

The British Nativity Play: an initiation into a familiar paradigmatic scene

Lucinda Murphy
Durham University
lucinda.a.murphy@durham.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Year upon year the scene is set for what has, for many in Britain, become a strikingly and tangibly familiar image of Christmas and ultimately of childhood. Shepherds fiddle distractedly with their tea-towels. Angels preen their sparkly foil wings and hoist up their white woollen tights. Proudly bejewelled Kings fight over makeshift cardboard crowns. The school nativity play has become an ingrained part of British culture, and perhaps even something of a rite of passage. Despite the continuing prevalence and popularity of this ritualized narrative in British churches and schools, this phenomenon has not, until now, attracted any sustained academic study.

This paper discusses four qualitative interviews I conducted in 2016 with parents whose children had recently performed in a nativity play at a non-faith state primary school in London. Examining how these parents interpreted their experiences, understandings, and memories of this dramatized narrative, I consider how the religious/cultural narrative is retold and reinterpreted through and in relation to personal life narratives. I draw upon anthropological and psychological theories of meaning seeking, memory making, and identity construction to explore how personal participation in, connection to, and narration of cultural/religious narratives might impact the type of *value* attributed to their contents.

KEYWORDS

Nativity Play; Nativity; Memory; Meaning Making; Autobiographical Memory; Christmas; Identity; Emotion; Phenomenology; Narrative

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Introduction

*The cattle are lowing. The shepherds fiddle distractedly with their tea-towels.
Mary shyly clasps her baby close. Joseph sways from this foot to that.
Assorted angels preen their sparkly foil wings and purposefully hoist up their
white woollen tights. Proudly bejewelled Kings fight over makeshift cardboard
crowns. And all the while, the fervent innkeeper shuffles up and down,
muttering quietly to himself,
'no room at the inn, no room at the inn.'*

This is a painting of a very particular narrative, and more specifically, the pre-performance *mise en scène* of a very particular play. It constitutes what Needham has characterised as a 'paradigmatic scene';¹ the go-to image of an associative narrative, and crucially, as he saw it, the basic key with which to unlock complex cultural, or indeed religious, worlds.² Such scenes offer us an evocative glimpse into the core values at the heart of these worlds, and crucially, a connotative hint of the affective states through which they are tinged. This particular scene transports us into the distinctive world of the British Christmas Nativity Play – a world in which four-year-olds transform into sparkly angels, in which comically chaotic vitality reigns and naively profound innocence triumphs; a world in which tea-towels become more than simply tea-towels.

An enactment of the Christian narrative of Jesus' birth, the play has come to include a range of now well-established, and highly anticipated, tropes, lines, songs and costumes; not least the classic tableau-like 'stable scene' depicting Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus in the manger surrounded by adoring angels, shepherds, kings, animals and token star. Interestingly, whereas such a scene has been popularised via the medium of 'Nativity scenes' or 'cribs' throughout the rest of Europe and beyond,³ in Britain, it is the play which appears to have become the predominant 'paradigmatic scene';⁴ the perceivedly charming image of 'innocence and amusing mishaps' which captures for at least one recent British commentator, 'the very essence of Christmas'.⁵

Nativity plays or pageants are of course not unique to the UK. Indeed, much older dramatic depictions of the Nativity can be traced back to scenes from medieval liturgical dramas and subsequent mystery plays performed across

¹ Rodney Needham, *Circumstantial Deliveries* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1981), p. 1, p. 89.

² Ibid. p. 90; In this metaphoric reference to 'world', I am drawing from the conceptual framework provided by: Alfred Schutz & Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World*, trans. by Richard M. Zaner and H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973)

³ William D. Crump, *The Christmas Encyclopaedia, 3rd Edition* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2013), pp. 307-309; Susan Topp Weber, *Nativities of the World* (Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2013)

⁴ Rodney Needham, *Circumstantial Deliveries* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1981), p. 1, p. 89.

⁵ Gervase Phinn, *The Virgin Mary's Got Nits: A Christmas Anthology* (Hodder & Stoughton: London, 2014), p. 3.

Europe for the Biblical instruction of the laity up until the Protestant Reformation. Contemporary versions of the tradition have since been revived across numerous parts of the world.⁶ However, the focus on its performance by young school children (typically around the ages of 3-7) has undoubtedly become something of a distinctive contemporary British tradition,⁷ carrying its own idiosyncratic set of affective expectations and associations.

Nativity plays grew in popularity amongst schools, churches and youth groups in Britain thanks in part to the encouragement of radio broadcasts during the inter-war years. By the post-war period, they had become a staple part of the British Primary School repertoire⁸ and perhaps even something of a rite of passage. Given the somewhat surprising lack of social scientific research in this area to date, it is difficult to measure the ongoing contemporary prevalence of the tradition with any exactitude, and more difficult still to account for any regional divergences. However, it does appear that, whilst perhaps no longer such a pervasive rite of passage in all quarters, this is an event in which thousands of British school children still participate, and which a good number of parents still expect and anticipate at Christmas time.

This is not least suggested by its continuing occurrence in December media reports,⁹ and often fondly comical portrayals in popular Christmas films such as the *Nativity!* trilogy and *Love Actually*.¹⁰ The positive emotions surrounding the occasion seem evident. Indeed, a study of 5500 women with children commissioned by Asda in 2013 found the 'deeply loved and emotional Christmas tradition' to be so 'important' as to persuade the company to market

⁶ Crump, *The Christmas Encyclopaedia*, pp. 101-102.

⁷ It should be noted that the tradition of the play becoming performed by young children is also popular across parts of the USA, though predominantly in churches and private schools as opposed to public schools. This may of course therefore provide a fruitful comparison for further research.

⁸ Martin Johnes, *Christmas and the British: A Modern History* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 121.

⁹ Examples from 2017/18 include: <<https://www.thesun.co.uk/fabulous/5113461/primary-school-teacher-reveals-what-your-kids-nativity-role-really-says-about-them-and-its-not-good-news-if-theyre-an-angel/>> ; <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/advice/the-green-room/2018/green-room-school-play/>> ; <<https://www.hellomagazine.com/royalty/2017120644569/prince-george-sheep-nativity-play/>> ; <<https://www.hellomagazine.com/royalty/2017120744611/prince-harry-prince-william-nativity-play/>> ; <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/22/tell-kids-nativity-play-rubbish-tough-love-christmas>> ; <http://metro.co.uk/2017/12/11/the-funniest-nativity-play-stories-as-told-by-parents-7044883/> ; <<https://www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/school-nativity-plays-across-devon-960263>> ; <<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/nativity-character-role-what-says-personality-primary-school-angel-donkey-narrator-a8086541.html>> ; <<http://metro.co.uk/2017/12/11/a-five-year-old-starred-in-his-first-nativity-play-and-rang-a-bell-to-celebrate-the-end-of-chemotherapy-7149288/>> ; <<http://metro.co.uk/2017/12/05/18-nativity-play-stories-that-will-make-you-snort-with-laughter-7041555/>> ; <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5136691/Care-home-residents-nativity-play.html>> [Last accessed 28th April 2018].

