is also a dynamic, relational process.
‘Church’ (giving praise to God) needs an interactive element in order for that activity to be ‘real’. This definition of church as being a function that can happen during ordinary, everyday activities demonstrates that, for participants, clergy and institutionalised rituals are not necessary to facilitate the connection between God and humanity. That is not to say that participants do not utilise the traditional sacred space, just that a relationship with God is entirely possible without the institutionalised element. For participants, a significant part of that relationship takes place in public service provision.

What this section demonstrates is that worshipping God, consolidating what is known about God and maintaining a personal relationship with God all happens through public service provision. That is, ‘Church’ is handing out food parcels; helping a service user fill in a benefits form; and organising days out for the elderly. As McGuire (2008) theorises the line between traditional notions of what is sacred and what is profane are porous and the two domains are not separate. The evidence presented in this chapter supports McGuire’s (2008), Stringer’s (2011) and Ammerman’s (2003, 2007) assertion about lived religion. Everyday activity is ‘church’ and is the conduit through which to pray, worship, learn about and interact with God.

This broad understanding of church gives support to the work of Luckmann (1974) Luckmann (1974) notes complete congruence between the collectively constructed understanding of religion and an individual’s subjective system of meaning is unlikely given that there will not be perfect socialisation of an individual in to the religious social order. Therefore if religion is to survive it must keep on changing. Non-ritualised praise, as seen here, is an example of that change and evolution. There is a decline in attendance at institutionalised church (Davie 1994, 2007; Crockett and Voas, 2006) however, among Christians, not ‘going to church’ does not mean that they are not evoking the multidimensional understanding of God just that they are doing so in alternate ways. As demonstrated in chapter five part of the multidimensional understanding of God have been constructed through an internalisation of institutionalised religiosities. Participants are validating that construction through autonomous religiosities. Perceptions of God constructed through religiosities that are autonomous to institutionalised religion results in an understanding of God that is more embodied, than previously considered. This is an example of the iterative process that results in adaption of religion.
Validation of an institutionalised understanding of God through profane activities acts as a direct challenge to Johnsen’s (2009) conclusions that the visibility and practice of religious activity in public projects has declined significantly in recent years. Johnsen (2009) argues that because worship services, chaplaincy services, prayer and scriptural study are no longer part of public projects this means that religion is no longer practiced (see chapter two for a more detailed discussion on what Johnsen (2009) understands to be religious practice). The evidence discussed in this thesis suggests that it is not necessary or even desirable to take part in such institutionalised activity to practice Christianity. Participants report an understanding of religiosity that happens outside of the institutional church, which is much more dynamic and closely linked to their everyday lives. Arguably, the most important part of Christianity for participants is to become an active part of the Christian narrative and this is more likely to happen during their working day then it is ‘sitting on a pew’. As public service work is a form of ‘church’, this chapter argues that religious activity is still an important part of public projects. It is only ‘invisible’ if the definition of religiosity is limited to an institutionalised understanding. When that definition is broadened to include what might be considered religiously informed practices in everyday life and work, it becomes clear that the practice of faith in public spheres is still strong.

7.2 How Christian elites and non-elites talk about proselytisation and ‘pushing’ faith

Assuming, then, that religion is still very much practiced in public service provision, this has further implications for political expectations of how faith groups act when working in the public realm. As discussed throughout this thesis there are political expectations that faith based organisations maintain a separation between religion and public service provision. In practice this means refraining from proselytising, and allowing service users to access help and support without having to take part in overtly ‘religious’ activity. It also means that people of faith need to work in such a way that respects and maintains the religious plurality of the public spheres. That is, participants should avoid drawing service users into the Christian narrative.

The idea presented so far, that interviewees are using public service work as a form of private praise, does not, by itself, challenge Government expectations. Participants are
linking their personal lives into the Christian narrative because their faith is a motivating factor for their action. With this kind of personal praise there is no expectation on service users to link directly to the Christian narrative themselves. Later in this chapter I demonstrate that there is also a public element to the broader understanding of church and participants are expecting service users to become part of the Christian story. Before coming on to this concept I will address the organisational understanding of public service work. The intention here is to compare the organisational understanding (represented by the organisational elite) of faith-based involvement in the public realm with how individual Christians (ordinary volunteers and workers within faith-based organisations) understand their role.

The interview data suggest that translating faith into action for the purposes of personal praise is the preferred operating model at an organisational level. On an organisational level, service providers are keen to use the discursive position of the state, which represents an active encouragement of faith involvement in public service delivery (see chapter one for more details), as an opportunity to take on a much greater role in public service provision. For example, one Christian elite said:

“Big society gives us an opportunity to say that we should be at the forefront for leading the way with a lot of this stuff and step back from waiting for Government to do stuff” (Terence: Christian elite).

Another representative said:

(about Big Society) “I can see there will be challenges but we see it as an opportunity” (Matthew: Christian elite).
Much of what Christian elites had to say about Governmental policies such as Big Society and Localism, centred on the implications of there being less state funding available, not just for faith based organisations but any organisation. One representative suggests that this could actually be good news for Christianity, saying:

“Funding being withdrawn from local communities gives us a massive opportunity because there is a local church in every community and we believe that the local church is actually the answer.” (Neil: Christian elite).

Many Christian based organisations have been actively developing alternative funding streams. A representative from one of the umbrella organisations I interviewed said:

“We do a lot in supporting churches to make use of their buildings, creating income, renting space to be able to support the work that we (Christians) do” (Derek: Christian elite)

Another representative said:

“we are definitely trying to move towards more successful business models and social enterprise models. That also gives you freedom to go where you want to, go in terms of what you believe your mission is” (Miriam: Christian elite).

Of course, it is not as simple as saying that Christian organisations will find independent means of financing their services. There were a number of representatives who recognised that the current austerity levels evident in the UK, with Government spending less money, are having a negative impact on some projects. For example one participant said:
“Many Christian charities are struggling or going to go under because of funding cuts” (John: Christian elite).

Another participant made the point that while some Christian organisations may be asset rich, that does not equate into having the necessary resources to do the kind of work that they want to do:

“A lot of church money is tied up in the building and land which is not always delivering very well. It can be an albatross.” (Andrew: Christian elite).

However, despite this understanding of the potentially negative impact of the current Governmental financial situation, there was a lot of optimism on the part of the Christian elites. Many interviewees pointed to the altruistic nature of Christians stating that religious people are more willing to donate then others. This translated into how public service providers understand their financial situation. For example during the data collection process one worker was interviewed about her personal faith convictions and she happened to be the CEO of one of the organisations. Given her status at the organisation some time was spent discussing some of the more practical elements of the service she worked for. In particular she said:

“our turnover is about £3 million and the vast majority of that is from private donations. A lot of people giving a small amount each month. We have had a small amount of Government money but that was for a very specific project.” (Deborah).

Relying on a funding stream that comes primarily from Christian donors has implications for how that service is provided, in that, organisations will ultimately be held accountable by the donor demographic. However the Christian elites interviewed also conveyed a sense that they wish to work within the expectations of universality and religious neutrality
presented in the public realm. Part of this is about accessing some of the limited funding still available from Government. As one representative said about the work that he does:

“It’s essentially about going to Government to say we need a level playing field for funding” (Derek: Christian elite).

This particular organisation works with local faith groups to ensure that they present a professional and credible image when operating in the public realm. The organisation encourages faith groups to adopt some of the working practices of their secular counterparts, especially when it comes to proselytising or talking about faith. The intention is to enable faith groups to compete with secular organisations for statutory funding.

Another Christian elite said, working to expectations of Government is a way of getting ‘a seat round the table’. Thus, at an organisational level, faith groups are willing to work within the parameters of religious neutrality if it means that they can be visible and have influence in the public spheres. Here, influence is measured in terms of the values that Christian organisations hold rather than in a spiritual sense.

The evidence discussed here demonstrates that there is a willingness to conform to expectations on religious neutrality in order to receive statutory funding and to be seen as credible actors in the public spheres. The situation becomes more complex when considering that a major source of income for faith groups comes from non-statutory sources such as private donations, rental income and profits from Christian-based businesses. This changes the line of accountability for faith groups from a religiously plural line to a more Christian focus. That said there is broad consensus among the elite interviewees that Christians who work in public service provision should act within the boundaries of religious neutrality and universality as set out by Government. Many elite
interviewees specifically made the point that helping people in need was more important to them than recruiting new Christians\(^{20}\).

It is important to note that this organisational understanding of how Christians should act in the public realm does not reflect how the broader set of participants understand their own role. The interview data show a strong desire among the ‘ordinary’ Christians, explicit in many cases, to proselytise. A theme that consistently came up among the non-elite participants was the concept that they had a duty, as Christians, to share their faith with others. For example one participant said:

“we are supposed to tell people the Good news and the Good news is that we have someone who is merciful and all loving. And we are supposed to tell people without coming across as too annoying” (Lilly).

Lilly finished her statement by saying ‘without coming across as too annoying’. Lilly thus acknowledges that service users may not be as keen to discuss the Christian faith as service providers are. However, despite an awareness of how talk of faith might be received by people outside of Christianity (discussed in more detail in chapter eight), non-elite participants still consistently made statements about how important it was to their faith to share it with others.

A number of non-elite participants went further, saying that the whole point of their public service work was to introduce people to Jesus. For example Sarah said that her primary motivation was to help people but ended by saying that “if I can’t introduce people to Jesus, what is the point?” (Sarah). Another interviewee said that the ultimate aim of helping people was “to share the good news of Jesus Christ” (Christine). Many others did not mention ‘introducing people to Jesus’ as a direct motivation for the work they do, but when asked if they would like to do this, they agreed. One participant said “If someone

\(^{20}\) It should be noted that this was not universal consensus, the Christian elite from the evangelical organisation took a more fundamental position, openly acknowledging that proselytization and conversion to Christianity was high up their priority list. However this was not a representative view.
asked me directly about my faith I would be happy to ask them to attend Church with me” (Michael).

One of the important findings from the interviews with the Christian elites is that they do not think that Christians working within Christian organisations should use public service provision as an opportunity for proselytisation. However this is balanced against a desire to be open about faith status. Many of the elite representatives talked about how openness about faith status was encouraged in the interests of transparency. They qualified this, however, by saying that Christians should only really talk about their faith if they were asked. This viewpoint was echoed by non-elite participants of this study. The following quote is typical of something that was said by many non-elite participants:

“I talk about my faith when it is appropriate. I don’t go around saying about it just for the sake of it but if there is an opportunity in the conversation to talk about it then I would” (Denise).

Further investigation into the issue of proselytisation, however, identified practices that people external to the Christian faith might think are at odds with the sentiment put forward by both elite and non-elite participants. Non-elite participants were asked to give examples of suitable conversation starters that they felt would give them permission to talk about their faith. The example of Phil can be used to illustrate the point I want to make. As discussed in chapter six, Phil works at a soup kitchen providing meals to homeless people. During his shift he said he would often spend time chatting to people that come to the centre about their circumstances and the situation that they found themselves in. Philip spoke about how sometimes people coming into the centre would ask him ‘why isn’t this happening to you?’. Phillip said that in response to this he will tell them it is because they do not have God in their life and then uses that opportunity to talk to them about his faith.

Julia, said that if she hears people use the word ‘God’ or ‘Jesus’ as a colloquial exclamation then that is reason enough for her to start talking about her religion. She gave the example of people saying “Oh God, why is this happening to me?” Julia said that she
uses that exclamation to say that this is not God’s fault. This then becomes a precursor to a wider discussion about Christianity. Penny said that she wears t-shirts with witty slogans about Jesus (she was wearing one during the interview). This participant reported that people will often approach her and ask why she is wearing this and she uses this as an opportunity to talk to them about her beliefs.

People external to Christianity may view these reasons for talking about faith as weak, especially the first two. The term ‘Oh God’ has become part of normal lexicon and the person using it may not have intended to start a theological conversation. Similarly someone asking why they face challenging life events may have intended to raise more functional issues such as searching for employment or practical help with addiction rather than signalling a desire to engage in spiritual conversation.

This approach should not be considered devious on the part of participants. The discussion of findings from the interviews has continually stressed how, for participants, constructions of faith permeate through everything they do. For participants the conversation starters mentioned above legitimately lead to discussions about their beliefs. It is what they most associate with colloquial exclamations or discussions about motivations for working in the public sector. The mere mention of the word God is interpreted as a genuine request to discuss the figure; for Phillip, the reason why service users face challenges in life is because of their attitude to faith.

So far, this chapter has discussed how direct proselytisation was a factor in public service provision. However, the interviews also suggest that some service users are required to partake in institutional religious activities. Clive said:

“ We encourage them (service users) to read the Bible, we encourage them to pray and they talk to each other and they are welcome to ask questions [...] most guys are not Christian when they come here, we never ram it down their throats, we only have that one meeting a day for instance”.

