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# Transitions to religious adulthood: relational geographies of youth, religion and international volunteering

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This paper offers important insights into the contemporary nature of youth transitions and the ways in which religious affiliation and engagement with international volunteering influences and interplays with negotiations of the life course. Situated within interdisciplinary debates about youth transitions, as well as discussions about relational geographies of age, religion and voluntarism, we demonstrate the multiple relationalities that are at play as young religious international volunteers negotiate the transition to religious adulthood. We focus on religious, vocational and aged relationalities to explore how these are engaged with, and experienced by, young people 'over there' in Latin America and 'back home' in the UK. Additionally, we explore how these relationalities shape identities within and between religiosity, age (youth) and volunteering, and how these are (re)organised through networks, flows and mobilities. To do so, we draw on our analysis of the experiences of young volunteers who participated in faith-based international volunteering with an evangelical Christian organisation that sends teams of young people on short-term missions to Latin America. We draw on our analyses of two sets of interviews with 22 young volunteers, 14 of whom also completed a diary about their experiences, supplemented by four focus groups. Our analysis points to the ways in which the spatial emphasis of geographical engagements with youth transitions can be well informed through considerations of religion; a key challenge being how young volunteers renegotiate their sense of religious self on returning 'back home'. In addition, although our participants displayed some self-reflexivity about the social construction of age, they did not necessarily exhibit an understanding of the power underpinning their encounters with others. Finally, our findings open up possibilities for appreciating the diversity of volunteering experiences and the role that volunteer organisations have in shaping the expectations and aspirations of those who participate in their programmes.

**Key words** young people; interviews; volunteering; religion; Latin America; transitions to adulthood

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## Introduction: geographies of youth, religion and voluntarism

Over the last 15 years, the complex spatialities of young people's lives have attracted increasing attention from social and cultural geographers. Important texts in the late 1990s and early 2000s (e.g. Aitken 2001) were crucial in shaping the field, with more recent contributions drawing attention to significance of the urban (van Blerk and Horschelmann 2011), the rural (Panelli *et al.* 2007) and the place of scales, themes and sites (Hopkins 2010) in young people's geographies. Important foci within this field include attention to the

transitions from childhood to adulthood (Hopkins 2006), youth policy and practice (Kraftl *et al.* 2012), and experiences of intergenerational relations that connect with broader debates about relational geographies of age (Hopkins and Pain 2007). This paper seeks to contribute specifically to ongoing debates about young people's transitions to adulthood, and in particular, their transitions to religious adulthood.

Among this focus on youth transitions that have been explored by social and cultural geographers, religion and faith have occupied a decidedly more constrained space. This is not surprising given that religiosity and spirituality are somewhat contested

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influences on youth development. In developmental psychology, for instance, religion has only recently been written into the canons of youth development theory (e.g. King and Roeser 2009). In this literature, religion appears frequently as a source of resilience (Pearce *et al.* 2003), with organised religious activities supplying access to social capital (King and Furrow 2004) and ideological and moral directives through intergenerational interactions (Regnerus 2003). However, these studies also hint at the potential developmental harms that might accrue at both the individual and social level as a result of religious development, such as the broader social unrest that emerges from youth adherence to violent or sectarian religious movements (King and Roeser 2009).

In the context of the ambivalent role of religion in youth development, little research has examined the ways in which everyday and exceptional religious encounters become part of the lived experiences of young people, or whether religion lends a different dimension to transitions to adulthood. Geographers studying the dynamics between religion, youth and community provide some starting points for this question. In some instances, religious communities and their related organisations structure youth lives and possibilities well into adulthood (Bailey *et al.* 2007), often in very banal but powerful ways that can include rules and practices that delimit encounters with difference (e.g. Dwyer 1999). These findings suggest the possibility that a transition to *religious* adulthood might be different from other dimensions of becoming an adult, both by providing an alternative marker of adulthood and by generating different understandings of how spaces such as the home, the street or the mosque contribute to a transition to adulthood. Furthermore, the rejection, modification or embrace of formal or personal faith doctrines are widely assumed to be a common aspect of transitions to adulthood while young people reconsider relationships with parents, future career paths and friendships (Smith 2011).

This paper examines the relationship between religion and young people's transitions to adulthood by focusing on the impact of short-term overseas missions. Experiences of international volunteering are more common than for previous generations, and research from the USA suggests that young people who consider themselves to be very religious are more likely to volunteer or participate in service work (Smith with Denton 2005). Faith-based mission trips combine global travel with worship, evangelism and volunteerism, often coordinating with churches or religious communities in countries abroad where participants might also run a children's club, assist in a building project or provide some other form of labour while also immersing themselves in prayer, study and transnational faith relationships.

