Another thing that always makes me feel at home is when you get north of Port Augusta and you see your first mesas, you know those flat-top landforms and the colour combination of blue, and red and grey, instead of green. I know that desert: the Flinders Ranges. I spent a considerable amount of my childhood at Leigh Creek, golden childhood years, year four to year seven, and I think that’s why I feel so attached. To that and to local people, the Adnyamathanha. I can pick an Adnyamathanha person in the street to this day. (Jenny, outer-south Adelaide focus group, 2018)

And the second thing that popped into my head was the muezzin’s call to prayer from the minaret, hearing that through my teenage years, and some of my childhood, through sort of the dusk and it would just echo around the neighbourhood, and then the third thing that popped into my head was the warble of a magpie. When I was overseas, the one thing that really brought me to tears and made me suddenly homesick … is that sound. (Kinza, inner-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

These different stories of belonging illustrate complex attachments. They are from women who live in the same city, yet who demonstrate different emotional and material entanglements of belonging. Place, sound, smell, people, language, prayer: the things with which we become enmeshed are diverse and often involuntary. I am not great at ‘belonging’ to communities, and I have moved more than most people I know. Like many Australians, I grew up as an outsider: not entirely Australian, but not Irish either. I still don’t completely belong in either of these countries. Like so many other children of migrants, living as the diaspora, a part of me always
feels like I would be better placed somewhere else. How, then, can I speak about belonging? Specifically, how can I speak about other people’s experiences of belonging? In this chapter, I collect the belonging stories that people have shared with me. They include a diverse range of ways that people find connection, community and belonging. For my research participants, community is a complex set of attachments to places, spaces, people and things: attachments that create a sense of belonging. These connections are variously found online, on a soccer field, through marriage or at a mosque or church, and they make people feel like they are part of something bigger. Furthermore, both online and offline communities are central to people’s sense of self, and these communities often reflect people’s faith, geography and sexuality. Migration stories and geographic community play central roles in determining community belonging, often followed by sexuality and career choices. Many participants who belong to church, for example, do so for the music, storytelling and community, as well as (or even instead of) faith and spirituality. Embedded in this search for and experience of community is often a history of being rejected by other communities. Many research participants are inside and outside communities that are online and offline, intertwined in both. Through the themes of belonging and community, this chapter shows religious and secular people have more they can claim in common than they claim as a point of difference. And as a result, those things to which we are attached, things that make us feel we belong, whether they be people, places, values or things, are of utmost importance in considering what makes a community.

Belonging on and offline

Social media platforms and messaging apps are key components of migrant communities and present a way to stay in contact with families and maintain strong transnational communities (Dekker, Belabas and Scholten, 2015; Lam and Smirnov, 2017; Mahmod, 2019; Marino, 2015; Martin, 2019; Nowicka, 2020; Samak, 2017). The emergence of online communities has led some observers to point to a diminishing place-based solidarity among some migrants, who, rather than developing a sense of belonging in their homes, establish...
transnational networks online. This can result in feelings of alienation and isolation from offline communities (Kastoryano, 2018). More broadly, digitally mediated communities are increasingly important for most people, particularly for those who identify with historically marginalised groups within mainstream society. Online communities provide important resources for minority groups who are marginalised or experience discrimination, for instance as a result of their sexuality (Brandt and Carmichael, 2020; Miller, 2017). Online networks can offer crucial support mechanisms and strategies to disseminate information. They also enable people in similar circumstances to share their experiences (Brandt and Carmichael, 2020; Pedersen and Lupton, 2018; Williams Veazey, 2018).

Among my participants, both online and offline support groups emerged as important sites of belonging. Participants were strategic about the ways they negotiated online and offline communities, and the reasons why they chose to belong to different groups. In one focus group discussion, Nicole, a mother from Adelaide, shared her experience of membership in an online group of single mothers:

> Probably the main community I’m part of is an online group called ‘Solo Mums by Choice’. Some of the mums identify as lesbians, some as heterosexual, some don’t particularly put themselves in a box, some have had failed relationships and then got to an age where if they were going to have children, then it has to be then. I’m nearly forty-nine, and my children are six and seven, so I was definitely in the category of, if I’m going to have kids this is how it’s going to have to happen. (Inner-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

For Nicole, membership in the online group provides her with an important opportunity to meet others who have chosen to become single mothers. Like many other online communities, ‘Solo Mums by Choice’ is a community of people who might not have met in any other way because they are spatially disparate, and do not necessarily foreground their identity as single mothers by choice because of negative stereotypes in the community, as Nicole pointed out later in the discussion. In her words, ‘the other thing we all have in common is a bit of dislike for the phrase “don’t you think it’s selfish to have a child by yourself?”’ Going through similar experiences and facing a shared social stigma in particular is an important connection for these women that creates a feeling of being understood. As
Nicole also suggested, the members of the community have more in common than just their choice of becoming mothers on their own:

_The other thing I like about ‘Solo Mums by Choice’ is that it tends to be older mothers who are professionals, and so just by choosing career over relationships perhaps through their thirties, they’ve then ended up in a situation where, if they want to have children at all, they need to have children by themselves._ (Inner-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

Nicole has known some members of the group for years and feels like they are good friends, even though she has not met most of them in person. She has visited some of them and stayed in their homes, an indicator of the trust that she has established as a result of their online engagements. Nicole explains:

_It’s a national group and I’ve gone on holidays with my kids and we’ve met up with other donor-conceived kids whose parents we’ve met through this forum. The kids and I went to Tasmania for four weeks and met up with three kids there who aren’t related to us at all, but I know the mothers because we were in the pregnancy group together, then in the baby group together, in the toddler group together, and then the school-aged kids group together ... And so, I’ve known these mums for eight years online. So, when I said ‘Hey, I’m coming to Tassie for a month, can I pitch a tent in your backyard?’ and they were like ‘yeah, come and sleep in the living room’. And we went to Melbourne on these last holidays and house-sat again, this same situation. The little girl is a similar age to Sophie, so I’ve known the mum online for eight years._ (Inner-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

The women in this online group are making major life choices: they are becoming pregnant or fostering children by themselves, and their choices are sometimes judged by their peers, including friends and relatives. In contrast, the online group represents a variety of different family constellations, and this diversity results in a non-judgemental approach towards other members’ circumstances. Group members tend to find that they also have other things in common:

_Two of the women in the group that I know fairly well, have created families through fostering, or fostering and biology in the case of one family that we stayed with in Tassie. So, I think that I would_
Belonging / Muintearas

click with most of these women anyway, just in terms of the age, background, where we live, lifestyle choices, and then particularly the other mums who have children the same age as mine, I feel like they’re my friends even though we haven’t met face-to-face in some cases. (Inner-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

Nicole is also a member of a church community; she attends with her children. As she points out, though, religiosity is not her main reason for being a member of the church: ‘We are a nice, quirky, interesting group … We are a religious group that’s not technically that religious.’ For her, the more relevant education she hopes her children will receive is what she calls ‘characters and values education’:

I started coming two years ago because, as a homeschooler, I was looking for a centre for characters and values education. And we are not religious homeschoolers and for me, this provides a lot of structure because our family comes pretty much every Sunday and I like the sense of community. (Inner-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

One of Nicole’s main reasons for attending the church with her children was to support them in understanding the similarities between different religions:

Church … can springboard into conversations with my kids about similarities and differences amongst religions without putting one particular religion as being better than the others. So, just yesterday, we strolled past a barbershop near our house that is run by some Muslim men and a lot of their clients are Muslim men and I was chatting about how looking clean, being clean and looking neat and tidy, shows respect for religion and the religious beliefs. So the kids and I were able to have a conversation about how you show respect and what’s important, what you value, and it was great that we could use our experiences meeting people of different colours, and different cultures and backgrounds here, in a non-judgemental way to sort of link the two, link the Muslim faith to sort of the things that we believe. (Inner-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

Nicole’s story is one of many that show how online and offline communities can serve different purposes and fulfil different needs. The ‘Solo Mums by Choice’ online community connects Nicole with other mothers who decided to have children on their own, while
her church group connects her with families who share spiritual and ethical values. The church and the online mums’ group are great examples of how Nicole negotiates different kinds of communities and establishes functional strategies around the need to belong, to be supported by others, and to feel accepted, skilfully combining both online and offline sites of attachment. Many other families bridge distance with technology and also find real-life community in mosques or churches, as the move between digital and offline as a strategy for everyday belonging has become seamlessly enmeshed in day-to-day life.

Surface attachments and outside belongings

In her 1996 book titled *Outside Belongings*, Elspeth Probyn characterises a sense of attachment to peripheries and surfaces, in contrast to identification with nationality and/or dominant models of heterosexual domestic life. Following Probyn, I want to suggest that the edges and surfaces of communities, organisations and belief systems are critically engaged spaces, and that they are needed more than ever with the continued global rise of the far right. Probyn explains the utility of thinking through belonging to surfaces:

> At the same time that the ‘whatever’ aspect of belonging on the surface forces us to relinquish the idea of guarding difference jealously as a personal possession whereby ‘my difference’ makes me better than you, it also works against a happy pluralism. For the question of ‘being such that it always matters’ constantly compels us within the processes of singularizing specificity. Conducted on the surface, this requires us to constantly place ourselves within relations of proximity of different forms of belonging. And at the edge of ourselves we mutate; we become other. (1996: 34)