It is important to note that there was only one example of this kind of overt requirement to partake in institutionalised religious activity. Johnsen (2009) found a similar example and
dismissed it as being an exceptional case rather than the norm. It has been included in the analysis however because of the interesting way that Clive frames this participation. He says they (service providers) do not force religion upon services users. They (service users) are only required to attend *one* meeting a day. This is indicative of how, to Clive, religious activity once a day does not represent much of a commitment to the faith. To people external to Christianity this requirement to attend a faith meeting everyday may well be construed as religion been ‘rammed down their throats!’ Linking back to the Christian perception of God however, participants understand God as being a constant presence in their lives, one that is imminent and that they communicate with continually; thus only having to think about God once a day is, for participants, being separated from the figure.

7.3 *Acting in the way that God would have*

The discussion so far has indicated that participants consider public service work as a form of church, and also that they use public services as an opportunity to proselytise and push their faith. The section above has discussed the overt ways that participants do this. However, Christian action in the public realm is more complex than this. There are other ways in which participants translate their understanding of the God figure into action, and that is by acting ‘in the way they believe God would have’. This further form of action links directly to the ‘Embodied God’, in that God is embodied in the tasks and actions performed by the interviewees when they relate to service users. By drawing on an understanding of an Embodied God and by acting in the way God would have, participants are giving God corporeal form. Participants use this representation of God to take the figure to people that may not ordinarily attend an institutional church.

The following quote comes from a discussion with one participant, Julia, who talked about the work they did with young people and gangs. Julia spoke passionately about how much of her work involved what she called ‘being there’ for service users. For Julia this meant taking the time to build a friendship with the young people she worked with and to provide them with love and support. In the following quote she explains why she thought this was the right approach:
“I mean if you look at how Jesus was in the Bible he spent a lot of time healing people, just hanging out with them, being friends with them. So I think that people who are really into drugs or are involved a lot with gangs they are not necessarily seen as the scum of the earth but they haven’t got the best reputation, but the fact that we were able to go ‘tell us whatever you need and we will help you’. That’s what we saw Jesus was about and we just do the same.” (Julia).

The first line makes clear that Julia is taking her cue on how to act by how she interprets the actions of Jesus. Julia says, Jesus ‘hangs out’ with people and ‘is friends’ with them and this is replicated in how she works with her own service users. At the end of the quote, Julia says ‘that’s what we saw Jesus was about and we do the same’. This final line makes clear that it is this demonstration of ‘friendship’ that is driving Julia’s behaviour. She is using this demonstration as inspiration for her own actions. Julia is being explicit about embodying the qualities of Jesus (and God) and is saying, outright, that it is her interpretation of Jesus’ behaviour that is the driving force for her own actions.

Similarly Felicity is explicit about her desire to act as Jesus does, saying:

“On my facebook status, on my profile it says trying to be more like Jesus, still a long way to go”.

So too is Maria who says:

“I have a certain duty to be able to express (Gods love) to other people and in different ways, that means just going out and being the loving and caring person that Jesus was in very practical ways. Taking on the values of God”.
The words that Maria uses convey this dual understanding of God and Jesus; God being the originator of specific values and Jesus demonstrating those values on earth. Marie conveys the sense that God/Jesus not only acts as inspiration for how she behaves but that it is a necessary part of her Christianity to embody these qualities. She must act in this way in order to play an active part in the Christian narrative.

Constructing Christianity in such a way to ensure that it has significance for participants requires them to not just observe the existence of God but also to act on the values of Christianity by taking an active part in the Christian narrative. With regards to public services, participants convey a sense that they are compelled to act in two distinct ways. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the first is to act in the way they think God wants them to and working for God to fulfil a greater plan. This representation sees God as a separate entity; one that participants interact with and work for but is, very much, an external figure. The second representation of God is about acting in the way that participants think God would have. In this representation, participants are copying the actions of Jesus (the original human embodiment of God), embodying the fundamental principles of God and once more giving God human form.

The two representations of God should not be viewed separately but as a process that is happening simultaneously. Participants are giving their faith meaning by acting in the way that God wants them to AND acting in the way they believe God would have. This duel representation of God has a narrative fidelity with the broader sociological understanding of the Christian relationship with God discussed in chapter five. This dual representation of God accepts the figure as a supreme being and in a position of superiority and authority to humanity. But at the same time, participants are representing God in a way that makes the figure much more personal. By taking on the qualities that God is said to represent, participants are demonstrating the same dynamic understanding about Christianity that they do about the God figure. Christianity is not a static concept that is thrust upon participants, but is one that participants interact with and respond to. Participants do not just observe Christian teachings and work towards static aims; rather they absorb teachings and use those teachings to construct who they are and how they act within the public realm.
7.4 Public representation of God: taking God to the secular public
Giving God corporeal form, and embodying God, has significance for the way that
participants interact with service users. This chapter has already shown that there is a desire
among participants to proselytise and convert people to Christianity. So far this has been
demonstrated via the very overt ways that participants find to discuss faith with service
users. The interview data show, however, that communication with service users about faith
also takes an alternative form. A number of participants stated that by embodying the
qualities of God they can use their actions as a way to minister to people. There is thus a
desire among participants to recreate the Christian narrative through non-verbal
communication.

This kind of non-verbal recreation of the Christian story means that participants feel
able to reach people that may not ordinarily feel comfortable being spoken to about faith.
Clive spoke at length about he tries to show service users the love that God has shown him
and that he deliberately takes on the qualities of God as a way of spreading God’s word. As
Clive says:

“(through action) we are taking church to the community”.

Clive continued by explaining that spreading God’s word through his action was an efficient
way of getting the Christian message out to people that may not know what Christianity was
all about. He ended by saying that he would like someone to ask him why he acts in this way
and then he can convey the message about God in a more verbal sense. But it was fine if
that did not happen. He contented himself with educating people about God through
example.

This notion of teaching people about Christianity through example was strong
throughout many of the interviews. For example, Denise said “the people in our lives are
our flock and if people go missing that is important”. I asked her what she meant by this and
she said that service users have gone missing from the Christian church and it is her job to
go and find them. I said, does that mean using public services as a way of teaching people about Jesus that may not otherwise come to meet him?

Denise responded by saying:

“yeah, yeah but not in a teachy way. Not in the sense of imposing something on them. I think the most important thing is to live it (faith) out. I don’t see it as just a private thing. If it is real then you are going to be giving it out”.

This sentiment was echoed by Patricia who said:

“God wants us to love with all our hearts; It is my job to encourage people in the right direction. I can do that by showing how much God loves them through my actions”.

Patricia went on to say:

“so it (public service work) is expressing my love to God, directly to him, in prayer and in praise and stuff like that but it is also what I can do to show his love for the world and to other people. I really think that is my motivation really to show his love and when possible to express to people how they can have that relationship with God that I have, we try very hard not to make a sacred secular divide”.

These quotes show that one of the things participants are trying to achieve through their work is to introduce people to Jesus. However a key theme here is to teach the Christian narrative in ways that does not emphasise the institutionalised notions of the sacred. Teaching people about God by example is not the preferred way of recreating the Christian story. Denise, Clive and Patricia all said that they would prefer to simply talk to service users
directly about their faith. However, teaching people by example is a useful substitute especially in situations where they thought the service user might be put off by direct conversations about God, Jesus and the sacred world.

Another participant, Hannah, has four years experience of working in youth centres, all of which were based in Christian buildings but, as she said, the young people did not have to be Christian in order to attend. Hannah described how embodying the qualities of God allowed her to reach out to non-Christians about her faith but in a way that was relevant to the people she was targeting:

“The tag line with youth for Christ is taking the good news relevantly to every person. It is basically taking the good news of Jesus that he wants to have a relationship with us, taking that relevantly. So relevantly meaning that we are going to come and meet you where you’re at rather then you need to come to us because we have the right answers. It’s more about ‘that’s where you are’ and we are going to come and find you and talk about things that are relevant to you and bring what we think are really good news to you. We won’t sit and talk about God but we will show you how much God loves you.” (Hannah).

Hannah is taking a proactive approach to proselytisation; she is seeking out people to talk to and is giving some thought to how she can convey her message so that it resonates with her intended audience. Hannah goes on to say she changed the way that she approaches people, depending on who she is talking to:

“(Sometimes it was) about us building a relationship with you because you really don’t like church [...] Trying to get young people involved in the church is quite difficult especially in a very small town in an Anglican church because the way that they (young people)respond and the way that they want to be is not necessarily going to fit into the church they were in”.

173
For Hannah, embodying God is a really useful way of reaching out to the people that ‘don’t like church’. It is about extending the Christian message but in a way that is not directly connected to the institutional church. As Hannah said previously, embodying God is about reaching out to people in a way that is relevant to them. This section has demonstrated that through the embodiment of God, participants are able to recreate the Christian narrative in non-verbal ways.

7.5 Discussion on the purpose of public service provision

The interview data discussed in this chapter challenge the political expectation that Christians should keep their faith separate from their actions within the public realm. The concept that public service provision is both a private and public expression of faith supports the theoretical concept of lived religion (McGuire’s, 2008; Stringer, 2011; Ammerman, 2003) in that notions of what is sacred and profane are intertwined with one another. Faith does not start and end with institutionalised rituals rather it forms parts of participants’ everyday lives. This acts as a direct challenge to Johnsen’s (2009) conclusions that the visibility and practice of religious activity in public projects has declined significantly in recent years. Interviewees have indicated that the most important part of their faith is to become an active part of the Christian narrative. In that respect, not only is public service work an example of religious activity it is arguably the most important part of participants’ religious expression.

Using public service work as a form of private praise does not, by itself, represent a challenge to political expectations of Christian action in the public realm. Participants are linking their actions to the Christian story but only to demonstrate their understanding of this narrative. In this particular aspect of public service work as a form of church, service users are not expected to play an active role. The picture becomes more complex when incorporating the multidimensional understanding of God into the analysis. The data presented in the last two sections above act as a direct challenge to Johnsen’s (2009) assertion that faith groups do not expect public service users to participate in religious activity in order to access services. I argue that there is no requirement for service users to ‘attend church’ because service providers now take church to the user. In a sense, through
provision of public services and other community and outreach events or projects, the participants are creating a set of ‘unwitting participants’ in the Christian narrative. That is they are not taking part in religious activity as a deliberate act, but they are still being ‘churched’. The only aspect of ‘church’ that is missing for service users is the cognitive recognition that a divine figure exists.

For participants, church is not just about the deliberate worship of God. There are outputs of church that do not necessarily require recognition of the existence of God. That is not to suggest that the cognitive understanding and acceptance of theological depictions of God and faith is unimportant for participants. However, for participants’ faith to take on significance, this theological understanding must link to their daily lives by way of active participation, thus intertwining the sacred elements of the Christian faith with the profanity found in the everyday. Participants consider it necessary for the satisfactory expression of their faith, to be a dynamic part of Christianity. In other words, constructions of faith’s significance are largely predicated on having a role within the Christian narrative, as opposed to merely being an observer of the faith. Thus there are two fundamental aspects of Christianity for the interviewees, where one is about observation of doctrines and the other is about being an active part of the Christian story. By embodying God, and taking God to service users participants are attempting to include service users as part of that discourse.

This concept that the cognitive recognition is unnecessary to become part of the Christian narrative becomes clear when exploring participants understanding of ‘God’s plan’. I asked participants whether 1) they thought God had a plan for them and 2) whether God had a plan for everyone, regardless of faith. The answer to both of these questions was a resounding yes. Where answers differed was the extent to which the ‘plan’ could be fulfilled if the person in question was not a Christian, or was a Christian but did not know what God’s plan was. Some participants felt very strongly that someone had to be ‘listening’ to God in order to understand what that plan is. For example one interviewee said:
“I think God will always have a plan for us but we have the freedom to be able to say no to that. You can have a plan and not follow it, you can be given a plan and decide to do something else. I mean if people aren’t listening then god is not going to force it on you. It’s not that if you don’t listen to his plan then God is going to make it happen anyway, if he has a plan and you are willing to take that plan, you have to communicate. You have to take that step to know what that plan is.”

Whereas others felt it entirely possible for someone to fulfil Gods ‘plan’ without having to first believe in, and then communicate with God. In this instance the cognitive belief in the Christian God is not necessarily important. On more than one occasion participants raised the issue of moral acts by atheists and put this forward as evidence that God is working through them.

This notion that someone who is not a Christian can be part of the Christian narrative resonates with current popular discourses. Pope Francis recently stated that atheists could get to heaven saying that the redemptive nature of Jesus was not just for the chosen few but was for everyone (Day, 2013). This resonates with the findings in this thesis that Christianity is not just about the belief in God but is also about living within the boundaries of a Christian lifestyle.

This chapter also showed evidence of one example of a public service where there is a direct requirement for service users to take part in a daily prayer session. For Clive, the person working at that service, this daily session did not equate to a requirement to participate in religious activity in order to access services. As demonstrated in the multidimensional understanding of Christian perceptions of God, participants connect with God continually throughout the day and as such a one off prayer session does not resonate with what they understand to be ‘religious activity’.

This direct requirement for service users to participate in what is often considered to be institutionalised religious activity may not be replicated throughout the services that are included in my study. However, this example does highlight how there can be a mismatch between what is understood to be religiosity between Christians and those external to the
faith. This was also demonstrated by what participants reported as being appropriate reasons to discuss their faith with service users. Participants considered the use of the term ‘God’ in a colloquial sense or being asked a general question about challenging life events as giving them permission to proselytise. This links back to participants understanding their faith as being a constant and continuous part of their lives. God forms the underlying basis of all their actions, so when they hear the word ‘God’ they immediately connect it to their belief systems. Similarly participants understand challenging life events as being directly connected to belief.

