Affect and joy / Áthas

Introduction

Affect and joy are key themes that run through my data in a number of ways. Firstly, the research methods and the data communicate through affect. The children’s artwork, both individual and collaborative, touches the feelings of its viewers and expresses the feelings of those who have made it. The artworks themselves are materialisations of feeling, communicated through line, shape, form, tone, imagination and matter. The adults’ conversations are similarly drenched with affect. Faith is an emotional issue. What we believe in arises from our family history, our places of birth and residence, the languages we speak: our blood and the air we breathe. It is impossible for such intimate matters to be devoid of emotion and connectedness to others, both of which are defining aspects of affect. The connectedness to others which is both part of collaborative art-making and participating in a faith is what also creates joy as Spinoza explains it. Spinoza suggests that ‘If a person has done anything which he imagines will affect others with joy, he will also be affected with joy, accompanied with an idea of himself as its cause; that is to say, he will look upon himself with joy’ (2001: 121). He later concedes (on the same page) that such joy may, at times, be imagined. To the extent that acts of connection, empathy and support facilitated through faith practices are real, they bring joy to those who experience them. In this chapter, I explore affect and joy as created through children making artworks, as communicated in children’s artworks and as themes that run through the parents’ focus group discussions and interviews.
What really matters

As I noted earlier and expand upon in the following chapters, my data collection with children began by asking them ‘what really matters?’ Read collectively, their visual and material responses to this issue can be seen as a chorus of joyful affects. Indeed, making artworks can be a form of valuing something – a way of revering objects and experiences. Renold and Ivinson (2022: 4) suggest that ‘becoming able to respond to “what matters” is an embodied and embedded ethical practice’. The embodied and expressive nature of the children’s work substantiates this claim. An earlier example of this relationship between ethics, the body and feelings can be found in proposition nineteen of the ‘Origin and Nature of the Affects’, where Spinoza suggests that ‘He who imagines that what he loves is destroyed will sorrow, but if he imagines that it is preserved he will rejoice’ (2001: 114). The demonstration for this proposition continues, explaining that ‘the mind endeavours as much as it can to imagine those things which increase or assist the body’s power of action … that is to say, to imagine those things which it loves’ (2001: 114). This sentiment can be taken as a map for approaching the way children engaged with the making tasks I gave them. The act of thinking about ‘what really matters’ for children became a way of imagining ‘those things’ which are loved (2001: 114). The images they drew, in the first instance, almost always featured family. Pets, favourite locations (a tree, a shoreline, grandma’s house, the back garden, the Ka’bah, the Burj Khalifa) and special foods and symbols (flags and religious symbols) were the ‘go-to’ first images that children created: key constellation points for their feelings. These points (or objects and people) all exist in affective relationships with each other. They are the neighbourhood of what children hold tightly: a map of what animates their emotional worlds.

These things (family, pets, places, symbols) have affected the children who draw them. Thinking about why they matter is part of the joy of creating for the children. As I noted earlier, affect is the concept of changing in relation to an experience or encounter. Deleuze employs this term in changing ways across his career, and all of them apply to various stages of the children making and sharing the artworks. There is a difference in nature between image affections (ideas) and affects. Image affections might include the idea of
belonging, the name of the country in which you have citizenship, but not the actual feeling of belonging. Affect (affectus) is the materiality of change, how the feeling of belonging changes your body, the empirical relations that the affected body has to affecting bodies. Affectus is analogous to what theorists such as Giroux (2010) call ‘pedagogy’, namely, a relational practice through which some kind of knowledge is produced. These ideas help to foreground the fact that small economies of change are essentially what the children are making with their artworks.

The children pass on the ways that ‘what really matters’ in their lives has changed them. Affectus is a rhythmic trace of the world written into the body, an expression of an encounter between a corporeal form and material forces that are not necessarily ‘human’. Art-making – especially collaborative art-making – can create individual affective responses and generate affectus. In creating subjective change or a ‘modulation’ in the form of affectus, art materials become physical forces of change. Our environments, animals and objects are material pedagogies and they impact on us in pre-perceptive ways that are so small we don’t necessarily notice them.