Investigating mutating edges, I consider the politics of ‘becoming other’, of life at the peripheries of social formations: faith and race, outside belongings in/as family, and the significance and complexity of such attachments. While online communities can span countries and continents, many communities are more spatially situated, anchored in the places and institutions that support everyday lives, such as schools, shops, workplaces, leisure and sports facilities, and religious institutions, including churches, mosques and temples.
Research into the practices that enable affective attachments to community shows that it is the everyday spaces and personal encounters that can destabilise prejudice and stereotyping and allow for a sense of belonging to emerge (Askins, 2015, 2016; Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2018; Williamson, 2016). Faith plays an important part in this process, not just because faith communities are important in the everyday lives of many of my participants, but also because faith in others and a belief in the importance of diversity motivates many participants’ engagements with people from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Most participants believe that people from different religions are honest, trustworthy and kind, and what is required for better interpersonal understanding is more personal knowledge about different faiths and cultural and religious values.

In spite of this broad sentiment attributing honesty to those who are religious, attachment to religious and faith communities also emerged as a complicated topic for many participants. Reyhan, who we met earlier and who moved from South Australia to west Sydney, explained how, in her new area, communities were segregated around ethnicity and religion, to the point of attending religious institutions according to their own background:

> Community is so important, so important. But to me, it has its pros and cons in that like for me, like I said, like it's very community-based here in west Sydney, but they are very split – like you know, you will go to Merrylands, and you'll know that’s where the Lebs [people from Lebanese background] are, or Bankstown is where the Muslim Lebs are. Merrylands is more Christian Lebanese, or the Turkish people will be in Auburn ... Here, they don’t intermingle as much as in Adelaide. Like here it's very much you know, this mosque is for the Turks, this mosque is for the Lebs or the Arabs, and this mosque is for you know, the Indian/Pakistani community. (Reyhan, west Sydney, interview, 2018)

Reyhan moved from being at the heart of a Muslim community in Adelaide to Sydney and is finding it hard to ‘fit in’. My research participants did not necessarily feel that they had much in common with people just because they shared the same ethnic background or religion.

Personal notions of community also often diverge from assumed external constructs. This is particularly striking in cases where a
sense of affiliation is presumed on the basis of a shared aspect of identity, for instance among what is sometimes termed the ‘Muslim community’ or the ‘LGBTQIA+ community’. Such generalisations can be useful, for instance when trying to examine issues such as discrimination or racism, but more often than not, identity labels gloss over the internal diversity (and internal frictions) of these presumed communities. In the case of ethnic religious and minority religious groups, such stereotyping is also often framed in spatial terms, in particular where some areas within a city or region have higher rates of ethnic or religious minorities. This is reaffirmed when this is reflected in the environment, in the names of shops or the goods for sale, in the skin colour of residents, or in the languages spoken on the street.

Exploring the intersections of place, ethnicity and community as sites of belonging, Hussain (2014) explains how associations of place and ethnicity inform popular ideas of a political construct of ‘the Muslim community’, based on simplistic assumptions and stereotypes. Hussain considers how definitions of ‘community’ have been utilised by the ruling, generally white, political class to delineate specific ‘bounded ethnic and racial groups conceived by liberal multiculturalism and practised through identity politics’ (623). He also uses the instance of the Sparkbrook ‘spy-cam affair’2 to investigate how constructions of ‘the Muslim community’ have been ‘used in local policy- and decision-making to locate and govern “other” groups – in this case Muslims’ (2014: 623). Hussain contends that a dominant ‘multicultural’ model of place and community maps religions onto spatial areas where ethnic and religious minorities live. Hussain shows how dominant representations and public discourses tap into particular constructions of ‘the Muslim community’, namely as a ‘homogenous [sic] group of outsiders’ (623), but also create ‘the Muslim community’ as being spatially bound, such as to a suburb or ward. As the data from my ethnography clearly shows, and Hussain’s argument corroborates, ‘the Muslim community’ is neither homogeneous nor spatially bound. Secular and religious communities are diverse, and part of their similarity lies in this diversity.