7.6 Conclusion
This chapter has demonstrated that participants understand public service work as a form of church. It argues that Christians work within public services to live out Christian principles of compassion, love and forgiveness and to give their faith meaning in their everyday lives. ‘Living’ their religion in this way means that prayer, worship and learning about God and Jesus is subsumed into everyday activity. What this demonstrates is that worshipping God, consolidating what Christians know about God and maintaining a personal relationship with God all happens through everyday activity. The line between traditional notions of what is sacred and what is profane is porous and the two domains are not separate in that the sacred elements of the Christian faith (God and religious doctrines) are intertwined with the profanity found in the everyday. In other words the two domains are more merged than previously thought as everyday activity is ‘church’.

Part of this is about private praise but it also has a public element. Participants are open about their desire to proselytise and ‘introduce people to Christianity’. On some occasions they do this overtly by seeking out opportunities to talk about their faith, but there is also a much more subtle way of communicating about religion. By giving God a corporeal form, participants feel able to take ‘God’ to people that may not practice Christianity and recreate the Christian narrative through non verbal means. While there may not be a cognitive acknowledgement to the existence of God by service users, participants are still expecting them to take a more active role in the Christian story.

Thinking about religion as a lived experience does not refute claims that the numbers of active Christians are reducing or that the UK is becoming more secular. It does
however suggest that McGuire (2008); Ammerman (2003, 2007) Davie (1994, 2007); Luckmann (1974), Beck (2010) and others are right in saying that traditional sociological assumptions about what religious activity is, how it is measured or what God represents may mean that sociologists and other commentators on religion are missing part of the picture.

This finding that the nature of church is different from what many sociologists previously assumed has implications for some of the findings of the body of work reviewed in chapter two. In particular it challenges Johnsen’s (2009) conclusions that the visibility and practice of religious activity has declined significantly. The visibility of faith to a secular audience may have declined (due to our misunderstanding of what faith is) the practice of faith is still very much a part of public service provision.

Johnsen (2009) also concludes that faith organisations are reticent to push their faith on to service users and that spiritual aspects of faith are not intruding inappropriately on service provision. The church as everyday activity places a different perspective on the way we observe interactions between Christians and non-Christians. Johnsen’s findings may hold true in that Christians are not pushing for non-Christians to attend an institutional church. But we now have a different understanding of what ‘church’ is. Church is not necessarily the traditional event at a sacred place and time (if it ever was); it now takes place through everyday activities including outreach, service provision and community work. Instead of trying to convince people to go to a traditional church Christians are able to take church to the people and many of the participants are explicit of their desire to do this.

The previous chapter presents evidence which indicates that Christian involvement in the public realm has the potential to undermine the political expectation that religious plurality in the public spheres is respected and maintained. The evidence presented in this chapter adds to this critique as we also see that participants are not explicitly meeting Government expectations about refraining from proselytisation and are expecting service users to take part in religious activity in order to access help and support. The following chapter looks at the issue of religious plurality and proselytisation in more detail, in particular investigating how Christians frame their public discourses in ways that builds credibility as public actors.
Chapter eight: Discourses of love, compassion and belonging: framing Christianity for a secular audience

So far this thesis has argued that when individuals working for Christian-based organisations deliver services to their users, they practice their faith through their work and also include service users as participants in a Christian narrative. The discussion poses as a challenge to political expectations about how faith groups should act in the public realm. Chapter six showed that participants consider Christians to be uniquely positioned to tackle social injustice due to the belief that injustice is inextricably linked to the Christian God. Chapter seven demonstrates how religion is still visible and practiced in public projects as public services are considered a form of church. Part of this is about private praise, however, there is a public element to it too, as participants use public service work as a way of taking ‘church’ to service users. The findings from chapters six and seven can be said to demonstrate a mismatch between how Government expects faith groups to act in the public spheres and what faith groups understand about public action.

The public practice of faith by interviewees could be detrimental to participants’ efforts to be seen as credible actors in the public realm. To understand how participants may overcome this potential problem I have drawn from Habermas (1996:107) who outlines a principle of discourse which states that choices or actions are considered justified if people affected by that choice or action accept them as reasonable. It follows then, that if individuals within faith-based organisations wish to practice religion in the ways discussed in chapters six and seven and at the same time be seen as credible public actors, they need to find a narrative fidelity between their faith discourses and the discourses accepted as reasonable not only by service users and by Government. I’ve included Government here because faith based organisations’ participation in the welfare sector involves maintaining some kind of religion/ state relationship. Funding for public projects is not always provided for by Government, however due to processes of public accountability, the state will continue to have a stake in any action that takes place in the public realm. In that respect
state expectations on faith based organisations’ conduct must at least be acknowledged and to a certain extent negotiated if effective partnership working is to be achieved.

This chapter uses framing theory to understand how participants are attempting to find a narrative fidelity with the religiously neutral discourses expected within the public realm in the UK. It argues that participants of this study are framing faith discourses in terms of love, forgiveness, compassion and belonging, rather than talk about God and belief directly, so that they resonate with public principles of universality. It also argues that participants are amplifying the values of forgiveness, compassion and belonging in order to counter perceived criticisms that Christian are prejudiced and intolerant of certain groups. The chapter argues that the intention behind this framing is for participants to build credibility as egalitarian public actors who are working towards universalistic goals. The framing process is conceptualised via the identification of two social action frames, the Love Frame and the Inclusivity Frame. The chapter only investigates the process participants undertake in this framing, it does not assess whether they are successful in this endeavour.

The chapter starts with a theoretical discussion on framing theory, drawing on scholars including Benford and Snow (2000) Rucht and Neidhert (2002) and Bacchi (1999). The process followed in developing the action frames draws on the theoretical concept that frames are a response to problems, in particular problems as perceived by the social actors who use them (Benford and Snow 2000, Bacchi, 1999). In that respect early in this chapter there is a discussion on how participants are problematising the issue of faith action in the public realm. In particular it discusses what participants feel are barriers to being considered credible public speakers by Government and public service users. The chapter then goes on to discuss how participants are framing their faith discourses and relates this to the problematisations identified.

The findings discussed in this chapter furthers sociological understanding of how Christians are responding to the challenges of working within a religiously plural landscape, by investigating the way Christians express their faith through public service delivery. It begins to challenge Beckford’s (2010) claim that the resurgence of religion in public life is being driven by Government policy and state structures rather than through activity initiated by faith organisations. This chapter argues that framing faith discourses in terms of
love and inclusivity is an intentional or deliberate act. This intentionality demonstrates that participants are proactively working to change their position within the public realm and are not the passive players that Beckford (2010) suggests.

8.1 Frame analysis
Snow and Benford (1988, 1992) and Benford and Snow (2000) have been particularly influential in taking Goffman’s (1974) principles on frame analysis and turning them into a dominant approach to studying social movements. Rucht and Neidhart (2002) describe frames as collective interpretations of problems, demands, justifications and values. These interpretations are given a structure and consistent framework for the purposes of ‘explaining facts, substantiating criticism and legitimating claims’ (Rucht and Neidhart 2002:11). Snow and Benford (2000) considers collective action frames to be tools, used by political and social groups, for reaching agreement on specific issues and in some cases mobilising people into a specific course of action. A key concept in the effectiveness of a frame is resonance, that is, the extent to which a political or social group has the ability to reach a mutual understanding with the target audience (Snow and Benford 1988). Snow and Benford (2000) break down the issue of resonance further, noting that the effectiveness of a particular frame is down to its credibility, i.e., the congruency between frames and actions; the apparent fit between the frame and events of the world and the perceived credibility of frame articulators.

The concept of framing can be linked with the work of Habermas (2006). As discussed in chapter two Habermas (2006) considers that in the interests of fair representation, states’ public spheres must be open to religious contribution. However Habermas (2006:8-10) also argues that in order to get agreement within a democratic, culturally plural, liberal and egalitarian state, public issues that are agreed must be based firmly on religious neutrality. In the public realm Habermas (2006) places a duty on religious people to translate their religiously centric claims into ‘reasoned argument’ that can be accepted universally. This translation of religiously centric claims into ‘reasoned argument’ is a form of framing as people of faith are trying to find resonance with the religiously neutral discourses of the public realm.
The use of the words ‘reasoned argument’ implies a logical, democratic approach to decision making. However it needs to be understood within the context of Habermas’ principle of discourse (1996: 107) which states that choices or actions are considered justified, if those affected by that choice accept them as reasonable. Applying this principle to religious involvement in public life, people of faith can reach consensus with the public realm on religiously orientated choices and actions if they can overcome the discursive obstacles which might make the public believe these choices to be unacceptable.

8.1.1 Frame construction

Rucht and Neidhart’s (2002) use of the words ‘collective interpretations’ to describe frames is particularly important. Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes and Sasson (1992) call social movement frames collective action frames in credence to the collective construction of frame meaning. Benford and Snow (2000) too, consistently use words denoting group action, such as ‘collective’ and ‘shared’, and note that frames are rooted in and constituted by group based social interaction. For Benford and Snow (2000) it is the collective identification and shared understanding of a problem that is the base element for any social action frame, and it follows that the construction of a frame is predicated on, first, the diagnosis of the problem, then the proposed solution and the call for action. The constructionist approach moves attention away from epistemological accounts of how Christianity is viewed publicly to accounts of how Christians perceive their faith is viewed publicly.

A useful interpretative approach to framing is the ‘what’s the problem?’ approach developed by Bacchi (1999). For Bacchi (1999), frames are to be thought of, not as independent tools to respond to existing conditions and problems, but as a discourse in which both problems and solutions are created. Bacchi (1999) asks of any particular frame the questions what is the ‘problem’ represented to be, and what presuppositions are implied or taken for granted in the problem representation which is offered. Drawing on Benford and Snow’s (2000) work on problem definition, together with Bacchi’s (1999) ‘what’s the problem?’ approach as a methodology for conceptualising the action frames, the next section sets out an understanding of the problem representation of communicating in the public realm from the perspective of participants. The chapter then goes on to discuss
how participants’ frame their faith discourses so that they overcome these problematisations and create a resonance with their target audience.

8.2 Problematisations of working within religiously plural spheres
Analysis of the interview data highlights two issues that participants perceive to be barriers to being seen as credible public actors. Firstly, participants believe an association with ‘faith’ (and what ‘faith’ represents) has the potential to discourage Government and public service users from working with Christian organisations. In particular there is a concern that public servers users feel alienated by talk of faith, and that Government are put off by the thought that public services may be used to attempt to ‘convert’ public service users to Christianity. Secondly, participants feel that Christians in general are portrayed as acting with prejudice and intolerance towards certain groups. The next section discusses how interview data support these conclusions.

8.2.1 “Whoa, Whoa let’s back off” (Clive)
On a very broad level participants convey a sense that Government and public service users are put off from engaging with Christian organisations by any acknowledgement of, or association with having a faith. This is especially the case if there is any suggestion that a service user will have to participate in religious activity in order to have access to the service provided. The quote below comes from a discussion with one participant about how Government is disinclined to become too involved with ‘religious’ aspects of faith based service providers. In this particular case, the Prison Service had contracted out a rehabilitation programme to a service provider, knowing that they were a Christian organisation. As the quote illustrates, the Prison Service withdrew further funding when it became obvious that there was a strong ‘religious’ aspect to the rehabilitation programme:

“In the end the Prison Service felt that it didn’t meet their equal opportunities policy because it was requiring too much of people in terms of commitment to the religion. In a sense there was too much religion and not enough rehabilitation about it” (Chris).
The fact that the organisation was open about their Christian status suggests that statutory agencies are willing to work in partnership with faith organisations as long as they are not expecting service users to commit to overtly religious activity. This problematisation by participants mirrors the findings of many scholars in this field. Smith (2002), James (2009), Johnsen, (2009); Thomas, (2004); Cloke, Williams and Thomas, (2009) all conclude that state and secular donors are willing to collaborate with faith groups as long as ‘religious’ aspects of public projects are not overtly displayed. This expectation by Government is well understood by people of faith; Johnsen (2009) notes that religious organisations play up the spiritual aspects of their work for a religious audience and play down the spiritual aspects for a secular audience.

An official Government reason for terminating funding might be about the need to accommodate a plurality of faiths in their rehabilitation programmes, not just Christianity. However, research participants perceive these kinds of decisions as evidence that Government and statutory agencies are reluctant to engage with faith organisations, not because service users are expected to take part in religious activities of a singular religion but because of the wider and more general overt expression of ‘faith’. The quote below is representative of what participants said on this subject. This particular participant presents their faith status as being a deal breaker when trying to secure state funding:

“There is a lot of prejudice against faith groups. If you put in your funding application that you are of faith then suddenly it’s all ‘whoa, whoa let’s back off’” (Clive).