I now turn my focus from the joy found in making art about ‘what really matters’ to examining the joy that is communicated by art. Extending the possibilities for thinking through how matter impacts subjectivity, Deleuze and Guattari develop the ideas of the percept and affect in a chapter from What is Philosophy? (1996) as a nuanced theory of art’s material agency. They argue that percepts are fragments of the perception of the world created in an artwork. Affects are the compounds of artistic techniques that make one feel a certain way in response to a work of art. The art children made explores the way that non-human things such as significant places, animals, beliefs, objects and rituals impact on their subjectivity and can enrich and extend their emotional worlds.

In explaining how art communicates, What is Philosophy? shows us that art is more than a mode of producing subjectivity and a way of modulating community. Deleuze and Guattari (1996: 24, 66, 163–99, 173, 177–84, 211–12) suggest that a percept is a physical fragment of the world imagined in and through the artwork. An affect is the sense, or feeling, that is enmeshed with the materiality of the artwork. Combined together in art, percepts and affects constitute what Deleuze and Guattari term a ‘bloc of sensations’ (1996:
Faith stories

Blocs of sensations are the language with which art speaks. They suggest:

Art is the language of sensations. Art does not have opinions. Art undoes the triple organisation of perceptions, affections and opinions in order to substitute a monument composed of percepts, affects and blocs of sensations that take the place of language ... A monument does not commemorate or celebrate something that happened but confides to the ear of the future the persistent sensations that embody the event. (1996: 176–7)

Through art, knowledge is communicated in ways that exceed language, and often by things that are not human: by colours, textures, amalgams, lines or shapes. This is especially important in the case of children’s work because often their vocabulary is limited and their expression comes from other sources, including the materiality of their art. The children’s artworks are monuments ‘composed of percepts, affects and blocs of sensations that take the place of language’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996: 176). They propel the emotional geographies of those for whom they speak. In doing so, they create a new sensory landscape for their beholder. This act of creating a sensory landscape occurs through an artwork’s affective potential. This is the way a work of art can make its observer feel; the connection(s) a work prompts its observer to make. The materiality of the artwork, the blocs of sensation from which it is composed, embody affects that are specific to the worlds and lives of the children who create them. Each bloc of sensation has its own affective force or quality. The materiality of art can readjust what a person is or is not able to understand, produce and connect to. This is not to say that a work of art necessarily will change viewers in prescribed ways, but rather that artworks can create new associations and habits of clustering emotion around new images. Art thinks with us; it machines thoughts and feelings.

Percepts and affects exist within a work of art, as part of a work of art, upon terms established by and situated within the work; terms that are specific to the way the work of art has been constructed. This kind of affect embedded in a work of art is a new milieu of sense, or series of personal associations, that are created in relation to percepts: ‘Affects are precisely these nonhuman becomings of man [sic]’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996: 169). Such transformations are more than human (or ‘non-human’ in this quote) because, although an affect is an embodied change in the respect
that it is a readjustment of personal ‘limit’ or capacity, affect is produced in relation to the material product – the work – an artist has created. A work of art thus presents its viewer with a miniature universe that performs a pedagogic function through crafting and imbuing elements of experience, and experiential difference, upon its spectator. For example, children’s artworks often featured places that were significant in the emotional geographies of their religious worlds, such as the Ka’bah, or their local church or mosque: symbols that show what they believe. The materiality of these symbolic expressions changed them and also brought them into the world in a way that allowed the children’s images and what they represent to become part of the emotional economies of their beholders. The Ka’bah, expressed in paint, glitter and cardboard, both shows what it feels like to be drawn to something, to revere something and dream of it, and it also presents the Ka’bah as an actor in the centre of its own story. Who is praying outside the Ka’bah? What can they see? What stories, hopes and dreams do they bring on their pilgrimage? It is the materiality of the artwork, after being entangled with the child’s imagination, that asks these questions.

