

**Excluded Urban Youth and Religious Discourse**  
**in the Trans-local City**

**Theoretical Framework**

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## **Project Aims**

1. To develop an in depth ethnographic action-research project alongside three targeted youth projects working with socially excluded urban youth in Birmingham.
2. To explore the relationship between experiences of social exclusion and the use of religious discourse by urban youth.
3. To examine the capacity of such youth projects to facilitate the development of bridging social capital.
4. To develop with youth-partners a range of grass-roots initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue between different groups of urban youth, empowerment and new forms of self-expression.
5. To set this in an international context through an exploration of comparable projects in New York and draw upon international good practice in the field of urban youth dialogue and transformative Urban Faith Education.

## **Intended Output**

1. 3 articles in peer reviewed journals and 1 book chapter.
2. Report for Birmingham City Council aimed at informing policy.
3. Report for Birmingham Faith Leaders group aimed at enabling more informed practice.
4. Conference on 'Social Exclusion and Faith Amongst Urban Youth in Britain'.
5. Production of a CD Rom/DVD resource for citizenship/R.E courses at Key Stage 4.
6. Development of a 'Journal of Urban Religion'.

## **Intended Outcomes**

1. Establishment of an ongoing 'Forum for Urban Youth Dialogue'.
2. Development of a range of public creative practical responses by urban youth to their experience of exclusion.
3. Development of a Diploma in Urban Faith Studies.
4. Launch 'Urban Theology in Action' web site.

Beyond the Research Project a book will be published provisionally entitled 'Voices from Below: Social Exclusion and Faith amongst Urban Youth in Twenty-first century Britain'.

## **Key Concepts**

The following key concepts will be of central importance within this research project. In this theoretical framework I discuss these themes, their relationship with each other and the ways in which I will draw on these key concepts to meet the aims of the project.

- 'Theorising Youth'
- Social Exclusion

- The nature of religious discourse in a 'Postmodern' century
- Religion and Youth
- Social/Spiritual Capital

### **Foundational Values**

This project will strive to exemplify evidence-based research and rigorous academic discourse. I do not however make any claim to neutral analysis. Together with Gustavo Gutierrez (1973), Paulo Freire (1998, 22) and Stephen Pattison (1997) I suggest that any claim to value-free reflection is ultimately flawed. As Pattison (1997, 34) writes, *'Since all theology is human discourse, and all human discourse is conditioned by the socio-political nature of reality, all theology must be regarded as biased.'* Within recent decades varying expressions of contextual theology have defended values-driven theological reflection. An early pioneer of Latin American Liberation Theology, Juan Luis Segundo (1975, 7) critiques what he calls, *'...the naïve belief that the word of God is applied to human realities inside some antiseptic laboratory that is totally immune to the ideological tendencies and struggles of the present day.'* The Urban Liberation Theologian Kenneth Leech (1997, 50) confirms Beckford's assertion, *'The only theology to which I am committed is one which is part of the current of liberation....If theology does not help to liberate human beings...it helps to oppress them.'* The research project should be placed within this tradition of theological reflection. It is for this reason that project fieldwork will be guided by the methodological approach articulated within Community-based Action Research which seeks to engage people as active subjects in a dialogical process of change-oriented research (Ernest Stringer, 1999). This philosophical and methodological stance will be aligned with the liberative educational model pioneered by Freire (1972 and 1998) whereby education is seen as a dialogical liberative process through which those who are oppressed become conscious of the causes of their oppression and are empowered to enact liberative praxis in their own lives and communities (1972a, 30-31).

### **Examining Key Concepts**

#### **Theorising Youth**

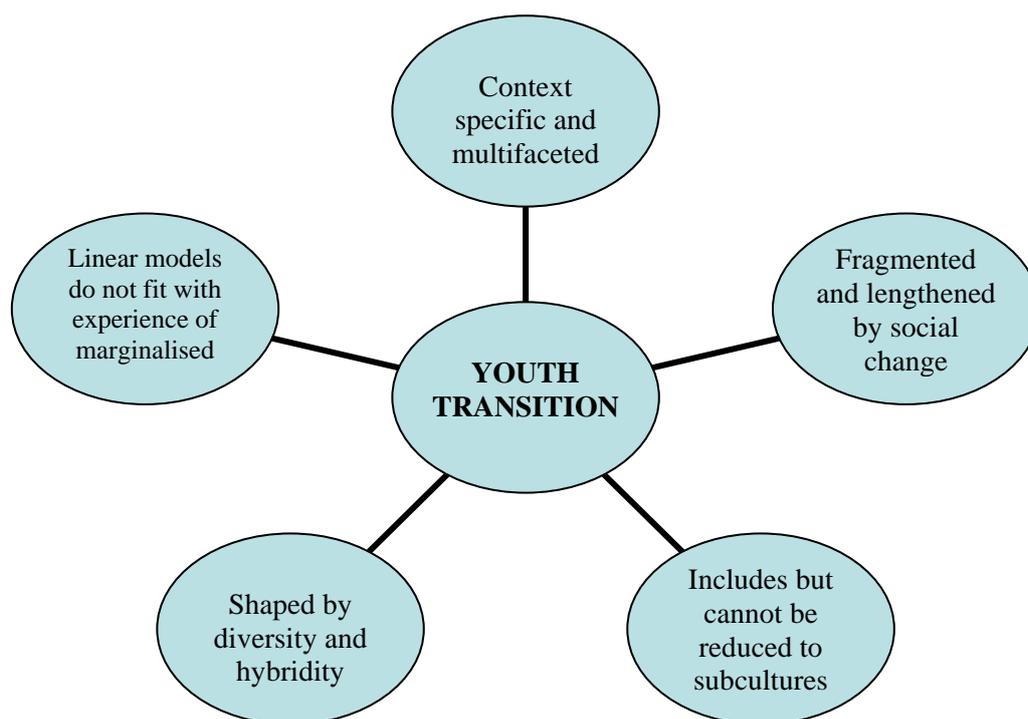
What does it mean to be young? Rupa Huq (2006, 1) suggests that this seemingly simple term is fraught with biological, sociological, cultural, psychological developmental and educational complexity. The interdisciplinary theorising of youth is a contested arena and since the 1970s it has largely been characterised by five emphases:

1. Economism: Youth transition as a linear movement towards work and social exclusion as 'dysfunction' amongst 'workless' young people.