This illustrates a sense that funding has been refused specifically because there is a faith dimension to the service offered. Also, the language used by the participant is indicative of the type of relationship participants think they have with Government. “Whoa, whoa, let’s back off” suggests not just reluctance from Government to work with faith organisations but a perceived fear of being associated with concepts of faith and religion. There is, thus, a sense that participants feel Government is afraid of losing their own credibility by being associated with faith organisations.
Other reasons for Government’s alleged reluctance to be associated with Christian organisations are thought to come from the mismatch between some traditional Christian doctrines and more recent political developments, particularly with regards to equality legislation. Some participants articulated an awareness that they may need to drop some of the uniquely religious elements of their work not only to be taken seriously as service providers but to avoid breaking the law. As one participant notes:

“there are some tricky areas here. The boundary between the distinctive contribution between a faith organisation and its motivation for doing the work may collide with the public sector duty to be even handed. And of course the Equalities Act introduces a general public sector equality duty, so there are all sorts of things there that are untested. But I am sure there will be conflicts and boundary issues about how far a religious organisation has to adapt.” (Miriam: Christian elite)

Instances where the Christian faith is in direct contrast to democratically agreed laws are rare, but this issue raised by Miriam illustrates the sense that some compromises may need to be made, whether that is for legal reasons, to avoid criticism of their faith or to reach a tacit agreement on areas of contention between Christianity and more liberal and secular ideals, for example with gay adoption services, gay marriage and euthanasia.

This overt articulation of political and legislative constraints on Christian actions was largely part of the discursive domain of the interviewed Christian elites. Individual Christians interviewed tended not to talk in these terms, although it is possible and, perhaps, even probable that they too understood such issues. Participants speaking on an individual basis tend to problematise Christian action in the public realm within the context of popular culture. Almost all participants felt that they had less respect from the wider community than their secular counterparts and they cited public and media discourses that portray Christians as being conservative as the cause for this. Participants said that they felt like they are being portrayed as immutable and non-progressive, and that some media discourses make it seem like Christians are victimising specific groups. In other words,
Christians are portrayed, in the media, as having socially and politically conservative views, or as acting with prejudice and intolerance towards certain groups of people.

A reoccurring theme was issues relating to sexuality, in particular gay marriage. Participants were keen to state that connections between Christianity and sexuality depicted in popular discourse were not representative of Christianity as they understood it. As these participants say:

“The media always focus on negative stories such as gay marriage, when that is just a tiny part of what Christianity stands for” (Julia).

And

“I don’t recognise the stories in the newspapers. Very few (Christians) I know really care about that sort of thing” (Maria).

In particular, participants feel that such discourses serve to undermine the status of all religious actors within society; as this participant illustrates:

“People more often than not tend to generalise it to all Christians, so if people have had a bad experience they will not interact with Christians because of that experience” (Hannah).

Participants thus perceive that their ability to engage with certain groups has been negatively affected by a public discourse that portrays Christians as prejudiced and intolerant.

At one end of the concept of a ‘non-progressive’ faith is the issue of extremists. A common theme among participants is that the media representation of Christianity paints a
rather fundamental picture. One participant said that these media representations make “People believe that God is about justice and rules more than love” (Christine). There was acknowledgement that some people who affiliate with the Christian faith do hold extreme views especially around issues such as fertility, abortion and sexuality, and that extreme views can be articulated in a particularly hostile manner. However there was a rejection of aggressive approaches that attempt to impose particular views on others. One participant, rather poignantly said: “Actions in the name of God, but which are not about love is not really Christianity” (Felicity).

These discourses of political conservatism and extremism are not the only discourses on religion in popular culture. Marsh (2007) notes that in film God has been depicted as a white haired old man, a woman, an African American man, an off screen character, a figure of fun and many more characters besides. Indeed, far from being seen as negative, some depictions of God and faith are sanctioned by senior figures within Christianity. For example, *The Blues Brothers* film has recently being described as a ‘modern classic’ by the Vatican’s newspaper “L’Osservatore Romano” (Hooper, 2012). Other cultural works with obvious parallels to the Christian faith, such as the book “the Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe” by C.S. Lewis, are also celebrated by prominent Christian figures including the previous Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams (Williams, 2012).

Despite these many representations, some irreverent some not, it is the discourse that portrays religious actors as politically and socially conservative, or worse, as extremist, that is perceived by participants to be culturally hegemonised. It is felt, by participants, that the discourse that portrays Christians as conservative or extremist is specifically highlighted by news media in order to create a consensus among the liberal and secular population that Christianity is a threat to certain rights and freedoms. These discourses are causing particular concern for participants as it is felt that they undermine the status of religious actors within society. The fear for participants is that this negative media attention is influencing how service users, government and the wider public interact and engage with faith.
8.2.2 “It doesn’t mean you’re raving Jesus Loonies” (Deborah)

Participants are also concerned that Government thinks they have underhand motives for providing public services, in particular that there is a plan to use public service provision as a way of recruiting new Christians. This problematisation is illustrated by the following quote:

“There is a large amount of suspicion on behalf of the Government and statutory agencies about faith groups. In terms of funding, they say ‘are you just doing this because you are trying to make people Christians’ or are you, as you say, going to serve those whether they have a faith or not” (Michael).

It seems somewhat paradoxical that participants consider this suspicion of Government to be a problem for them, yet the discussion of findings in chapters six and seven conclude that participants themselves are attempting to include service users as participants in a Christian narrative. Arguably this is less of a suspicion and more of an observation by Government. A question that arises, then, is whether the inclusion of service users as participants in a Christian narrative is a problem or not, and for whom. Rather than participants trying to convince Government that they are not working within and attempting to implement a Christian narrative in their delivery of public services, is there capacity for renegotiation of terms and conditions when acting within the public realm? These questions go beyond the scope of this study and require further investigation.

It is not just Government that participants feel are put off by an association with ‘faith’. Participants repeatedly spoke about the challenges of discussing their faith with service users and conveyed the sense that service users are actively deterred by overtly religious discourses:

“There are times when people just don’t want to talk about religion or faith because it just doesn’t interest them” (Sarah).
Similarly Audrey said:

“People are put off by Bible bashing. I think there are some people who come across so strongly and force people to sit and listen to them”

Audrey went on to talk about how she is very aware of the stereotypical image of Christians and makes a concerted effort not to act in any way that may be construed as such when working with service users. Audrey demonstrates a belief that her faith may not be received positively by everyone. Sarah, too, spoke about how service users address her faith:

“I don’t know how many of the women that we have would know that I am Christian; some of them do because they have asked the question ‘are you one of those Nuns?’” (Sarah).

This quote has been included here because the language Sarah uses to describe how public service users relate to faith is interesting. The use of the word ‘those’ denotes a sense of otherness and suggests that this participant feels this service user is disassociated with faith. These quotes suggest that participants believe that service users consider faith as something that they are disconnected from, disinterested in and that generally does not concern them. The key task for participants is to get their message across but in such a way that does not evoke these sorts of responses. As Deborah says:

“you have to explain to people that it doesn’t mean you’re raving Jesus loonies or whatever and you go there to be some sort of cult. I think that is what people are scared of”
The data indicates that the participants, who are all working for Christian-based organisations, perceive Government and public services users to be put off from engaging with them because of their public declarations of faith. Participants conveyed a sense that Government feared losing credibility if they are associated with faith and that public service users perceive faith to be something that does not concern them and that they are disassociated from. Participants also felt that Government in particular fear that public service provision will be used as a conduit through which to attempt to convert public service users to Christianity. Finally, the interview material shows that there is a perception among participants that Christians in general are portrayed as acting with prejudice and intolerance towards certain groups. For participants, all of these aspects are undermining their ability to be seen as credible public actors.

Losing credibility in the eyes of Government and statutory agencies is a particular problem for participants because they feel that they are losing out on funding and strategic opportunities to provide public services and are not seen as worthy speakers on public issues. Finding a place in the public realm, which means building legitimacy with both Government and service users, is particularly important for participants; it is believed to protect the Christian identity from marginalisation; they feel they can begin to influence public policy and public service provision and that they can influence the way that society views social problems, with the aim of then influencing solutions to those problems.

The remainder of this chapter addresses how participants frame their faith discourses in an attempt to try and solve these problems. The next section starts with a discussion on discourse framing to address the problem of being seen as intolerant and prejudiced towards certain groups. It then goes onto address how discourses are framed to solve the perceived problem that overt discussions of faith deters service users, Government and the wider public from engaging with them.
8.3 The Inclusivity Frame: amplifications of forgiveness, compassion and belonging

In order to solve the perceived problem of being seen as socially and politically conservative, participants are invoking the values of forgiveness, belonging and compassion. These concepts came up frequently in the interviews when participants were asked “Who do you provide services for?” Overwhelmingly, the response to this question was that services are provided for everyone regardless of faith. The following quotes demonstrate the extent to which participants want to get across the idea that their services are inclusive. That public service users can expect to feel welcome regardless of whether they are of a Christian faith or not:

“If you are providing a service to the public that comes regardless of faith” (Sarah).

And

“We are here for everyone, not just for Christians” (Fran).

Another remarked:

“Our resources are suitable for anyone and everyone so we don’t have any assumption about faith in what we deliver” (Michelle).

And another:

“There are things in Christianity that you don’t have to be a Christian to enjoy like family life, parenting skills and things that cut across anyone” (Michael).

The final quote conveys a sense that even though services are open to people of all faiths and none, what participants believe to be true about their faith is still an important part of what they deliver. This suggests that participants feel that aspects of Christianity, such as Christian moral values, are very much relevant to service users.

The quotes above are about being inclusive of all faiths and none, but the desire to be inclusive goes wider than faith. Many participants wanted to communicate that their
services are also welcoming of people regardless of behaviour or demographics. Participants spoke often about the desire to provide services to people regardless of their personal circumstances, for example:

“Our would definitely provide a service to anyone; I mean a key part of our faith is inclusivity in the way that we engage with others. We would never say ‘you need to be x, y or z’ to receive a service” (Maria).

This particular participant spoke in very general terms, and did not elaborate on what she was referring to when she said ‘x, y or z’. Other people spoke more openly about what kind of circumstances would be accepted by Christianity, the most common being related to issues of sexuality, family and sex workers.

For example Denise said:

“there is no scenario where a good person, with a good heart, regardless of all other stuff, regardless of whether they have been divorced or if they are homosexual; there is no scenario where they would not be loved by God”

While Denise is not specifically talking about public service provision in this instance, this is still indicative of how participants frame their faith discourses in terms of compassion and belonging. This suggests that as far as participants are concerned Christian principles transcend across all communities regardless of faith and demographics.

What is interesting are the particular circumstances that participants highlighted that they were inclusive of. For most circumstances there was a direct link between the field that participants worked in and how they chose to illustrate their response. So for example, participants working with families said they were very inclusive of all family types, participants working in soup kitchens said they were inclusive of homeless people etc. The
one issue that came up consistently and that did not have a link with the particular field that participants worked in was gay and lesbian people. This links directly to what participants understand to be the challenges of working within the religiously plural public realm. By specifically stating they are inclusive of gay people they are demonstrating the extent of their collective sensitivity to the idea that they may be exclusive of this particular group.

This sense of wanting to make Christian based public services inclusive was compounded by some participants who were keen to get across the idea that they were no different to the people they were providing a service for. For example:

“One of the very important things is talking openly about where things haven’t gone right in our life, in our family life and using that to equip people in the future” (Patricia).

Furthermore:

“My passion for women’s issues is because I am a woman and I have had a lot of those issues. And I feel that if I hadn’t been through so many life experiences I wouldn’t be as good at the job I do now” (Sarah).

Both of these participants express the idea that they will deliver their particular service without judgement, because they have experienced the same problems that their service users have. Both of these participants want service users to believe that they will be met with understanding and compassion rather than any kind of contempt or prejudice.

The two quotes above illustrate a common theme among participants; that of a desire not to judge a person for their behaviour and the belief that God’s love is extended to everyone regardless of individual action. The quote below comes from a participant who
was keen to say that they deliberately tried to be non-judgmental when communicating with the public:

“You have to be very careful to be able to express faith in a way that doesn’t offend people because I think that it is easy to come across as saying that my way is the right way and your way is clearly wrong which is not the impression you want to give off if you want to be able to have communication with people”. (Julia).

Indeed, people who act in ways that contrast to conservative Christian ideals were seldom spoken of disparagingly by the interviewees. Such people will, more often than not, be framed as ‘victims’. Instead of judging their behaviour, participants spoke about service users in terms of forgiveness and compassion. For example Sarah who worked with sex workers said:

“A lot of the girls were getting pulled into prostitution you know, because of being away from their families and everything else” (Sarah).

Sarah wanted to get across the idea that becoming a sex worker was something that women have no control over, they are not making a deliberate decision to become a sex worker, rather they are a victim of external circumstances and should be viewed compassionately. As seen previously, a participant working with families said:

“I saw first-hand the real pain of when family life hasn’t worked out like people had hoped” (Patricia).