Against constructions of homogeneous Muslim communities, Hussain (2014) argues that we need to develop ‘a more complicated
picture of community as contested and created through space and in dialogue with notions of race, ethnicity and nation, and not determined by them’ (623). He goes on to explain that ‘What binds people together, in this case Muslims, is not an assumed idea of culture derived from ethnicity, but an assemblage of social, cultural and affective practices that produce relations between different ethnicities, generations and collectivities in the same area and beyond’ (633). For Hussain, The Hub – a Muslim-led community arts space – is positioned as a place that ‘materialises different ways in which Muslim identity and collectivity is felt’ (2014: 633) and ‘enables a making of Muslim identity in ways that challenge reductionist accounts framed in ethno-religious terms alone’ (2014: 624). Indeed, this assemblage is how belonging is created across both the
religious and secular communities with whom I worked. Martha from south-east London explained her belonging in relation to her church community:

I belong to a strong church community and I would say that’s both local, as in my immediate church community, but also larger, as I belong to the Anglican Church, so I would say I’d be quite linked to the Anglican Church in this diocese of the country. Perhaps worldwide, but I struggle with that because I don’t always agree with it, but I obviously feel part of it, so that’s quite interesting. And I sometimes do ministry in different parts of the world. So I’ve been to India and places like that on ministry trips, so I do feel kind of part of a worldwide sense of the, they call it Anglican but it’s the Episcopal church. (South-east London focus group, 2018)

Martha is both outside and inside her church community, a theme that returns in many ways across participants’ stories of belonging. Indeed, the complex nature of belonging and of the ‘diverse ranges of social, cultural and affective practices that produce relations between different ethnicities, generations, and collectivities’ (Hussain, 2014: 633) mean that being inside and outside communities simultaneously and learning to accept and value diversity are critical components in feeling belonging. For example, Meerab, a Muslim immigrant living in Canberra, explains valuing diversity as core to building community:

Our heritage from our origin and country is not a good thing to lose. Because it is very important to carry these things on and if we can bring them here, the good things, then we can pass these things on. (Meerab, Canberra focus group, 2018)

Meerab felt we have to hold on to ‘the good things’ to form a community and keep heritage alive. He was afraid of losing his culture coming to Australia. She mentioned that there are always good and bad things, and that we can’t judge a whole community based on a few bad people. As a Muslim, Meerab went on to refer to terrorism and the ways it has created prejudice or racism towards her community, leading to attitudes such as:

Well, you know there might be a nice boy at your school and he finds out that your dad’s a Muslim and then loses interest in you and goes back and tells his family: ‘Oh, you know, stay away from her; her dad’s Muslim.’ (Meerab, Canberra focus group, 2018)
Meerab’s experiences are not isolated. Iner (2015) has found very similar experiences in her work with young practising Muslim women in Australia. Iner worked with both those born in Australia and those who had relocated. These women experience belonging in relation to Islam, Australia, and their ethnic origin and had also experienced prejudice, often based on an unrealistic idea of their community or acts of violence that are extrapolated to represent their community. Interestingly, Iner argues for diverse and intersecting senses of belonging in her participants. She suggests that respondents displayed a sense of belonging to ‘many worlds at once’ (2015: 168). Iner found that this sense of belonging was a fluid and dynamic process in which ‘the identity formation of the second generation is actually an active process of rebuilding, reassessing and redressing their sense of belonging with situationality’ (168). Part of this situational responsivity is a requisite engagement with social stereotypes about Muslim culture.

Iner explores belonging as a component of identity, specifically the sociopolitical formation of a collective Muslim identity that is ‘strongly felt especially among the Muslim immigrants in non-Muslim majority countries’ (156). Iner identifies several ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ forces that contribute to the formation and characterisation of these group identities, such as the national identity of the host country, parental and familial pressures of loyalty, and national and ethnic heritage. Iner documents several instances in which young people worked to develop specific community identities around Islam and the national identity of the host country, stating emphatically that ‘ethno-religious identities are not at odds with embracing a host country’s national as well as cultural and sportive assets’ (159). Yet the day-to-day life of Muslim people in Australia is too often crossed by having to justify themselves in the face of popular misconceptions about their religion, and indeed, their character.

Queer family belongings

Much has changed since Probyn published Outside Belongings (1996), including a vote for marriage equality not just in Australia but many other countries, notably the Republic of Ireland, and the accompanying rise and celebration of ‘rainbow families’.
Belongings came back into my mind in two very different fieldwork settings, in east London and Adelaide, when discussing social and community values with two different families that both consisted of white Christian lesbian mothers and a Black son. The feelings of outside belonging that organise family and attachment were articulated by these mothers in terms of nationality, class, race, gender and family, in insightful ways that resonated between my fieldwork sites.