¹⁰ *Love Actually*, dir. by Richard Curtis (Universal, 2003); *Nativity!*, dir. by Debbie Isitt (BBC Films, 2009); *Nativity 2: Danger in the Manger!*, dir. by Debbie Isitt (BBC Films, 2012); *Nativity 3: Dude, Where's My Donkey?!*, dir. by Debbie Isitt (BBC Films, 2014).

themselves in their attitudes to 'working mums' by introducing 'Nativity leave'.¹¹ Meanwhile, a YouGov survey of 1838 UK adults the following year shows 87% of respondents reporting that their child's school had put on a nativity play, and – perhaps connectedly – 79% 'approving' of the way in which the school marked Christmas.¹²

However, despite these positive depictions of the play as a 'milestone moment',¹³ in the British cultural life script,¹⁴ the tradition, unsurprisingly, now occupies a somewhat contested space. As social historian Johnes has recently indicated, it seems that as well as being 'infamous for pushy parents showing off about their offspring's talents or lamenting the fact that their child had been relegated to the role of a sheep', the plays have over the years been portrayed as playing 'an important role in spreading knowledge of the Christian tradition'.¹⁵ Indeed, a survey conducted by the Bible Society in 2012 suggested that reportedly high levels of semantic retention of the basic components of the Nativity story are directly aligned with the classic tropes presented in the play tradition rather than the Bible itself.¹⁶ It seems that the prime 'carrier institution'¹⁷ of the story has perhaps shifted over time from the Church to the Primary School.

This clear educational prioritisation of the Christian message has of course more recently raised some challenging issues, particularly in the case of non-faith state primary schools. Thus, if not simply abandoning them in favour of more secular Christmas productions, many schools, especially in more multicultural areas, are now opting for plays in which the ostensibly Christian storyline is tweaked, updated, and reinterpreted to accommodate for a plurality of potentially conflicting worldviews.¹⁸ The often contested injection of extra characters and alternative storylines has now become perhaps as much incorporated into cultural conceptions of the tradition as the original theme; a point well-rehearsed by the proud, comically self-aware inclusion of the 'First

¹¹ <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/asda-gives-working-mums-nativity-leave-to-see-children-in-plays-8983474.html>> [Last accessed 28th April 2018].

¹² <https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/juhk980ke8/YG-Archive-Pol-Sunday-Times-results-051214.pdf> [Last accessed 28th April 2018].

¹³ In the words of Asda's executive people director:

<<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/asda-gives-working-mums-nativity-leave-to-see-children-in-plays-8983474.html>> [Last accessed 28th April 2018].

¹⁴ Martin A. Conway and Laura Jobson, 'On the nature of autobiographical memory' in *Understanding Autobiographical Memory: Theories and Approaches*, ed. by Dorte Berntsen and David C. Rubin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 54-69 (pp. 63-64).

¹⁵ Johnes, *Christmas and the British*, p. 121.

¹⁶ <<https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/latest/news/children-and-parents-6-out-of-10-score-on-nativity-knowledge/>>;

<<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/christmas/9748554/Scandal-of-Mary-and-Joseph-passes-most-Britons-by-as-they-place-Father-Christmas-by-the-manger.html>> [Last accessed 28th April 2018].

¹⁷ Douglas J. Davies <<https://blog.oup.com/2016/09/church-england-nhs/>> [Last accessed 28th April].

¹⁸ See for example school resources such as:

<<http://www.outoftheark.co.uk/products/nativities/whole-school/>> [Last accessed 28th April 2018].

Lobster' in popular, and now 'classic', British Christmas film *Love Actually*.¹⁹ The 'lobster' has, thus, become the ultimate sophisticated emic 'metacommentary' upon the ethos of contemporary British nativity plays, and by extension, contemporary British Christmas.²⁰

That the move to 'ditch', alter, or 'water down' the traditional Christian story has been met with seemingly widespread scepticism, baffled amusement, and sometimes even outrage,²¹ presents a potentially interesting insight into the complex make-up of religious identities in Britain today.²² Just *how* widespread this implicit conservatism is, and just exactly what *kinds* of scepticism - and indeed, what kinds of belief - it implies are questions which still beg considerable further research. However, as can be observed from the context of the Bible Society's 2012 survey, it seems certain that there may be a popular tendency to align the decline of traditional nativity plays with the decline of Christianity in contemporary British culture.²³ According to this view, Nativity plays become sites of yet another vestige of a cultural heritage, and the perception that they are under 'threat' another symptom of secularisation. This trend is also reflected in the wording of the 2014 YouGov survey in which respondents were asked to indicate whether 'it is better for schools to have traditional nativity plays, telling the story of Jesus' birth' or whether 'it is better for schools to have more modern Christmas plays that are more relevant to Britain today'; interestingly 62% chose the former, whilst 17% chose the latter.²⁴

It may well be, as Johnes concludes, that the 'evolution of nativity plays' can be seen as an example of how Christianity has come to 'accommodate rather than compete with the secular Christmas'.²⁵ However, just how this attempt at

¹⁹ <<http://www.digitalspy.com/movies/news/a816640/love-actually-what-the-girl-who-played-first-lobster-in-nativity-play-looks-like-now/>>; <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/love-actuallys-10th-anniversary-the-cast-and-crew-reminisce-about-the-christmas-classic>> [Last accessed 28th April 2018].

²⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays* (New York: Basic Books, c1973), p. 448.

²¹ <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1571187/School-nativity-plays-under-threat.html>> [Last accessed 28th April 2018].

²² <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1571187/School-nativity-plays-under-threat.html>>; <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2856795/The-schools-Elvis-nativity-star-Nearly-half-schools-scrap-traditional-play-updated-version-starring-modern-characters.html>>; <<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2017/22-december/news/uk/the-second-lobster-parents-sceptical-of-new-nativity-plays-with-random-parts>>; <<http://theconversation.com/more-than-one-lobster-present-at-the-birth-of-jesus-thats-old-news-35338>>; <<https://www.itv.com/goodmorningbritain/news/poll-should-schools-keep-the-traditional-nativity-play>>; <http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/juhk980ke8/YG-Archive-Pol-Sunday-Times-results-051214.pdf> [Last accessed 28th April 2018].

²³ <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/christmas/9748554/Scandal-of-Mary-and-Joseph-passes-most-Britons-by-as-they-place-Father-Christmas-by-the-manger.html>>; <<https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/latest/news/children-and-parents-6-out-of-10-score-on-nativity-knowledge/>> [Last accessed 28th April 2018].

²⁴ <http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/juhk980ke8/YG-Archive-Pol-Sunday-Times-results-051214.pdf> [Last accessed 28th April 2018].

²⁵ Johnes, *Christmas and the British*, p. 121.

accommodation might interact with more popular ideologies on the ground appears regrettably unexplored. This paper attempts to make a small first step towards redressing this gap, laying the foundations for the further research I am currently pursuing in this area.²⁶ The ensuing case-study describes a preliminary research project which continues to inform much of this work, and which I hope may generate some substantive indicative themes for others to pursue.²⁷

The project was conducted in 2016, and set out to explore the perspectives of parents whose children had recently performed in a nativity play at a non-faith state primary school in a multicultural area of North West London. Entering into a detailed phenomenological exploration of the ways in which these parents interpreted their experiences, understandings, and memories of the cultural narrative, I hoped to ascertain how personal participation in, connection to, and narration of cultural/religious narratives might impact the type of value attributed to their contents.