Building on a broader interest in the complexities of the spatial dynamics of voluntarism (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011; Baillie Smith *et al.* 2013), our aim is to contribute to understandings of the intersections between youth transitions, religion and mobility through offering 'more lively and creative accounts' of people's involvement in volunteering (Smith *et al.* 2010). In particular, we explore how religiously active young people understand transitions to adulthood in the context of their faith, and how participation in a mission trip might influence other essential dimensions of youth transitions. This paper focuses on clarifying how participation by 22 young people from the UK in short-term mission trips in Latin America shapes understanding of what it means to be an adult. Furthermore, whereas the international volunteering literature has provided much insight into the kinds of skills and capacities developed while 'going abroad' (Jones 2011), it has not considered the diverse ways that young people understand these experiences in their transition to adulthood, nor the more specific transition to *religious* adulthood. Drawing on interviews conducted with young Christians and the diaries they kept during their missions in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Ecuador, we examine their own accounts of their transnational experiences and their resulting understandings of religious participation, vocation and age.

## Youth transitions, religion and space

Modernity cast youth as a series of parallel transitions centred on key events (leaving home, joining the labour market, forming new families), through which young people were expected to move en route from childhood to adulthood. (Ansell 2008, 220)

As Ansell (2008) observes, youth was once regarded as a series of relatively uniform transitions that young people were expected to negotiate as they move inevitably into adulthood. However,

in late modernity, youth transitions are increasingly complex, fractured, multiple and unpredictable ... while there may be 'critical moments' in young people's transitions (Thomson *et al.* 2002), transitions are not a one-off or one-way process. (Ansell 2008, 220)

Late modernity has arguably seen 'youth' becoming more individualised, with life-course trajectories being increasingly variable and open to negotiation and contestation, though there is still a sense that 'only young people who are able to mobilise strong social networks can achieve autonomy through active individualisation' (Ansell 2008, 221).

Although there is much research about the transition to adulthood within the social sciences (e.g. Jones 2002) as well as within social and cultural geography (Ansell 2008; Hopkins 2006), such work has tended to

omit religion, spirituality and belief as important influences in shaping the many diverse experiences and expectations of young people entering adulthood. Commitment to traditional religions declines as young people enter higher education (McNamara Barry and Nelson 2005), though findings often assume a direct relationship between affiliation and spirituality, religious life or religious participation (Vincett *et al.* 2012). Furthermore, 'few studies have examined the role of religious culture' (McNamara Barry and Nelson 2005, 246), despite suggestions that both acceptance and rejection of family religious practice or spiritual belief are common considerations of young people in their transitions to adulthood. McNamara Barry and Nelson note that:

emerging adulthood may be best characterized as a time during which young people (a) question the beliefs in which they are raised, (b) place greater emphasis on individual spirituality than affiliation with a religious institution, and (c) pick and choose the aspects of religion that suit them best. This gives reason to wonder about those individuals who do place a lot of importance on the religious or spiritual aspect of their lives, participate in religious organizations and activities, and who immerse themselves rather deeply into their religious culture (i.e. attend religious institutions). There is some evidence that emerging adulthood may be different for these young people than their peers. (2005, 246)

McNamara Barry *et al.* (2010) discuss three approaches to religious development. 'First, through daily activities such as prayer or participation in a religious community, individuals acquire a religious consciousness' (p. 312). Second, the development of faith occurs through a process of meaning-making. Third, there is the role of context and location in supporting (or not) the development of religious beliefs and reasoning. Important socialising agents for young people as they develop their religiosity include parents, peers, other adults and the media. That being said, young adulthood 'appears to be a period when religious practice and commitment, if not belief, decline' (Hunt 2007, 617) and irreligion is at its peak around the age of 30 (Hunt 2007). Furthermore, the changing structure of social relations and the decline of community have led to the demise of important rites of passage, with fewer baptisms, marriages and other religious ceremonies (Hunt 2007).

Within these discussions, space and mobility most frequently appear at the margins of analysis, or indirectly referenced as relatively unexplored mechanisms by which changes in young adult lives occur. In contrast, the subfield of geographies of religion has increasingly focused on youth (Kong 2010), though perhaps less sharply on youth transitions. Motivated by earlier work about young Muslim women's constructions and contestations of identity and community in

the UK (Dwyer 1999), youthful geographies of religion now include important scholarship on a range of diverse issues such as historical perspectives on youthful religiosity (Bailey *et al.* 2007), gender and social reproduction (Halverson 2005), intergenerational relations and religious youth (Hopkins *et al.* 2011), religious vocation (Lester 2005), and everyday expressions of worship (Mills 2012). Within these studies, religious influence on transitions to adulthood extends beyond decisions about affiliation. Lester's (2005) analysis of the training of young Catholic novices shows how religious practice, including immobility, map the body as a site of sanctified religious adulthood. In this case, religion literally shapes the religious body, and replaces other markers of transitions to adulthood with one that complies with a Catholic theology of gender (see Olson 2013). However, Halverson's (2005) engagement with girls in rural Pakistan also suggests that religious doctrine and regional or global economic shifts can produce new interpretations of the appropriate role for girls in the context of the home and work. In short, decisions made in transitions to adulthood – whether or not to work in or out of the home, or to envision the body as the material for motherhood – can be shaped by religious doctrine and theology, but scripts for religious adulthood might also shift according to wider social, economic and political conditions.