One of these mothers was Martha, who has a powerful story of ‘elective belonging’ (see Jeffery, 2018), detailing her move from a very conservative family to a working-class area. Martha also shared stories of outside belonging, of creating new surfaces and points of intersection for isolated mothers, and of seeking communities of mothers of mixed-race children:

*I’ve been building a mums’ network community, of which I’d say I was strongly part of, which is part of a group of mothers in the Greenwich Peninsula ... I’m deliberately focused on doing that. And also some in East Greenwich for isolated women. And I’m just about to join a community of parents with mixed heritage children. Because the parents don’t always have the heritage information, so it’s to come together and work around supporting each other and also sharing. (South-east London focus group, 2018)*

Martha very much identifies with communities at the margins. While she is part of a range of different and often marginalised community groups, being a lesbian mother and a female church minister, she is also very grounded in her sense of belonging. She explained: ‘When I say this community here, I would say I have a sense of living in quite a big area of Greenwich and [Charlton], it’s not just up here, it’s quite a bigger geographical area, but I definitely feel rooted here’ (south-east London focus group, 2018).

While Martha expressed her need for support with the politics of being a mother of a mixed-race child, she did not explain how she intended to meet her children’s needs when questions of racial prejudice and white privilege shaped her son’s (and her daughter’s) experiences of growing up. These issues were discussed a little more by Nancy and Louise, the two white lesbian mothers living in Adelaide. Senses of belonging and relationships with place are mediated by all kinds of things that extend beyond sexuality and relationships with community.
Nancy and Louise are a white lesbian couple who live in Adelaide with their son Jessie. Over some food at a church focus group in the Adelaide Hills, they explained the complications of belonging to a church as a lesbian couple and of parenting a Black boy in the racist climate of predominantly white Australia:

Anna: Nancy, what drew you to the church?
Nancy: Well, when I met Louise, she was going to a rather large Pentecostal church with Jessie quite regularly, and I was never very religious, I wasn’t raised religious, I went to a public school, didn’t have any kind of religious background at all, but obviously it was important to Louise, she went to a Christian school –
Louise: My school was an Anglican school –
Nancy: And Jessie was at an Anglican school at the time so it was obviously quite important to them, so I thought I’d go with them to support the family. But it was quite evident when I started coming with Jessie, that they weren’t very, they weren’t rude –
Louise: Nobody ever said anything, but –
Nancy: You just never really got the full sense of welcome that you expect.
Louise: And it was around the same time as the same-sex marriage laws were changing, they did the postal vote, and so –
Nancy: Yeah, so there were a few talks about that,
Louise: We liked to talk about it.
Nancy: They were like ‘Make sure you stick with your values’, and we were like ‘We will’, but you know, it wasn’t the greatest fit so we just stopped going for a while. Then Jessie started saying that he wanted to go back to church, because at the church that he went to they would play video games and stuff, so he just wanted to be with the other kids again, but we couldn’t really get past that just to go for him, and we didn’t want to send him there to learn all these values as well, we were a little bit conflicted, so I think I ended up googling which religion is most accepting of same-sex families.
Louise: What she did was she googled ‘top ten most accepting churches for same-sex couples’.
Nancy: And then we just started coming, and Jessie has just loved it. All different kinds of families that are here, and all different kinds of kids, it’s very multicultural which is very good for him, him being raised by two white women but he’s very clearly of African descent. It’s important for him to be around people with different kinds of families.

(Outer-south Adelaide focus group, 2018)
While the journey to find a safe spiritual home led Louise and Nancy to a church where they and their son are very happy and accepted, the politics of race relations in Australia are an ongoing source of marginalisation for the family in some community settings. This is compounded for their son Jessie by the perspectives of many religious communities on same-sex families. Louise explained Jessie’s feelings of outside belongings:

> Jessie struggles a lot, when we go out, people automatically assume he’s adopted, and he’s got quite a complex history with his dad’s side, so that can be really hard for him, because he’s wanting to be proud of his culture, but isn’t really proud of his dad’s side. So it’s really quite conflicting, so a lot of time he just ends up saying he is adopted. (Outer-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

The negotiations that Louise and Nancy explain as being core to Jessie’s everyday life become even more complex when questions of race are considered. Nancy’s family live in a country town in south Australia called Maitland, in which the racist treatment of Aboriginal people is explicit and normalised (see, for example, the work of Fowler, Roberts and Rigney, 2016; Liebelt, Roberts, O’Loughlin and Milera, 2016). The Aboriginal members of the community live on a mission adjacent to the township, racially separating the two communities. They explained the Aboriginal people in her parents’ town:

> Nancy: They all live in the mission, no one [who is Aboriginal] lives in the town, and when we take Jessie back, everybody stares at you. And I got really scared, because from the back, he was wearing his helmet one day, scootering along, and from the back he looks like an Aboriginal boy because of his dark skin, and he was scootering off, and I thought, we’ve got to stay with him, because I was worried that someone was going to start yelling at him or something. Because even the Indigenous kids from the mission don’t go to school in Maitland, they go to the Indigenous school, and so there is no integration. I was scared. We went to an Australia Day breakfast they had there, because that’s what my grandparents do. My grandparents, they kind of like to stay away from all the bitterness in the town. There’s all these little cliques, but my grandparents say, we do our own thing. And so grandparents are sitting there, they’re already quite segregated in
the town, and they’ve got a lesbian grandchild, with their half-
Black great-grandchild, and they’re taking it in their stride, and
everybody is staring.