A Brief Word on Method

The school was approached shortly after Christmas 2015, and four parents volunteered to take part in response to my email invitation. The group was therefore naturally self-selecting. Sadly, and quite possibly significantly, no Muslim parents came forward, despite the large Muslim population present in the school community. However, as will hopefully become more evident, a complex range of worldviews were still apparent amongst the group that volunteered. Only one confessed an explicitly ongoing (though admittedly troubled) Christian identity, the others all falling in some way into nuanced shades of non-belief.

Lasting roughly one hour each, the interviews were conducted in locations around the area from February to March 2016, and subsequently recorded and transcribed. Involvement in the research was of course voluntary, and identities have been protected as far as possible with the use of pseudonyms. Interviews were semi-structured so as to preserve enough flexibility for the interviewees to organically guide the conversation, whilst also ensuring a degree of structuring to allow for an accurate cross-comparison of themes.

The conversations played out in roughly seven sections:

- (1) Word association with 'nativity'.
- (2) Discussions of last year's Christmas celebrations.
- (3) Memories of nativity plays.

²⁶ For more info on this research, see: <<https://lucindaslog.com/thefestivelog/>> [Last accessed 28th April 2018].

²⁷ André Droogers and Anton van Harskamp (ed.), *Methods for the Study of Religious Change: From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2014), pp. 43-60.

- (4) Interpretation of nativity story.²⁸
- (5) Narration of nativity story as if to their children.²⁹
- (6) Discussion of how they found task (5) and what they were trying to get across.
- (7) In the interests of respecting my interlocutors as co-interpreters who have the right to evaluate the judgements being made about their own lives, I concluded by revealing my guiding research question and asking for further reflections on the conversation in relation to this question.³⁰

Given the clear idiographic focus of my research, I opted for an approach which follows the methodological tradition of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.³¹ This allowed me to incorporate 'thick' idiographic descriptions of intuited emotional experience³² alongside more constructivist narrative interpretations of generative discursive speech.³³ With this in mind, I begin by introducing each of my interlocutors in turn. Presenting their personal narratives alongside each of their retellings of the cultural narrative will, I hope, allow us not only to glean a sense of the dynamic process which integrates the 'personal' and the 'cultural'; but to keep not just the stories, but the *people* who drive this research in mind as we travel through our ensuing interpretative reflections.³⁴

²⁸ I deliberately chose not to inquire directly about religiosity at this juncture so as to observe whether participants might voluntarily raise the topic in relation to their interpretations.

²⁹ Excerpts from the transcripts are provided below.

³⁰ Ian Parker, *Qualitative psychology: introducing radical research* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005), p. 8, p. 20; Eatough and Smith, 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis' in *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*, pp. 179-194 (pp. 188-189); Alan Bryman, *Social research methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 324.

³¹ Pnina Shinebourne, 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis' in *Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology: Combining Core Approaches*, ed. by Nollaig Frost (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Open University Press, 2011), pp. 44-65 (p. 49).

³² Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1984), pp. 42-44.

³³ Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers and Michael Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: SAGE, 2009), p. 36; Virginia Eatough and Jonathan A. Smith, 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis' in *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology*, ed. by Carla Willig and Wendy Stainton-Rogers (Los Angeles; London: SAGE, 2008) pp. 179-194 (p. 184).

³⁴ This follows Smith's model of 'empathetic reading' before 'critical...speculative reflection': Jonathan A. Smith, 'Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1: 1 (2008), 39-54 (p. 46); [For a particularly pertinent example of a similar phenomenologically minded approach see: Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2008)]

Introducing my interlocutors

	Jake	Katy	Clare	Tara
Date of Birth	17/08/84	22/10/75	14/04/74	27/01/77
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Female
Race / Ethnicity	Mixed Race: British / Tunisian	White: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British	White: Other Background	Asian / British Asian: Indian
Country of Birth	United Kingdom	United Kingdom	France	United Kingdom
Highest Level of Education	NVQ Level 2, Intermediate GNVQ, City and Guilds Craft, BTEC First/General Diploma, RSA Diploma	Degree (for example BA, BSc)	Higher Degree (for example MA, PhD, PGCE)	NVQ Level 1, Foundation GNVQ, Basic Skills
Religion	Christian	Pagan / spiritual	Christian (Roman Catholic)	Hindu
Active Practice?	Yes	Yes	No	No
Religion as child	Christian	Atheist	Christian (Roman Catholic)	Christian / Hindu

The Nativity According to Jake

Given his Christian upbringing and active involvement in the Church throughout his life, Jake was instantly familiar with both the nativity story and nativity plays. Sadly, his life circumstances seem to have changed recently and he found himself at home on his own this Christmas in a new area, though he did manage to find a church. In recent years, he has become quite disenfranchised with the institutional Church, and though he says Jesus is still important to him, he reflects that Jesus is not central in his life at the moment. He was enthusiastic when describing his daughter's performance as an angel in the play. Although he was disappointed he could not attend, he watched video clips back afterwards and was clearly extremely proud that his daughter 'got a massive applause' for confidently shouting her lines. Initially, he struggled when trying to recall his own memories. He had vague memories of having been 'a sheep or a pig or something.' However, he was tangibly excited when he eventually remembered that 'a lot earlier on' he had been a wise man. He laughed at recalling his '*really* itchy beard'.

Again, perhaps due to his Christian background, Jake offered a thorough and confident rendition of the nativity story, was comfortable in his handling of its content, and seemed to enjoy musing upon its various themes and messages. The central message, he thoughtfully concluded, was one of 'faith...courage...and love' and of 'trust[ing] in God's plan.' He engaged competently with some of the more challenging issues in the story and expressed some concern that many Bible stories are often 'presented like *fairy tales*.' Viewing nativity plays as an effective way of presenting a 'bitesize' version of the story, he thinks they 'should be there...at primary school level'. Since 'we live in a Christian culture', he emphasises that children 'of all nationalities' should learn the story as part of their 'education' and 'history'.