The mission presents several opportunities for exploring how the constitution of religious adulthood creates new spaces and reflects new global patterns of transnational religious mobility (e.g. Tse and Waters 2013) by focusing on changes within the 'traditional' missionising centres such as the UK, where the relatively scant research by geographers nonetheless suggest both greater technological sophistication integrated into a return to intensive, interpersonal engagement (e.g. Kong 2013). A striking change within this kind of 'traditional' international missionising is the growth of youth missions. Critiquing accounts of lived religion that focus on the everyday experiences of faith rather than exceptional moments like mission volunteering, Trinitapoli and Vaisey (2009) found that adolescents who attended mission trips had heightened senses of religious engagement compared with those who do not participate in missions. Volunteerism thus presents a compelling glance into the ways that international travel happens on the edges of development and formal geopolitics, emerging both in and through an individual's construction of themselves and their perspective on the world (Simpson 2005; Jones 2011). Quantitative studies of American youth suggest that age is an important variable for both the predictability of mission and the patterning of subsequent volunteering behaviour (Beyerlein *et al.* 2011). However, in the case of religious volunteerism, we know little about how young people think about these

exceptional relational experiences as part of their overall life course, or how these missions might influence their sense of aged subjectivities.

A focus on youth transitions to religious adulthood provides one route towards accounting for how the youthful and/or adult subject is constructed by and through mission trips, and in turn, how these constructions either reinforce or challenge other subjectivities related to relative age. Importantly, it trains our attention away from a focus on the individual acquisition of skills that are frequently referenced in the 'gap year' and international youth volunteerism literature (e.g. Jones 2011), and attempts to situate the experience as constituting multiple and perhaps alternative understandings of what it means to be an adult. Furthermore, subjective and constructivist approaches to age tend to focus on the interrelationships between young people and individuals or societies that are positioned close by, such as sibling relations and (grand)parenting practices (e.g. Tarrant 2010), or immediate cultural communities. Ansell clarifies that 'neither childhood or adulthood is simply a matter of age or physical maturity; both are performative identities' (2008, 220). What happens when the performance of emerging adulthood is modified, first by a deeper engagement with religious versions of adulthood, and second, through the experience of religious adulthood in places and among people who are far removed from everyday experience?

In seeking to answer this question, we adopt a relational approach to experiences and negotiations of religion, youth and volunteering that extends understandings of space as relational (Massey 2005) and shows attentiveness to the relations between 'over there' in Latin America and 'back home' in the UK. Furthermore, by exploring how 'identities are forged in and through relations' (Massey 2004, 5) and being aware that 'there exists an array of vectors of relationality' (Hopkins and Noble 2009, 815), we also consider how transitions to religious adulthood are shaped by the relationalities within and between religiosity, age (youth) and volunteering. In doing so, we focus on the ways that these complex relationalities are 'constituted through relationships that are organised and reorganised through networks, flows, and mobilities' (Ansell et al. 2011, 527), focusing in particular on the relationships constituted in and through the context of faith-based international volunteering. We are interested in the sets of relations between youth, religion and voluntarism as well as the relations the young volunteers negotiate between their experiences in Latin America and their lives in the UK.

In the next section, we introduce our study, research focus and methodological approach in some detail in order to give context to the empirical material we draw on in our discussion of how the young people themselves

constructed religious adulthood in the backdrop of the mission, and the ways that this adulthood modified other aspects of youth transitions while reinforcing common colonial tropes about youthfulness, maturity and responsibility.

## The study

This paper draws on a qualitative research project about the religious identities and spiritual understandings of young Christians who participate in faith-based international volunteering projects. In particular, we are interested in the ways in which young people's experiences of faith-based volunteering relate to their experiences of being a young person, their transitions to adulthood and what it means to be a religious adult. To explore this, we collaborated with a non-denominational charity that arranges opportunities for young people to work in local communities and churches in Latin America on building projects, youth work, and drama and music projects. Before leaving, all young people attended briefing meetings where they got to meet up with their team and the charity staff and where they were provided with information about the local contexts in which they would be working.

In order to explore young people's transitions to adulthood with reference to faith-based international volunteering, we conducted 22 interviews with young volunteers before they left the UK to visit Latin America. These focused on the motivations, expectations and hopes of the volunteers. All of these young people were asked to complete a diary when volunteering in Latin America, with 14 diaries being returned to the research team. Following their volunteering experiences, all 22 young people also participated in a follow-up interview in order to discuss and reflect on their experiences. In addition to these 44 interviews and 14 diaries, we completed four focus groups with young Christian volunteers, all of which took place after the young people had returned to the UK. Ten stakeholder interviews were also undertaken with key members of staff from the participating organisation and related agencies in order to explore the perspectives of service providers on the experiences of young Christian volunteers.

The vast majority of these interviews and focus groups were conducted by one of the four authors of this paper. The young people who participated are not typical of other young people of their age in the UK, where 'Generation Y' has been identified as having the lowest religious affiliation rates of any generation preceding it (Possamai 2009). In other words, we focus sharply on those young people for whom Christianity is already an important part of their practices and/or beliefs, though to varying degrees and for different reasons. This variation is also evident in their reflections on their experiences,

with some of our participants beginning to embark on more independent forms of religious practice and theological study, and others building their religiosity in reference to their family or their church. All interviews and diaries were fully transcribed and coded using a coding framework that was produced collaboratively during team meetings following an in-depth reading of all of the transcripts by the team, with all four authors attending these meetings. All data were then coded by one person in order to ensure consistency with further in-depth analysis being completed on each theme. Key themes included: growing up; development; justice; cross-cultural learning; faith; teamwork; and gender. All of the names used in this article are pseudonyms in order to protect the confidentiality of those who participated in the research.