2. Cultural Studies: Exemplified by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies focus on 'style', 'subcultures', 'cultural codes' and 'resistance' amongst young people (Stuart Hall, 1975 and Dick Hebdige, 1979 and 1988).
3. Post-Structuralism: Youth experiences as cultural 'texts' interpreted through semiotics and discourse analysis with little reference to economic, cultural or systemic questions.
4. A 'new' Cultural Studies approach: A 'new ethnographic' focus on youth 'social movements' and youth as the site of patterns of (and attitudes to) multiculturalism.
5. Reflexivity and Individualisation: Examining the impact of narratives of citizenship, cultural entitlement, educational stakeholding, globalisation processes and social change on individualised identity formation amongst young people.

### **Youth as 'Transition'**

Steven Miles (2000, 9-11) suggests that a 'fetishization' of youth has emptied youth cultures of their specific meaning as 'youthfulness' has become the culture of a whole society. Sue Heath, Rachel Brooks and Elizabeth Cleaver (2009) affirm this view, suggesting that youth experiences are increasingly seen as a barometer of the 'health' of wider society by politicians and the media, a view amplified by Angela McRobbie (1994, 156) who describes youth as '*...a major point of symbolic investment for society as a whole.*' Miles argues that a focus on youth as a period of transition has led to a neglect of the study of youth lifestyles in their own right. However, Heath et al (2009) point out that the experiences of young people are structured around a series of transitional milestones where age is a key indicator of rights and responsibilities (e.g. buying alcohol, cigarettes, voting, having sex, getting married and standing for Parliament). Bob Coles (2000, 5), Huq (2006, 1-2) and Robert Macdonald and Jane Marsh (2005, 28-37) note that the extended transition in contemporary Britain between childhood and adulthood resulting from changes to educational policy and employment legislation has lengthened the period when young adults live with parent[s]. Coles (2000, 9-10) suggests that the 'youth as transition' approach over-emphasises and over-simplifies 'normative' forms of youth transition, it can present youth transition as linear rather than cyclical and excludes young people in marginalised groups who do not experience the form of stability that it implicitly assumes. Chris Barker (2008, 407-408) argues that youth is a culturally specific social construction rather than a fixed biological category and MacDonald and Marsh (2005, 32ff) suggest that youth transition has become far more uneven and fragmentary in post-industrial trans-local societies. Mindful of this dynamic Coles (2000, 12-14) calls for a more nuanced perception of youth transitions:



It will be important within this project to be familiar with the symbolic meanings that ‘adult society’ ascribes to youth if the multiple influences on youth experiences are to be taken seriously. However the project will primarily engage with urban youth in their own right to avoid the unconscious imposition of adult themes and questions. For purposes of definition youth will be seen as the period stretching from 16-24 years but uniform approaches to youth transition will be questioned and a more provisional perspective adopted that takes account of the fragmentation and glocalisation of youth identities in plural and postmodern urban contexts.

### **Fragmented Identities**

Caitlin Cahill (2000, 252ff) writes about the importance of ‘street literacy’ when working as a researcher alongside urban youth on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. She suggests that ‘street literacy’ privileges experiential knowledge and focuses on the relationship between spatial practices and the socio-cultural discourses that shape the self-understanding of young people on ‘the street’. Such a rooted ethnographic perspective can prevent homogenisation and enable a grappling with the fluid complexity of multiple and fragmented contemporary youth identities. In his exploration of Black responses to racialised suffering the African-American theologian Anthony Pinn (1991) argues that there is a need to develop a ‘nitty-gritty’ hermeneutics that is characterised by an a priori commitment to open-ended engagement with the untidiness of Black life if an honest and organic response is to be forged. Pinn’s undogmatic hermeneutical perspective can be aligned with Cahill’s advocacy of ‘street literacy’ and both concepts will help to guide the fieldwork of this project and

limit the possibility of imposing conclusions onto the research that do not accord with what is discovered in the community.

Barker (2008, 408) describes youth as a, '...complex set of shifting cultural classifications marked by difference and diversity...[which] alters across time and space according to who is being addressed by whom.' Miles (2000, 49) and Barker (2008, 426) suggest that postmodernity and globalisation have led to increasingly fragmented and individualised youth identities. Nick Barham (2004) writes about his year long conversations with young people across urban Britain. Barham (2004, 42) suggests he encountered, '...a disconnected generation which feels little empathy with or love from the country it inhabits.' He does not, however, see disconnection from adult Britain in negative terms but as an expression of alternative passions through which young people in a fragmented socio-cultural context make sense of life and points to the importance of 'dis-connect' zones (cars, graffiti, x-box/Playstation, text-speak and music) as key construction sites for youth identity building. Barham's creative re-framing of youth disconnection as a positive response to adult social norms will provide this project with an important corrective to the assumption that disconnection or exclusion are inherently negative or imposed upon young people by adult society.

### **Consumption and Place**

Miles (2003, 170ff) emphasises the central role played by consumption in the formation of youth identities. Barker (2008, 428-429) comments on the influence of consumer capitalism on youth cultures leading to an emphasis on 'style' and 'keeping it real' in the face of postmodern theoretical claims about the 'end of authenticity'. Paul Willis (1996 and 2001) Paul Gilroy (1987 and 1993) talk of the active subversion of commodities and see youth as 'active consumers' who create their own meaning in relation to consumption. Gilroy (1987 and 1993) and Beckford (2000) identify popular music, as a site of Black resistance to the norms and values of a society where Black youth do not feel as if they belong. Particularly within club and hip-hop cultures the artefacts of mass consumption (records) are subverted as a new track is dubbed over the old, creating new meanings and social commentaries. Within this project it will be important to learn from the urban youth with whom I will be working about their attitudes to consumption and arguments that the re-invention of popular cultural commodities is an act of subversive resistance to oppressive systems and structures.

Anita Harris (2004, 119) argues that youth engagements with public space represent attempts to mark out their own 'spaces' in an 'adult world'. Playgrounds, parades of shops and parks become 'surveillance free space' for youth but young people's presence on the street has been depicted as the cause of fear amongst certain older adults. Harris (2004, 143) suggests that this correlation leads to the assumption that, 'If the streets are to be kept safe, this means that young people must be

placed elsewhere.’ She argues that formerly unregulated space has become increasingly regularised by statutory authorities, colonised through regeneration programmes and commodified as the space for new business. Part of the task of this research project will be to discover if and how young women and men are claiming and subverting public space and how these actions impact upon their sense of identity and meaning.

