In this chapter, I develop a new materialist philosophy of faith. Through mobilising affect theory and writing from the new materialisms, I demonstrate how faith operates as both a form of what Spinoza (1996) calls ‘joy’ and, alternatively, what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls ‘cruel optimism’. I show that a change in the capacity to act (affect), such as that which is created through belief, is an experience that unites both secular and religious people. For example, belief in the superiority of secular culture over religious culture, and vice versa, are two affectively similar corporeal orientations that, to quote Braidotti, show how we are ‘all too human’ (2019: 1–5) and all ‘in-this-together-but-not-one-and-the-same’ (2019: 157). I outline the three scales across which faith entanglements and resulting unconscious orientations articulate: macro, meso and micro. On a macro level, global material economies, worldviews, geographies and networks of faith impact substantively upon an individual’s capacity to act, as these assemblages are both political and world-making. On a meso level, the individual and community geographies of belonging that constitute people’s everyday lives demonstrate the complex entanglements of matter and belief that make up lived faith worlds. At a micro level, ‘joy’ is the feeling that is brought about by an increase in our capacity to act and, alternatively, ‘cruel optimism’ is deferring pleasure (for example, sexual pleasure) in the hope that the act of deferral will lead to reward. We are all consciously or unconsciously enmeshed in various systems of faith relations, both formal and informal, religious and secular. This chapter puts forward a unified approach to thinking about the social and individual politics of orientation as expressions of different forms of faith.
Faith is an ontological state, an orientation and a capacity to act. It is a set of practices, an embedded emotional geography that choreographs subjectivities and communities. Philosophies of religion often account for transcendental frameworks, as a religion is a belief structure; however, religious belief structures interpolate objects and in so doing, give them meaning. As an affect, faith is material; it presents as a capacity to act characterised by belief in the world. My new materialist theory of faith presents it as a cosmological, ontological condition, drawing on resources from the field of new materialist scholarship (Meyer, 2015, 2019; Braidotti, 2019; Coleman, 2020) to think about what it means to have faith. For some, faith begins with a faith in a god, or gods, although for many others it doesn’t; for them, faith is about connectedness to community, family, values, places and rituals. Faith is a way of being a person and belonging to a community. It is a capacity to act, or a set of embodied orientations that limit capacity to act.

My contributions in this book extend existing work in new materialist writing which focuses on religion (Arab, 2019; Bräunlein, 2019; Burchardt, 2019; Hazard, 2019; Meyer, 2015, 2019), but I offer a very different contribution to these. Faith brings religious and secular communities together; it is expressed as systems of cultural value rather than abstract beliefs. Drawing on Iris van der Tuin’s analysis of diffraction, as a practice designed to ‘provoke change … [through paying attention to] cracks in the academic canon’ (2015: 100), I offer a diffractive engagement with philosophies of religion as examples of some ideas that motivate bodies who have faith. Yet often, philosophies of religion have very little to do with people’s faith practices, which are usually performances of commitment to community, values and belonging rather than an investment in existential ideology. As one of my research participants explains, she is drawn to community rather than abstract belief:

Growing up white Anglican … there wasn’t that huge amount, you know, that really convivial, come to my bosom and let’s all have a big casserole and all that kind of stuff. It was really quite austere and quite straighty-one-eighty. When I married Simon, who was at the time Baha’i religion, something that I found really, absolutely delightful about that was all these Persian people who bring you into
For Nancy, her faith community provides emotional sustenance. While acknowledging that philosophies of religion have limited impacts on the lives of many people who have faith, thinking about philosophies of religion is a way of mapping some of the many thought constellations that are reflected in faith-based patterns of feelings. Often these constellations are points that those who have faith define themselves against, or as being different from.

In his 2014 book *Reinventing Philosophy of Religion: An Opinionated Introduction*, Graham Oppy draws his readers’ attention to the impossibility of a consistent definition of religion – since, although over half the world has faith in a religion, it is always a context-specific task to define exactly what a religion is. Oppy explains:

Perhaps the very first question that arises for philosophy of religion is whether there is any such thing as *religion* [original emphasis]. This question seems straightforward. We are all familiar with Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Jainism, Sikhism, Shintoism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What are these, if not religions? Of course, recognizing that the major world religions are religions does not guarantee that we can decide harder cases, nor does it guarantee that we will not go seriously wrong if we try to give a definition of ‘religion’. On the one hand, you might well be unsure whether Scientology – or Discordianism, or the Church of MOO – is a religion; on the other hand, you might think that we simply misunderstand ancestor worship if we think of it as being a kind of religion. (2014: 3)

My in-depth conversations about faith with people who belong to religious communities have taught me that people’s faith and attachments often come about as a result of lived experiences, habits and values more than abstract beliefs. Faith is largely an embodied practice, not an abstract idea. While Oppy’s inquiry is shaped by a liberal understanding of what religion is, he develops a new idea of philosophy through his study of religion:

On any account of religion, it is clear that there are many ways that one might choose to study it. History, anthropology, geography, sociology, demography, and psychology all promise to yield significant information about religion. Perhaps the study of literature, music, painting, sculpture, and architecture will do so as well. However, while
philosophy of religion ought not to proceed in ignorance of the information that is yielded by other approaches to the study of religion, the questions that are taken up by philosophers of religion will not be straightforwardly answered by that information. (Oppy, 2014: 6)

To put this another way, there are multiple knowledge systems produced through religious practice and belief. In some cases, these systems could nearly be seen as mutually exclusive (for example, the philosophy of a religion versus the sociology of how it might be practised). Further, a contemporary philosophical perspective on faith must be informed by, or at least developed in relation to, religions that inspire so many people’s faith. This requires a diffractive reading of religion that takes ‘off elsewhere’ from a strictly religious reading and has ‘differing effects’ (van der Tuin, 2018: 100) from canonical engagements with philosophies of religion. Indeed, as I have suggested (Hickey-Moody, 2019), in thinking through faith as an embodied experience we can see that people who belong to different religions have more in common than they have separating them.