This conveys the sense that families that fall short of the Christian ideal are not to be blamed. The use of the word ‘pain’ denotes that such people are also viewed as victims.
Finding common ground in this way is an important step towards opening a dialogue with service users about social issues. Such dialogue allows those who work for Christian-based organisations to communicate their own specific viewpoint on issues with an ultimate goal of reaching consensus. For example, one participant had very specific thoughts on what constituted an ideal family and felt that this view was informed directly from his faith. His conviction in this view was strong and the desire to convince others of its rightness was stronger than his desire to convert people to Christianity. As the participant says:

“We deal with family matters and marriage matters, regardless of whether you have faith or no faith you need to have input in that area. We’re not Evangelical in the sense that we are not trying to convert people but we are trying to get families to stick together” (Michael)

This quote shows that even though participants may acknowledge that some service users do not share the Christian faith, participants are still attempting to share their Christian values. This is illustrative of the conviction that the participants have in all their Christian principles and the desire to build consensus, among the wider community, that their values are just and right.

Participants are using the values of compassion, belonging and forgiveness to describe how they act when providing public services. These values come from what Christians understand about the God figure and they are being amplified above other aspects of Christianity, such as the Christian moral framework, to foster a sense of belonging and inclusivity among service users, especially those that may feel excluded by the Christian faith. In this chapter I have conceptualised this amplification as the Inclusivity Frame. By amplifying the parts of faith that are about belonging, forgiveness and compassion, participants are attempting to discredit the ‘conservative Christian’ discourse that they are prejudiced towards or intolerant of certain groups. The Inclusivity Frame serves to create a narrative fidelity with the discourse of liberal rights and beliefs that may sometimes be at odds with Christian doctrines.
8.4 The Love Frame: reframing Christian discourses in terms of love, compassion, forgiveness and belonging

In order to solve the perceived problem that concepts of faith are putting Government and service users off from engaging with them, participants translate their faith into a set of values. The interview data suggests that participants are using these values to talk about their faith, rather than refer to God and Jesus directly. In the previous section I demonstrate that participants translate their faith into the values of compassion, forgiveness and belonging. However, there is an additional and possibly even greater, value that faith is translated into and that is love. Throughout the interviews, participants referred to love frequently: the love of God, their love for God and loving others because of God.

Participants use the value of ‘love’ to explain why they are motivated to act in their chosen fields. All of the interviewees were asked the question “what motivates you to do the work you do?”, and all responses featured the concept of ‘love’. Some participants responded simply with the word ‘love’, while others expanded on this saying things like:

“You only do things if they are around love. This is how you judge every action” (Phil).

Initial responses to the question portray the concept of ‘love’ as being the predominant motivating factor for Christian action. As Tom said, in chapter six:

“God said love your neighbour, so I see that a clear expression of my faith. If there is a need in my local community I want to address that” (Tom).

In this instance, Tom has interpreted this as being a command to address social problems and has cited it as a reason for getting involved in local projects. Another example comes from Patricia:
“I saw first-hand the real pain of when family life hasn’t worked out like people had hoped. I think that was my prime motivation and I believe that was something that God used to bring me here and get me involved in the things that I do now” (Patricia).

For Patricia it is the way that God uses conditions of love, in this case pain, to elicit a compassionate response that motivates this person to action. The action itself is very much believed to be what God wants them to do.

Love as a motivating factor comes from the strong connection between love and God and many participants talked about love being an expression of their faith. In chapter seven, Maria was quoted as saying:

“I have a certain duty to be able to express God’s love to other people, that means just going out and being the loving and caring person that Jesus was in very practical ways” (Maria).

Expressing love in this way is, for Maria and other participants, an important way of worshipping God. For example, Fran said:

“(I) acted in love towards someone because they are in God’s image” (Fran).

This statement shows that the participant acts in love towards other people, because that person is a reflection of God. For participants, love is inextricably linked to God as it is one of the primary values that the figure is said to represent. The concepts of love and God are so strongly related that the word love is widely accepted as a description of God - ‘God is love’ (The Bible John 4:8). Participants use this value to describe their relationship with the figure
as well as to explain their motivations for providing public services. The word love has a definite sacred connection but it is also an everyday word with a more straightforward meaning. Talking about love instead of God, means that faith can be talked about without participants having to first justify their belief in the God figure and without Government and service users fearing that the conversation is going to be overtly religious.

Participants report that all the values discussed in this chapter (love, compassion, forgiveness and belonging), come from the qualities that God and Jesus are said to embody, as this quote illustrates:

“The values spring from what we believe about God and how we know Jesus, I guess. That’s where the values come from” (Catherine).

At an organisational level, findings from this study suggest that Christian organisations are actively encouraged to make this translation of their faith in a purposeful attempt to appear more credible to Government. The following quote comes from an elite representative of an organisation that helps Christian groups win Government funding. The representative says:

“We really encourage a lot of organisations to do some very clear thinking about putting together a document that isn’t necessarily a statement of faith but says that these are the values that our faith translates into” (Derek: Representative).

This participant goes on to say:

“One of the key things that we found early on was there was a big divide between faith groups and the language that we use and articulating what we do and why we do it. Government and statutory agencies have used totally different lingo and the two kind of don’t really meet” (Derek: Representative).
But this translation of faith into values is not just about winning Government funding. As discussed in chapter six, a deeper exploration among interviewees of their motivations for providing services often revealed goals such as wanting to minister, proselytise and introduce people to Jesus. This desire to proselytise and minister is seen as hindered by the perceived problem that the secular public are alienated by talk of faith and God. In response to this, many participants were explicit about how they used the translation of faith into values to communicate the fundamental principles of Christianity but in a way that does not adversely affect the perceived credibility of the frame articulators. As these two participants say:

“Values mean that we talk (about faith) but without making it inaccessible to the people in the community. We wouldn’t want to quote Bible and verse” (Miriam: Representative).

and

“Values are about teaching the Bible differently to the ‘hymn, prayer, hymn approach’ (Michelle: Individual Christian).

These quotes illustrate how participants feel that traditional ways of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ such as saying prayers, singing hymns or listening to sermons in a sacred time and place is no longer a workable tactic. ‘Going to church’ (in the form of an institutional church) is not a relevant activity for many people anymore and participants are using the values of love, compassion, forgiveness and belonging as innovative ways to share the ‘Good News’ and minister.

The analysis suggests that participants in this study use the value of love to describe the Christian relationship with the God figure and explain motivations for working within public services. In addition, the analysis indicates that participants use the values of compassion, forgiveness and belonging to describe the way that they act when they provide these services. By translating what participants understand about the God figure into the values of love, compassion, forgiveness and belonging they hope to engage public service users in conversation about their faith without alienating them. By not speaking of God and
belief directly participants attempt to allay fears that they are proselytising or trying to recruit new Christians.

The connection between the words and sacred texts is strong and the Love Frame can be said to have an internal meaning to Christians as well as a profane meaning to the public. This chapter argues that participants are intentionally using the profane understanding of the words in an attempt to play down the association with God. It is intentional in the sense that ways of speaking about faith have risen out of a desire to spread the Christian message through parts of the community that may not understand the language of Christianity or who may feel alienated by religious talk.

This framing process serves to disassociate motivations and goals of Christian service providers from the concept of ‘God’ and ‘faith’. It creates a narrative fidelity with the religiously neutral discourse that is dominant in the public sphere. The aim of this is to counter the perceived problem that talking about God and faith puts the public off from interacting with them. As with the Inclusivity Frame, the Love Frame is about opening channels of communication with Government and service users. Despite the fact that some participants specifically state they wish to proselytise, the language used by interviewees allays fears that conversion or proselytisation are motivating factors in the work they do, as God and Jesus are not specifically mentioned.

Habermas’ principle of moral normativity in decision making (1992: 87), argues that moral consensus of an idea is reached if all sides share a common understanding of the linguistics involved. The difference between the profane and sacred understanding of the Love Frame, is subtle. The construction of the frame has been developed from the values most commonly attributed to God and Jesus. The words may have a different internal meaning but Christian teachings are widely known and Christians and the wider public understand both the internal and external meanings of the words; especially with the connection between love and God.

8.5 Conclusion
Religious plurality in the UK means that if Christians want to fulfil their own religious goals but also be seen as egalitarian public actors they need to find a narrative fidelity between their faith discourses and discourses which are accepted as reasonable by both Government
and public service users. This chapter has provided a fresh perspective on how Christians and Christian organisations in England and Wales are attempting to find this narrative fidelity.

This chapter has argued that participants are framing faith discourses in terms of love, forgiveness, compassion and belonging, rather than talking about God and belief directly. This chapter has conceptualised this framing into the Love Frame. This frame is indicative of a use of profane terms instead of sacred terms to describe aspects of the Christian faith. The chapter also argues that participants are amplifying aspects of their faith that are about compassion, forgiveness and belonging in order to counter perceived claims that Christians are socially and politically conservative and are exclusive of particular groups. This chapter has conceptualised this amplification into the Inclusivity Frame. Both of these frames are used to ensure that communication about the Christian faith resonates with public boundaries of universality and religious neutrality and thus build the credibility of Christians as egalitarian public actors.

The intentional framing of faith as an expression of love, compassion, forgiveness and belonging poses a challenge to Beckford’s (2010) conclusion that the current resurgence of the role of religion in the public spheres is entirely driven by Government rather than through activity initiated by religious groups. Beckford’s (2010) conclusion assumes a passivity about faith groups in that their involvement in public life is something that happens to them rather than something they have any influence on or control over. This chapter has neither refuted nor confirmed whether the social significance of religion is increasing. However, on the basis of how interviewees talk about their own actions within Christian –based organisations, it has argued that participants are not passive actors in the secularisation process, as Beckford (2010) suggests. In a sense, the use of profane language and the amplification of belonging is evidence that the Christians understand the principles of religious neutrality and universality. They are working within the confines of secular discourses to disseminate their message in a way that resonates with plural society.
Chapter nine: conclusion

The broad aim of this research is to provide sociological knowledge around faith action in public service provision. Radical reform of the way that public policy is made and how services are delivered is underway. Government is seeking to shrink the size of the state and, instead, promote more use of a mixed economy welfare system. That is, a system where communities, third sector organisations and private business, alongside Government, take collective responsibility for the social needs of the public. Government are increasingly looking to faith organisations to provide public services that it can no longer afford or that it has decided it should no longer provide. While it can be argued that faith organisations have always been involved in meeting the needs of communities, there is evidence that they are tendering for more public contracts (Beckford 2010) and they are finding a new voice in local and national politics (Chapman and Lowndes 2009).

The potential problem for Government is that it has little understanding of faith groups or how they act in public spheres. In 2008 the Church of England reported on the issues of Government, church and the future of welfare. In that report the Church of England claimed that Government was guilty of a religious illiteracy. The administration at the time (the Labour Government 1997-2010) had made some considerable advances in engaging with British Islam but had done little to develop relationships with some of the larger faith groups (Davis et al. 2008).

This thesis provides a fresh look at faith in the public realm. Previous sociological thinking about faith involvement in public service provision suggests that faith based service providers act in ways that are largely similar to secular service providers. Studies have concluded that the visibility and practice of religion in public projects has diminished in recent years; that service users notice no discernible difference between services delivered by faith based or secular providers and that faith groups are reticent to push their faith when working in the welfare fields (Johnsen, 2009; James, 2009, Smith 2002).

Arguably these conclusions can be attributed to the theoretical perspectives and research methods utilised by scholars. Previous research has focused on the functional role of faith based organisations in providing public services, such as their capacity and capability
to meet the expectations of Government and the public (Harris et al. 2003; Smith, 2002; Farnell et al., 2003). Very little work has focused specifically on the influence of ‘faith’ and how this is manifest in service provision. Where faith has been addressed, scholars have tended to focus their study at an organisational level (Johnsen, 2009; Smith, 2002; Cloke et al. 2009; Williams et al. 2012), rather than focusing on the personal faith convictions of those involved.

This thesis has gone some way to fill this gap in sociological understanding. Using a social constructionist epistemology it has investigated the personal faith convictions of Christians who work or volunteer for Christian based service providers and has applied this to the work that they do. Data were collected in two stages using semi structured interviews. Stage one obtained a broad overview of the role of Christian service providers from the perspective of ‘elite’ Christians representing Christian organisations that have a direct connection to welfare provision in the UK. Stage two took an in-depth look at the issues raised in stage one, seeking to understand them from the perspective of ‘ordinary’ Christians who work for Christian based service providers.

This approach has produced findings which further sociological understanding of Christian involvement in religiously plural public spheres and I argue that faith is an intrinsic part of the delivery of public services by people working for Christian-based organisations. The findings build on the work of social constructionists such as Berger (1967) and Luckmann (1974) to develop a new understanding of the social construction of God; they also challenge the conclusions of scholars such as Johnsen (2009); Smith (2002); James (2009) and Beckford (2010) by providing an alternative perspective for social and political expectations of how faith groups act in the public realm.

**9.1 Summary of findings**

Investigating the personal faith convictions of volunteers and paid employees working for Christian based service providers has produced conclusions which challenge some of the more established thinking on the nature of religion and the role of religion in the public realm. In particular it demonstrates that faith is an intrinsic part of service delivery for many of those who work for such organisations. Participants understand social injustice in such a way that links it inextricably to their understanding of God and thus, participants believe
that they are being called by God to work in these particular fields. Far from faith practice diminishing in public projects (as concluded by Johnsen, 2009 and James, 2009), a public project is an *example* of faith practice. Public service provision is considered a form of church, which not only provides an outlet for private praise but also provides an opportunity for Christians to take church to service users.