### **Subcultures: Style and Resistance**

The youth cultural studies perspective pioneered by the BCCCS focused heavily of youth subcultures and style as a form of youth resistance to a hegemonic adult society (Hebdige, 1979 and Hall, 1975). Within this project subcultures will be understood as social groupings of young people that include/exclude on the basis of specifically defined style or musical tastes which provide a basis for shared ideas about meaning and identity. Paul Hodgkinson (2002, 28-33) argues that subcultural language can be a useful pointer to:

1. Cultural/stylistic distinctiveness
2. The subjective self-identification of youth
3. Activities that account for a large amount of the time of young adults/youth.
4. Articulations of autonomy

Miles (2000, 5-6), however, suggests that the ideological model adopted by BCCCS has become more difficult to sustain in the ‘post-ideological’ twenty-first century. Both he and Huq (2006, 11-15) argue that it neglects the everyday nature of youth experience that is not informed by homogeneous subcultural allegiances and exhibits an over-reliance on theoretical frameworks rather than empirical research. Furthermore Huq suggests the BCCCS focused almost exclusively on White male youth, largely ignoring the specific experiences of female and Black youth. Another concern that Huq expresses in relation to subcultural studies relates to what she sees as an analytically rigid ‘...obsession with class...’ that romanticised white male working class youth. Whilst she recognises the recent softening of such rigidity Huq suggests that the increasing fluidity of youth experiences demands a far more multidimensional approach to understanding youth cultures that engages with the fragmentation and globalisation of contemporary youth cultures. Huq (2006, 24) points to a need to grapple with the plurality of both disparate and converging youth cultures and argues that, ‘Grand theories and linear models of youth culture are...increasingly redundant in the culturally pluralist multimedia of the twenty-first century.’ This project will be open to the insights that subcultural youth studies have contributed to an understanding of certain semi-enclosed youth cultures. However, though a use of Pinn’s ‘nitty-gritty’ hermeneutics and

Cahill's 'street literacy' these insights will be critiqued enabling a more open-ended approach to the dynamic diversity of youth cultures within the city. Such a perspective will enable me to adopt an inclusive research project that is open to female and male, Muslim, Black and White youth cultures thus resisting the temptation to homogenise plural youth cultural experiences and the substituting of theoretical presuppositions for empirically based findings.

### **Gender and Youth**

McRobbie suggests that where 'girls' appear in youth subcultural studies it is often either on the margins, reinforcing stereotypical imaging of women or in terms of sexual attractiveness. With reference to a study of working class 'girls' in Kings Heath, Birmingham McRobbie (1994) suggests that the young women she worked alongside:

1. Are one of most powerless groups in society.
2. Their lives are more structured and monitored than those of working class 'boys'.
3. Have less freedom than 'boys' and are less likely to travel across cities.
4. Self-image is of central importance
5. Are often 'spectators' at male activities like football....
6. Are music/fashion oriented
7. Do not get as involved in group activities at youth clubs as male youth.
8. Have become increasingly envisaged in exclusively sexual terms.

McRobbie (1994, 157) points to what she calls a '...dramatic 'unfixing' of young women in British society.' Harris (2004, 1) alludes to this suggestion in her examination of the depiction of twenty-first century young women as the 'vanguard of the new subjectivity'. She suggests that the identities of young women have become an increasingly central focus of attempts to understand fragmented youth identities in the face of the destabilising processes of globalisation and postmodernity. Harris (2004, 6) writes that, 'Young women...have become a focus for the construction of an ideal late modern subject who is self-making, resilient and flexible.' Since the 1990s 'Girlpower' has become an exemplar of youth identities that are relational and empowering. Harris (2004, 9-13) points, however, to a blind-spot in such positive imaging whereby young women who do not conform to the 'girlpower' profile of success are labelled as 'failures'. This project will seek to engage with the experience of socially excluded female youth in their own right and then in relation to male youth.

It will be important to recognise the multiplicity of female youth identities, their relationship to cultural or religious norms and to the narrative of 'girlpower' to which Harris refers.

### **Engaging with Diverse Youth Experiences**

Essentialism rests upon the assertion that it is possible to identify an irreducible cultural core that pertains exclusively to specific ethnic groups that remains intact in spite of the disruptions of history and contemporary globalisation. Gayatri Spivak (1987, 205) and Beckford (2006, 8) suggest that 'strategic essentialism' can enable marginalised communities to unite around common goals thus stimulating the development of project identities which re-define the position of oppressed communities in relation to wider society. Since the 1990s examples of such 'defensive' youth identities have included the Nation of Islam (in relation to Black-British youth), the British National Party and more recently the English Defence League (in relation to White-British youth) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir and variations of Salafi Islam (in relation to British-Muslim youth).

A dramatic counterpoint to essentialism is found in recent debates about hybridity in contemporary Britain (Hall, 2003, Sandercock, 2003 and Baker, 2007). Baker is almost alone in contemporary urban theology in his engagement with the language of hybridity within an increasingly fluid and intermingled society. Sandercock (1998, 16) suggests that is within this fluid 'third space' that new models of '...multicultural literacy' can grow. Iris Marion Young (1990, 163-191) speaks of the emancipatory capacity of a 'politics of difference' which holds commonality and distinctiveness in creative tension enabling an increasingly networked approach to contemporary liberation struggles. This project will faithfully identify and empathise with both youth based essentialist identities and the 'hybrid' youth identities that have emerged in the blurred 'third space' of contemporary urban life (Bhabha, 1994, Soja, 2007 and Baker, 2007). However, because the project represents a search for a liberative dialogical multicultural youth identity and discourse of meaning a key aim will be to examine the capacity of Young's 'politics of difference' and Sandercock's 'multicultural literacy' to resource new patterns of bridging social capital and religious discourse amongst excluded urban youth.