A Deleuzo–Spinozist reading of faith as increasing (joy) or decreasing (sad affect) capacity to act shows us that belonging to a religion is not so much about having one worldview, but rather about feeling belonging and being connected to communities, or being prevented from connecting to communities. While, for Oppy, religion as a philosophical approach is cognitive rather than embodied, drawing on Spinoza (1996) we can understand that cognitive constellations need to be understood as images of things around which beliefs and capacities to act are organised.

Other significant works in the interdisciplinary space of new materialist studies of religion include Birgit Meyer’s formative and enduringly useful 2003 piece ‘Material Mediations and Religious Practices of World-Making’. This essay offers resources that are in line with the contemporary philosophy of faith I develop here, although it is focused on religion rather than a broader experience of faith. Meyer argues that:

[s]ecularization theory with its inbuilt teleology gave way to an understanding of religion as being in constant transformation into multiple directions. The question of how (and why) religion transforms is at the core of much current research, yielding a strong emphasis on detailed case studies that place religion in broader social-cultural settings. (2003: 1–2)
As Meyer attests, the experience of having faith makes religion; it is a located, historically situated, embodied imagining of what the future might be (Braidotti, 2008: 18) and how the present is constituted. Meyer argues that the fact religion is a located and embodied practice has rightly shaped religious studies and should continue to do so:

Scholars signalled the need to pay urgent attention to actual religious practices of engaging with things, words, pictures, and other religious forms. Materiality became a key term. Far from designating simply the empirical study of religious material culture from a practice perspective, the point is to ‘re-materialize’ our conceptual approaches to religion. (2003: 2)

Meyer is asking us to think about the role that materiality plays in religion. I cannot agree more with her proposition, and I would extend such considerations of religion to include all forms of faith. A ‘re-materialisation’ of often abstracted belief structures requires a critical engagement with the post-Enlightenment, romanticist Protestant bias that Meyer (2010) argues still haunts the modern study of religion, as well as openness toward the spheres of the everyday level of ‘lived religion’, asking how religion becomes tangible in ‘the world’ (Meyer, 2003: 2). I try to do both these things in writing about faith as a vernacular, lived aspect of everyone’s everyday life. Faith is bigger than religion and, while it is often inspired by religion, or is developed in response to religion, it is experienced rather than thought, felt rather than written, and happens rather than is planned.

In Religions, Reasons and Gods: Essays in Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion, Clayton, Blackburn and Carroll (2006) argue that cross-cultural philosophies of religion are much more about the ways religious beliefs orient a body than about abstract ideas. Religious beliefs thus provide frameworks in and through which a body becomes:

Theistic arguments as forms of conceptual analysis might help us better understand the place and nature of gods in religious traditions, thereby leading to a clearer sense of the comparative grammar of religion: the rules of discourse about the gods. Such rules of discourse would show what would count as gods, the kinds of properties such beings possess and their place in different religious forms of life – for we cannot assume that the gods play the same role in all traditions any more than we can assume, e.g., that constitutions play the same
role in all countries. Identification of the rules of discourse about the gods might also serve specifically philosophical ends ... From this point of view, religious contexts would provide particularly interesting examples of some of the most difficult philosophical puzzles, and could contribute to their clarification or even solution. (Clayton, Blackburn, and Carroll, 2006: 306)

The contexts in which philosophy is generated, appreciated, and given life are the pathway to understanding it. Context makes religion over again and again; it makes faith over again and again. I think about ‘a thousand tiny faiths’, after Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘thousand tiny sexes’. Everyone’s faith is uniquely their own, just like everyone’s sex. Clayton, Blackburn and Carroll continue, explaining that:

[c]ontrary to dominant post-Enlightenment emphasis upon consensus, examining the actual contexts in which theistic proofs are used leads to a greater appreciation of the differences, not the sameness of humankind’s understanding of divinity. The craving for all rationally achieved consensus is in part an indirect reaction to the competing claims of religious traditions and more directly a protest against the sectarian bitterness that had arisen during and in the century or so of conflict after the Reformation. A Utopian dream it may have been, but its achievement should not be underestimated. In any case, in a pluralistic society such as ours is increasingly becoming, substantive consensus about means of goals is unlikely; the only consensus for which one can hope is a framework in which differences can be protected as well as commonalities identified. (2006: 307)

The differences and commonalities to which the authors refer are enacted on and carried through the body, through faith and through (in)capacities to act that shape cultures and perform life worlds.