Exploring the agency of matter in art, the term percept describes aspects of the physicality of the artwork in its completed form. Deleuze and Guattari suggest:

a percept is material crafted into a sensation … it is difficult to say where in fact the material ends and sensation begins; preparation of the canvas, the track of the brush’s hair, and many other things besides are obviously part of the sensation. (1996: 166)

The liveness of making is embedded in the percept. New lived sensibilities, or personal vocabularies, are often the products of the artistic affects that percepts make. In describing this potential for the creation of newness and transformation, Deleuze and Guattari argue:

‘Blocs’ of percepts and affects are innovative by nature; they are not about preserving previous events or works of art, but are the creation of a new solidarity … Even if the material only lasts for a few seconds it will give sensation the power to exist and be preserved in itself in the eternity that exists for that short duration. (1996: 166)

Hundreds of little ‘faiths’ are expressed in the children’s artworks. What it means to have faith is remade in relation to the joys of what really matters in life and shared with others. Translating
this sentiment into subjective or ‘human’ terms, the implications of what Deleuze and Guattari suggest are that the person who experiences the force produced by an affect can retain this force, and can also be changed as a result of their experience. The effect of the children’s art is to give the viewer a piece of their world. Not just any piece: a treasured source of joy that expresses how they connect to community, to place, to family, to religion and so on. The following conversation from my work in the Greenwich primary school illustrates children’s experiences of joy in relation to their choices of ‘what really matters’ in life. The natural environment and family celebrations stand out to them as the most important things in their lives and the primary reason for their spiritual beliefs:

Anna: The next picture that we’re going to do is a picture about what really matters and you’re going to work with somebody else to make the picture of what really matters. So, what are some things that really matter? Call them out.
Elise: Flowers.
Anna: Excellent, and why do flowers really matter?
Elise: Maybe because they take in carbon and make oxygen.
Anna: Oxygen, excellent. Flowers make oxygen, well done. Who was next?
Elise: They keep us alive.
Anna: Keep us alive. Yep, Simon?
Simon: Flowers are also good because it’s also good for the bees, bees get the nectar to make honey for us.
Anna: Right, flowers, bees that make honey. And you know what? The bees also make flowers because the bees carry pollen between flowers. Yeah, they sprinkle it on the flowers. Yes …
Simon: How about rain, even though you don’t like it, it gets you wet, but it still helps you because it goes through the tap so you can drink it, and wash your hands with it?
Francesca: Our bodies.
Anna: And why do our bodies matter?
Francesca: Because we need to look after our bodies, by not like eating sugar.
Anna: Eat healthily, no sugar. So we had other hands too, didn’t we, you haven’t said anything yet. So, who else?
Samantha: Lungs.
Anna: Lungs, that’s fantastic.
Samantha: They help us breathe, and mine don’t work very well because I have asthma.
Anna: Oh, honey. Do you? That’s a shame. Help us breathe. Yeah. Yeah, so what about religion? Hands up here who has a religion. And so, can we say what everyone’s religion is?
Francesca: Christian.
Anna: Yeah, Christian, that’s Francesca’s religion. Is religion something that really matters?
Abdul: Yes.
Anna: And does your family have a religion?
Abdul: Christian, Muslim.
Anna: Is it Christian or is it Muslim?
Abdul: Muslim.
Anna: And Frank, does your family have a religion?
Frank: Christian.
Anna: Great. And what’s yours?
Divya: Hindu.
Anna: Hindu, that’s right, of course. So, I just want to have a talk because religion is kind of meant to embody what really matters in a lot of ways, and what we are interested in doing is thinking about what religion teaches us and thinking about how there might be some similarities between what religions teach us and some differences. So, maybe if everyone gives us one word about what their religion teaches them? If you were going to say what’s the main message of Hinduism, what would you say?
Divya: Parties.
Anna: Parties, that’s awesome. I love a good party. So, what’s the main message of Christianity, you think?
Tom: Keeping the people safe, keeping the bugs safe.
Anna: Keeping people and insects safe.
Francesca: I was going to say the same thing.
Anna: And so, Abdul, if you were going to pick something that was one word about being Muslim, what would it be?
Abdul: Praying to Allah.
Anna: Praying to Allah, yes.
Abdul: Eid is my birthday.
Anna: You’ve only just finished Ramadan, haven’t you? Oh, is Eid your birthday?
Abdul: And everybody’s different.
(South-east London Primary School, 2018)