### **Black Youth**

In order to explore the experiences of Black urban youth it is necessary to engage with the 'youth as problem' perspective as much of the literature that has been produced by Black Britons has focused in critical detail on the stigmatising of Black youth as an alienated, 'disruptive' and 'criminal' community. Reddie (2003, 20) suggests that 'One of the inherent difficulties in attempting to understand the nature of the identity crisis amongst Black youth is the danger of seeing their condition as being abnormal.' Tony Sewell (1997 and 2009) has written widely about the experience of Black-British boys within the Secondary School system, emphasising high levels of

exclusions and perceived 'underachievement'. Anthony Reddie (2003, 27ff) and Beckford (1998 and 2000) suggest that Black youth in a British context have continued to face the same systems of rejection, as their parents and grandparents did before them. Beckford (2004, 4-5) focuses on the growth of increasingly violent gang culture in inner-city areas and suggests that due to persistent cultural racism media, government and police engagement with urban gangs has a tendency to depict Black gangs as more dangerous than White gangs. Beckford suggests that gang violence amongst young urban Black-Britons is not the result of violent rap music lyrics but of decades of structural injustice. Within this project research alongside excluded Black youth will be cognizant of the contentious 'youth as problem' syndrome and of the multifaceted structural causes of the growing influence of gang culture.

In the face of what Reddie (2008) terms 'othering' an important aspect of urban Black youth culture has been the search for belonging and self-worth. Over the last three decades this search has embraced the affirming philosophy of Rastafarianism (1970s-1980s) and the assertive Black Nationalism of the Nation of Islam and associated rap musicians such as Public Enemy (1990s to present). Two further sources of cultural self-identification for Black-British youth have been found in Afrocentric spiritualities and, according to Richard Reddie (2009), the increasing conversion of Black Christian youth to orthodox forms of Islam. Gilroy (1987 and 1993), Anthony Reddie (2003, 30-32 and 2008) and Beckford (1998, 2004, 52ff and 2006, 48ff) argue strongly that an arena of central importance within the existential search of Black youth is popular music. Reddie and Beckford also point to the plural and 'hybrid' nature of Black cultural forms that mirror the increasingly plural character of the Black-British community. The 2001 National Census, for example, suggested that 47% of male Black-Britons and 34% of Black-British women were married to people from other ethnic groups. Amongst Dual-Heritage Black-Britons the figures were higher still, 76% for men and 79% for women.<sup>1</sup> Within this research project the dialectical relationship between raciological 'othering' and the search for belonging by Black/Dual Heritage urban youth in the plural context of Birmingham will be set alongside the experience of excluded African-American youth in New York. Central themes to explore will be the attitudes of Black youth to ideas about essentialism and cultural hybridity and the existential meanings attributed to consumed or created popular cultural forms such as 'urban' music.

### **Muslim Youth**

Philip Lewis (2007, 3) recognises that 'Muslim identities' can be religious or an expression of 'identity politics'. He points to the importance of theoretical engagements with the experiences of Muslim youth because of the youthful character of the British-Muslim population (2001 National Census: 33% of British Muslims are aged 0-15 years and just 6% over 60 years). Lewis (2007, 40ff)

suggests that a range of potential inter-generational tensions impact upon Muslim youth in Britain. These include the impact of clan based norms on young British-Muslims, a culture gap between Muslim youth and their parents, gendered expectations which may suppress young Muslim women, a conflict between traditional Islamic education and 'critical' secular educational system, limited opportunities to socialise with 'non-Muslim' youth (a questionable claim in a Birmingham context) and the challenge of forging a dialogical identity that brings Muslim identities and postmodern urbanism into conversation. Writing before 9/11 and 7/7 Steven Vertovec and Alisdair Rogers (1998, 1-9) suggest that there is no inherent contradiction between 'Westernised' cultural identities and faithfulness to an Islamic faith amongst Muslim youth. They suggest that key elements within youth Muslim identities in a British context include growing up as a minority community in a diverse society, syncretistic popular culture, rising patterns of Islamophobia, debates about Britishness and Muslim self-definition, an increasing emphasis on transnational religious identities as opposed to more culturally defined identities and a frustration with religious leaders/Imams who have little understanding of the British context. Ikhtlaq Din (2006, 71-72) picks up a number of these themes in relation to young 'Pakistanis' in Britain, suggesting that the language of ethnic labelling is problematic because it implies a continuing 'otherness', whereas youth Pakistani identities are heterogeneous, 'There is a constant shifting of identities, particularly among the young, which takes into account changing circumstances.'

Richard Gale and Therese O'Toole (2009, 143-160) explore the faith based political activism of young Muslims in Birmingham, highlighting debates about the disengagement of young Muslims from mainstream civic life since the 2001 disturbances in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham, 9/11 and 7/7. They argue that assertions that the young British Muslim community is introspective and self-segregating lack empirical evidence and narrow down definitions of political participation and suggest that historically Black and Minority Ethnic political engagement has often taken place in grassroots community organisations and social movements. Sunaina Marr Maira (2009, 4-16) writes about identity formation and attitudes to citizenship amongst young South-Asian Muslims in New York since 9/11. She suggests that young 'South-Asian' Muslims are forced to explore these questions in the face of enduring 'orientalist' perceptions which imply that they are 'caught between cultures' or are not 'American enough'.

It will also be vital within this project to recognise and critically assess narratives in the media and within the political establishment relating to the radicalisation of certain sections of British-Muslim youth (Baskia Spalek, 2007, 192ff). Since the 2001 disturbances in Bradford and the London bombings in 2005 a range of government sponsored or encouraged initiatives such as the Quilliam

Foundation and the Preventing Violent Extremism strategy have been launched on the basis of an assumption that problems of alienation amongst some Muslim youth are being fed by violent Jihadi rhetoric leading to a process of radicalisation. This project will not place a strong emphasis on the assumptions behind these initiatives. However, as one element within the identity formation of young urban British-Muslims their importance will be recognised. A key question to explore will be why it is that it is that certain urban British-Muslims become radicalised when the vast majority do not. The critical use of the tools provided by youth subcultural studies will help to identify the key existential themes within this dynamic and their variation across different groups. It will be important to pay close attention to the plurality of British-Muslim youth identities and the tensions and challenges outlined above. Cahill's 'street literacy' and Pinn's 'nitty-gritty' hermeneutics will help to resource this approach.