I propose a reading of faith as an embodied experience that is shaped by material cultures of religion and by the ‘post-secular’ state. Here, I take my cue from Rosi Braidotti, who astutely observes that:

[t]he legacy of psychoanalysis allows us to challenge received ideas about the rationality of political subjectivity. Let us take a simple notion, such as faith in social progress and the self-correcting powers of democratic governance. In a psychoanalytic perspective, the operational concept here is faith itself. Psychoanalysis is a sober
reminder of our historically cumulated contradictions: we are con-fronting today a post secular realization that all beliefs are acts of faith, regardless of their propositional content – even – or especially, when they involve the superiority of reason, science and technology. All belief systems contain a hard core of spiritual hope – as Lacan put it: if you believe in grammar, you believe in God. (2008: 11)

Here, Braidotti show us the necessity of faith. She alerts us to the fact that various forms of faith are what animate all human actions. There is no purely transcendental faith. For those who are religious, even when they subscribe to transcendental beliefs, the modulations of faith they experience are embodied affects. These affects are co-created through visual and material cultures of religion, as John Cort shows:

A look at the material culture of a religious tradition indicates that texts alone are insufficient. Texts at best provide only a limited perspective on a religion. Two centuries of textual studies have led to an academic understanding of Jainism as an ascetic, world-renouncing, unaesthetic religious tradition ... Looking only at texts has blinded scholars to the extent that Jains for centuries have built temples, sculpted and adorned images, painted, embroidered textiles, and created a myriad of other objects – in short, have created a full material culture. (1996: 630–1)

Touching and feeling, objects and places, are too quickly left out of the philosophy of religion. Material cultures are at the heart of faith practices; they are just not always at the heart of academic methods for understanding faith and religion. This argument is further developed by Matthews-Jones and Jones who explain:

On the one hand, objects are shaped by people and cultures and become expressive of their beliefs and values. On the other hand, objects have the potential to shape and condition people. An appreciation of these twin processes is essential to understanding religious faith and spirituality. (2015: 2)

Here, we see that visual and material cultures of religion are key in constituting how faith is experienced, especially by those who are involved in religions:

Rather than perceiving them as the end product, or as a reflection, of social and cultural systems, material-culture scholars prefer to see
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objects as playing an active, constitutive role in the construction and maintenance of these very systems. (2015: 2)

Objects co-create systems of cultural value. There is an alignment here with Braidotti’s argument that the contemporary political and cultural globalised world generates faith experiences through material, embedded engagements with worldviews. Indeed, Matthews-Jones and Jones continue and extend this point, stating that:

[r]eligiosity is not simply an internal belief that comes to find codified form in the written texts of religious institutions. Religion is also constructed in the day-to-day, through people’s engagement with material things. Thus belief is not static, but negotiated through contact with everyday objects. Belief is highly dependent on the sensory experiences that enable people to make meaning out of their faith. (2015: 3, emphasis added)

Through a Deleuzo-Guattarian lens, faith is not dependent on sensory experience, but rather is a product of sensory experiences. Such sensory experiences are both responses to transcendental knowledge that is taught as religion and participation in the everyday events and cultural experiences that shape religion. Everyday experiences of being involved in visual, material and sensory cultures of religion produce our embodied imagination. Experiences create ideas of things, beliefs and faith in beliefs. From such a perspective, we can see that religion is created as a response to faith, which in turn is created by visual and material cultures.

Visual and material cultures are both located and globalised; for example, while Christianity’s colonising project is echoed in its continued quantitative popularity (there are currently around 2.1 billion Christians worldwide), links between Christianity and colonisation have long been muddied by exceptions. For example, the Republic of Ireland, the first country to decolonise, has a substantial Catholic population; another example can be found in the contemporary majority of non-white Christian believers across the globe. After Christianity, Islam is the most practised religion, with around 1.3 billion followers, while Hinduism has 900 million. Of course, this list goes on. Religions always have been, and are now more than ever, global and globalising. This has implications for the continued and varied ways in which the colonial project is carried
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on through religions. Further, as Richard Mann (2014) shows, the colonial imperative was originally translated into scholarship in the form of disdain for the material:

For many archaeologists and art historians during the colonial period such as Henry Cole, Alexander Cunningham and John Marshall … the historical appearance of material culture in India was interpreted as a sign of religious decay. In the case of Buddhism, the tradition was perceived of as having degenerated from its ‘original’ rational and ethical heights to a corrupt, superstitious and idolatrous tradition. Indeed, for many, the sign of this degeneration was the emergence of Buddhist iconography, ritual and material culture. Similar narratives of decline and debasement were used to characterize Hinduism as well. The materiality of Hinduism and Buddhism was perceived as an indication of a society that had de-evolved from sophistication to superstition; a slide the British argued they would correct with their own notions of high religious culture. (2014: 267–8)

In order to avoid recolonising culture through scholarly paradigms that perform conceptual abstraction, we need to heed Braidotti’s call for Europeans to develop a critical perspective on their imagination of themselves as ‘moral guardians of the world’ (2008: 8). We need to refuse to exchange transcendental thought for immanent thought which is mobilised in similarly problematic ways. This appeal is restated in different terms in Matthews-Jones and Jones’s later work:

The intellectual tradition that has privileged religion-as-thought over religion-as-material is part of that highly problematic modernist tradition in which all sorts of binaries – mind/body, male/female, modern/pre-modern, civilized/uncivilized, and so on – have taken on the appearance of universal truth rather than ideological construct. Just as we have come to question these binaries in relation to histories of gender and sexuality, for example, so too we should question assumptions made about practices of belief in modern societies. (2015: 4)

Materiality is as, if not more, constitutive of faith than thought. Belief is experienced as faith, because all faith needs to be understood as felt and embodied; it is a response to objects, ideas, places and practices. In Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America, Colleen McDannell (1995) offers a
located perspective on the material organisation of feelings by explaining that:

> the symbol systems of a particular religious language are not merely handed down, they must be learned through doing, seeing, and touching. Christian material culture does not simply reflect an existing reality. Experiencing the physical dimension of religion helps bring about religious values, norms, behaviors, and attitudes. Practising religion sets into play ways of thinking. It is the continual interaction with objects and images that makes one religious in a particular manner. (1995: 2)

As McDannell, Matthews-Jones and Jones, Cort and others show, material cultures shape patterns of feeling. Indeed, this is the case for those who have faith in the power of science and whose faith experiences are choreographed in relation to science laboratories and periodic tables, but also for those who have faith in religious deities or God.