Clearly, the children value and delight in the natural world. Flowers, bees, rain, insects: they are enamoured with nature and respect the
role it plays in sustaining life. Religion at ages eight to nine is still primarily about celebration, ritual and the pleasure of family and community togetherness. Indeed, the conversation recounted above could be read as a shopping list of ‘what kids love’, as they remember things that bring them joy in life. Spinoza explains: ‘Besides the joys and sorrows which are passions, there are other affects of joy and sorrow which are related to us in so far as we act’ (Spinoza, 2001: 144). He continues, explaining that the mind ‘endeavours to preserve its own being’ (2001: 144). In primarily being motivated by joy, children’s recounting of religion acknowledges it as a source of great happiness. Religion is also, as Abdul shows us, about relationality. ‘Praying to Allah’ is inherently relational and it requires the production of the self who prays. Abdul points towards the many layers of experience that comprise a relationship with religion: the relationship between self and God, celebrations, understanding and accepting cultural differences.

Unintentionally, celebrating joy became the focus of children’s explorations of what really matters. In many of the children’s minds, religion was alight with the colour, sound and spectacles of parties. One exception was the Muslim boy, Abdul, who understood his relationship with Allah as the central purpose of his religion. I would suggest he was the most religious child out of the few who featured in the discussion above, and this was why he had a more developed perspective on the matter. The main thing the discussion shows us is that joy – connectedness to nature and to other people – is a primary motivating factor for children, and it organises how they see the world. Their artworks communicate their joy through affect: through the percepts and affects that they create in being enmeshed with matter.

Of course, the way an affect is experienced, and the ways an affect works, will always be specific to the body in question. Indeed, whether a work of art is perceived as having affect at all is always specific to the body in question. Not all viewers respond in the same way. As Deleuze and Guattari contend:

[A work of art] is no less independent of the viewer or hearer, who only experience it after, if they have the strength for it. (1996: 164)

Therefore, the power of percepts and affects must be seen as situated: as context-specific and highly subjective. The forces produced
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by works of art exist in relation to those who experience them, those who ‘have the strength for it’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996: 164), those who have the strength to share the joy. In my discussion so far, I have drawn attention to the ways children orient their worlds towards joy and also how they communicate joy through their artwork. Turning to examine the adults’ worlds and the way affect communicates joy in their lives, the theme of empathy comes through as something that people feel they develop through their faith practice and also something they value as a result of their faith.

Empathy and religious identities

Practices of belonging are often based on resonances between individual identities. However, my research has found that individuals can have more in common with others who do not follow the same religious beliefs but have a similar orientation to faith. Both similarities and differences can provide pathways to empathy and identification with others, experiences which are mediated through affect and which bring joy by increasing the individual’s capacity to understand others. Spinoza’s joy arises from an increase in power, but not controlling power; rather, an increase in capacity: to understand, to witness, to help. Many participants were bonded by their shared experiences of difference. Spinoza explains that ‘If a person has done anything which he imagines will affect others with joy, he also will be affected with joy, accompanied with an idea of himself as its cause; that is to say, he will look upon himself with joy’ (2001: 121). Similarities between others can also create a feeling of joy, especially when experiential similarities are found across contextual differences.

Many examples of similarities between people creating empathy can be found in my focus group discussions and interviews. During these discussions in England and Australia it became clear that participants’ lived experiences of being Muslim did not generally coincide with what they saw as public perceptions of Islam, especially ideas broadcast by popular media. Most Muslim participants felt that the general public did not understand the diversity within Islam and, further, felt the fact that religious identities only make up a small part of individual systems of belonging was ignored in popular representations. Participants felt religious identity needed
to be considered alongside other factors such as being a mother or a father, a student, a professional, an amateur photographer, a cricket enthusiast and so on. Many participants had experienced discrimination – including discrimination on religious grounds – but some had also had experiences where people in the workplace went out of their way to respect their need to pray, or where others in public had been accepting of religious, ethnic or cultural minorities. Even still, most participants were critical of the media’s role in representing their religion, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Anti-Islam media bias is well documented in the academic literature (Aly, 2007; Aly and Green, 2008; Aly and Walker, 2007). So too is the fact that media representations affect popular opinion and attitudes (Ahmed and Matthes, 2017; Baugut and Neumann, 2019; Brown and Richards, 2016; Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008). Several participants in focus groups and interviews commented on the negative way Islam was represented. Aquid spoke of his family being persecuted for their religious beliefs by fundamentalist groups. He felt that ignorance, rather than malice, had been the cause for his experience of racism in Australia, but he also thought that the media was responsible for negative and stereotypical representations of Islam:

_The person in Australia who talked to me when asking what my belief is, the person doesn’t recognise they are learning from the media. They are watching the media and don’t know exactly what’s the difference between these people and those people. We don’t belong to those people. Because they only thinking about the religion: ‘Muslim’. All Muslims are the same to them. I had two or three experiences, not only me as well, two or three of my friends as well. When they were walking with their family on the street, one time they were attacked with an egg, his wife and her family as well. ‘Go back to your country. You are not Australian’, is what was said to them. That’s why when they see the media, they don’t recognise we are suffering as well from those fundamentalist people. They think all Muslims are the same ... My five children are wearing the hijab. The only thing they understand is that all of the Muslim have a hijab and are the same._ (South-east Melbourne focus group, August 2018)

The angry white Australian citizens who confronted Aquid in the park, and who he characterises above, are led by media representations of terrorism. Here, communicating through affect has led to a reduction in capacity to act: they are not able to relate to or
understand a Muslim man because the affective arrangement of their emotions caused by popular media has limited them. They have been taught to conflate being Muslim with being a terrorist. Understandably, Aquid was disappointed by the inaccurate public understanding and the way that the media focus on Islamic extremism has led to open hostility and aggression. However, sharing this sentiment in the focus group engendered a lot of understanding from other people – especially from Muslims who’d had similar experiences. Collective experiences of misrecognition have clearly become a way in which people’s capacity to act is extended: they understand how it is that others come to have such an impoverished view of what it means to be Muslim and feel empathy for the ignorance and lack of capacity demonstrated by those who believe popular misrepresentations.

As I have suggested, many other participants also observed how media representations and public opinion had conflated Islam with fundamentalism (Ahmed and Matthes, 2017). For example, Bilal, who took part in a one-on-one interview in Manchester in 2018, had experienced people’s fear of extremism, but had also developed some clear strategies to counter the broad lack of public awareness. Above all, he felt that the role of the media in guiding people’s perceptions of Islam was important because it could be leveraged to either improve community understanding or foster negative stereotypes. Bilal specifically referred to the taxi drivers who helped victims and witnesses of the 2017 Manchester Arena terrorist attacks. As Bilal points out, narratives of predominantly Muslim taxi drivers helping their fellow Mancunians were also included in media coverage. He suggests:

*I cannot blame Islam or Islamophobia in any way, it’s natural. People fear terrorism. So I guess the important point is communication among and between key actors of each religion. Of course, we can learn from the Manchester Arena attack where the bomb happened. I’ve heard that these taxi drivers were Muslim in the majority. They volunteered to take the victims home, free of charge. I mean, this is the most effective way to, how do you say – promote that Islam does not have anything to do with that terrorist attack. These perpetrators are extreme. People don’t understand that. We actually practise the real Islam here. So it’s action and communication that is important. But the most important thing is action. Because that’s what the*
Bilal, like so many participants, felt that a lack of differentiation between extremist and everyday Muslims in the mainstream media, alongside a failure to represent the complexities of religious affiliation and the diversity of subgroups within Islam, has led to stereotypical and negative public perceptions of Muslims and Islam. Through mainstream media, the ‘mind’s power of acting is lessened’ (Spinoza, 2001: 144). These stereotypes result in racist and discriminatory attitudes that are expressed in frightening and confrontational ways, such as Aquid’s friends being attacked with an egg in the street. Other examples included a woman being told she was not fit to be a doctor because she was Muslim, and young white men pretending to shoot non-white Muslim children while the children’s parents watched. The fact that people found ways to overcome these egregious acts of violence and, even more so, to understand why they happen, demonstrates the phenomenal power of the mind as cultivated through faith. Spinoza suggests that ‘when the mind contemplates itself and its own power of acting, it rejoices, and it rejoices in proportion to the distinctness with which it imagines itself and its power of acting’ (2001: 138). Understood in this way, the power of understanding where hate acts and speech come from and why they are used is not just a cause for solidarity among those who experience oppression, but this understanding, insight and empathy into the lack of capacity of so many people who believe mass media texts is a kind of joy: it extends the capacity to act of those who experience it. Indeed, some participants had chosen to develop their faith because of their empathy for the ways people were marginalised. One example of this can be found in Fatima from Adelaide’s story of finding her faith identity:

Fatima: I had never prayed a day in my life when I was nine. So yeah – so I really struggled with my identity and proving myself growing up and I wanted to wear a headscarf from when I was 16, but my parents were really against it, because they were scared I was going to be discriminated against and, you know, I wouldn’t
find a job or I wouldn't even find a partner. That's how scared they were. And then I got to the age of twenty-two and I was in my second-to-last year of uni and I was like ‘I don’t care anymore. I’m going to wear a headscarf’, because it was really, really important to me to show my religion and to prove myself. I was sick of being asked why I couldn’t go on pub crawl. So yeah, I was like ‘Sorry, Mum and Dad’, and put on the headscarf. Put the Facebook post up, so, you know, friends can’t say ‘Oh no, the family doesn’t know yet, you can take it off still.’ And yeah, I ended up working for Islamic organisation.

Anna: Are your parents sort of all right with it now? Like have they changed how they feel?

Fatima: I think they always have a fear. Like my parents – so my mum didn’t start wearing a headscarf till she was in her fifties and, like, they own a fish and chip shop in an area that was a housing trust area. So they get racist comments all the time. So, like, to the point where we’re telling one customer that we wanted to close our shop and their response was to throw a hotdog at us and tell us where to go. And like – so my brothers are very visibly Arab and they grew up in a post-9/11 era where their faces were being photoshopped on Osama bin Laden’s body and posted all over the school. So there was very much a reason for their fear. Like there was racist comments all the time. So for me, I was quite oblivious to it because I’m the one really white blonde person in my family whereas the rest of my brothers are very obviously Arab.

(South-west Adelaide focus group, 2018)

Fatima’s story shows how her empathy for her brothers increased her resolve to live a Muslim life in public as well as in private. Many participants had strategies to deal with and try to alter negative stereotypes. Like Bilal, some participants argued that it was important to engage in personal conversations with people in the community and to establish relationships in order to create trust and understanding. These strategies provide a counter-narrative to those disseminated in the mainstream media, but also tie in closely with faith as a means of belonging and togetherness, as such conversations build bridges between people and also cement similarities that already exist. More than anything, religion was seen as an ethical and moral guide in focus groups and interviews, and this is partly how my research participants understood the work of dismantling inaccurate representations of Muslim culture.
Faith stories

Exploring the theme of joy as an extension of the self and a product of increasing one’s capacity to act more broadly, there were many accounts of the ways faith practices help people grow. For example, Ramadan featured in discussions as an example of how faith teaches people to become more caring:

Danah: And during Ramadan, we also put more emphasis on charity. Charity is something we consider in Islam, but during Ramadan even the kids – even if it’s ten dollars or five dollars, we, they would want to donate it like through their school or through a kid who is needy. Yeah, even the kids turn, ‘Okay, when do this, we get rewarded for this. We are helping a kid who doesn’t get to pay for it’, because even last Ramadan our girls were also like, ‘Can you please get this? I want to donate it to these group of kids.’ I mean, ‘Our school they are having this collection.’ So it shouldn’t be expensive, just something so you can bring the smile on somebody’s face.

Zahuk: Yeah, so in terms of like Ramadan, it helps to build empathy and one more thing I want to add, the Qur’an mentions that – Ramadan is like the training session. Like a one-month training session to do good, so that you can be good for the rest of the year. So, like military training or police training, they have a training session, or like the firefighter, they have a training session, so that they can work. Just like a training session for us for one month so that we can be good for the rest of the eleven months.