### **White Youth**

Many years ago I was a teacher in a large comprehensive school in East London. One morning I was talking with a class of fifteen year olds about the way they thought about themselves and the way other people treated them. The class was made up of Muslim, Black and White teenagers. I asked the class to think about what it meant for them to be White, or Black or Muslim in London. Every Black and Muslim student spoke powerfully about their experience and their sense of who they were. The White students remained silent because it was a question they had never had to think about before. This personal story emphasises the importance within of engaging with excluded White youth in the excavation of 'Whiteness' in a plural urban context where both the raciological essentialism of the British National Party and the recently formed English Defence League and the syncretistic Whiteness of popular cultural icons like the grime hip-hop artist Lady Sovereign (especially her 2006 song My England) have significant currency. In light of my 'Introductory Remarks' and the Aims of this project the insights made possible through Critical Whiteness Studies which seeks to examine the historical, political, sociological and cultural construction of White identities, will be used to inform ethnographic field-work. Ruth Frankenberg (1997) and Noel Ignatiev (1995) have sought to examine the construction of Whiteness and its historic alignment with economic and political power and religio-cultural ideas of 'purity'. Frankenberg (1997, 4-5) critiques any sense that Whiteness is a fixed or singular primary identity. It is, she says, '...historically constructed and internally differentiated...whiteness as unmarked norm is revealed to be a mirage.' In light of my search for the relationship that urban youth identify between social exclusion and their own ideas about faith, truth and identity the ways in which ethnicity is constructed, imagined and challenged will be of central importance.

### **Youth as a Glocal identity**

Miles (2000) suggests that the globalisation of youth cultures has transformed localised youth lifestyles. Huq (2006) comments on such trans-local urban youth identities, 'Diaspora cultures are able to remain in contact simultaneously with different points across the earth's surface, linking east and west...Cultural power can be seen as being exercised laterally rather than in a top-down way' (2006, 38) A question that this research project will grapple with is whether such diasporan 'fusion' and processes of globalisation lead to the standardisation of youth cultures/identities or to new glocal youth forms. Barker (2008, 424) suggests that, 'Youth cultures are not pure, authentic and locally bounded; rather, they are syncretic and hybridised products of interactions across space...constellation of temporary coherence.' Miles (2000, 67 and 156) amplifies this point, suggesting that globalisation processes and changes in information technology have led to the 'de-territorialisation' of youth, which he describes as an unstable 'nomadic experience'. Within this project it will be important to examine this claim in light of articulations of spatially based youth identities that guard territory and regulate belonging. In a century where children of dual heritage exemplify the 'new ethnicities' to which Les Back (1996) and Hall (2003) refer is it any longer sufficient to speak of culture or ethnicity as bounded experiences or is it more appropriate to speak instead of multiple interrelated urban youth landscapes that are articulated through bhangra, hip-hop and ragga? Within this project the significance of popular culture to express and challenge the existential experiences of excluded urban youth will be an important indicator of the potential of a twenty-first century bridging social capital to resource dialogical religious discourse amongst urban youth in Britain.

### **Youth as 'Problem'**

Jonathon Epstein (1998, 1) and Eldin Fahmy (2006, 347ff) suggest that theoretical analyses of 'youth' have often been framed as a response to a 'problem'. Barker (2008, 410) notes the way that subcultural youth studies responded to this agenda through its depiction of subcultures as, '...spaces for deviant cultures to renegotiate their position or to win space for themselves.' Sarah Thornton (1997, 4) argues that this approach focused largely on groups labelled as 'deviant' reinforcing the depiction of 'youth' as problematic. Nick Barham (2004, 310-311) also questions the engagement with 'disconnected' youth as a problem to be solved, 'Disconnection happens in creative cultures, it is a sign of human potential...Instead of trying to label and contain this generation we should see where it takes us....this generation doesn't need another name, another cute set of typographies, or some extra laws to keep it in check. It needs a break.' An expression of this debate is found in the work of Macdonald and Marsh (2005, 6-20) who explore the ways in which ideas about a youth 'underclass' in the late 1980s and 1990s fed into ideas that 'youth' should be approached as a 'problem to be solved'. In particular they suggest that 'underclass' narratives overemphasise

criminality, 'unstable' homes, teenage pregnancy, poor education and an 'unwillingness' to enter paid work or training. Peter Dwyer and Johanna Wyn (2001, 145) raise questions about the self-fulfilling nature of this term, 'They become defined as a potential underclass and are then treated as an underclass.'

### **Social Exclusion**

In Britain the focus on 'at-risk' youth and language about a youth 'underclass' has characterised much government discussion of social exclusion. This research project will draw on these parallels within its examination of the effect that the experience of social exclusion has on the ways that urban youth understand and use religious discourse. The project will recognise the contested meanings that have been applied to the term social exclusion but its careful use will provide a helpful theoretical trope which engages both with government and policy makers and the plurality of exclusions experienced by Muslim, Black and White urban youth. Key questions will include:

- Do groups of urban youth feel socially excluded?
- If so from what/whom do they feel excluded?
- Are all forms of social exclusion comparable in effect?
- Is disconnection different from exclusion? If so, how?
- Does the effect of disconnection or social exclusion impact on the existential questions asked by urban youth?

Use of the term social exclusion first arose within French social policy during the 1980s before spreading in usage throughout Europe (Loury, 2000 and Levitas, 2005). Ruth Levitas (2005, ix) notes that the term 'social exclusion' which, in a British context, was originally largely confined to the Social Exclusion Unit (established 1998), has become '...commonplace in public discourse and pervades government policy.' She identifies a shift in New Labour's use of the term from 'redistributive discourses of exclusion' towards a combination of 'social integrationist discourse' and 'moral underclass discourse'. The SEU defines social exclusion as '...a short-hand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown.' (<http://www.archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/seu>). Tony Atkinson (2008, 4) suggests that social exclusion is relative to the norms of a specific society, results from a conscious act and impacts on future prospects as well as current circumstances. Levitas (2007, 10) identifies three dimensions of social exclusion: lack of resources, lack of participation and the dominant ways in which it has been perceived:

1. Social exclusion as a moral term relating to the behaviour and values of specific groups and, ‘...the breakdown of the structural, cultural and moral ties which bind the individual to society...’ (Levitas, 2005, 21).
2. Social exclusion in relation to a lack of integration with the world of work, education or training, (N.E.E.T - no education, employment or training).
3. Social exclusion as poverty resulting from inequalities in society.