A contemporary approach to thinking about faith, then, needs to be informed by both human and non-human intra-actions (Bräunlein, 2019). Visual and material cultures of religion need to be one of many key resources, along with philosophies of immanence that locate the body as core to knowledge production. This is a moment where philosophy needs to look outside itself and fold in otherness. Indeed, we can take Deleuze’s (1992a) Spinozist dividual, the idea of the body as one part of a larger whole, filled with immanent knowledge; Gatens and Lloyd’s (1999) bodies that share collective imaginings; or collaborative social fictions in Braidotti’s (1994) nomadic subject as philosophical models that show us how the body intra-acts with the otherness of material cultures in ways that are constitutive of meaning. People draw on each other, their surroundings and lived as well as religious philosophy and science in determining their approach to faith. Philosophy becomes the ‘subject looking for the ways in which otherness prompts, mobilizes and allows for the affirmation of what is not contained in the present conditions’ (Braidotti, 2008: 19). To put this another way, philosophy and religious belief structures become ways people can think outside their immediate context: portals into other worlds, not the defining matter of faith.

This move to draw on material and visual cultural artefacts in developing our understanding of religion is carried on by the work
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of many. For example, in ‘Integrating Texts and Material Culture: Methodological Approaches to the Study of Premodern Religions’, Abhishek Amar (2012) suggests that ‘the privileging of textual sources over archaeological ones has been a major problem in the historiography of premodern South Asian religions’ (2012: 528). Amar’s call for a reconsideration of the material echoes the earlier work of Jerome Levi (1998) who, in ‘The Bow and the Blanket: Religion, Identity and Resistance in Rarámuri Material Culture’, argues that ‘renewed consideration of the material markers of internal differentiation is a complementary balance to recent discourse emphasizing linkages between global and local economies’ (1998: 300). To put this another way, the detail in cultures and stories is often held and told in matter. Small differences and particularities are evidenced in things rather than words. Van der Tuin (after Elizabeth Grosz) characterises new materialism as a means for locating ‘the surprise of the future that we find in the past’ (2015: 10). Similarly, Levi argues that religious ‘objects are not inert relics from the past but, on the contrary, are active strategies for the present’ (1998: 300, emphasis added). Religious objects are strategies for the present and for subjectivation; they are constellation points that shape faith experiences. Religious objects inform what David Morgan (2015) calls ‘the social life of feeling’. Morgan also agrees with this contention that the body and embodied engagements with material cultures of religion shape social imaginations. He suggests that:

[It]o belong to a community is to participate, to take part, to perform a role, to find a place within the imagined whole, which I have called the social body. Belief, it is important to point out, is not simply assent to dogmatic principles or credal propositions, but also the embodied or material practices that enact belonging to the group. The feeling that one belongs takes the shape of many experiences, unfolds over time, and is mediated in many forms. Moreover, belonging is nurtured by the aesthetic practices that are designed to generate and refine feeling on the crossed axes of human relationships and human–divine interaction. (Morgan, 2015: 141)

Intra-action between material aesthetics, feeling and sociality is how we come to belong. Aesthetics is at the core of our experience, but ideas also shape how we interact with material worlds and need to be considered as one of the factors impacting affective
Faith – people have faith in ideas as much as in things. There is, then, a sense in which studies of the visual and material cultures of religion reify the material realm for existing outside iconoclastic ideals or dogmatic structures. While this is largely true, engagements with material cultures can also be iconoclastic, dogmatic and are often popularly entwined with ideology. Any distinct split between the material and conceptual is a binary that cannot be upheld in everyday life. Bağlı (2015) explains the messy nature of the meanings of things by gesturing towards the slippery nature of the material world. The existential, the abstract, and the material are always enmeshed. Bağlı notes:

The special case of religious symbols differs from the symbols in daily life like traffic signs, where we can make the connection between signifier and signified much easier. However in the case of religion, the metaphysical or ‘unknown’ nature of the signified (God) and the interconnectedness of the signifier … make the process of analysis much harder and more complicated. (2015: 306)

What is God? How is God expressed in objects and actions? What sustains faith? How does faith animate human actions? Questions such as these require an approach that is so much more specific than a relationship between a sign and a signifier. The lived experience of having faith is a complex assemblage that is different for everyone who has faith. It is a complex and context-specific mixture of the material, the immaterial, community ritual and family history. Bağlı (2015) examines this slipperiness, or this complexity, as a new terrain in scholarship, reminding us that:

[i]f we are to talk about the functionality of a religious object, it is usually directly related to an action as a part of a ritual or a practice, e.g., prayer beads (rosaries), prayer rugs, etc. The symbolic aspect, however, is more peripheral. It uses representation of some abstract values connected to the system of belief or certain religious figures mostly in the form of icons, without necessarily being connected to any religious practice. (306)

Indeed, Bağlı is not the only scholar to argue (see Wang, 2018) that reading symbols as being significant to religious experiences is a colonial importation, if not a racist imposition. Islamic culture’s preference for calligraphy, its choreographic work around the body in prayer and its attention to how praying
bodies are positioned in space and time are significant. So too are
the material rituals of washing, fasting and sharing meals. These
are the organising material cultural aspects of the religion that hold
power, rather than the focus on symbols that characterise Catholic,
Christian, Hindu and Buddhist religions. We need to have an intra-
active, mutable, reshapeable and engaged material-conceptual
position on what a new materialist philosophy of faith might be.
Faith is engendered by ideas, practices, places, rituals and symbols,
and these intersect in ways that generate zones of relationality and
inform experiences of faith.