This challenges the theoretical assumptions used by many social scientists (including Johnsen, 2009, Crockett and Voas, 2006, Bruce, 2002 and others) that only institutionalised religiosities are examples of religious practice. The findings discussed in this thesis support the theories of scholars such as McGuire (2008); Ammerman (2003, 2007) and Stringer (2011), who argue that the line between traditional notions of what is sacred and what is profane are porous and the two domains are not separate. Everyday activity is ‘church’ and is the conduit through which to pray, worship and learn about God.

This thesis starts by investigating how participants construct their understanding of faith; in particular it focuses on the constructed nature of God. This thesis discusses how constructions of God are created through a combination of both institutionalised and autonomous religiosities. This was illustrated with the development of a broad multidimensional understanding of God that simultaneously places the figure in a 1) Superiority Position, 2) Parental Position and 3) as an Embodied God. This multidimensional understanding takes into consideration how a social realist understanding of God influences how participants understand the figure, building on the work of Berger (1967) and Luckmann (1974). The first two positions have a strong narrative fidelity with popular theological depictions of God and are indicative of how participants continue to internalise these institutionalised discourses into their own individual meaning systems. The Embodied God is built through participants’ relations with God through everyday activity and, correspondingly, participants understand the figure in more everyday contexts.

Constructions of faith built through institutionalised religiosities have explicit consequences for how participants understand their role in the public realm and how they act. There is a belief among participants that social injustice occurs because of the separation between God and humanity, and, as a result, participants consider that Christian based organisations are better placed than their non-Christian and secular counterparts to
provide public services. This model of religious singularity serves to possibly undermine the principle of religious plurality in the public spheres.

The significance of constructions of God through autonomous or individual religiousities becomes clear when exploring the concept that public service is a form of church. There is an explicit desire among participants to use public service work as a medium through which to proselytise and communicate about faith, and while the plurality of the public spheres acts as a challenge to this desire, participants are finding innovative ways to solve this problem. In particular participants are reproducing their faith through non-verbal means. Participants are drawing on their understanding of God in the embodied position and using that to teach people about God by example. While there may not be a cognitive acknowledgement to the existence of God by service users, participants are still expecting them (service users) to take a more active role in the Christian narrative.

Moreover, religious pluralism results in political expectations that faith groups are religiously neutral when delivering public services (see “Ensuring a level playing field: Funding faith-based organisations to provide publicly funded services”, DCLG, 2010; “Voluntary and Community Sector: quick start guide to religion or belief discrimination in service provision” Government Equalities Office, 2013; “Equality Matters”, Big Lottery Fund, 2011; “Reaching Communities”, Big Lottery Fund, 2013; and “Community Innovation Fund”, Wirral NHS CCG, 2013). Using framing theory this thesis argues that participants are framing faith discourses so that they resonate with discourses deemed acceptable in the public realm. It conceptualises these discourses in two action frames, the Love and Inclusivity Frames. With these frames there are indications that profane terms instead of sacred terms are being used to explain and indirectly promote aspects of the Christian faith. Moreover, Christian teachings of love, compassion and belonging are amplified to counter criticisms that Christianity is a threat to liberal rights and beliefs. These frames, which illustrate the accommodation of Christian discourse to a religiously plural and/or neutral discourse, have implications for how we understand Christian involvement in the public spheres.
9.2 The social construction of God
Chapter five re-examined how understandings of God are socially constructed and developed a fuller social constructionist understanding of the Christian God which builds on the work of Berger (1967) and Luckmann (1974). This chapter investigates the internalisation of institutionalised sources of information about the figure, whilst also taking into consideration the ways that participants interact with the entity, on a basis that is autonomous to the institutionalised church.

Both Berger (1967) and Luckmann (1974) acknowledge the agency of individuals and understand the relationship between agency and social structure as being dialectical. However neither scholar has addressed agency in the social construction of religion in sufficient detail. Berger (1967) theorised that agency in the social construction of religion would result in secularisation as people draw on institutions other than religious ones to develop their own system of meaning. Luckmann (1974) theorised that agency, or at least autonomy with respect to institutionalised religious activity, would result in the development of new religious themes that are autonomous to institutionalised understanding of faith. However he concluded that identification of these themes would be difficult for two reasons. One, traditional Christian rhetoric is so dominant that adherents of faith will continue to use the vocabulary of institutionalised religiosity to describe new themes, thus making it difficult for researchers to identify them. Two, new themes will be internalised in significantly different ways in different social contexts making identification of new themes difficult (Luckmann, 1974).

In attempting to address the issue of autonomy, this chapter drew on the theoretical concept of Individualised Religiosities as proposed by Luckmann (1974) and developed by Bellah et al. (2007), Davie (1994, 2007) and Beck (2010). More specifically chapter five investigated the extent to which individualisation influences the way that participants use or reflect on activities such as Bible study, attending Church Sermons, and formalised prayer, when constructing understanding about the God figure. The chapter also drew on the concept of Lived Religion as developed by Stringer (2011) McGuire (2008) and Ammerman (2003, 2007) and took into consideration how participants use activities that fall outside the structural boundaries of institutional religion to construct their faith understanding. In
particular it focused on the ways that participants communicate with the God figure on a day to day basis.

Using this approach this chapter demonstrates that participants use a combination of institutionalised religiosities, and religiosities that are autonomous to institutional religion to construct their understanding of God. Participants report that they build an understanding of God through Bible study, prayer and sermons but also through private conversations with the figure that happen in the everyday. There is some evidence that institutionalised religiosities are seen through an individualised lens, although not to the extent that Beck (2010) and Bellah et al. (2007) suggest. Individualisation is particularly apparent with participants understanding of denomination affiliation. Participants are attending a range of denominational churches rather than sticking with just one denomination and they are blending their denominational influence in order to fulfil what they understand to be their unique faith needs. This is indicative of a level of agency participants have over their constructed understanding of the God figure.

Through this blending of institutional and autonomous religiosities participants, at one and the same time, understand God as being in a Superiority Position, a Parental Position and as an Embodied God. Constructions built with institutionalised religiosities are evident in the first two positions which have a narrative fidelity with popular theological depictions of the God figure as creator and father. The narrative fidelity with popular theological depictions of God is so strong it suggests that, even though institutionalised religiosities are viewed through an individualised lens this individualisation does not have much an influence on these two understandings of God.

Where individualised and autonomous religiosities have more influence is with the embodied God. This broader understanding of God provides empirical data in support of the theoretical concepts of lived religion (McGuire, 2008; Ammerman, 2003, 2009; and Stringer, 2011). With the embodied God position, participants are relating to God through the activities they perform in their everyday life. Where the first two positions maintain the God figure as being a sacred entity that is separate from and greater to humanity, the third position understands the figure as being personified and more akin to humanity. Invariably participants describe God as being a friend or a confidante and described a relationship with
the figure that is relaxed. There are no boundaries to the Embodied God, there is no ritualised element to the communication or the need for clergy, rather communication with God is routine, in many ways mundane and immediate.

9.3 The connection between God and service provision
Incorporating an element of social realism into the constructed understanding of God changes the assumptions underpinning sociological analysis of interactions between faith and the public realm. Chapter six reports that for participants’ faith to have significance in their daily lives they need to be part of a Christian narrative. This means translating their perceptions of the God figure in ways that can be incorporated into their day to day actions. For participants the mere acknowledgement that God exists is not a sufficient expression of their faith. Their profane lives must also act as a representation of their belief in the Christian God. This supports the theoretical concepts of lived religion as developed by McGuire (2008) Ammerman (2003, 2007) and Stringer (2011), as well as supporting concepts of Belief as developed by Day (2009, 2010). All of these scholars discuss how religious belief (or in Day’s case, just belief) is an embodied practice. Belief is not just a cognitive process but is dynamic, there is an immediacy about it and it includes an element of agency. In particular, for this set of participants translating faith into action means working to tackle injustice and there is a strong desire among participants to act within this particular part of the public realm.

Faith action in public spheres, however, has been politicised. The religious discourse of the public realm is complicated given the historical and ongoing involvement of Christianity in the political, social and judicial systems; and the personal faith convictions of politicians which have been expressed as political rhetoric. Nevertheless, the dominant discursive position of Government is religiously neutral and universalistic. Numerous policy documents have articulated the importance of respecting the religious plurality in the UK, have stressed that religious actors should refrain from proselytising when providing public services and that there should be no expectation that service users partake in religious activity in order to receive a service (“Ensuring a level playing field: Funding faith-based organisations to provide publicly funded services”, DCLG, 2010; “Voluntary and Community Sector: quick start guide to religion or belief discrimination in service provision” Government Equalities Office, 2013; “Equality Matters”, Big Lottery Fund, 2011; “Reaching
The multi-dimensional understanding of God raises questions about the extent to which ‘faith’ and public action can remain separate. The Superiority and Parental Positions are transcendental constructions of God. These are externally developed positions that are imposed on the individual and internalised (or not) by that person. They take on a form that is separate from humanity in that they are observed, revered and worshipped. Any interaction that takes place is directed from humanity to God in the form of prayer and praise. Participants report that ‘prayers’ are sometimes ‘answered’ but this is done through a complex system of signs and symbols as opposed to direct communication. In that context these positions provide a wider web of meaning that participants internalise and link into, to understand their own existence and life trajectories. They only have an indirect effect on action by having an influence on how participants understand themselves.

This links closely to the work of Habermas (2006) who argued that while religious people act in public spheres there will never be a separation of faith and public action. To expect people of faith to separate their beliefs from how they act would be a form of cognitive dishonesty. This type of link between faith and action, however, is not a threat to political expectations. Participants are linking into the Christian narrative but there is no expectation on service users to do the same.

The Embodied God position, on the other hand, adds a layer of complexity to the connection between faith and action. This perception of God is the most personified of the three. Participants interact with this figure as if God were equal to them. They talk with this position throughout the day and thus, with this position, participants understand God as being intimately involved with their everyday lives. Participants report an affinity and closeness to this God; and it is this position that is intertwined with their routine decision making. All three positions of God represent a social reality to participants but it is the embodied position that is the tangible one of the three.

In that sense it can be argued that understanding God as an embodied figure could have a direct influence on participants’ actions. Given how much this understanding of God is embedded into participants’ lives, it raises the theoretical question about whether it is
possible for participants to interact with service users and *not* expect them to become part of the Christian narrative.

For participants, the phenomena of social injustice and God are inextricably linked. This has implications for how participants understand their role in public service provision. Participants have indicated that Christian service providers are better placed than their secular and other faith counterparts to act in the welfare field. The benefits of Christianity are described as three-fold. Firstly participants feel that they are able to call on the power of God to support service users, they feel that the Christian moral framework has an efficacy unrivalled outside of Christianity and they believe that the qualities required to provide good services come from the Christian faith.

Believing that Christian organisations are better placed than secular organisations for tackling social injustice undermines political expectations that the religious plurality of the public spheres is respected. The evidence presented in chapter six indicates that, for participants, non-Christian welfare providers are less able to contribute equally to the field. While there is acknowledgement that non-Christian service providers have some success the overriding assertion by participants is that social injustice can best be tackled if there is unity between humanity and the Christian God. The theological belief that the welfare field is part of the Christian narrative indicates that participants do not recognise the status of other belief systems when it comes to delivering public services.

**9.4 Embodying God**

A more in-depth investigation into how participants relate their own work to their faith demonstrates that contrary to conclusions by Johnsen (2009) the practice of faith in public projects is still strong. Participants use public service work as a form of ‘church’. They become involved in the welfare field because they believe this is where God wants them to be. Through public service work participants can consolidate what they understand about God and faith; acknowledge the sacrifice that participants believe God and Jesus made for them and worship and revere the figure. Participants work within public services to live out Christian principles of compassion, love and forgiveness and to give their faith meaning in their everyday lives. ‘Living’ their religion in this way means that prayer, worship and learning about God and Jesus is subsumed into everyday activity.
This directly challenges the findings of Johnsen (2009) who concludes that the *practice* of religion in public projects has declined in recent years. By widening the boundaries of what is considered religious activity and drawing on the theoretical concepts of individualised religiosities and lived religion to reassess religiosity, this thesis indicates that religious practice still happens in the public spheres, albeit in more subtle ways than some scholars have previously concluded.

Working ‘in the way that God wants’ is a form of private worship, however public service provision has a public element too. The findings discussed in chapter seven indicate that there is a desire among participants to introduce people to Christianity. Sharing the good news about God’s love is an important motivating factor for many of the participants interviewed as part of this study. A theme that consistently came up was the concept that they had a duty, as Christians, to share their faith with others.

The communication of faith to service users takes a complex form. In some instances participants are seeking out opportunities to talk about faith directly with service users. Participants state that they will only discuss their faith, if they are asked. This position sits nicely with the organisational understanding of faith action in the public realm. At an organisational level, there is a desire to achieve a balance between meeting the expectations set by Government, that ‘religion’ and public service provision will be ‘separate’, but at the same time operating a culture that is open and honest about faith status. The conversation starters that participants consider to be appropriate for discussing faith, however, may seem, to people external to Christianity, to be weak. Participants report using colloquial exclamations of the words ‘God’ and ‘Jesus’ and functional questions about challenging life events as a reason to discuss spiritual aspects of Christianity. This approach should not be considered devious on the part of participants. The discussion throughout this thesis has continually stressed how, for participants, constructions of their faith permeate through everything they do. The mere mention of the word God is interpreted as a genuine request to discuss the figure.