Howard Williamson (1997) speaks of ‘Status Zero Youth’; young people in their late teens not in education, employment or training [‘NEETS’] and Bob Coles (2000) and MacDonald and Marsh (2005, 26) suggest that this designation provides a metaphor for purposelessness and alienation amongst some young people. Dwyer and Wyn (2001, 40-63) suggest that British government social policy excludes a significant minority of ‘Status Zero’ through an over-emphasis on the importance of a ‘learning society’ and a ‘knowledge economy’. They suggest that this emphasis can mask the structural barriers caused by increasing social inequality and focus instead on ideological assumptions about paid work and behaviour which either emphasise phrases like ‘dependency’, ‘dangerous’, ‘immoral’, ‘deviant’, ‘irresponsible’ (on the political Right) or ‘survival’, ‘victims’, ‘alienated’, ‘brutalised’ (on the political Left). Barham (2004, 307) approaches youth disconnection in quite a different way, arguing the need for a more subtle and differentiated approach to ‘disconnected youth’ that recognises the difference between positive disconnection and negative alienation, ‘The active disconnection from many of the things that contemporary society continues to try and attach importance to – politics, business, history – has not led to apathy, but instead to passion, creativity and influence.’

Within this research project youth Social Exclusion will be seen as a fluid and multifaceted process that can impact on individuals and groups of young people in a variety of ways. For the purposes of clarity of analysis and fieldwork I have grouped the following twenty ‘faces of exclusion’ under four categories to indicate that there are distinct pathways of exclusion which may interrelate but can operate in isolation from each other. Within the project, however, I will endeavour to recognise the point made by Barham (2004) that ‘disconnection’ is not inherently negative but can point to positive choices made by urban youth who are alienated from ‘adult society’. The ‘faces of exclusion’ to which I refer below have been drawn from the work of Peter Dwyer and Johanna Wyn (2001, 40-63), Richard Steer (2000, 2), Eldin Fahmy (2006, 350-366),

## **Faces of Social Exclusion**

<b>Economic factors</b>	<b>Cultural/Political factors</b>	<b>Social factors</b>	<b>Moral factors</b>
Unemployment	No political participation	Low skills/education	Family breakdown
Poverty	No civic engagement	Live in high crime area	Teenage pregnancy
Inequality	Racism/Religious prejudice	Isolation	Anti-social behaviour
Not in training	Perception of youth as problem	Poor health	Role models/Parenting
Poor housing	Gendered prejudice	Drugs/Alcohol	Existential alienation

## **Youth Resistance to Exclusion**

Harris (2004, 134-142) notes two widely discussed popular perceptions about contemporary youth: a lack of interest in formal politics and a disconnection from traditional communities. Like Gale and O'Toole (2009) she argues for a wider definition of political engagement that includes youth involvement in social movements. Harris recognises that it has been argued that young women have 'lost their resistant voice' as a result of socialisation and expectations about female achievement but suggests that 'established feminists' have undervalued new ways of acting elected by young women. This assertion is borne out in a Birmingham context by the high levels of young Muslim women working as activists within the charity Islamic Relief and the broad based community organisation Birmingham Citizens. A further example of youth resistance that is not easily aligned with either traditional structures or semi-structured social movements is identified by the work of Gilroy (1987 and 1993) and Beckford (2006) on the counter-hegemonic use of popular music by Black youth. Within this research project it will be necessary to adopt an open approach to varying forms of youth activism and resistance that recognises engagement in social movements and the use of popular culture (music in particular) as a medium through which urban youth express alternative forms of activism and resistance and existential narratives. Two key methodological tools will enable this approach, ideological criticism and reception criticism, both of which are explored in the companion 'Methodological Framework' paper. Three key questions will be used to interrogate forms of youth resistance: What or who are youth resisting? What stimulates resistance? How is resistance manifested?

## **Understanding Religious Discourse**

The 'Secularisation Thesis' within sociology expresses the idea that as societies develop along rationalist lines the purchase that religion has on people declines. The world is 'de-mystified' leading to the 'disenchantment of the world'. Grace Davie (2002), like Peter Berger (1999), questions the validity of the secularisation thesis and suggests that whilst Europe has become more secularised than other contexts there is still a high degree of respect for religious institutions and a persistence of existential questioning. Stephen Hunt (2002, 29) suggests that '...the importance of religion has not declined. Rather its form of expression has changed.' In recent decades 'Disenchantment' narratives within sociology have been supplanted to an extent by a range of

recent ‘re-enchantment’ narratives (Christopher Partridge, 2004 and Lynch, 2007) and the phenomenon of individualised ‘believing not belonging’ (Davie, 1994). In this context it is important to establish the ways in which religious discourse will be understood within the project. Gordon Lynch (2005, 27-40), Hunt (2002, 7-8) and Inger Furseth and Pal Repstad (2006) suggest there are two broad ways of defining religion and religious discourse.

<b>Substantive Approaches</b>	<b>Religion defined by core elements – God, scriptures, ritual, priesthood, religious buildings</b>
<b>Functionalist Approaches</b>	<b>Religion defined by social, existential and transcendent function an act performs: expressions of ‘ultimate concerns’<sup>2</sup></b>

I will draw on both the substantive and the functionalist definitions of religion in my engagement with excluded urban youth in order to explore the relationship between experiences of exclusion and explicit (substantive) and implicit (functionalist) religious discourse. Within this project I use the term ‘religious discourse’ in three ways, following Barbara Johnstone’s (2008, 2-3) definition of broader social discourse: spoken or written language, symbolic behaviour and the use of clothing, music and visual-media. Culture will be viewed as a dynamic system of existential symbols, values, ideas, language and action, drawing on Clifford Geertz (1993), Raymond Williams (1981), Lynch (2005) and Beckford (2004 and 2006). This approach will enable me to engage with the existential meaning that excluded urban youth may find within popular culture as implicit religious discourse (Sylvan, 2002, Beaudoin, 1998).