In her 2009 piece ‘Grasping the Elusive and Unknowable:
Material Culture in Ritual Practice’, Nicole Boivin argues that:

[follow scholars like Clifford Geertz, many archaeologists have,
indeed, seen religion as a ‘system of symbols’. The recognition that
many of these symbols are material ones, recoverable in the archaeo-
logical record, has helped to make ancient religion somewhat acces-
sible to the trowels (and interpretive frameworks) of archaeologists.
[However, she also cautions that] despite increased interest in recent
years in the material dimension of religious practice, particularly
within the discipline of archaeology, studies of the material and arti-
factual aspects of ritual continue largely to overlook the materiality
of ritual objects and landscapes. (2009: 269)

Boivin shows that material systems of signification are remade, rein-
vented within the tangle of context-specific intra-action that consti-
tutes practices of faith. Coding systems break down and are hacked
and recoded in everyday life. She continues, explaining that:

A recognition of the relevance of the physical qualities of material
signs had often been implicit in structuralist analyses in archaeology
... and both anthropologists and archaeologists came to recognize
more explicitly that the meaning of material signs was often moti-
vated by their physical qualities. One early anthropological example
of such a recognition can be found in the work of Victor Turner,
whose extensive mid-1960s analysis of ritual symbols among the
Ndembu of Zambia explored in some detail the links between mate-
rial signifiers and the concepts they signify. (2009: 272)

Turner’s work is but one early example of the shifting meanings
that religious symbols can hold. The other point I make in fram-
ing intra-action above is that sharing food, drink and community
togetherness is a key part of entanglements that create faith. This, too, is a point made consistently in the literature examining material cultures of religion. For example, Uri Kaplan (2017) argues that the individual nature of faith is co-constituted by consumption (food and drink) in material culture, explaining how:

\[
\text{eating and drinking (and abstention from which) play central roles in religious rites, where re-enacting mythologies jogs to life collective memories and re-confirms religious adhesion and distinctiveness ... facilitating communication between individuals and their communities, as well as with their ancestors and gods. (2017: 4)}
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Putting the question of transubstantiation aside for now, it is clear that there are many ways in which the consumption of food is part of faith-assemblages. So too are ritual performances, as characterised by Christiane Gruber:

Dodging dogma as verbalized in prescriptive texts and modern curbs implemented in more-conservative milieus, votive practices and objects have long been a hallmark of creative activity among members of the global Muslim community. Early Arabic narrative sources tell us about devotees placing votive candles in shrines, while contemporary Muharram mourning ceremonies provide their participants with a rich Gesamtkunstwerk, blending processional and musical performances with votive objects and foods. (2017: 99)

Faith, then, is produced through daily life performances, involvement in material culture, ideology, belief and, more than anything, context.

Questions of scale

In this book, I respond to, and move in and out of, three scales across which faith entanglements and unconscious orientations articulate: macro, meso and micro. Both explicitly and implicitly, I argue that, on a macro level, geographies and networks of faith, material economies and worldviews impact substantially upon an individual’s capacities to act. Geographies and material economies of faith are both political and world-making. For example, where people are born often influences the religion or belief system into which they are born, as do the economic and material conditions
War, economies and associated rises and falls in opportunities for employment are global events, part of flows and assemblages which impact the creation and spread of flows of religious and secular faiths. For example, many of the Australian participants in the research had sought refuge in Australia as a result of either the conflict between Israel and Palestine, the war in Afghanistan or the West Papuan separatist conflict. My research participants in England had migrated largely from Africa (Eritrea, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zimbabwe), India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Similarly, civil war was a significant motivating factor behind these migration patterns. There are global, macro movements that shape the individual life and faith stories represented here.

On a meso level, educational systems and family are structures that bridge the global and the personal and which can reinforce religious faith, teach different religious faiths, question religious faiths and undoubtedly impact the ways that faith systems are maintained. The individual and community geographies of belonging that constitute people’s everyday lives demonstrate the complex entanglements of matter and belief that make up lived faith worlds. An example of this is the national discourses about faith in participants’ countries of residence and the religious organisations or school communities to which individuals belong, orient and inform their faith experiences. Medina from Adelaide draws a direct line between her national religion and her choice to invest in religion over ethnicity:

Beginning with my religious background, I’m Muslim, so I belong to the religion of Islam. I was, I would say, fortunately born into it, because my parents were both Muslims. They were Bangladeshi Muslim, so that’s my ethnicity part. I belong to Bangladesh, it’s a country in South-East Asia, very close to India, but it’s a country of its own, and it has not just Islam as a religion, although the government runs on Islam … it has Islamic inclusions in it. But there is Hinduism, there’s Buddhism, and Christianity, but they are a minority. Yeah, but we actually did get a chance as a Bangladeshi to integrate into other religions as well. But, in my household we always try to keep our identity as a Muslim at a higher level than being a Bangladeshi, because there are points where religion and the Bangladeshi culture do clash, and … my dad was always very firm with his belief in
Islam and he taught us how to differentiate where it’s going wrong, or where religion is not being accepted by the Bangladeshi culture because of their own background and historical events, that actually made some changes with how people follow Islam there. (Medina, south-west Adelaide focus group, 2019)

Medina primarily identifies with being Muslim above all other community attachments. At a micro level, Medina shows us how faith can be a form of what Spinoza (1996) would call ‘joy’, a feeling generated by an extension of the capacity to act. However, in other circumstances, faith is what Berlant (2011) calls ‘cruel optimism’. That is, faith can be a deferral of the present based on a hope for other things. Educational and biographic experiences orient people towards their faith – be it religious or secular.