The communication of faith also takes a non-verbal form. Participants are explicit about how they are embodying God so that they can take ‘God’ to people that may not ordinarily practice Christianity. Thus they are reproducing the Christian narrative by
example. Through provision of public services and other community and outreach events or projects, the participants are creating a set of unwitting participants in the Christian story. That is service users are not taking part in religious activity as a deliberate act, but they are still being ‘churched’ in more indirect ways.

The understanding of church as present in everyday life and work demonstrates that, for participants, church is not just about the deliberate worship of God. There are outputs of church that do not necessarily require recognition of the existence of the figure. This thesis has discussed how taking a dynamic and active part in the Christian narrative is just as important as observing religious teaching. By embodying God, and taking God to service users participants are attempting to include service users as part of that discourse.

The findings presented and discussed in chapter seven challenges sociological assumptions that faith organisations are reticent to push their faith when providing services. The church as everyday activity places a different perspective on the way we observe interactions between Christians and service users. Johnsen’s (2009) findings may hold true in that Christians are not pushing for non-Christians to attend an institutional church. But there is now a different understanding of what ‘church’ is. Church is not just the traditional event at a sacred place and time (if it ever was), it takes place through everyday activities including outreach, service provision and community work. Chapter seven has argued that there is no requirement for service users to ‘attend church’ because service providers now take church to the user.

The line between traditional notions of what is sacred and what is profane is porous and the two domains are not separate. The two domains are intertwined as everyday activity expresses ‘church’. This chapter provides further support to the conclusions of that McGuire (2008); Ammerman (2003, 2007) Davie (1994, 2007); Luckmann (1974), and Beck (2009) in that some sociological assumptions about what religious activity is, how it is measured or what God represents may mean that some sociologists, and other commentators on religion, are missing part of the picture.
9.5 Discourses of love, compassion and belonging

Chapter six argues that participants consider Christians to be better placed than their secular counterparts to provide public services. Furthermore, Chapter seven argues that religion is still visible and practiced in public projects as public services are considered a form of church. The findings from both of these chapters can be interpreted as undermining the principle of religious plurality and neutrality that Government expects of faith groups when they act in public spheres. Chapter eight addresses how participants balance the public practice of faith with the need to find a narrative fidelity between their faith discourses and discourses which are accepted as reasonable by both Government and public service users. Chapter eight uses framing theory to provide a new perspective on how Christians attempt to find such narrative fidelity.

Findings suggest that faith discourses are being framed (by participants) in ways that counter what participants understand to be the problems of acting in the public realm. Drawing on Bacchi’s (1999) concept of problem representation, in that solutions to problems are dependent on what that problem is understood to be, chapter eight starts with a discussion on how participants think Christianity is viewed publicly. Analysis of the interview data highlights two issues that participants perceive to be barriers to being seen as credible public actors. Firstly, participants believe an association with ‘faith’ (and what ‘faith’ represents) has the potential to discourage Government and public service users from working with Christian organisations. In particular there is a concern that public servers users feel alienated by talk of faith, and that Government are put off by the thought that public services may be used to attempt to ‘convert’ service users to Christianity. Secondly, participants feel that Christians in general are portrayed as acting with prejudice and intolerance towards certain groups.

To counter the perceived criticism that Christians are prejudiced and intolerant towards certain groups, participants amplify aspects of their faith that are around compassion, forgiveness and belonging. These values are being amplified above other aspects of Christianity, such as the Christian moral framework, to foster a sense of belonging and inclusivity among service users, especially those that may feel excluded by the Christian faith. I have conceptualised this amplification as the Inclusivity Frame and it is used to describe the way that participants act when providing these services. I argue this action...
frame is an attempt, by participants, to discredit this perceived criticism and instead create a narrative fidelity with the discourse of liberal rights and beliefs that may sometimes be at odds with Christian doctrines.

To counter the perceived criticism that talk of faith alienates Government and service users, as well as the perceived criticism that participants are using public services as a way of converting service users to Christianity, participants are translating their faith into a set of values. These values are love, compassion, forgiveness and belonging and are being used to talk about the Christian faith rather than to talk about God and belief directly. By translating what participants understand about the God figure into the values they hope to engage public service users in conversation about their faith without alienating them. By not speaking of God and belief directly participants attempt to allay fears that they are proselytising or trying to recruit new Christians (even though in previous chapters I demonstrate that this is the goal of many participants). I have conceptualised this framing as the Love Frame and it is used to describe the Christian relationship with the God-figure and explain motivations for working in the welfare field. The connection between the words and sacred texts is strong and the Love Frame can be said to have an internal meaning to Christians as well as a profane meaning to the public. However this framing process serves to disassociate motivations and goals of Christian service providers from the concept of ‘God’ and ‘faith’. It creates a narrative fidelity with the religiously neutral discourse that is dominant in the public spheres. This frames is indicative of a shift towards a use of profane terms instead of sacred terms to describe aspects of the Christian faith. Both frames are used to ensure that communication about the Christian faith resonates with public boundaries of universality and religious neutrality and thus build the credibility of Christians as egalitarian public actors.

9.6 Implications for Government
The findings presented and discussed in the thesis have implications for the political understanding of the interaction between faith and the public spheres. The introduction to this thesis details how Government is encouraging faith involvement in the public spheres in two ways. The first way is direct in that Government are outsourcing the running of public services to faith based organisations. Policy documents such as
“Ensuring a level playing field: Funding faith-based organisations to provide publicly funded services” (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010) can be considered a publicly stated commitment to incorporating faith groups in statutorily provided services, albeit with conditions attached. For example, level the playing field stipulates that statutory funding can be given to faith groups but it must not be spent on overtly religious activity such as proselytising or trying to convert people to a particular faith.

Faith groups are also being encouraged to become involved in the public sphere through indirect means. Scholars such as Baker (2012), Jawad (2012, 2012a) and Beckford (2010) trace this encouragement to the election of the New Labour administration in 1997 highlighting policy documents such as “working together”, as evidence of a deliberate strategy to form stronger partnerships with faith groups. This discursive encouragement of faith group involvement in public spheres has continued with the Coalition Government following elections in 2010.

As Baker and Jawad (2012) note “the Conservative-led coalition Government is keen to promote the general re-moralisation agenda of religion (in an) appeal for a return to ethics and values as a restorative component for the drive to mend ‘Broken Britain’” (2012:548). As Baker (2012: 569) puts it “Secular policy is inviting faith groups to not only provide practical resources to the social welfare of the nation but also remind society of key values, ethical norms and principles that should lie at its core”. Thus the opportunities for faith based organisations to have greater involvement in public life, remains.

Policies like ‘Big Society’ are about shrinking the size of the state and deliberately developing a welfare system that is not (entirely) funded by statutory means but through private payments and charitable giving. In that sense, political reforms can be viewed as a discursive position which encourages faith groups to become more involved in service provision to fill the gap that this shrinking state leaves behind, regardless of how that service is funded. Current thinking in the field of social movements is that successful movements are influenced by three key factors: the receptivity of political elites, favourable public opinion and an organisational structure that is strong enough to effect change (Burstein, 1999; Burstein and Linton, 2002; Soule, 2012; Cress and Snow, 2000). The political mediation model postulates that social movements have positive effects on policy when
mediated by advantageous political opportunity structures (Amenta, Carruthers and Zylan, 1992; Cress and Snow, 2000). In other words social movement mobilisation works best if the political elite are receptive to the change that the social movement is pushing for and public opinion is in their favour. The discursive position of Government suggests that the state is receptive to any changes faith groups may wish to make in the public realm.

A problem for Government is an accusation of religious illiteracy that has been claimed by the Church of England (Moral, but no compass, 2008). Thus, in essence Government are drawing on a resource that they may not know much about. This thesis has investigated, from a Christian perspective, how Christians understand their role in public service provision and thus has created some sociological knowledge around their public actions.

9.7 Religious literacy
The findings presented and discussed in this thesis suggest that institutionalised religiosities remain firmly embedded in participants understanding of Christianity. This means that concepts which form a fundamental part of popular theological depictions of Christianity continue to be internalised into individual understanding of faith. Pertinent to this study are the concepts of religious singularity i.e. the idea that Christianity is best placed to provide public services, and the concept that social injustice and Christianity are inextricably linked.

A Habermasian understanding of democratic processes is the antithesis of concepts of religious singularity. Habermas argues that decision making should be open to the widest possible public discussion. In that respect action involving a plurality of cultures necessitates a universalistic (as opposed to a religiously singular) approach (Rasmussen and Swindal, 2010). In practice this means attributing status to different belief systems so that they have an equal influence with one another. This Habermasian principle is supported by official Government policy on the status of religion in the UK, as evidenced by a statement made by Government to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. This statement demonstrated a commitment by the UK Government to respect the religious neutrality of the nations and to provide all religions with the right to contribute equally to society.

On an organisational level there is, at least, rhetoric about conforming to Government expectations about the separation of religion and the public realm (chapter
seven). The desire has a largely pragmatic basis in that organisations see conformity as a precursor to receiving statutory funding or being invited to take part in the policy process. None the less the broad consensus among the Christian elites that were interviewed, is that Christians who work in public service provision should act within the boundaries of religious neutrality and universality as set out by the Government.

The findings discussed in chapter six, however, suggest that this is not a position mirrored on an individual basis. The theological premise that social injustice is inextricably linked with the Christian God mean that participants consider themselves to be better placed than other belief systems, in particular secular belief systems in delivering public services. There are indications that participants consider Christian based service providers to be better placed to tackle social injustice then their secular or non-Christian counterparts. While there is no outright denouncement of other faiths, the sense from participants is that Christianity is the one true faith. Therefore, for participants, it is the Christian God who is best placed to help service users, the Christian moral framework is best placed to effectively tackle injustice; and the values needed to provide a successful service are deeply intertwined with Christianity.

Chapter seven argues that proselytisation and incorporating service users into the Christian narrative is taking place within the context of the services that faith-based organisations deliver. This suggests that, for participants, maintaining religious plurality in the public sphere is not a high priority. This is indicated in chapter eight where participants recognise the need to articulate their faith discourses in profane language. The reasons given for this translation were not about developing the status of other faiths but were around not wanting to alienate service users and Government by talk of Christianity.

In the public realm, Habermas (1996) places a duty on religious people to translate their religiously centric claims into reasoned argument that can be accepted universally. The principle behind this is so that communicative action can be orientated to reaching some kind of mutual understanding or agreement between different groups. The data discussed in chapter eight suggest that participants are translating faith discourses in such a way that they can be accepted universally. However the principle of religious singularity, the belief that social injustice and Christianity are inextricably linked and the overt desire to
proselytise and incorporate service users into the Christian narrative raises questions about whether the translation of faith discourses into religiously neutral language has been done for the purposes of promoting religious plurality. Attempting to avoid alienating people is indicative of a group that is using the principles of neutrality to gain access to people rather than for egalitarian purposes.

Chapter two discussed how Governments are willing to engage with Faith Based Organisations and work with them to provide public services but would prefer to keep the more spiritual elements at arm’s length. Literature suggests that there is an acceptance of religious organisations acting within the public sphere as long as they do not act in ways that promotes one religion over any other. In that sense there is a political narrative that Christian involvement in public service provision should be limited to the resources that faith based organisations can offer and that issues of faith and belief will remain separate from service provision (Johnsen, 2009; Thomas, 2004; Cloke, Williams and Thomas, 2009). The findings discussed in this thesis, however, suggests that the separation between belief and service provision is not happening. Faith continues to be an intrinsic part of participants’ delivery of public services. The discursive changes to faith discourses and the non-verbal reproduction of the Christian narrative indicate that the incorporation of religion in public projects is more complex than previously understood.

Many scholars conclude that the differentiation between religious spheres and the political, economic and cultural spheres of modern life has caused a decline in the social significance of religion that is particularly advanced and irreversible (Mouzelis (2012), Bruce and Glendinning, 2010). Even scholars such as Beckford (2010), who acknowledge a recent political interest in religious organisations, suggest that any resurgence we are witnessing is entirely driven by Government rather than a real change to way that religion is viewed socially. While these positions may have merit in the wider secularisation discussions, they assume a passivity about faith groups in that their involvement in public life is something that happens to them rather than something they have any influence on or control over. The findings discussed in this thesis suggest that people of faith are taking an active role in the public realm. They understand and are seizing upon the opportunity structures given to them by Government.
The frames developed in chapter eight illustrate an attempt by Christian faith-based organisations to cast Christianity in terms that the secular community both understand and agree with, but which also continue to have resonance with Christians as well as finding resonance with people of other faiths. Cultural resonance has been seen as the success criteria of framing strategies (Diani 1992) however Ferree (2003) notes that by seeking cultural resonance some of the more radical ideas of a movement that are not in line with the more dominant discourses, can get lost, or overlooked. As Ferree states:

“Ultimately, the strategic choice to seek resonance is stripped of effective agency if it is defined as the inevitable direction that all framing efforts will take” (Ferree 2003:47).