David Herbert (2003, 59) explores the dispersed ‘power’ of religious discourse within the public sphere of ‘post-religious’ societies. Sara Savage, Sylvia Collins-Mayo, Bob Mayo and Graham Cray (2006, 18-22) suggest that ‘Generation Y’ youth are characterised by ‘fuzzy’ religious ideas, the residual importance of Christian concepts, individualised frameworks and a disengagement from substantive religious language.<sup>3</sup> This project will interrogate this claim in relation to a multifaith cohort of excluded urban youth. The work of Leslie Francis and Mandy Robbins (2005, 18-22) can help to resource this interrogation through a focus on the ‘spiritual health’ of young people. Key indicators that will be of use in fieldwork include ideas about personal well-being, values encountered at school (college/work), religious beliefs, relationship to religious institutions, attitudes to the supernatural, political values, social values/concerns, sexuality, attitudes to legal/illegal drugs, morality, leisure activities and ‘my neighbourhood’. Within this project I will ask how the religious discourse of excluded urban youth can critique ideas about belonging, value,

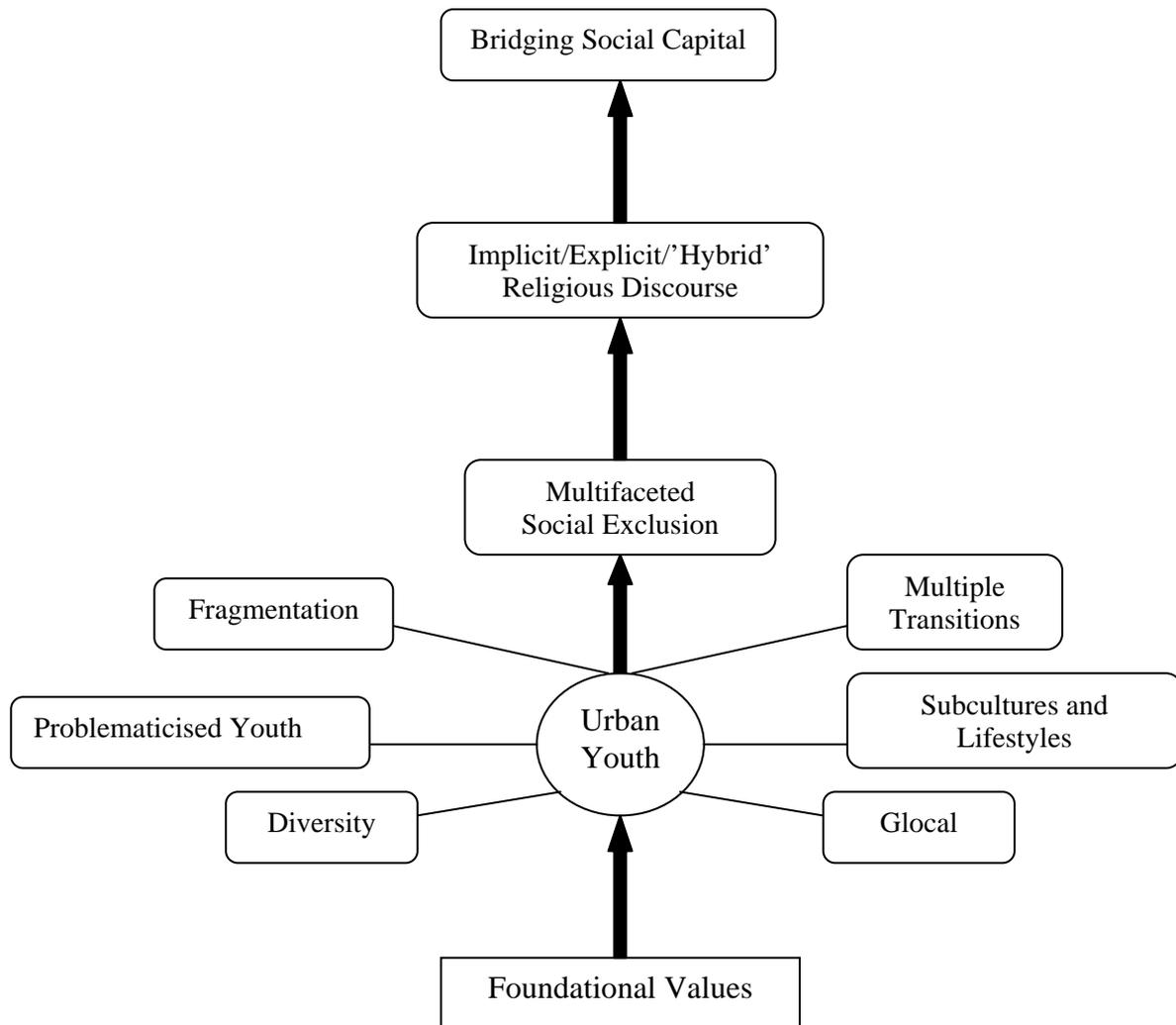
identity and citizenship in a trans-local society. I will consider whether we need to look to the possibility of diverse patterns and sites of youth religious discourse in dialogue with each and with wider society rather than a single, homogenised meta-discourse that, arguably, runs counter to the glocal experience of life in a diasporan city in the twenty-first century.

### **Social Capital**

The language of social capital has gained significant currency over the last decade within sociology and, more recently, within urban theology. The term refers to the capacity of relationships and networks of trust to generate social inclusion, connectedness and community cohesion leading to the reinvigoration of an atomized civil society and has been closely associated with Robert Putnam (2000) in the USA and John Field (2003) in Britain. Putnam (2000, 22) suggests that, ‘...social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.’ He identifies two forms of social capital. ‘Bonding’ social capital builds trust and cohesion within homogeneous groups, but excludes those who do not share these roots or attitudes. ‘Bridging’ social capital is built through the forging of networks of association and trust that cross group boundaries. Tracey Reynolds (2007, 385) writes about friendship networks amongst Black-British youth which act as a source of reciprocal trust, social support and connectedness. She suggests that ‘same-ethnic’ friendships can act as an important source of bonding social capital in the face of racism. In a similar fashion Dorothy Bottrell (2009, 476ff) speaks about the importance of loose friendship networks amongst marginalised young women as a source of social capital.

The concept of social capital has played an important part in the recent development of public theology in a British context, not least in the work of Chris Baker and Hannah Skinner on ‘spiritual’ and ‘religious’ capital (2005) and the CULF report Faithful Cities (2006). Baker and Skinner explore the potential of religious and spiritual capital as vehicles for inclusion, empowerment and social cohesion. They suggest that spiritual capital energises more clearly identifiable religious capital, ‘Spiritual capital is found within ‘the values, ethics, beliefs and vision which faith communities bring to civil society at the global and local level.’ (2005, 12) Baker and Skinner suggest that spiritual capital values personal stories, sees God within civil society, draws on faith values such as self-emptying, forgiveness, risk-taking and openness, includes those who have been excluded elsewhere and values creativity. Within this project I will examine the capacity of implicit and explicit religious discourse amongst excluded urban youth to resource liberative patterns of ‘Bridging’ Social Capital. Baker and Skinner’s description of ‘Spiritual Capital’ will provide useful interpretive tool in this exercise.