Louise: The whole room is white, there’s not a single person who
was –

Nancy: Not a single person who was even tanned. Everybody is pale
white, and there are all these old white men, with beards and
balding. And it was the first time where I thought, I should feel
at home here, but I don’t, and I don’t want to be there because
I felt, ‘What am I bringing Jessie into?’ He’s too little to really
notice it, [but] he’s almost old enough to be like ‘No one here
looks like me’, and there’s going to be a point where he’s going to
say, ‘No one looks like me’, and there’ll be an Indigenous person
walking on the street and everybody around them will be saying
something, or the police will come and chat to them just because
they’re sitting there, and it’s horrible. So, when you were talking
about feeling Australian, I guess I, yeah, it’s this weird thing inside
me that makes me feel like I’m not.

(Outer-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

Nancy’s dis-identification with a racist country town in white
Australia comes together with fear for her child’s safety. She went
on to explain feeling scared for Jessie’s safety, and complained about
the emotional pain he is forced to live with:

What makes me more Australian than Jessie is? And why is it that
everyone asks him ‘Where are you from?’ and he’s like ‘Adelaide’.

(Outer-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

Being on the organising surface of Maitland soil made both Jessie
and his mothers feel un-Australian. Space and whiteness were used
to position Jessie as ‘not from here’, and the racist, homophobic
community sentiment leads his parents to also feel outside the cul-
ture. I had the distinct feeling that ‘all these old white men, with
beards and balding’ had brought their temporalities with them.
Days of unquestioned colonial reign, of the White Australia Policy
and unquestioned, dysfunctional patriarchal rule were kept alive
in their social imaginations. This feeling of unbelonging is signifi-
cant and must be read as important. As Probyn (1996) so astutely
notes, ‘desires for alternative relations and connections can only be
considered superficial if seen through an optic that excludes their
importance’ (35). Nancy and Louise worked hard to find their inclusive church, and love attending Pride with their family. But in other significant spaces, such as their son’s Christian school and their parents’ country town, they really struggle to feel a sense of belonging.

Martha, on the other hand, who lives in a much more progressive and cosmopolitan city (London, as opposed to Adelaide), has had more opportunities to create community through her work as the youth minister for her community church, her local mothers’ group, and a local lesbian community. Martha shared a vivid and warm story about her wedding that gives a clear sense of her skill at community-building:

*We had a civil partnership in 2006 and then when the law changed we converted our civil partnership to a marriage. But we did it on my wife’s fiftieth birthday, because she’d asked me to marry her on her thirtieth. And then we had a bit kind of celebratory party and it was not quite a garden party, a kind of country fair. We borrowed one of the churches. Borrowed loads of hay bales and had people playing live music and it was a kind of real cake bake-off and it was just a fun time … We have a friend who does clowning who came. Another friend brought his circus equipment. It was a bit kind of fun, all-ranging celebration we had when we did that … For everybody and after all, that’s what it’s meant to be about really. You’re not … when you get married you’re not just marrying the other person. You’re creating community and you’re forging community and it’s not just the families you’re with. It’s much bigger.* (South-east London, interview, 2019)

It isn’t at all surprising that Martha has managed to create a sense of community through her marriage, as she has moved away from her family of birth in order to build a religious community, her family and a strong local mothers’ community. Martha really is a community-maker. While Martha and Nancy and Louise are all white lesbian parents of Black boys (Martha also has a little girl), they navigate their experiences of belonging in different ways. Martha does enjoy Pride, but her primary connection is to her religious community, and then to her mothers’ group. Nancy and Louise, on the other hand, have a primary connection to their local queer community and then to their church, which, as their story makes plain, they have joined because of their son. Both families have worked
hard to both find and create spaces of acceptance and to navigate the prejudice some people hold against them and their children.

**Faith as community and culture**

During focus group discussions and individual interviews, people in all my research sites acknowledged the interrelatedness of religion, ethnicity and culture. This has also emerged as a pattern in the academic literature in recent years, in particular among younger people (Halafoff et al., 2020; McGuire, 2008; Woodhead, 2011). Participants repeatedly commented that culture has a significant impact on how religion is practised, including on the way that they felt towards specific religious communities. Many participants suggested that culture, rather than religion, was what drew them to religious communities, because they wanted to pass specific values on to their children. These include kindness, being helpful and generous and being convivial and sociable. Alayah said that she misses the educational aspects of the Muslim culture in which she was raised, and explained that she worries her daughter does not always behave in the ways she would like. She is trying to teach her daughter to be more helpful towards others. Like many others, Alayah felt that what she calls the ‘sense of village’ is often lacking in her experience of community in Australia. Many parents wanted their children to develop specific character qualities (being friendly, caring and selfless) that were, in many ways, inseparable from religious communities. Alayah is drawn to her church because it provides a sense of village life. In raising her daughter, she brings together the ethical teachings of the Islamic religion in which she was raised with the sense of community her church provides.