During this process, we were particularly attentive to what Bailey *et al.* have observed about the 'contested product of negotiation between the practices (including methodologies), beliefs and identities' of researchers involved in the geographies of religion (2009, 254). As a team of four researchers with different sets of expertise in relation to the topic of this project, we contend that these multiple sets of collaborative knowledges were a crucial part of the success of this project. With varying interests in feminist, development and social geographies alongside geographies of religion, voluntarism, citizenship and youth, we are sensitive to the significance of our multiple positionalities and how this shaped the research (Hopkins 2009; Moss 2014) and the importance of creating a safe space 'for people of faith to speak, be heard and to do research' (Laurie 2010, 167).

## Religious adulthood, faith and church

One very common experience described by these young people is a new understanding of their own religiosity that emerges from planning for, participating in and reflecting on a mission experience. International faith-based volunteering among this set of young people appears to create opportunities for increasing religious resilience and self-confidence in personal relationships with God. As we illustrate, changes in personal religiosity gained from the trip generate further changes and facilitate a reworking of religious relationalities, both in the sense of developing religious maturity and in acquiring a more global understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Hill *et al.* (2006) use the concept of resilience in their research with children to reference a combination of 'intelligence, self-belief, problem-solving skills, [and] high self-esteem' (p. 40). These young missionaries offer a slight modification to this theme; for young people who are already decidedly religious, faith resilience is rooted not only in the acquisition of what we might loosely refer to as secular concerns, but also the kinds of intelligence, self-belief

and problem-solving skills that are specific to their religious formation.

Among our young participants, engagement with global Christianity was seen as a key means for testing or probing faith resilience. In his pre-departure interview, Alex (age 18, Argentina) noted that 'I think also it's time away from what I am used to with other Christians and [to] make myself vulnerable in situations to see if I can strengthen my faith.' In the context of a volunteer network and organisation dedicated to cultivating personal and collective Christian spirit, the short-term mission provides an opportunity to both develop resilience and to take stock of areas for future growth in a setting 'over there' and away from the comforts of home. The interviews and diaries alluded to comparisons of faith 'over there' with faith 'back home'. While existing research on volunteering and on comparison between global South 'there' and 'here' has largely focused on relative poverty and cultural difference, and on transitions around career development and citizenship, here we can see quite different vectors of relationalities and transitions at play (Ansell *et al.* 2011; Hopkins and Noble 2009; Massey 2005). In this scenario the 'over there' becomes a sought-out site of connection within the context of a common faith and a place where that faith can be, if not exactly tested, at least put under the critical pressure of having to cope with difference and deprivation of the familiar in order to experience spiritual growth. For example, before departing for Latin America, Lynn (age 19, Ecuador) said confidently, 'my faith will grow' and Michael (age 19, Bolivia) noted 'it will give us confidence in our faith'. Furthermore, Kay notes:

I'm not massively talented about talking about the Gospel and things to people and I would love this experience to be somewhere where I can learn how to, how to bring Jesus into more conversations, so that he becomes more relevant in conversations I have or whether he's, whether my actions reflect more of him, and that in turn makes people ask me questions. (age 22, Argentina)

In these pre-departure interviews, the young volunteers, like Kay, demonstrate their eagerness to grow in faith, their desire to learn more about their religion and their willingness to increase in confidence in following Christianity and in being able to converse with Christians and non-Christians – so through multiple religious relationalities – about their beliefs. Jones has noted that 'the motivation of young people to undertake this kind of activity is complex, with research indicating that a range of motivational factors are often behind an individual's choice' (2011, 534). In this paper, the central motivation of many of the young people is a desire to develop and grow their religiosity in a specific setting and build on particular religious relationalities.

For all of the participants, their experiences helped them to feel more knowledgeable about their faith,

closer to God and more confident about their practice. Barbara (age 25, Argentina) referred to the experience as a 'faith check' and in their diaries, Lynn and Helen wrote of similar self-assessments:

My faith has grown massively, having the testimonies of people on my team and in Church has been really encouraging and I can see now God has his hands on people's lives ... I feel capable of more now than before I went and I am less afraid to try new things because I have more trust that God will guide me. (Lynn, age 19, Ecuador)

I feel God is teaching me so much through my team and mostly through the Brazilian Christians I have spent time with. (Helen, age 22, Brazil)

These experiences led participants to feel more confident, self-assured and generally resilient about their religious identities. Rachel (age 18, Ecuador) said she 'gained more confidence in [her] own faith', Kelly (age 17, Bolivia) felt 'more mature' and Michael (age 19, Bolivia) said his faith 'had been made stronger'.