## Relating Key Concepts



This diagram is a visual representation of the interdisciplinary shape of the research project and depicts the way in which different theoretical concepts will link together on the basis of the foundational values outlined in my 'Introductory Remarks'. The experiences of socially excluded urban youth will be seen to be heterogeneous, fragmentary and interwoven. This plural framework, which is made possible through a 'nitty-gritty' approach to hermeneutics, will feed into my interpretation of social exclusion as a multifaceted concept. Such a theoretical approach will make it possible to interpret multiple relationships between experiences of social exclusion and the use of implicit and explicit religious discourse without imposing a priori assumptions on the youth alongside whom I will work. The foundational values will act as a 'moral compass' to guide the project and identify ways in which my research can help to identify and stimulate patterns of 'Bridging' Social Capital amongst and between urban youth.

## **Fieldwork**

Within this project fieldwork a primary focus will be placed on the relationship between the implicit/explicit religious discourse used by excluded youth and the plural and fluid nature of contemporary urban life. Three important strands of my theoretical approach are found in debates surrounding the terms 'Fourth World', 'Third Space' and 'hybridity', all of which express important elements of the experience of contemporary youth in British context. Use of the term 'Fourth World' has largely been connected with the experience of stateless marginalised indigenous peoples and can be dated to the work of Ben Whittaker (1972) and the writing of the Canadian Native American George Manuel (1974). The term has also been used more recently by Manuel Castells (1996, 164-165 and 2000, 144) to embrace marginalised inner city communities, outer-city estates and post-industrial towns in Europe and North America that exist in the shadow of globalised capitalism. It is in this second sense that the term 'Fourth World' will be used in this project, providing a metaphor for powerlessness, exclusion and disconnection. My interest in the term 'Third Space', which can be dated to the work of the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha (1994), arises from its use in the work of Chris Baker (2007, 16), who describes it as, '...the space produced by the collapse of the previously defining narratives of modernity based on colonialism, class and patriarchy.' This is a cultural and actual space that is characterised by fluidity, crossover and cultural encounters that blur previously fixed ethnic, cultural and religious boundaries. It is a space exemplified by contemporary urban music (Huq, 2006) within which new expressions of dialogical identity and meaning are created by urban youth. I am interested in exploring the ways in which 'Third Space' thinking within the urban 'Fourth World' might provide a framework for the exploration of the use and nature of religious discourse amongst excluded youth. The 'Third Space' has been described as one of 'hybridity': the forging of new 'mixed' identities as a result of cultural fusion. Within this project it will be important to explore references to 'fusion' or 'hybridity' amongst urban youth. However, in spite of its significance in Cultural Studies (Stuart Hall, 2003 and Paul Gilroy, 2004) and new forms of Urban Theology (Baker, 2007), I am interested much more in the creative dialogue of difference amongst urban youth rather than its submersion within so-called 'hybrid' fusions. It is in this way that I hope my use of 'Third Space' ideas can resource an engagement in the field with plural experiences of social exclusion and religious discourse amongst urban youth without seeking to impose categories that implicitly seek to minimise or squash difference.

Three methodological and hermeneutical tools will help to ensure that fieldwork within this project engages with these areas of interest as a way of interpreting the use of religious discourse amongst a diverse cohort of excluded urban youth. First, the approach found within Action Research

(described in a forthcoming 'Methodology Framework' paper) will enable me to meet these areas of theoretical interest, the 'Foundational Values' which guide the Project (see page 2 of this paper) and the commitment to fashion project 'Outcomes' that can enable the development of long-term grass-roots initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue between different groups of urban youth that lead to empowerment and new forms of self-expression. Second, the 'nitty-gritty' framework developed by Pinn (1991) provides a hermeneutical perspective that will enable me to engage with the fluidity of 'Third Space' urban youth experience in a manner that is not bound by presumption or doctrinal/theoretical 'orthodoxy'. A 'nitty-gritty' hermeneutical perspective will facilitate a critical engagement with an untidy and fragmented range of youth identities. Such a hermeneutical approach will enable me to fashion the 'street literacy' advocated by Cahill (2000) whereby the ways in which youth experience the changing nature of their communities provide the vocabulary and the conceptual framework for understanding youth experiences in the blurred 'Third Space' of the urban 'Fourth World'. Within the plural context of Birmingham such 'street literacy' will be informed by what Sandercock (1998, 16) has termed 'multicultural literacy' which incarnates 'street literacy' in a diverse urban world. Such hermeneutical and methodological perspectives will enable me to allow plural youth experiences to 'speak for themselves' thus providing an authentic expression of the relationship between social exclusion and religious discourse amongst urban youth, rather than imposed conclusions that arise from my own values and assumptions as White male adult researcher.

In order to meet the aims of the project fieldwork will entail an in depth two year ethnographic study of three faith-based youth projects in Birmingham working with socially excluded Black, Muslim and White youth. This primary fieldwork will be complemented by a briefer piece of fieldwork in New York, U.S.A through the Centre for the Study of Urban Religion at the New York Theological Seminary. This New York based fieldwork will enable a critical comparison between two comparable urban contexts.

### **International Comparisons**

In an era of trans-local youth cultures it will be important to set this British focused research project against another comparable global context. It is therefore my intention to interrelate, compare and contrast the findings from field-work amongst a diverse cohort of excluded urban youth in Birmingham with a comparable sample of urban youth in New York, U.S.A. This will be made possible through an existing connection with the Centre for the Study of Urban Religion within the New York Theological Seminary. This comparison will draw upon comparative method within sociology (Wacquant, 2008 and Sasaki, 2008) which makes it possible to measure similarity and difference between comparable international contexts, enabling the development of research

outcomes that have the capacity to articulate themes in an intra-contextual manner. In an age of trans-local urbanism and cultural globalisation such an approach can inform analyses within single urban contexts and serve as a critique of local practice in relation to faith-based work with excluded urban youth.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> 'Inter-ethnic marriage', Web site <http://www.statistics.gov.uk> accessed 21 October 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundation* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Book, 1949), 59-64; *Systematic Theology Vol 1* (London: James Nisbet, 1953), 15ff and *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).

<sup>3</sup> Here the term 'Generation Y' (sometimes referred to as 'Generation Me') refers to people born from the mid 1980s onwards.