**Faith as bodily affect**

Having faith can increase, or alternatively decrease, a body’s capacity to act. Value judgements about faith can stop a person from connecting with another, can cause rejection, and create a ‘sharp edge’ (Barad, 2003: 803). Faith can also provide the capacity to reach out to others, to be there for others, to keep people going. Many people in my research tell stories of moving across the world, living through wars and surviving change and separation from family, and their stories make clear the fact that faith can sustain people through very difficult times. Rafi, a Muslim man living in Melbourne, explains his journey to relative safety in Australia:

*Ten years ago, I came from Christmas Island [an immigration detention centre]. I had only one T-shirt from Immigration. One small shirt. The shirt is from Immigration. Nothing else. And at the moment, I have a house, two, three cars. My life is not rich. Not the bottom. In the middle. Similar like someone who is born in Australia. We live the same way. It’s the best country. I think it’s the best, best country in the world.* (Rafi, south-east Melbourne focus group, 2019)

Rafi had lived in Afghanistan until fleeing the war, and he arrived on Christmas Island in 2009. His Muslim faith sustained him not just through war, but through the difficult process of seeking asylum and the complex task of building a new life. He explains: ‘All
religion is looking for one way, to follow, to look for a God’ (south-east Melbourne focus group, 2019). It seems to me that, as Rafi and many others suggest, this act of looking for a God can give bodies the capacity to keep going. Rafi and Ersheen, a mother in Manchester, whom I discuss in the chapter on incapacity, both went to great lengths to explain the similarities between Muslim and Christian relationships; they offered detailed academic accounts of these similarities that stood out from many other comments on the similarity of religions.

While these accounts illustrate faith as a way of extending people’s capacities to act, my research has also shown that faith can generate embodied limits. For example, I was told I was ‘going to hell’ for believing that all religions are equal by an angry Christian minister’s secretary in the religiously conservative outer west suburbs of Sydney. On some level, I think I am still recovering from her denunciation. Therefore, faith also creates (in)capacity, and can be thought of as both enabling and disabling. Another example of limits to acting is given by Joanie, who explains feeling rejected by Muslim mothers, one of whom said to her, ‘You know what I mean’ as a justification for why her daughter from a north Pakistani Muslim family and Joanie’s white, English, secular daughter should not be friends.

Creating affect, faith aligns subjects to experience a moment in which ‘the mind is assailed by any emotion, [and] the body is affected at the same time by a modification whereby its power of acting is either increased or diminished’ (Spinoza, 1996: 148). Deleuze, and Deleuze and Guattari subsequently argue that affect refers to changes in bodily capacity. The body to which Deleuze refers is not necessarily human. It is a degree of power held within any given assemblage or mixture. Faith creates affects, in that it extends or decreases the limits of what a body – or a given assemblage or mixture – can do. An affect, then, is the margin of change in capacity: a material and/or conceptual bloc that articulates an increase or decrease in a body’s capacity to act.

The term faith can, in fact, be employed in exchange with affect to refer to changing bodies: to what a body can do. The actual changes caused by the experience of faith are affectus, the empirical increase or decrease in subjective capacity made by an affect (Marrati, 2006; Clough, 2008; Hickey-Moody, 2009, 2013a, 2013b; Parr, 2010;
Duff, 2014). As I have explained elsewhere (Hickey-Moody, 2020), in *Spinoza, Practical Philosophy*, Deleuze says that an *affectus* is ‘[a]n increase or decrease of the power of acting, for the body and the mind alike’ (1988: 49). He builds on this definition through arguing that *affectus* is different from emotion. While emotion is the psychological striation of affect, *affectus* is the way our experiences change our subjectivity; it is the virtuality and materiality of the increase or decrease effected in a body’s power of acting. Objects such as religious icons, experiences of reciting a prayer, joining a community in praying or eating, are enculturating, enculturated, affective experiences. Deleuze explains:

The affection refers to a state of the affected body and implies the presence of the affecting body, whereas the affectus refers to the passage [or movement] from one state to another … there is a difference in nature between the image affections or ideas and the feeling affect. (1988: 49)

Thus, *affectus* is the materiality of change: it is the *passage from one state to another* which occurs in relation to *affecting bodies*. Image affections, or the ‘ideas’ to which Deleuze refers, can be the idea of a God, or gods, or an image of the religious deities or figures in which people believe. Increasing or decreasing one’s capacity to act is the modulation of *affectus*: the virtual and material change that prompts affection or feeling in consciousness (Hickey-Moody, 2013a, 2013b). Faith attachments and the act of believing in something create virtual and material change that prompts affection or the feeling of affect in consciousness.

Deleuze’s work on affect as changes in embodied capacities begins with his reading of Spinoza. In *Spinoza, Practical Philosophy*, Deleuze explains:

The affections [affectiones] are the modes [forms of life] themselves. The modes are the affections of substance [matter, the universal] or of its attributes ... These affections are not necessarily active, since they are explained by the nature of God as adequate cause, and God cannot be acted upon. At a second level, the affections designate that which happens to the mode, the modifications of the mode [affectus], the effects of other modes on it. These affections are therefore images or corporeal traces first of all and their *ideas* involve both the nature of the affected body and that of the affecting external body. (1988: 48)
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Deleuze reminds us of how feelings, and to this I would add beliefs, mark out our emotional geographies. This is Deleuze’s Spinozist framework for thinking about the ways ideas and interactions can create conceptual and material changes. For Spinoza, substance is the stuff of which life is made. Substance is expressed in modes, which are changed (affected or modulated) by affections (affectiones). Affectiones are traces of interaction: residues of experience that live in thought and in the body. They make affects, modulations marked by our feelings. Faith, then – the belief that something is possible, or that something is inherently wrong – changes capacities in ways that are marked by feelings. Faith in religion, faith in social values or faith in science choreographs people, societies and relationalities. Following this understanding of assemblages of places, objects, people, beliefs, as ways of shaping patterns of feeling, we can see that faith can become a map, an internal–external set of coordinates that moves bodies to act and react in certain ways. This map is living; it is a dynamic, responsive, and very alive part of people’s engagements with their contexts. In being responsive, faith is always being remade; it shapes streams of consciousness that flow across established patterns of feeling.