So there...³⁵ once there was a man and a woman called Joseph and Mary...And Joseph went off to work one day. And Mary was at home...chilling. And suddenly then an angel came to her. An angel from God. And the angel said to her, 'You're going to have...a baby.' And the angel said to Mary, 'The baby is going to be extremely important because God is going to give you the baby. And you'll call him Jesus. Mary told Joseph when he got home and he was...very surprised. But God had told him that...everything was going to be ok and...to just go along with it and it will be fine. [Pause] Around this time...the ruler of er...where they lived...told everyone to return to where they were born and sign a massive register so...they could count all the people. So...Mary and Joseph...set off...for Bethlehem...[laughing!] on a donkey! *Ey-ore!* [both laugh] But when they arrived...it was jam packed. And there was no...room at the hotels...And Mary was feeling very tired and she was getting very big and the baby was coming soon. So they went knocking on all the doors until they could find a place to chill. [Pause] And they came to a a place...a farm maybe...a farmyard. And they knocked on the door and the man said 'There's no space...no space here but, I could put you in the barn with the animals.' So Mary and Joseph settled for that...and they bedded down [pause - laughs] I don't know where to...oh ok...Meanwhile...um...in a nearby field there were some shepherds tending to the sheep, looking after the sheep...And suddenly there was a blast of...trumpets and horns and loads of angels appeared above them...And they were very scared. But the angel said, 'Dudes [pause] Don't worry. Don't panic...I bring you amazing news. Just up the road in Bethlehem, a woman's about to have a baby...who is...gonna be called Jesus and he's gonna be the most important man to ever live because he's God's own son...And a massive star appeared in the sky to lead them there....Meanwhile meanwhile *meanwhile* [laughs]...a group of wise men, or astronomers, people that study stars, also saw the star and set off to follow it...The shepherds following the star soon arrived at where the star had stopped, above a little barn...and as they entered, they saw...Mary and Joseph and the little baby, who was Jesus. And they kneeled down before him...and praised him. And soon after, the wise men appeared at the doorway and came in...and saw

³⁵ ... constitutes a 1 second pause. [Longer pauses are indicated in parentheses]

the baby Jesus, and they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh! [Pause] Um...and there was a...there was a horrible king that wanted to...that kind of caught wind of it and wanted to kill Jesus...um...he intercepted the kings...the three wise men on their journey. But we don't need to go into that. Um...and all the angels around...the barn, the stable and the...and the shepherds and the three wise men all celebrated the wonderful birth of Jesus. That's about right isn't it?

The Nativity According to Katy

Describing herself as 'non-religious',³⁶ Katy was clear that she does not believe the nativity story 'actually happened.' She was, however, definitely familiar with both the central tenets of the story and the nativity play tradition. She immediately recalled being pleased to be chosen to play Mary in her own school nativity play and remembered how the teacher had called her over for a 'little chat' about her 'special dress'. She fondly described her daughter's performance as an angel, repeatedly saying how 'adorable' it was. She was, however, anxious to keep reiterating that 'there was no deeper level to it' for her. It was 'very endearing but...nothing else'. When pushed, she attributed her fond feelings to the fact that 'seeing your kids doing the stuff that you did when you were five' gives you a 'sentimental' sense of 'time line of your life'.

She has 'mixed feelings' about Christmas which 'hasn't really had a lot of meaning' for her since she lost her parents around age 19. This year was 'alright', however, because she spent it heavily involved in organising a Christmas meal for homeless families with the charity she works for. She and her children were homeless last year and clearly this work means a lot to Katy. It seems significant that when dwelling upon the central message of the story and considering how she might present it to her children, she chose to 'focus' on 'the sense of helping people that are less fortunate.' This is, she believes, 'a universal message.' Being part of this Christmas event enabled her to feel a 'connection' with the 'community'; to feel 'part of something bigger' than just being 'stuck at home watching the telly.' However, it also increased her enthusiastic engagement with other faith traditions and fascination with navigating the interplay between them. She is now keen to help support more multicultural events in her local area and expresses some frustration at the lack of inclusivity she sometimes observes amongst middle class white mums on the school PTA.

To this end, she says nativity plays performed 'at the exclusion' of all other traditions are not the way she wants to see society progress. For her, 'it's all or nothing'. Therefore, although she thinks it would be a 'shame' for nativity plays to disappear because it is 'a lot of people's tradition', she says she 'wouldn't be disappointed' if they were scrapped. She reported struggling with the elements of the narration task which required her to relate things she felt uncomfortable with, such as 'a God...want[ing] to have a baby on earth.'

³⁶ Interestingly she identifies as a pagan on the demographic form though this is something she alludes to only once in the interview.

Anxious not to 'project' her 'anti-ness onto them', Katy is clear that she wants to give her children a 'healthy perspective' which will allow them to 'make their own minds up' within the 'multicultural environment' in which they are growing up.

Well I tell...I'm quite honest with them about how I feel and I say...Because Bronte went to visit a church I think on Wednesday [pause] erm...and she was talking about it and I...she said people go to church and I've said to them several times, people go to church because that's what they believe. I personally don't believe that and that's why we don't go...So...my version of events would be...alright so I would say: Some people believe...in a God and...that God wanted to have...a human form of himself on earth. And he chose a lady called Mary and she became pregnant with the baby. But she had a husband which is a bit weird. It's not his baby which is a bit weird. [laughs] And then they needed somewhere to stay and they travelled and they found an inn with a stable and they stayed there and Mary had the baby there...And then I would put in the bit about the three wise men...and the epiphany bit and would say...and then that baby is Jesus. And then people followed him and they listened to him and they thought that he was a good person...um and that's how the religion formed and that's how Christianity formed around...the birth of this special person who...is called Jesus. And that would be the kind of...stand off-ish version of...it seems very kind of...I don't believe in that which is unfortunately how I would put it across. Because I have said to my kids...you know I...to me it's a story and it's a lovely story and there's a nice message but all religions to me have that just live a decent life and be a decent person message...So...yeah. It's tricky because I'm not religious so...I would say this is the story of what *they* believe, this is what happened...but I probably would be...putting my own...agenda on it...but I suppose that's what we do.

The Nativity According to Clare

Born and bred in France, Clare enjoys returning back there at Christmas to celebrate with her family. For her, Christmas is a 'family reunion'. Unlike the others, she seemed unfamiliar with the nativity play tradition and also omitted many key components of the story. Her retelling of the story was merely a sentence long, and unlike the others, she was not inclined to engage in any detailed analysis of the narrative's content. This may well reflect the fact that nativity plays have not become a tradition in France. She certainly could not recall having been in one herself. Perhaps unsurprisingly given her French background, she thought it was strange that the tradition should be performed in a secular primary school, expressing concern that such plays 'could be a problem' for many parents. She reiterates that religion is a 'sensitive' issue, and tells several anecdotes about religious sensitivities in the school.

She was enthusiastic in describing her daughter's involvement in the play, outlining her excitement at getting to dress up. She felt it was important that children were able to 'express themselves' in this way and learn these type

skills to increase confidence. She thought the play was 'cute' and was impressed with how much the children had learned and how confident they were. Clare was brought up a Catholic, attending a Catholic school, but has moved away from practicing the religion in her adulthood. Religion is still important to her but 'more in terms of the value than the practice.' She views the 'gifts' at the centre of the nativity as 'more [of] a symbol' and 'celebration' of 'new life'. However, she is clear that 'you don't really need religion to get the right message.' The right values can be passed down to our children through other good moral stories like the ones she watches with her children on *CBeebies*.³⁷

So there is Joseph and er Mary...[clarification about Mary's name in English]...and the Kings are coming to bring some gifts to celebrate the birth of the little Jesus...And I don't remember so much after that really.