In other words, if social movements continue to compromise on their ideals in order to create resonance amongst those they are seeking consensus from, then they will lose sight of their wider goals and will assimilate into the group they are trying to convince. Narrowing public frames of the Christian faith to those that are most resonant with the target community is expedient for the purposes of influencing opinion, gaining consensus that the Christian way is the right way; teaching people about the ‘good news’ and defending themselves from criticism. However such strategic framing also excludes Christian ideologies that are more extreme and less defensible in that discursive context.

It is necessary for a movement to make trade-offs between aspects of the movement that resonate most with the target community and some of the more fundamental ideas of the movement where consensus could be more difficult to reach (Ferree, 2003). This can be seen with the Christian movement, with the amplification of compassion and forgiveness and the corresponding dampening of more conservative ideas. Only when faced with definitive action, such as legislation on gay marriage, has the Inclusivity Frame been dropped in favour of more radical protestations, in this case that gay people are not included within the institution of marriage. Further research is required to assess how this narrow public framing of the Christian faith may influence the nature of Christianity in the future.
9.8 Reflections on research methods and conclusions.
The conclusions of this study are important for understanding faith-based involvement in public service provision. They provide some religious literacy to faith action in the public realm and give a fresh perspective on how Christians understand the connections between their faith and the work they do. That said this thesis does not make any claims about being representative of the Christian community it studies. The research participants’ faith was the central dimension of the research undertaken, while other demographics of participants, such as their gender or geographical location, were considered less important. That said, it was deemed necessary to achieve a diverse sample of participants to ensure that the quality of data collected was sufficient to develop robust conclusions. An attempt was therefore made to ensure a rudimentary level of diversity among research participants particularly in terms of their age, gender and race or ethnicity. This was done through purposeful selection of interviewees from the pool of people volunteering to be interviewed to ensure maximum diversity within the sample.

Future research would benefit from an analysis to see if narratives of inclusivity, faith in action and expressions of love are consistent across different stratifications of society. This was highlighted in chapter five with the discussion on denominational affiliation. This chapter put forward the notion that people’s understanding of denomination could differ depending on specific demographics. Here I used the example that denomination takes on additional significance in places such as Northern Ireland and Scotland due to the connections locals make between denomination and national identity (Brown, 2009; Davie, 2007). This principle that an understanding of Christianity could differ depending on social stratifications could apply to all themes raised in this thesis.

An early theme in this thesis is that there is a three-fold sociological conceptualisation of Christian perceptions of the God figure. This three-fold conceptualisation has links with, although does not entirely mirror, the popular theological understanding of God as a Holy Trinity. The Trinitarian conceptualisation is an understanding of God which is deeply embedded within the popular constructions of Christianity and depicts God in three terms: the father, son and Holy Spirit. These three terms are not to be thought of as three separate parts of a whole but are, at one and the
same time, the entire understanding of God. That is God is wholly the father, wholly the son and wholly the Holy Spirit and each part is as sacred as each other (Williams, 2012).

The Superiority Position and the Parental Position of the sociological conceptualisation of God, as outlined in this study, resonates strongly with the ‘God the father’ aspect of the Trinitarian. ‘God the father’ is detailed in the Old Testament which describes the figure as both creator and father (BBC Religions: the Trinity, 2011). This links directly with the Superiority Position; where participants acknowledge that God created the world and thus place the figure in a position of superiority and themselves in a comparative position of inferiority. ‘God the father’ also links with the parental position. With the parental position participants continue to acknowledge the hierarchy inherent in their relationship with God but frame this hierarchy in more nurturing and parental terms.

The Embodied Position of the sociological conceptualisation of God resonates with the aspect of the Trinitarian that understands God as the Son and the Holy Spirit. A common understanding is that the Holy Spirit is the God that is active in the modern world and is the source of Christian agency (Diocese of Portsmouth n.d.). This has a narrative fidelity with the Embodied Position, where participants understand God as being active and immediate in their day to day lives. Participants interact with God on a daily basis, often in profane settings and about very normal and routine parts of their day. In that respect, it could be said that, with the embodied God, participants are drawing on an understanding of the Holy Spirit to comprehend how the God figure interacts with them but also to give their faith meaning. Participants use the notion that God is part of action and every deed (Holy Spirit) to justify religious input into their profane activity. Thus the Holy Spirit could be said to influence participants’ aim of making faith an intrinsic part of the delivery of public services. With this influence participants draw upon the more corporeal imagery of Jesus Christ as a role model for their actions.

The amalgamation of the Holy Spirit and God the son is significant for understanding how participants relate their understanding of God to action in the public realm. Participants are not only being inspired to make their faith a ‘lived religion’ by the belief in the Holy Spirit, but they also emulate that understanding by acting in the way that God would and, in essence, become God. Where once Jesus Christ and, in some denominations,
the clergy, were considered the human embodiment of the God figure, now participants take on this mantel, thus further demonstrating that activities that are autonomous with respect to institutional religiosities form part of the social construction of religion.

Where the three-fold sociological conceptualisation and the Holy Trinity differ is in the configuration of the three parts of God. The Holy Trinity conceptualises God into three consubstantial parts: God the father, God the son and God the Holy Spirit. Participants’ narratives of God are also three-fold but are arranged differently. In the sociological conceptualisation the Superiority and Parental positions both resonate with ‘God the father’. God the son and God the Holy Spirit are both drawn upon but are bound together in one description, that of the embodied God.

The similarities between the three-fold conceptualisation of God presented in this thesis and the Holy Trinity is indicative of how popular theological conceptions of God have influenced participant’s understanding of the figure. As discussed in chapter five participant’s constructions of God are heavily influenced by institutional religiosities. Participants spoke about drawing on the Bible, Sermons and conversations with clergy to develop an understanding of their own Christian faith. During this chapter I discuss how the popular theological narrative of father and son resonates highly with the narrative produced during the interview process.

Indeed, many of the narratives expressed by participants showed significant consistency, for example participants regularly spoke about themes of translating their understanding of God into action, being inclusive of all parts society and acting with love towards others. It is possible that this is indicative of a central source of information such as messages from interdenominational organisations or public debates on Christian service provision, although this issue was not explored in-depth in the thesis. A cursory review of some websites of some of the more dominant organisations within Christianity shows that themes of love, compassion and belonging are consistent within Christian discourses (for examples see: Churchofengland.org; freshexpressions.org.uk; oasisuk.org). This further demonstrates that participants’ understanding of their own faith is influenced by institutional religiosities as well as more autonomous activities.
In terms of policy implications, this thesis argues that the neutral and pluralistic outlook that Government assumes should be characteristic of faith organisations acting in the public realm is not necessarily a constructive discourse in the delivery of workable public services. Current public debate looks at ways to maintain the integrity of religious plurality and considers what religious groups acting in the public realm must do to uphold that plural status. Participants’ understanding of religion is that the Christian God is the one true God. In relation to public services, participants believe that Christians are better placed than their non-Christian counterparts to tackle social injustice. While alternative religious approaches are tolerated, participants consider these approaches to be of lesser value than their own. This religiously singular understanding of the world means that developing policy in an attempt to regulate religious plurality may be unproductive, and Government must accept their part in this if they are to continue to encourage faith groups to actively participate in public life. On that basis a more important debate is to understand the overlaps and connections between religiously disparate groups and to identify ways that these can be built upon to maximum benefit for society, regardless of the plethora of faith convictions that exist.
References

ABBAS, T., 2006. Muslims in Birmingham, UK. Centre on Migration Policy and Society: Background Paper for the University of Oxford, COMPAS


ARMSTRONG, K., 2007 The Bible, the biography London: Atlantic books.


BBC Religions, 2011 The Trinity available at www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/beliefs/trinity_1.shtml accessed 01/01/2015


BRENTANO 1995, Descriptive Psychology, transl. by Benito Müller, London: Routledge


BRITISH HUMANIST SOCIETY, 2013 Majority of identifiable free school proposals from 2011-2013 were religious available at https://humanism.org.uk/2013/03/22/majority-of-identifiable-free-school-proposals-from-2011-13-were-religious/ accessed 21/09/2014


DIOCESE OF PORTSMOUTH n.d. What is the Holy Trinity available at http://portsmouth.anglican.org/what_we_believe/faq/questions_about_faith/what_is_the_holy_spirit/ accessed 01/01/2015


GANIEL, G., and JONES, P. 2012 Religion, Politics and Law in Religion and change in modern Britain. London: Routledge,


HOLSTEIN, JA., and GUBRIUM, JF.,2008 Impulses in ethnographic fieldwork in HOLSTEIN, JA., and GUBRIUM, JF., (Eds.), *Handbook of constructionist research* New York: Guildford Press , pp. 373-392


ISLAM TODAY, 2010 UK general election 2010, the Muslim Vote available at http://muslimmatters.org/2010/04/19/uk-general-election-2010-the-muslim-vote/ accessed 24/08/2012


OASIS UK available at http://www.oasisuk.org/ accessed 06/02/2015


SCHEURICH, J., 1995. A postmodern critique of research interviewing. *Qualitative studies in Education 8* pp 239-252


THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND available at https://www.churchofengland.org/ accessed 06/02/2015


TRUDEAU, D., 2008 Junior partner or empowered community: the role of non profit social service providers amidst state restructuring *Urban Studies 45* pp2805-2827

TRUDEAU, D., and VERONIS, L., 2009 Enacting state restructuring. NGOs as translation mechanisms *Environment and Planning 27* pp117-1134

UK GOVERNMENT STATEMENT TO OSCE, 26 September 2013 UK Statement to the OSCE on freedom of religion or belief available at https://www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/uk-statement-to-the-osce-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief accessed 05/09/2014


WILLIAMS, R., 30 July 2012 Aslan is on the knife-edge of the erotic available at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/9429139/Rowan-Williams-Aslan-is-on-the-knife-edge-of-the-erotic.html accessed 19/09/2014


Appendix A

Loughborough University

Resurgence of Religion in Public Life
Participant Information Sheet

Researcher: Nicola Reynolds,
If you have any questions you can contact me at N.Reynolds@lboro.ac.uk or call on 07803031605

What is the purpose of the study?
This is an exploratory study looking at how faith organisations are responding to Government reforms to the way that public policy is made and how services are delivered with a particular focus on the recent austerity measures, increased privatisation and policies such as Big Society.

The study will look at how faith organisations response to these challenges fit with wider responses to secularisation.

The research aims to challenge and inform the debate regarding the role of faith-based groups, particularly Christianity, in public life and social issues.

This study is part of a student research project supported by Loughborough University.

Participant Criteria
- Male or Female age between 18 and 65
- Identify themselves as Christian
- Work, either in a paid or voluntary capacity, for Christian based organisations that provide a public or community based service.

Once I take part, can I change my mind?
Yes! After you have read this information and asked any questions you may have you will be asked to provide Informed Consent, however if at any time, before, during or after the sessions you wish to withdraw from the study you may do so. Contact details are provided at the top of this information sheet. You can withdraw at any time, for any reason and you will not be asked to explain your reasons for withdrawing.
Will I be required to attend any sessions and where will these be?

Data will be collected via interviews. Interviews will take place at a time and place convenient to you.

How long will it take?

Each interview will take around an hour. You do not need to do anything before the session or bring anything with you.

What will I be asked to do?

During the interview you will be asked to talk about:

- Your voluntary and/or employed work in providing public or community services.
- Your faith
- How your faith impacts on the work that you do

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All data collected will remain confidential and will be kept in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. During the analysis all data will remain anonymous and transcripts and recordings will be deleted upon completion of the thesis.

Interviews will usually be recorded. If you do not wish to be recorded or wish me to stop recording at any time you can say so at any point and you will not be asked to explain your reasons.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of the study will be used to inform the final thesis and subsequent academic articles. If you would like to see the final thesis please let me know. I will be happy to share it with you.

What if I am not happy with how the research was conducted?

If you are not happy with how the research was conducted, please contact the Mrs Zoe Stockdale, the Secretary for the University’s Ethics Approvals (Human Participants) Sub-Committee:

Mrs Z Stockdale, Research Office, Rutland Building, Loughborough University, Epinal Way, Loughborough, LE11 3TU. Tel: 01509 222423. Email: Z.C.Stockdale@lboro.ac.uk

The University also has a policy relating to Research Misconduct and Whistleblowing which is available online at http://www.lboro.ac.uk/admin/committees/ethical/Whistleblowing(2).htm.
INFORMED CONSENT FORM
(to be completed after Participant Information Sheet has been read)

The purpose and details of this study have been explained to me. I understand that this study is designed to further academic knowledge and that all procedures have been approved by the Loughborough University Ethical Approvals (Human Participants) Sub-Committee.

I have read and understood the information sheet and this consent form.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions about my participation.

I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in the study.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any stage for any reason, and that I will not be required to explain my reasons for withdrawing.

I understand that all the information I provide will be treated in strict confidence and will be kept anonymous and confidential to the researchers unless (under the statutory obligations of the agencies which the researchers are working with), it is judged that confidentiality will have to be breached for the safety of the participant or others.

I agree to participate in this study.

Your name

Your signature

Signature of investigator

Date