An important component of the young people's daily routine while volunteering included daily devotions where group members read from the Bible, reflected on the teachings of the gospel, and discussed matters of faith and practice. We might anticipate this, since previous studies have suggested that among very dedicated young people,

religion is not simply a matter of general identity or affiliation or cognitive belief. Faith for these teenagers is also activated, practiced, and formed through specific religious and spiritual practices. (Smith with Denton 2005, 27)

Though much of the mission experience is enhanced with both expected and actual encounters with unknown people and places, the intensity and prevalence of reading, discussing and even speaking to groups about their faith led to feelings of religious maturity. Here we see a particularly intimate and embodied form of religious relationalities that builds on, in particular, the relationships and connections between team members. This feeling of maturity is associated with confidence, as summarised by Alex:

well I think it is very much a time where I have matured a lot in way I kind of look at things ... I think my faith has matured ... I think I have confidence in God's provision. (age 18, Argentina)

Through leading religious ceremonies and devotions, both within the local community and within their team, many young people felt empowered and enabled as they were authorised to speak in front of others about matters of faith, in many respects assuming the roles that they assume are reserved for adults. In her diary, Kelly (age 17, Bolivia) said 'I led devotions which I feel helped me mature in my faith' and Martin comments on praying together with his team:

but when you're away and praying together you just become more confident in speaking out and you become part of that community so things like that they would be a lot more willing now to think yeah, just read or say something that I had thought. (age 22, Bolivia)

The young people's interviews and diaries are littered with comments about how they feel more self-assured and secure about practising their religion, whether this be about leading a sermon, reading from the Bible or praying with others. Interrelated with this increased confidence about religious practice was a new-found certainty with regards to conversing about matters of faith. This is in stark contrast to their pre-departure interviews where many, although not all, young people felt self-conscious, shy and uncertain about communicating openly about their religious beliefs. Martin, for example, confidently said:

I can just say I am Christian and things like that and talk about the reasons behind it and not to say I'm not drinking because I am a Christian but to say why not and things like that. (age 22, Bolivia)

Enhanced engagements with religious practice and increasing confidence to converse about matters of faith led many young people to feel a deeper sense of understanding of their religion and a stronger sense of being closer to God. Michael (age 19, Bolivia), for example, felt that he 'got a glimpse of understanding of different Christian concepts' and Barbara reflects on how the depth of her relationship with God has grown:

We definitely changed in terms of our faith. We've got deeper faith, we've got a better understanding of the Bible, we've got ... I suppose our relationship with God is deeper than where we were before, because each of us was on different paths in terms of our faith, so wherever we were before, we're now one step closer to God, understanding about God and who he is and what he does, and how we fit in his whole realm of plans. So, yeah definitely we are a lot closer in that sense ... (age 25, Argentina)

With a fresh confidence about practising and discussing their faith, coupled with a strong sense of being closer to God when removed from the mundane preoccupations of home, many of the young volunteers reflected on their sense of religious growth and how they might contribute to their communities in the UK in ways that reflect this sense of religious maturity. After returning from their volunteering experiences, some of the participants presented their experiences to the congregation at their local church and found doing so an empowering experience:

but I was able to get up in front of my church and speak and explain it all which is stuff I never do and fundraise and be really focused. I have never had anything before where I have really had to focus ... (Lynn, age 19, Ecuador)

A number felt compelled to take on leadership roles within their local churches or communities as the religious relationalities experienced by the young volunteers had led them to realise that they had the necessary talents to take on such responsibilities. Consider what Karen says here:

After Brazil I feel prepared to lead the CU small group in my hall this year ... more like ready to lead the group that I am doing in Nottingham because I came back prepared in terms of Bible knowledge and stuff because we did a Bible study. (age 20, Brazil)

Not all young people felt as strong a sense of shift towards religious adulthood; a mission trip does not always trigger a sense of transition to religious adulthood. Though there are many factors that might determine this outcome, including issues related to confidence in individual Christian commitment, most of our participants who expressed transformation were at stages in their lives in the UK that also signal other movements into adulthood, such as attending University, living outside of the family home for most of the year, and considering their movements into the workplace (see Sharma and Guest 2013). Indeed, both current and future vocation was a central feature in young people's conversations and routines, a point that we develop in the next section.

### Religious adulthood, the mission and the future workplace

Cloke *et al.* (2010) have argued that religious practices and theologies can also influence other aspects of social, political and economic activity and may not only be confined to the religious realm (see also Olson *et al.* 2013). Our young volunteers explained their international experiences as giving them space and time away from home to consider what they want to achieve from life and how they want to serve their local communities in the future. For many of the young participants in our study, religious maturity was also signalled in their new understandings of what they were being 'called' to do as they construct their vision of what their own version of religious adulthood might look like. The sense here was that the young volunteers were hoping that specific inclinations or urges to work in a particular field or to serve their community in a specific way would become clear, or be clarified, as a result of their volunteering work. One way of putting this, as Barbara (age 25, Argentina) did, was the desire 'to develop as a whole person'. The hope here is that the spatial relationalities (Massey 2005) of being 'over there' would help to confirm the vocation to be followed 'back home'. For some, this was far less tangible and focused on finding out more about life generally. In their pre-departure interviews, Rachel and Kirsten said:

I am hoping I will get more of a sense of what I am to do with my life and what God wants me to do and who I will be serving ... I am hoping to determine whether I do want to live abroad or do missionary work long term after my degree and to show me the kind of work I want to get into whether it's more practical or more people based. It's self-discovery. (Rachel, age 18, Ecuador)

And then like kind of like I was thinking of maybe doing something international development-y, but I am just trying to test things out and see kind of what I want to do with my life, so I hope ... (Kirsten, age 22, Ecuador)

These quotes from Rachel and Kirsten show that, far from strategically participating in international volunteering in order to enhance their CVs and secure high-level employment, both were hoping that their specific careers might be revealed to them or that they might discover how they want to serve others.