(South-west Adelaide focus group, 2019)

These focus group participants clearly state that, in their experience, Muslim faith has taught them how to have empathy for the poor, how to sacrifice, how to work hard and how to grow as a person. I delved further into these themes as part of a follow-up interview I undertook with one of the focus group participants a week later. I asked Danah if she felt that her religion focused on empathy and had taught her to focus on empathy. She responded by explaining that:

Danah: Yes, the Ramadan is a training period, as my husband was mentioning the other day, it’s like one-month training period in the whole year, which will actually allow us to refocus ourselves, and yeah, like develop empathy for the less fortunate who don’t have enough to eat, if you’re starving you’ll actually understand how the person who is not able to afford a decent meal, how they might
feel, you’ll actually think about taking a part of your income to donate it. Because, like, as I was growing up, I noticed that when I was in school, there were some kids who were very well-off, and they didn’t actually understand the value of anything they had. So, to understand that value of something you have to lose it. You have to not have it in your life. And on empathy, actually we are supposed to be very sensitive towards not only human beings, but even animals. Like we have a story, it’s a collection of events that happened earlier, and it’s, there’s one story where this woman, she fed water to the dog and that’s why she was granted paradise.

(Danah, individual interview, north-west Manchester, 2019)

Acts of kindness are rewarded in other worlds. Danah’s account of this is unequivocal, as is the justification of Ramadan as a training method for kindness and empathy. This theme echoed through the children’s artwork as well: many pictures featured the word ‘service’ and explained both through images and through words how important it was to be of service to your community and your God. While these examples are specific to the Muslim faith, there were other examples from other faith backgrounds. For example, Amira’s story from the church in Adelaide:

My dad’s from Pakistan, my mum’s from Australia, I was born in Nigeria. I was only there for the first couple of years of my life. But since then I’ve grown up Australian/Pakistani, I’ve never actually been able to comfortably call myself Australian, or call myself Pakistani. I don’t quite know where I belong, I kind of hover in the space in the oceans, kind of thing, in between. And so, for the very first time, I’ve realised that what I love about my work, when, on a good day, is that I can exist in that limbo space. So, it’s a community where you don’t have to belong to a particular thing to belong, in a way, or where I find meaning and purpose by not belonging to any particular thing, and by not belonging to any one particular aspect, I am able to engage with my students, and have empathy for my students, in a way that I’m finding, more and more, a lot of those who, those white-bread, for lack of a better term, people who have only ever grown up Australian, their attitudes towards our students, it’s really interesting to hear the undercurrent of cultural imperialism that comes across. (Amira, inner-east Adelaide focus group, 2019)

In a church in a middle-class Adelaide suburb, Amira echoes the sentiments of Aquid from south-east Melbourne and Bilal from
inner-south Manchester, both of whom have negotiated vernacular and institutionalised forms of white imperialism and have had cause to think about how such ignorant white supremacy has come to be accepted as a form of ‘common sense’ in the mainstream colonial culture. The role played by mass media in perpetuating and distributing racism was lamented in related ways across all my research sites. Discussions with mothers in north-west Manchester also explored the theme. For example, Emily, a white English mother, also suggests racism is perpetuated by the media, stating that:

*I think most racism is informed from a place, even though they say it’s hatred. I don’t. I think most racism is a place of ignorance and lack of understanding. You know what I mean? It’s fair. If we all listen to the media, you know we will never speak to migrants whether they are white, Black, Asian or whatever … We tend to cherry-pick bits of the media that are the most frightening and stick that in the forefront of our mind and then apply it, which is wrong really. We should take the media with a pinch of salt. I usually think anything they say is the opposite of the truth. If it’s going to rain, yes it’s gonna be sunny. But I mean just take it as the opposite and then it’ll make life a lot more easy for people.* (Emily, north-west Manchester focus group, June 2018)