Some parents were quite clear about wanting to replicate their own childhood experiences for their children. Another mother, Sarah, was adamant that her main reason for being a member of a church was to enjoy a sense of community and learn values, rather than to learn about God or to serve God. Sarah explained that her own ‘growing away from religion’ was the reason for introducing her son to a more liberal church community:

*I’ve been coming to the church for two or three years. I was introduced by another friend and I thought, Giorgio is an only child and it’s a great place for him to experience community, and also some*
good values. I was brought up in South India, in an Orthodox Christian family called Syrian Jacobites. My grandfather was a church minister, and although I’ve grown away from religion, I’ve felt there were values that I was taught that were useful, and I want Giorgio to get a similar kind of education and experience. (Inner-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

The reasons why Sarah came back to a church show clearly how participants choose religious communities based on a complex enmeshment of history, lived experience and culture. Seeking a sense of community or trying to replicate their own childhood experiences for their children were among the main reasons parents gave for joining faith-based communities. For some participants, the attraction to religion was the feeling of ‘fitting in’ that fostered a sense of belonging, a feeling of familiarity and tradition. For example, as Philomena explained, her family still attends the church in which her parents were married, even though it is now a significant distance from their current home. Whenever possible, her family makes the long journey from their home in the outer-west suburbs of Sydney to the inner-west location of the church, because they derive a sense of belonging from their involvement with this community:

My parents still like to go, so I sometimes drive them to Leichhardt church, which is where they got married. All my kids were baptised there. My brother and my sister got married there, so we have a big history at that church. I know my parents’ funerals will be there … maybe even mine. So, there is a – a calling there, a belonging there, a family there, a community there. So, when there is a – a festival there or a commemoration of some sort we’re drawn to that. (West Sydney focus group, 2018)

Philomena’s comments illustrate how memory lives on in a place. Her story demonstrates the appeal of continuity with/in place, where community is built through years and years of living with, and interacting with, each other – what Alayah above calls the ‘sense of village’.

For others, the quest to ‘fit in’ manifested itself in more complex ways: aspirationally moving to a more affluent community, moving to a more diverse area as a political statement, travelling abroad for education or safety, and so on. In these diverse settings, religion is seen as a way to be a better person, to belong to more desirable.
people, a barrier between self and others, and a way to keep going despite hardship. One Australian participant, Marge, explained the educational value she gets from her Buddhist religious group, whose members are predominantly of Vietnamese origin:

I’ve got a few communities that I currently belong to. One is our [government-funded] public school community: we volunteer, and the parents and the teachers, our child’s in grade four now, and the longer we’re there I think we both feel that sense of community and working together. The teachers say, ‘It’s great that your parents are switched on, because we can work together’ etc. So that gives me a sense of community I guess, being part of the local school. The other thing for me is, back to my Buddhist group, which is run by a fellow psychologist, it’s actually at the moment all Vietnamese people, who kindly translate. We are working on Sunyata Emptiness Meditation. So, when I go to that group, with such a wonderful bunch of people who are essentially non-judgemental and really supportive, I feel at home and really part of, I’m part of their community, I feel part of their community, even though at the moment I’m the only English-speaking person, or some of them speak English and Vietnamese. So I feel like I’m coming home when I’m there, and yet I’m not Vietnamese, I’m Russian Orthodox from early on. (Outer-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

Not only does Marge feel most at home in a group that is totally different from the culture in which she was raised, among peers who do not speak the same language she does, but the group itself is also fairly removed from any mainstream religious school of thought, or as she puts it, operates without ‘all the dogma and stuff in the way’. Marge’s Buddhist community creates its own religious sub-culture based on the priorities and aspirations of its members and their personal spiritual philosophies. This theme of faith as a way of belonging to community and culture is an attraction for people who belong to religions, as well as those who never chose to belong, but who encountered religion through others or family (Woodhead, 2011). Martha from south-east London made a huge effort to find a church where she could belong:

So now, for me, the Church of England church I go to is part of Inclusive Church, which is a church that accepts everybody on grounds that it doesn’t matter what your gender is, financial situation, disability, sexuality. Basically, it’s very clear that this is a church
for everybody. Normal people, basically ... The church will not dis-

criminate on any of those grounds: you know, things like addiction,

debt, blah blah. All those things. Whereas a lot of churches would say
they are welcoming, but really, you might come through the door and
people might tut or say, 'well, that's okay for you but we don't want
your type [lesbians]'. (South-east London focus group, 2018)

While Martha sought out her inclusive church in London, Simone

experienced a very different version of an inclusive church as a
result of the rural location of her childhood home.