On return, both Rachel and Kirsten felt that their volunteering experiences had helped them think more deeply about this:

reinforced the fact that I could live in a different place and made me realise what I want to do ... did make me think things over about what I want to do and where I want to be next year and I suppose that has had an effect on what I am applying to do this year. (Kirsten, age 22, Ecuador)

being in Ecuador and then coming to Uni I have really realised that I really want to become a social worker ... I think I prefer the public sector for work for an NGO. (Rachel, age 22, Ecuador)

The reflections of Rachel and Kirsten echo some of the more adult-oriented research conducted by Cloke *et al.* (2010), highlighting the faith motivation of social service among professed Christians in the UK around themes of homelessness. This dovetails with new kinds of alliances that have been forged between faith-based groups and secular movements on shared concerns in the areas as diverse as living wages and global finance. It also places the voluntary tendencies of religiously affiliated individuals within a wider context of life work, raising questions about how we might take account of voluntary tendencies of mission-goers, alongside potentially even more substantial vocational decisions, as hinted at by Kirsten and Rachel.

Jones (2011, 535) argues that international volunteerism enhances economic and cultural capital and develops skills that are important to developing skills as a 'global worker' and 'global professional' identities. In our research, very few of the participants talked about their volunteering experiences as movements toward becoming global professionals – and few emphasised the significance of enhancing their CVs – but were instead more likely to talk about their vocational aspirations in line with a Christian understanding of relationships rather than competitiveness. Our findings



point to the importance of taking into account the 'specific kind of international youth voluntary work' (Jones 2011, 543), and raise the possibility of a more diverse set of international values, relationalities and forms of social reproduction that are facilitated in the context of volunteerism that cannot be simplified as the production of the neoliberal self that is prepared to take part in the reproduction of global capitalism.

This is not to argue that our participants demonstrated a more cosmopolitan grasp of social justice or a 'truer' dedication to working for greater global equality, for as we have explored in-depth elsewhere, their recognition and navigation through a sophisticated theorisation of inequality was often lacking (Baillie Smith *et al.* 2013). The space and time of the mission did also serve as confirmation of a different vocational future than the one experienced through the short mission trip. As Karen (age 20, Brazil) said, 'I feel God is calling me towards something else and not mission abroad'. We would not expect volunteers to interpret and then act on their Christian faith in the same way or expect that it would be consistent with a global Christianity, since transnational religiosity reveals diversity in theologies and commitments that are socially, economically and culturally situated (Olson 2008). However, our study does suggest that the normative orientation of international volunteering – in this case, around Christianity – could modify transitions to religious adulthood in the context of labour and vocation in very significant ways. We should perhaps not be surprised that a volunteering opportunity organised around the experience of Christian relationships prioritises an alternative understanding of the purpose and benefits of international engagement from the standpoint of future vocations and therefore draws on different relationalities in the process.

### Transnational transitions – being an adult here and there

Thus far, we have considered how young people understand the role of the mission in their transition to religious adulthood, and how this also influences their vocational aspirations. In this final section, we explore briefly how the transnational experience of participating in a mission abroad shaped our young participants' understandings of their age identity and position, both at the intimate scale of the body (Longhurst and Johnston 2014), and also at the scale of global relations. The vast majority of the young people who participated in our study took part in the mission because they had a strong desire to work on their personal religious and social development and felt that, given their position on the life course (Hopkins and Pain 2007), this was an ideal time to volunteer. The somewhat more mundane practices of missionising in

the four destination countries also provided an outlet for rethinking the broader social roles of adults and children. However, as we explain here, the context of cultural difference also reproduced global tropes of adult respectability that are reminiscent of the infantilisation of colonised peoples.

In the pre-departure interviews, participants regularly located themselves on the transition to adulthood and as negotiating the changing responsibilities and experiences of no longer being a child while not yet being an adult. Being located in a position of transition meant that many of the participants felt that they had the time and space to commit to volunteering. For example, James (age 20, Bolivia) commented 'I have the opportunity now and also the time as a student' and Tony (age 20, Argentina) observed 'it's a time when I have nothing to hold me back'. Furthermore, consider the pre-departure narrative of Helen:

For me being at Uni, you have such long holidays and you have so much free time that I didn't want to be sitting around for three months. My situation of being a University student has given me the encouragement to do it because next year I will be applying for a job as a teacher and I don't know if I will have the opportunity to do something again. (age 22, Brazil)

Like Helen, many of our participants were conscious that they currently have time to devote to participating in faith-based volunteering, using their breaks from university study to do so; simultaneously they also envision experiencing adulthood in the near future, which they see as being accompanied by pressures of work, experiences of bringing up children and possible periods of ill-health.