The Nativity According to Tara

Tara was vivaciously enthusiastic when it came to reminiscing about the Christmas traditions at her own school. Although she came from a Hindu background, classing herself 'a Hindu by religion', she attended a Church of England school as a child. The conversation was littered with her various fond memories of singing from the 'little common praise book' of 'Father Anthony' and of their 'traditional' church with 'all the stain glass windows' and 'the big old creaky wooden doors.' She repeatedly told me how much she 'loved' these experiences and how just being in a church still makes her feel 'quite warm.' She is keen that her children 'should have the same memories' and therefore is delighted that the school her daughter currently attends engage with 'Christmassy things' like putting on a nativity play. It had saddened her that her older son's first school 'didn't do anything'. Interestingly, she cannot quite recall being in a nativity play herself, but presumes she must have been.

Tara's abundant pride of her daughter's nativity play was striking. She gave me a blow by blow account of the process of rehearsing her daughter's part with her at home, her excited attempts to secure a good 'front row centre' spot, and her memories of the children's performance and audience reaction. She was clearly extremely familiar with the various popular elements of the nativity story and came up with a clear image when asked to describe the scene. She struggled, however, when asked to narrate the whole story, embarrassed that she might have forgotten 'important chunks of the story.' Although she did still relay many of the details of the story, she struggled to pick out a central message and became uncomfortable when asked to discuss the values it might represent. Despite her childhood memories, as an adult she is 'not practicing anything' and says her belief has been 'kind of...lost...along the way.' She expresses scepticism about people who 'excessively' follow 'a book that was written so long ago', and also alludes to some uncertainty about the concept of God, admitting that she usually sends her children to her Father-in-law when they ask religious questions she feels she cannot answer. She is clear, however, that she would still like for her

³⁷ *CBeebies* is a popular British children's TV show.

children to 'know' the story she 'learnt as a kid.' For Tara, it is important that children learn the nativity story to remind them what the Christmas festival they grow up with is really all about. She mourns the fact that it seems to have become so 'commercial'. Reflecting on how the story should fit into the broader curriculum, she emphasised the importance of children learning about 'everybody's religion', but reasoned that she probably particularly cares more about this tradition because of her 'upbringing' and her memories.

I'm going to be thinking about them walking along...to Jerusalem...yeah it's...oh my God. That's a good one...erm right...let me think...yeah no good question...erm [pause] that is a very good question...it's going to be a short concise [pause] So er ah...yeah again...it's...I remember King Herod and I'm not sure how he got the message that obviously....a child was going to be born that obviously...I want to say special powers but no obviously a special child...um of which he then ordered that all the children in I'm thinking Bethlehem? Or Jerusalem?...would be killed. Erm...and obviously when Joseph and Mary heard that you know they were gonna have you know a baby boy, they obviously packed up their bags, and got on their little donkey with their lifelong belongings and...they fled...to Bethlehem. Um...they made obviously the journey...um...which was long and treacherous with all their worldly belongings saddled up on their little donkey with its heavy load! Um...they tried to find shelter...and they knocked on the obviously the doors of many um many inns. Er they couldn't find anywhere to stay. And an innkeeper let them in and said I don't have a room, I have nowhere for you to sleep, but I do have a stable that you can obviously take shelter in...Erm...and then obviously the three wise men...well not obviously but the three wise men knew that the baby was going to be born...um and they had presents for the future king...Um and they followed the star...is it the north star, they followed the star in the sky which was gonna lead them...to the child, obviously because they didn't have satellite navigation. Um...and yeah it led them obviously to the manger where baby Jesus was born. And they presented the three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus...Um and I don't remember anything after that.

Autobiographical Remembering

For all their divergences, what seemed abundantly clear when unravelling these conversations was that each person undoubtedly interpreted the meaning of the nativity story according to their own personal narrative. Their retelling and interpretation of the cultural narrative was shaped ultimately by the values, motivations and desires of their present conceptual selves; by the way they constructed their *memories* of the story, the way they personalised it to fit the schema of their own developing sense of self. This notion of memories being formed in a retrospective interpretative active process is well

supported in contemporary neurological and psychological research.³⁸ Furthermore, that such retrospectively constructed memories might take central place in the formation of identities is well attested in the growing literature on autobiographical memory.³⁹

Autobiographical memory is considered a subtype of Tulving's concept of 'episodic' memory,⁴⁰ in which the individual is enabled to autonoetically re-experience sensually distinctive moments of their past.⁴¹ This invariably involves the perception of visual images associated with particular settings or contexts.⁴² As Larud highlights in his observation of medieval mystery plays, exaggerated imagery, whether by vivid colouring, exceptional beauty or ugliness, clear disfigurement or even comedy,⁴³ evokes a 'quick image'⁴⁴ – an emotionally tinged 'mood memory'⁴⁵ – which provides the cue necessary for memory retrieval. This indicates why nativity plays, with their distinctive imagery and comedic value, might evoke particularly strong episodic memories.

Hence, it seems natural that episodic memories retained in the most autonoetically accessible forms might be particularly predisposed to becoming 'self-defining' later on,⁴⁶ as they become progressively embellished with further memory layers and increasingly elaborate constructions of personal meaning.⁴⁷ According to Singer and Blagov, a memory is more likely to become 'self-defining' if it is '(1) vivid (2) affectively intense (3) repetitively

³⁸ Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, trans. by Sara B. Young (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 8-9; Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The brain, the mind, and the past* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), pp. 44-50; As also originally seen in: Sigmund Freud, 'Screen Memories' in *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 3-22 (p.21); Hugh Haughton, 'Introduction' in *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. vii-lx (p. xix).

³⁹ Dorthe Berntsen and David C. Rubin, 'Introduction' in *Understanding Autobiographical Memory: Theories and Approaches*, ed. by Dorthe Berntsen and David C. Rubin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 1-8 (pp. 1-2).

⁴⁰ Endel Tulving, *Elements of Episodic Memory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 127.

⁴¹ Katherine Nelson, 'Narrative and Self, Myth and Memory: Emergence of the Cultural Self' in *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self*, ed. by Robyn Fivush and Catherine A. Haden (New York: Psychology Press, 2013), pp. 3-28 (p. 8).

⁴² S. A. Dewhurst and M. A. Conway, 'Pictures, images, and recollective experience', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition*, 20 (1994), 1088-1098; Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, p. 23.

⁴³ Theodore K. Lerud, *Memory, images, and the English Corpus Christi drama* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 3-4; pp. 11-12.

⁴⁴ Ibid. pp. 4-5.

⁴⁵ Douglas J. Davies, *Anthropology and Theology* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2002), pp. 179-181; Douglas J. Davies, 'Memorable Relations and Paradigmatic Scenes', *DISKUS* Vol. 10 (2009) <<http://jbasr.com/basr/diskus/diskus10/davies.htm>> [Last accessed 28th April 2018].

⁴⁶ Jefferson A. Singer and Pavel Blagov, 'The Integrative Function of Narrative Processing: Autobiographical Memory, Self-Defining Memories and the Life Story of Identity' in *The Self and Memory*, ed. by D. R. Beike, J. R. Lampinen, D. A. Behrend (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), pp. 117-138; Nelson, 'Narrative and Self, Myth and Memory: Emergence of the Cultural Self,' p. 12.