In the examples I give above, and indeed in much of my discussion in this book, the example of faith given is of religion; however, as Joanie’s story, and as many other accounts of belief in secularism show, the experience of faith is bigger than (and extends beyond) the experience of religion. Indeed, as I have suggested, faith in science can also be seen as a form of religion.

Faith as joy

Faith can be a form of joy. Spinoza (1996) discusses different kinds of joy: active and passive joys that can arise from vicarious experience or from acting through good intent, which he calls ‘good encounters’. Writing on good encounters, Deleuze explains that:

Reason’s only commandment … is to link a maximum of passive joys with a maximum of active ones. For joy is the only passive affection that increases our power of action, and of all affections joy alone can be active. The slave may be recognized by his sad passions, and the free man by his joys, passive and active. The sense of joy is revealed
as the truly ethical sense; it is to the practical sphere what affirmation itself is to the speculative ... A philosophy of pure affirmation, the *Ethics* is also a philosophy of the joy corresponding to such affirmation. (1992b: 272)

Active joys are those we work for, rather than those we experience by chance. When faith is a way of extending the capacities of others to act, as well as extending one’s own capacity to act, this affords the marriage of reason and passions and creates active joy. Deleuze continues, stating that ‘joyful passions increase our power of action; reason is the power of understanding, the power of action belonging to the soul; so joyful passions agree with reason, and lead us to understand, or determine us to become reasonable’ (1992b: 273–4).

For many, their faith is a resource they use to survive and navigate difficult life changes: a source of reason. Faith is also a means of supporting their family and community: a way of increasing the power of acting. As a way of understanding differences, faith allows many to become reasonable.

Spinoza discusses three kinds of joy, two of which are accidental. Indirect and partial joys are experienced as a result of benefiting from the misfortune of others, or of being pleased by something that might give passing pleasure but might not actually extend our capacity to act. Deleuze explains indirect and partial joys in Spinoza’s work by saying that:

We must also take account of other concrete factors, for the first sort of encounter, good encounters with bodies whose relation combines directly with our own, remains altogether hypothetical. The question is, once we exist, is there any chance of us naturally having good encounters, and experiencing the joyful affections that follow from them? The chances are in fact slight enough ... There is, then, very little chance of our naturally having good encounters. We seem to be determined to much contest, much hatred, and to the experience of only partial or indirect joys which do not sufficiently disrupt the chain of our sorrows and hatreds. Partial joys are ‘titillations’ which only ever increase our power of action at one point by reducing it everywhere else. Indirect joys are those we experience in seeing a hated object sad or destroyed; but such joys remain imprisoned in sadness. Hate is in fact a sadness, itself involving the sadness from which it derives; the joys of hatred mask this sadness and inhibit it, but can never eliminate it. (Deleuze, 1992b: 244–5)
Spinoza’s sad reading of the natural orientation of human beings towards hate is quite an indictment on the human condition. He establishes the ethical orientation of his work – true joy entails increasing other people’s, as well as one’s own, capacity to act. Joy is achievable only when reason and intuition align. Deleuze further explains that:

The primary question of the Ethics is thus: What must we do in order to be affected by a maximum of joyful passions? Nature does not favour us in this respect. But we should rely on the efforts of reason, the very slow empirical effort which finds in the City the conditions that make it possible: reason in the first principle of its development, or in its initial aspect, is the effort to organize encounters in such a way that we are affected by a maximum of joyful passions. For joyful passions increase our power of action; reason is the power of understanding, the power of action belonging to the soul; so joyful passions agree with reason, and lead us to understand, or determine us to become reasonable. (1992b: 273–4)

Here, Deleuze explains Spinoza’s alignment between reason, intuition and action. This alignment is part of the work of ‘becoming reasonable’ and developing one’s own capacity to act. Many of the accounts of religious and secular faith given in this book explain the tectonics of joyful passions: the ideas, actions, contexts and histories that inspire acts of becoming reasonable in relation to others, of increasing one’s own – and other’s – capacities to act. The production of joy can be identified as one of the dominant discourses of faith. It is, however, not the only ‘big picture’ story that faith cultures produce. While faith is usually a positive agent in people’s lives, it can, as some of the stories discussed in chapters to come will show, also be a promise that operates as a form of cruel optimism, something that is never actually realised. Faith can be a series of sacrifices one makes in the hope they might be exchanged for a better future.

**Faith as promise, object and exchange value**

In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant (2011) discusses the feelings of failure, and the process of what she calls ‘slow death’, that can arise from trying to change habits that are perhaps not in our best
interest (think: smoking, eating too much, having unprotected sex with multiple partners). In this part of the chapter, I explore some of Berlant’s astute observations about unrealised and impossible desire in a very different context, not in relation to people trying to change when social, biological, economic and institutional structures prevent this possibility, but rather in relation to religious faith as a form of slow death. In such instances, religious faith demonstrates ‘the cruelty of optimism revealed to people without control over the material conditions of their lives’ (2011: 46). Berlant examines unfulfillable promises, often embedded in objects of desire, as one example of cruel optimism. She also discusses the promise of exchange value as another form of cruel optimism. Each of these ways of thinking offers insight into some faith experiences.