As well as recognising that their volunteering experiences were, as Tony (age 20, Argentina) suggests, 'like a rite of passage', they also offered the opportunity to break away from the aged relationships of the UK, face new challenges, learn new skills and engage in fresh experiences in a place that most of these young people expected to be exotic and different, with both class and race featuring in their descriptions. Some young people argued that they had lived quite sheltered lives and that new experiences in a different country would help to push them out of their comfort zone:

I've been living, I guess, quite a sheltered life living you know in a white middle class area, you know, going to the same school and that sort of thing (Rachel, age 18, Ecuador)

I went the first time because I live at home. I didn't move away for Uni so for me it was that I needed to know that I could live away from my family and I could cook for myself and get by on my own so I think it is about growing up in that sense and I was really pleased I did it. (Helen, age 22, Brazil)

Many of the volunteers made statements expressing progress in their movement toward adulthood, such as

Emma, who said 'I have moved forward'. Consider also the narratives of Derek and Karen:

I'm kind of growing up a good deal, I don't know, I kind of feel more – no I do feel like I've grown up in some ways, like I really kind of dying to move out and kind of get a start on things rather than living at home ... I'm not as mature as, you know, someone in their late twenties or whatever, but I do feel like a grown up and a lot more kind of responsible for my own actions. (Derek, age 22, Bolivia)

I would count myself as a young adult. (Karen, age 20, Brazil)

Alongside a sense that they had achieved the status of adulthood, a number of the young people reflected on how their volunteering experiences – and in particular their team role and their relations with the host community – had given them a clearer sense about their place in their social worlds. For some young people, these realisations were more general, whereas for others they were intimately related to the religious relationalities discussed above:

I definitely feel grown up and my leadership skills have been put to the test ... I think I know who I am and being more secure in my personal identity ... I felt so much older at the end of the project than at the beginning. (Tony, age 20, Argentina)

Though this statement of progress references a more general transition towards adulthood, one that might be experienced in any place that would be set apart from the everyday, one of the most powerful set of aged relationalities experienced by some of the participants relates to the ways in which they observed and experienced different culturally embedded assumptions about appropriate aged behaviour in their destination countries, and while interacting with their hosts. Their reflections on this often wove seamlessly between religious markers of adulthood and nonreligious aspects of work and labour, and indicated that transnational experiences can shift understandings of the timings of transitions to adulthood. In her diary, Lynn reflects on what she observes as the responsibilities given to young people in Ecuador where she was volunteering:

More responsibility within the family is given to teenagers here, and in the Church, e.g. a 19-year-old girl had to organise an entire kids club for over 200 kids! It's made me feel more positive about taking part in more things in Church and not shying away because of my age. Sometimes I do this because I don't have enough faith that God can and wants to use me, so I feel like my faith has grown here. (Lynn, age 19, Ecuador)

Lynn's comment points to a common theme in the post-mission interviews, which reference growing awareness of the spatial specificity of social constructions of adulthood. By playing out these alternative

roles, they not only learn about the spatial differentiation of age categories, but embody them and rehearse them.

The fact that British volunteers were more likely to be respected and treated as adults in Latin American faith-based volunteering settings provokes a series of personal reflections on their own transitions to adulthood. Here we can see an emerging *transnational* component to the aged relationalities experienced by the young Christian volunteers. Their relational experiences are not only about mobile engagements with 'over here' and 'back home', but also a set of transnational aged relationalities that contrast with their own self-orientation as young people. This new perspective therefore provides opportunities for young people to imagine themselves differently. For example, James (age 20, Bolivia) discussed at length the respect and deference he felt was shown towards him when he had his first experience of leading a sermon for a group of local young people. He explained that this was the first time that he had ever done anything like this and it would be very unlikely for him to be given such a platform in the church he attends in the UK. This experience was therefore crucial for James in helping him realise that leading a religious service was a task he was successfully able to undertake and perform as an adult:

well I was told that I was speaking at one of the churches and that was something I hadn't done before and that was pretty cool because every speaker I have ever seen is a very well regarded person in the Church and come across as very wise so being given the opportunity to do that and seeing how people responded ... so it was quite good ... it was a transition to preacher I tell you that! (James, age 20, Bolivia)

These young people's reports about comparative roles of childhood and adulthood also situate their experience in the context of a contemporary mission from the UK to Latin America, a place presumed by most of the participants as less developed, poor and disadvantaged (Baillie Smith *et al.* 2013). The 'adult' status conferred on visiting volunteers can be mapped onto historical discourses in which the global South has been constructed as immature and lacking in development, and represented as 'the child' (Manzo 2008) in relation to the 'adult' of the global North. At first glance it would seem that Kelly's (age 17, Bolivia) experience offers an alternative to such colonised understandings of power relations as she emphasised that 'everybody was treated equally, children and adults' in the community in which she was volunteering. She thought 'it was nice to be treated equal to everyone, to forget everyone's age and background'. In working closely with men from the local community in particular, she noted that 'just by meeting and spending time with older people makes me feel more

mature'. These are not opportunities that Kelly and her peers would usually encounter in their home churches where their activities would often be confined to youth sections of the church. Therefore significantly for Kelly, these aged relationalities have contributed towards her realisation that she can be independent and start to take on more of the qualities associated with adulthood. However, as the long tradition of feminist geography research in gender and development illustrates, young, white, western women are often treated as 'honorary men' when conducting fieldwork in global South settings. In this way they gain access to spaces working closely with men from the local community that would not normally be open to their female counterparts from those places. Kelly's experiences do describe a new understanding of the social construction of adulthood, but they also remind us that the kinds of religious adulthood conferred through international mission continue to be products of, and perhaps reinforce, colonised, gendered power relations.