⁴⁷ Douglas J. Davies, *Emotion, Identity and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 40-41.

recalled (4) linked to other similar memories (5) focused on an enduring concern or unresolved conflict of the personality.⁴⁸ In this view, such memories come to form continuing 'schemas' which act as the lens through which new events might be perceived.⁴⁹ This certainly tallies with Freud's earlier concept of fragmented pictorial, dream-like 'screen memories', retrospectively constructed to repress unconscious emotional experiences.⁵⁰

Furthermore, such models undoubtedly correspond with the theory of cognitive religious transmission expounded more recently by Harvey Whitehouse, in which dramatic, and usually traumatic, episodic 'flash bulb memories' are aligned with an 'imagistic' as opposed to a 'semantic' doctrinal mode of religion.⁵¹ That these 'flash bulb memories' should *necessarily* relate to a 'traumatic' form of initiation is perhaps disputable, though it does seem likely that the experience of performing a nativity play on the cultural stage for the first time may indeed constitute something of a quasi-traumatic event in the life of a 4-year-old. However, this aside, exploration of the attitudes presented in this study suggests the imagistic and semantic modes of religion might be rather more integrated and intertwined than Whitehouse initially implies. Indeed, it suggests that for the semantic mode of religion to have any lasting resonance, it must be bi-directionally informed by the imagistic mode which might provide resources not only for its retention, but for its navigation.

The process driving this navigation, I propose, is the dynamic mechanism of autobiographical memory. I will now explore this vital process in relation to each of my interviewees, in the hope that others may be able to extrapolate from this the kinds of rich implications such a treatment of emotionally generated interpretive processes might have for the wider study of religion.

Once Upon A Time

When first asked what the story meant for him, Jake replied:

I kind of guess...it's the start of everything. It's the start of...you know, Jesus' life. So, it's important to me. Jesus is important to me. Religion isn't but Jesus is.

For Jake, the very exercise of retelling the story and pondering its message seemed to reconnect him with Jesus and help him reflect upon the current state of his Christian faith. He comments early in his interview that, though he currently feels disenfranchised with the hypocrisy of the church, he knows that it is something he will 'go back to.' When asked what he was trying to portray when narrating the nativity story to his children, he thoughtfully reflected, almost as if reminding himself:

⁴⁸ Singer and Blagov, 'The Integrative Function of Narrative Processing', p. 119.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Freud, 'Screen Memories', pp. 3-22.

⁵¹ Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Walnut Creek ; Lanham ; New York ; Toronto ; Oxford: Altamira Press, 2004), pp. 65-74, p. 106, p. 111.

...to reassure the listener...that...that was God's plan. And he reassured Mary and reassured...Joseph that it was going to be ok.

After some thought, he concluded that the main message of the story was, 'Faith...courage...and love...Faith to...stick it out...and...trust in God's plan', adding:

This is a lot more thought provoking than I thought it'd be. I'm just saying. I'm going to carry this for a bit.

Hence, it seems for Jake, reflecting upon this narrative acts as an imagistic reminder of his core identity, the process of engaging with the narrative acting as a form of meaning-making which helps him develop his religious identity.⁵² Interestingly, when discussing the story's content, he constantly places himself actively within the narrative, considering how *he* might have acted in the situation. For example, describing the Shepherd scene, he says:

They're in a field...working all night as they normally do and suddenly the...night-sky is lit up with angels...That bit always stuck with me...you're in a field at night...and heaven on earth opens....and angels appear and they're little girls...shuffling onto the stage... 'Don't worry, we bring you good news!'⁵³...I'd be petrified. If I was a shepherd...you know, I'd...I'd poo my pants...I always thought...I'd probably run!...you know...forget the sheep, I'm out of here!

Thus, Jake integrates both himself and the nativity play image into his telling of the narrative, personalising it in terms of his own life experiences. Although she comes from a consciously non-religious perspective, Katy also clearly utilised the nativity story as a form of meaning-making. Rather than aiding her in the development of a classically religious identity however, this narrative process assisted her in developing the secular values which sustain her self-identity. When interpreting both the meaning of Christmas and the nativity story, she identified the central message as 'helping people that are less fortunate.' Expanding on how this is depicted in the story she said:

They needed somewhere to stay, and the innkeeper gave them somewhere to stay...because my kids come to work with me, they know about homelessness...So for me I guess the focus was...a nice message about...the homeless. Mary and Joseph are homeless...with a baby on the way. And I kind of tie it in like that.

⁵² Crystal L. Park, 'Religion and Meaning' in *Handbook of The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, ed. by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park (New York ; London: The Guildford Press, 2013), pp.357-379 (pp.358-360); Michael J. Thate, 'An inquisitive presence: Thinking with Douglas Davies on the Study of Religion' in *Death, Life and Laughter: Essays on religion in honour of Douglas Davies*, ed. by Mathew Guest and Martha Middlemiss Lé Mon (Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 230-248 (pp. 232-236).

⁵³ [Delivered in a high pitch voice]

Hence, although Katy may not hold the nativity story to be objectively 'true', and she may well also have come to her perspective on helping the homeless irrespective of *this* story's influence, she is still able to actively draw upon the story to complement and perhaps even deepen her worldview.⁵⁴ Her notion of 'ty[ing] it in' clearly underscores the conceptual self's active selecting of 'resources' from the cultural narrative.⁵⁵ Similarly, her recent experiences of engaging with other faiths when organising a Christmas meal for the homeless enabled her to add layers to her understanding of the familiar narrative. This delicate interweaving was pertinently observable in her animated relation of the Muslim leader's reminder that 'the three kings are actually a Muslim thing,' and her explanation of how they had acknowledged this by adding the kings to their poster. Hence, the story, through the material symbol of this poster, has begun to represent the developing multicultural identity and corresponding inclusive values which she is currently consciously attempting to cultivate as an important part of her self-definition.

Clare also interprets the narrative in terms of 'values'. Though she has rejected her Catholic 'practice', she still carries the 'values' 'in [her] heart.' These values are, once again, aligned with the nativity story's semantic content. Her narration focuses solely on the Kings bringing gifts and Jesus' birth. Commenting on the gift-giving in the nativity, she says:

I feel that it's...celebrating the birth of every...little child...you know it's not just Jesus because...it's a gift to get a new-born. Sometimes you can't have one. And it's a...beginning of a new life, hope and...so I think it's more symbolic than religious for me.

This gives us a decided glimpse into Claire's worldview. Explaining what Christmas means for her, Clare emphasised the importance of sharing with family,⁵⁶ and of it being a 'children's celebration', an understanding which aligns with the themes of gift-giving and birth which she plucks from the narrative. Here we can, again, clearly see the conceptual self-selecting from what is known about the cultural narrative to cultivate its developing ideals.⁵⁷ Given that she is the only interviewee to grow up in a culture without nativity plays,⁵⁸ it is noticeable that Clare does not seem to remember many further

⁵⁴ Nelson, 'Narrative and Self, Myth and Memory: Emergence of the Cultural Self', pp. 20-21.

⁵⁵ Denise R. Beike, James M. Lampinen, and Douglas A. Behrend, 'Evolving Conceptions of the Self and Memory' in *The Self and Memory*, ed. by Denise R. Beike, James R. Lampinen, Douglas A. Behrend (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), pp. 3-10 (p. 8).