Faith objects and surfaces

In some contexts, religious faith operates as a form of cruel optimism in which ‘proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object [symbolising faith] promises’ (Berlant, 2011: 23). Faith in religion can, depending on its configuration, lead to believing in a ‘cluster of promises … embedded in a person, a thing, an institution, a text, a norm’ (Berlant, 2011: 23). This is not necessarily a bad thing; as I show in the discussion above, the experience when an idea and practice come together (or intuition and reason meet) can be a joyful and sustaining experience. However, like all things, faith – either faith in medicine, science or religious faith – is not always able to be joyful and sustaining. It can be a set of impossibilities or refusals. Medicine cannot cure all ills. Science alone cannot stop climate change. Being religious does not necessarily make a person good or caring. In some instances, religious faith can be an endless deferral of pleasure which may never come to fruition, and which may value acts of pleasure deferral undertaken in relation to object attachments. Berlant explains this by stating, ‘all attachments are optimistic. When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make us and make possible for us’ (2011: 23). All religions have faith objects: shrines to elders and their ghosts, images or statues of deities, prayer beads, holy books, the crucifix, a prayer mat, the Ka’bah; attachments to objects related to religious
faith are part of the practices of orthodox and non-orthodox religious people in ways that facilitate attachments of different kinds. Like objects, surfaces also form sites of attachment: landscapes, the outsides of communities, physical and social edges, unexpected connections between people or places become things to believe in. Berlant explains:

So many of the normative and singular objects made available for investing in the world are themselves threats to both the energy and the fantasy of ongoiness, namely, that people/collectivities face daily the cruelty not just of potentially relinquishing their objects or changing their lives, but of losing the binding that fantasy itself has allowed to what’s potentially there in the risky domains of the yet untested and unlived life. (2011: 48)

People’s attachments to objects or surfaces symbolising hopes and ideas are often more powerful than attachments to others or one’s surroundings. Pilgrimages to holy places and attachments to religious icons or objects come to mind here. Each religion has its own version of faith object or place attachment, such as Virgin Mary shrines, rosary beads, Hajj, malas, temples and so on. Here, an object or surface stands in for the rewards or qualities that the believer holds dear. Berlant also discusses the promise of exchange value as another form of cruel optimism. This approach also offers insights into some faith experiences.

**Prayer as exchange value**

Cruel optimism is expressed in the possibility of exchange value, the kinds of intersubjective relationships that are cultivated through entertaining and voicing attachments to possibilities of promising qualities that are yet to materialise. Berlant examines the performance of investment in possible exchange value in ways that remind me of the act of prayer; namely a practice of annunciation spoken to a hearer who is not physically present:

the condition of projected possibility, of a hearing that cannot take place in the terms of its annunciation (‘you’ are not here, ‘you’ are eternally belated to the conversation with you that I am imagining) creates a fake present moment of intersubjectivity in which, nonetheless, a performance of address can take place. (Berlant, 2011: 25)
Prayer can be seen as an imagined conversation with God, an imagined intersubjective moment. The above quote brought into my mind a mother, a Serbian refugee living in Melbourne, who explained she felt that she needed to save her attachment for the afterlife. Malina explains that:

*I’m trying not to get too attached to recipes or things or places or anything. For me, they’re not important to me. Sorry. For me it’s like my prayer, my beliefs, it’s like that’s what I – I love my family and everything, but one day just my other friend she told me her husband just passed away. How? Like he was a perfectly looking, healthy young man. It’s just – one day people are here, and another day they are gone. You know? It just makes you think they’re here, that’s my family. But how much is that important? It’s like the next day you’re just going to leave and leave everything there, even your friends and family. Nothing of that matters anymore. (Malina, south-east Melbourne focus group, 2019)*

Here, we see faith as exchange value, faith in the afterlife is exchanged for daily investment in her children or husband. Malina is living her life in the hope of other worlds.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have situated this book in relation to the literature on materialism and religion while defining the remit of the book as considering faith as being larger than a focus on religion alone. I have drawn on the work of Spinoza, Deleuze and Berlant to think about faith as both positive and negative in the lives of my research participants. I have explored the micro, meso and macro scales across which faith articulates. I have tried to show that, in some ways, all those who have faith make it themselves, even if they do so unconsciously. Rituals, consumption practices and signification practices are citational modes that choreograph faith experiences.

The theoretical resources assembled in this chapter demonstrate my belief that any useful philosophical perspective on faith needs to be informed by interdisciplinary knowledge, since ‘[w]hen scholars of religion write on materiality ... they generally benefit from an art historian’s perspective, just as art historians with scant training
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in religious studies frameworks may benefit from the insights of a reader in that discipline’ (Floyd and Promey, 2018: 267). In developing my own new materialist perspective on faith and drawing on interdisciplinary resources to think about the production of faith as an affective experience, I want to show the complex ways people are moved to believe. We all have faith in something. Our faith is both an expression of context and a political act. Faith, like the body, is a thermometer of social becomings and, wherever we are situated and whatever we profess, faith is the means by which we continue to become who we are. In moving forward, I investigate situated faith in its material-conceptual-social and historical complexity.

Note

1 Lauren Berlant (2011) explains this idea by noting the amount of women who defer the pleasure of eating in the hope of being rewarded by weight loss.