Across class, race and geographic differences, media was identified as a key source of racist beliefs by the majority of my research participants. As the discussions I have included above have also shown, faith has proved a resource that people who are persecuted draw on in order to better understand why racist hate occurs. I have suggested that the collective and individual project of developing empathy for people who demonstrate racist beliefs is a form of joy, as to understand the actions of someone so different from the self is an increase in what one can do: it is an increase in the power of action. Spinoza notes that ‘since joy increases or assists a man’s power of action, it is easily demonstrated’ (2001: 126). Other discussions explored this theme in slightly different ways. For example, parents in inner-north Melbourne suggested the qualities that their faith had taught them:

_Aadila: Respect._
_Anna: Yes, I think respect is very important, isn’t it._
_Bingwen: Tolerance._
_Anna: For me, yeah, I think respect is probably what I would say as well. I think respect is really important. Other thoughts in terms of values? What values are most important to you?_
Farah: Understanding.
Anna: Yes, that’s a really good one. Elizabeth, what do you think?
Elizabeth: The same, understanding.
(Inner-north Melbourne focus group, 2019)

Respect, tolerance and understanding are brought up as the most important things that religion teaches this multicultural community of many faiths. In a similar discussion in Sydney, a participant suggested that an important difference between her religion and her husband’s religion was a way of teaching understanding:

And it’s funny, like when we got married, we got married in the Uniting Church and just as a – not a formal marriage, just a matrimonial blessing, so I, you know, got all dressed up and went there and the priest blessed us and then we had a reception afterwards. And the priest was saying the most beautiful things about how, you know, my religion and his religion have come together and, you know, what a great example we are and moving forward, um, blessing our marriage with peace and understanding and blah, blah, blah. And so I really took that to heart, like yes, I want us to be Catholic and Muslim and show the world, ‘Look at us, we are fusing these two religions together’, but I don’t feel like we are fusing them together and showing the world ‘Look at us’ because he’s not so Musliny! Does that make sense? (Philomena, west Sydney focus group, 2018)

Again, here we see the strength faith can build through extending what people are, or are not, able to understand. However, these forms of extending capacity to act are clearly a difficult form of joy – they are about negotiating difference, learning to sacrifice and develop empathy, and advocating for cultural change. Some other discussions of faith in relation to joy were more straightforward explanations of happiness. Samia from Canberra suggested that:

I’m always feeling that I’m a part of this Australia community … we have good neighbours as well. In the second day, they come to us and during Ramadan we usually cook a lot and then we send some to other neighbours and at the end of Ramadan, they come, bring us bucketful of fruit and they said, ‘We know that this is Ramadan finished, so we wanted to share the joy.’ (Canberra focus group, 2019)

Bahija from Rusholme, Manchester, made a similar point:

We have that too because, the two biggest celebrations in Islam are both to eat … So both, I mean if we talk about place I mean,
the typical place where we are Muslims and the prayer is ... pray together. And in Manchester, particularly near the place where I live in Rusholme, there's always a big event. The prayers are held at the platform part, where many, many Muslims from Manchester gathers and do the prayers out there. This is amazing. This is amazing I think so, I don't have any trouble with expressing our happiness in celebrating, doing the routines or the uh, traditions that we usually do back home in Indonesia. So yeah no problem doing this. (Bahija, inner-south Manchester focus group, 2018)

Conclusion

Celebration, community, togetherness, understanding difference, teaching empathy: clearly people's faith practices extend their capacities to act in many ways. In this chapter, I have examined the ways that faith is experienced and communicated through affect, in children's words and imaginations and art, and in adults' worlds. From feeling enthusiastic about insects and their role in maintaining ecosystems, to making artworks that tell stories of pilgrimage, to reflecting upon how religion teaches us to think differently about others and to put oneself in the shoes of the less fortunate, affect mediates joy in different ways across a lifetime. The complex relationships between joy and sorrow that are part of so many people of faith's experiences substantiate Spinoza's repeated observations (2021: 134–5) that hope and fear, joy and hatred are two sides of the same coin: different responses to the same phenomena. In this chapter, I have tried to show that faith practices can extend people's capacities to act, often in quite extraordinary ways. From a young age onwards, faith informs how people live with nature, feel part of community, celebrate and how they respond to prejudice.