⁵⁶ Clare repeats the word 'family' 21 times during the interview.

⁵⁷ Conway and Jobson, 'On the nature of autobiographical memory', p. 61; Dan P. McAdams, 'Identity and the life story' in *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self*, ed. by Robyn Fivush and Catherine A. Haden (New York: Psychology Press, 2013), pp.187-208 (p. 196); Mark L. Howe, 'Early Memory, Early Self, and the Emergence of Autobiographical Memory' in *The Self and Memory*, ed. by Denise R. Beike, James R. Lampinen, Douglas A. Behrend (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), pp.45-72 (p. 45).

⁵⁸ <<http://loumessugo.com/en/blog/entry/december-in-france-christmas-build-up-and-expat-life>> [Last accessed 28th April 2018].

semantic details about the story, despite her strict catholic upbringing. As well as supporting the idea that episodic memories retained in the most autoethnically accessible forms might be particularly predisposed to becoming subsequently 'self-defining',⁵⁹ this further demonstrates the bidirectional interaction of personal and cultural memory and identity-formation.⁶⁰

The impact of the cultural narrative on identity formation was illustrated particularly clearly in Tara's self-narrative. Even though she could not remember having been in a nativity play herself, she definitely aligned her daughter's performance with her own self-defining memories from her Church of England primary school. Despite her Hindu background, these experiences of singing 'proper Christian hymns' and attending church provided her with a love of the nativity story and a decent semantic knowledge of the narrative's details. For Tara, the nativity story's content carried value simply because it allowed her to commune with the happy childhood which had contributed so much to her conceptual self.

This content, however, did not seem to match up to a valuing of the story in its own right. When asked to extrapolate what the narrative might actually *mean* for her, she struggled to articulate a central message. However, even though she was unable to identify an overarching moral message in the story, it still underlies and contributes to her identity. It seems possible she was unable to provide a clear message because she is unconfident about her own religious belief. What she *is* confident about however, is her childhood memories which she repeatedly views as intrinsically 'happy', 'good' and 'nice.' *This* is what she personally wants to pass down to her children, and this is the way she formulates her approach to and narration of the story.

Familiar Fairytales

All the interviewees seemed familiar with the backbones of the story, and most, with the clear exception of Clare, were able to produce a coherent narrative in Section (5).⁶¹ Though the anomaly Clare presents must be considered an indicative speculation given the limitations of my small sample, it does nevertheless seem striking that when asked what images the word 'nativity' conjured up, she was the only interviewee not to mention images associated with nativity *plays*.⁶² Jake, in contrast, refers instantly to 'very young children...all dressed up', 'chaos', 'plastic Jesus' and 'children forgetting their lines.' Tara blurts out, 'the manger', before painting a vivid depiction of the scene, whilst Katy immediately rolls off:

It's the traditional...you know...Mary with the baby in the manger, Joseph, three wise men, somebody dressed up as a donkey.

⁵⁹ Jefferson A. Singer and Pavel Blagov, 'The Integrative Function of Narrative Processing: Autobiographical Memory, Self-Defining Memories and the Life Story of Identity', p.119.

⁶⁰ Conway and Jobson, 'On the nature of autobiographical memory', p.58.

⁶¹ See narrations above.

⁶² Although some of this may be attributed to language barriers.

This aligning of the play with British tradition was a recurring theme for the British interviewees, Jake reiterating the importance of its performance in a 'Christian country' and Katy reflecting that she reckoned Muslim parents understood that '...you know it's a...tradition in an English school, in a British school.' Its ingraining in British society was evident in the implicit expectation that the play would feature somewhere in the cultural life script.⁶³ If interviewees could not quite remember their own nativity plays, there was a sense that they 'must' have been in one.⁶⁴ The tradition is often aligned with 'history', and Jake strongly argues that, at primary school level, 'it should be done.' 'It's education. It's history. It's important', he said. Tara and Jake spoke proudly of the 'moment' their children experienced the play for the first time,⁶⁵ and Katy described her own school nativity play as 'standard.' Katy continually refers to the play as a 'tradition,' commenting:

It's a tradition that's been going on for generations and...you do enjoy seeing your kid go through the motions that you went through in your own childhood. There's kind of a sentimental element to it for that...it kind of gives you a time line of your life...

The notion of the play giving a sense of 'time line' supports the contention that it might be seen as a distinctive 'moment' in the British child's cultural life script;⁶⁶ a notion which might of course be directly aligned with Van Gennep's 'rites of passage' model for further elucidation.⁶⁷ However, it also relates Katy's own performance in the play to that of her daughters. This alignment was common amongst the British interviewees, interestingly even if they could not quite remember their own performance. Hence, it seems that repetition of the performance acts as an invitation to remember the story;⁶⁸ in other words, as a 'rite of intensification'.⁶⁹

Viewing the nativity play as a repeated and publically shared rite of intensification, I believe, makes it arguably potentially more powerful than other childhood memories or stories; for example, Katy's performance as Cinderella, or the comparably distinctive moral imagery discernible in other childhood stories such as 'Peppa Pig' of which Clare is so fond. Hence, it seems that nativity imagery may be more likely to be drawn upon in the formation of identity when it is connected to subsequent associations with further religious rites, or even to more implicit milieu of cultural referents.⁷⁰

⁶³ Conway and Jobson, 'On the nature of autobiographical memory', pp. 63-64.

⁶⁴ E.g. Jake: 'I must of'; Tara: 'I probably definitely was'.

⁶⁵ E.g. Tara: 'So my daughter had her first one'; Jake: 'first proper one'.

⁶⁶ Conway and Jobson, 'On the nature of autobiographical memory', pp. 63-64.

⁶⁷ Arnold van Gennep, *The rites of passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffé (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 1-2.

⁶⁸ Davies, *Emotion, Identity and Religion*, pp. 40-1.

⁶⁹ Eliot Dismore Chapple and Carleton Stevens Coon, *Principles of Anthropology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1942), p. 462; pp. 485-486; Douglas J. Davies, 'Cultural Intensification: A Theory for Religion' in *Religion and the Individual: Belief, Practice, Identity*, ed. by Abby Day (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 7-18.

⁷⁰ Demonstrated particularly by: Jake's references to 'The Nativity' movie, The Vicar of Dibley Christmas Special and a children's book told from the Donkey's perspective;

That episodic memories were likely to be evoked by distinctive nativity imagery was certainly attested to in the interviews. Katy described the nativity as 'very visual' and vision language recurred, particularly in Tara's interview. Support of Lerud's 'quick image'⁷¹ is featured acutely in her use of the present tense and fragmentary images as opposed to a more coherent chronological narrative:

That's pretty much the vision that I have...The manger. Obviously, the setting of the...little...stable. The little sheep in the background. The little manger with Jesus and Mary and Joseph sitting there and I see in the background this kind of quite...glorious kind of Angel Gabriel...You know the Angel Gabriel is quite kind of regal and has the kind of halo and the lovely wings...Quite...central. And then the three wise men are there kneeling down at the manger offering their gifts so, frankincense, myrrh and gold.