To sum up our argument, part of the transnational experience exposed our participants to different compositions or repertoires of being an adult and being a young person. The repertoire of responsibilities that would be reserved for adults in the UK are understood by the young people not as a given, but as a kind of social artefact, geographically contingent and flexible across age groups and bound not by age markers but by capability and cultural expectations. These relationalities also play into unequal power relations between the spaces the young people were moving between. The mission experience thus shapes transitions to religious adulthood in distinctly religious ways, but they also point to a continuity of the infantilising of colonised people that was essential to the colonial project. As religious roles are scrambled when young people are asked to partake in activities that in the UK would be reserved for religious leadership, the prospect of the Westerner as expert, regardless of experience or life position, is reinforced.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we have attempted to contribute to debates about, and understandings of, transitions to religious adulthood by exploring the complex relationalities between youth, religion and volunteering, particularly focusing on experiences 'over there' in Latin America and 'back home' in the UK. Though much has been made of the more obvious ways that differences in transitions to adulthood might be constructed, such as in different cultural or classed groups (e.g. Thomson *et al.* 2002), decidedly less attention has been paid to religious adulthood. In this article, we have examined the specificity of transitions to religious adulthood by examining how young people themselves define

maturity and growth in their faith and their practices. The short-term mission – an exceptional experience that interrupts the everyday but is accessed by a growing number of young people – appears to provide a unique space in which young people both expect and frequently find evidence of religious maturation. However, religious adulthood is not confined to the realm of belief or the spaces of the church, and our paper attempts to analyse how this sense of growth or progress towards adulthood factors into other aspects of youth transitions, including vocational plans. This opens the possibility that transitions to adulthood are not only temporally diverse, taking place over a long period of time and capable of regressing or circling back, but also contextually contingent, and therefore capable of reproducing tropes of maturity and respectability at a global scale.

By way of conclusion, we expand on this argument to suggest some insights from this study that deserve further attention. Perhaps most directly, the spatial emphasis of geographical engagements with youth transitions can be well informed through considerations of religion. We have examined the ways that religious relationships mediate youth transitions to adulthood among this group of young Christians, and how both religious adulthood and the context of the short-term mission shape dynamics that extend far beyond individual decisions about religious affiliation. A key challenge for many of the young people was the renegotiation of their sense of religious self on returning 'back home' having been 'over there' in a deeply religious group context. However, these visions of global space and age have effects that have not been noted in studies of youth international volunteering or in geographic accounts of youth religiosity. Emerging research on youth transnationalism, such as Cheung Judge's (forthcoming) research with working-class youth in London, promises some fascinating insights into the role of mobility in transitions to adulthood. The mission provides space in which to reflect not just on the acquisition of skills necessary for adulthood, but promotes a more critical understanding of adulthood itself as socially constructed. What we have not been able to examine is how this understanding might then influence or shape young people's practices as they complete their travel and return home.

Our research also points to the limitations to this more critical understanding of the constitution of adulthood in the context of international volunteering. The young people's volunteering experiences enable some self-reflexivity and an increasing awareness of the social construction of age, although not necessarily an understanding of the power underpinning their encounters. In this case, the comparison between childhood and adulthood is facilitated through their experiences of being treated with maturity and respect, as well as

observing and participating in different social roles for children and adults. The young people's comments suggest that it is not so much the assumption of responsibilities that matter to their subjective understandings, but an awareness of self as situated differently in the production and reproduction of society. This awareness of age as socially constructed allows for possible renderings of the self as adult, a trying out of adulthood, and an experiencing of adulthood that is very evidently, and quite safely, temporary. However, it also confers on these young volunteers a respectability that is disturbingly reminiscent of colonial projects, such that race and nationality confers 'adult' status regardless of expertise. We had little evidence in our study of concerns, either among the young people or the mission organisation, about emerging paternalism. Our study raises questions about whether new global paternalism might be accelerating through mission activities from the Minority World to the Majority World, and also the significance of transnational travel for this paternalism.

Finally, while the findings from this research echo the observations of others about the significance of volunteering opportunities for offering young people opportunities for independence (e.g. Jones 2011), the majority of our participants were not CV-oriented to the extent that previous research has argued was a common preoccupation of young volunteers. The Christian foundations and practices that dominated the volunteering experiences of our participants drove these concerns into the background (without necessarily completely erasing them). This may not necessarily be the domain of faith-based international volunteering, but opens up questions about the diversity of volunteering experiences and the role that volunteer organisations have in shaping the expectations and aspirations of those who participate in their programmes.

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