Everyone, except Clare, mentioned the stable, the innkeeper and the donkey during the course of the interview. The fact that such references were often mentioned in a familiar, offhand manner demonstrates the embeddedness of this imagery in the wider cultural milieu. For example, Jake referred to the shepherds as having 'always' stuck with him and Tara used the word 'obviously' 45 times when referring to the story's features. That she has known the story for some time was made comically evident when she cried, 'for years, I'm like, what the hell is myrrh?' Likewise, when asked about her daughter's role, Katy answered:

Yeah, Chloe was just an angel. She had the halo...You know, the little hairband with the stick and...fuzzy halo stuck on it and wings...

That Chloe was 'just' an angel, but also the implication of shared knowledge of 'the little hairband' in the phrase 'you know', again, seems to normalise the event. Story features were often accompanied by an in-the-know, loving laughter and the most recognisable tropes frequently told in an emphasised, sometimes babyish tone. Interestingly, Tara repeatedly uses the word 'little' when referring to both features from the nativity story and play, but also from her school.⁷² She thus directly links the nativity play experience to a wider plethora of nostalgic childhood memories. Hence, it seems quite possible that the nativity image acts, at least for Tara, as a kind of 'screen memory' which masks a perceived loss of innocence.⁷³

Katy's references to her Christmas Poster and the angel's halo; Tara's references to the children's Bible and the nativity coming on TV at Christmas time.

⁷¹ Lerud, *Memory, images, and the English Corpus Christi drama*, pp. 4-5.

⁷² E.g. 'little common praise book', 'little sheet' [script for play provided by school to help the children practice their lines], 'little teacher', 'little stable', 'little red nose', 'little donkey'

⁷³ Freud, 'Screen Memories', pp. 17-19.

‘The Awh Factor’

A sense of this fawning over innocence was a common theme across the interviews. That the atmosphere of the event was rife with collective parental pride is clear from Tara’s comments about the ‘massive turnout’ and the ‘standing ovation’ with tumultuous applause for one particular child who delivered her lines really well in a very ‘cute’ voice. Katy reiterated how ‘adorable’ she thought the children were, admiringly describing the ‘little row of little girls in their white dresses with their wings and everything.’ Meanwhile, Jake admitted:

Ah mate, I’m terrible...I’m one of those really proud parents...I’m just...you know, in floods of tears.

Perhaps, unsurprisingly, given her strong nostalgia for her own childhood, Tara was the most vivacious in her pride of the play. Almost before I could ask, she interrupted me in an excited whisper to impart just how ‘cute’ her daughter’s nativity debut had been. She explained in some animated detail how she had ‘managed to get a really good spot’, painstakingly deleted the photos off her phone - ‘must get this!’ - and blocked any mothers who got in her way:

I had my phone there and then a mum tried to come in and sit and I was like, ‘You’re blocking my way. You need to back up love. I can’t see my daughter!’

She eulogised about how ‘super bloody cute’ her daughter looked in her costume and expressed deep ‘pride’ that all the children had done ‘really well’. Tara’s hyperbolic pride provides a good example of how the ‘awh factor’⁷⁴ may be increased when attached to self-defining memories. This can also be seen in Katy’s case. When challenged as to why she found the play so ‘adorable’, Katy interestingly linked the experience to her own nativity play memories. Though it occurs on a much more unconscious level for Katy, a similar process seems to be evidenced here. Tara, at one stage, laughingly labels her childhood memories ‘the care free years’ when ‘we didn’t have mortgages and bills and all of that to pay for!’ This laughed exposé seems to indicate a kind of ‘bittersweet’ nostalgia;⁷⁵ the predominant emotional tone which accompanies and perhaps even generates the construction and cultivation of ‘screen memories’.⁷⁶ It seems therefore that watching the nativity play may provide these parents, not only with a sense of pride, but with a glimpse into a utopian lost innocence; a lost self.⁷⁷ This alignment is perhaps

⁷⁴ [Tara’s phrase]

⁷⁵ Marie A. Mills and Peter G. Coleman, “‘Nostalgic Memories in Dementia’ – A Case Study”, *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 38:3 (1994), 203-219 (p. 205); Harvey A. Kaplan, ‘The Psychopathology of Nostalgia’, *Psychoanalytic Review*, 74: 4 (Winter, 1987), 465-486 (p.465).

⁷⁶ Freud, ‘Screen Memories’, pp.17-19.

⁷⁷ This directly concurs with Christopher Deacy’s recent exploration of Christmas nostalgia: Christopher Deacy, *Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular, and the Sacred* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 20-23.

further indicated by the fragmentary nature of their own nativity play memories. For all her childhood memories, Tara could not 'lock into' a nativity play memory. She reasoned:

Maybe I wasn't a central figure, so I chose to...dismiss that from my memory...I was probably like a tree. So that has gone from my memory because obviously I was *born* to be *Mary* or the Angel...I was upset when my daughter wasn't chosen. She was an elf.

Similarly, until he remembered his King costume, Jake struggled to recall any memories and reflected in the subsequent discussion that this may have been because it had been quite a 'negative' experience of 'fiddling' with his 'awful itchy beard' and 'scratching his face...the whole time.' He also remembered being 'disappointed' when cast in another play as a pig. 'I thought I had a lot more to offer than just being an animal', he chuckled. Likewise, Katy's memory of the teacher pulling her aside to have a 'little chat' about her 'special dress', may provide evidence of masked negative childhood experiences. It seems this might have subsequently become a self-defining memory in reaction to her alluded resentment of being disliked by other children.⁷⁸ Though we must be careful here in our theoretical speculation, it seems possible that this particular memory construction may also implicitly connect to her adult feelings of loneliness at Christmas in the wake of her parents' untimely death. It is perhaps significant that this occurred for Katy at an age reportedly associated with a 'reminiscence bump' during which young adults begin to actively construct a sense of a narrated adult self.⁷⁹

Concluding Thoughts

Though it seems clear that the various constructions of memory explored here may relate to repressions from childhood, or to adult repression projected back onto a fantasied childhood, it seems more likely that the nativity image, for these individuals at least, represents a much more complex kaleidoscope of screens screening screens and of emotions generating emotions. Yet, however complex the kaleidoscopic identity, the fact remains that it is ultimately the motivations, the hopes, the dreams, the fears and the anxieties - essentially the *emotions* - of the developing conceptual self which ultimately review, revise and update the utopian 'paradigmatic scene' that is the Nativity. This raises ripe areas of investigation for further research; and has indeed been the starting point for a much more systematic review within my own current research in which I hope to further explore the complex matrix of emotions through which such autobiographical memories might weave their elaborately syncretic 'webs of significance'.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Katy: 'I just always seemed to get the good roles for the plays. I was Cinderella. I was whatever the lead role was, I seemed to get it...No wonder I was so popular *right?* [both laugh] That's why all the other kids *loved* me.'

⁷⁹ Alan Baddeley, 'Reflections on autobiographical memory' in *Understanding Autobiographical Memory: Theories and Approaches*, ed. by Dorthe Berntsen and David C. Rubin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 70-88 (p. 78).

⁸⁰ Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures*, p. 5.

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