Bordered on two sides by a warm coral sea, the state of Queensland
in Australia has an area of 1.853 million km². It is seven times the
size of England. Simone’s experience of church community is set in
north Queensland, and is an expression of the limited resources her
father’s community had available:

My father grew up in a very small town in north Queensland, and
there was no church, and his mother owned the only pub in town.
Because they weren’t open Sunday mornings, the pub would alternate
between housing the different religions in town – everyone would have
their church service in the pub. Every Sunday, everyone would go,
whether they were a Protestant or a Catholic or something else, and
each preacher would have a turn once a month giving a sermon. The
whole town would just rock up and listen. Remembering that from my
dad cracks me up, that’s how the community came together. The rabbi,
the priest, and the minister walked into a pub and gave a sermon. They
took turns. That’s how he grew up, at his mum’s pub – which was
also the local church. It was everyone’s religion. The alcoholics and the
religious folk, they all came together. Everyone got to learn about the
other religions because they had to share a church and sermons. And it
brought together their similarities, more than the differences. I guess,
if anything, you learn that it’s all pretty much the same and that stops
any arguing, and if you have a question the minister’s right there from
a different religion, so go and find out. It created that opportunity that
you don’t get when everything has their own place to go to and it’s all
separate. (Simone, south-east Melbourne focus group, 2018)

The idea that different faith systems have more in common than
they have separating them clearly runs through Simone’s story,
which positions alcoholics and religious folk as the two halves
of a shared place-based faith community. Faith is often based on
acceptance into a community, but it can also result in rejection from
communities (think of Martha trying so hard to find a church that
would accept her as a lesbian). In very different ways, people see faith as a pathway to happiness. Bringing out people’s similarities rather than their differences was the primary value Simone identified in her father’s experience of pub church. She clearly identifies that understanding ‘sameness’ across cultural and religious differences is a skill her father learnt through the experience of Sunday pub sermons. Themes of moral and ethical education clearly run across all religions.

One identifying feature that did not run across all religions was the fact that Muslim participants often suggested their religion was misunderstood in some way. Participants were adamant that Muslims are a diverse community, and that on an individual and a community level they have as much in common with non-Muslims as they have with other Muslims. In the next section, I explore some of the conversations I had with participants as examples of subcultures of Islam, along with the often-cited opinion that popular culture misrepresents Islam in ways that can lead to racist depictions of Muslim people.

Muslum diversity and connections with secular cultures.

Participants came from a variety of backgrounds. As pointed out elsewhere, not all Muslims have dark skin and certainly not all Christians are white, even though the research participants found that this imagined racial division is a persistent stereotype. Cultural and ethnic traditions varied widely, and many participants had grown up in more than one cultural environment. There were also sizeable differences in age groups, education levels, and political attitudes. In focus group discussions, these different subgroups of education standards, political attitudes and age often showed much greater similarities in attitude and opinion than those based on religious beliefs. Many people are unaware of the diversity within religion, particularly the diversity within Islam, which seems to be what has led to a public perception of Islam as monolithic and unchanging. However, just like within the Christian faith, there are many subgroups that are religiously and culturally quite different.

**Diversity within Islam**

During focus groups and interviews, a number of Muslim participants said they perceived the general public’s knowledge of Islam as quite low. This included knowledge of Muslim practices
and traditions, distinctions between moderate and fundamentalist beliefs, and between the different Muslim schools of thought and denominations. Many felt that they were unjustly perceived as the same kinds of people who would carry out atrocities (such as Islamic State, also known as ISIS or Daesh), even though they had themselves suffered from fundamentalist groups, and in some cases had become refugees because of fundamentalist persecution. One participant, Rahmatollah, explained:

*I think at the moment Muslim people have a lot of problems. Especially in the media ... We come from the same religion. But it’s two different branches ... Like two different groups. I’m Shia Muslim. And most of the population is Sunni Muslim. But when on the media showing like, al-Qaeda, Daesh, and the Taliban, they are Muslim. The public don’t recognise what’s the difference between us and them. And when the people see news on the TV and after that they think oh, this [is] a Muslim. When I am asked about what’s your religion, I’m Muslim, the first thing people are thinking about is I belonging to those people as well. To Daesh, to al-Qaeda, to the Taliban. For example, in the first year when I came to Australia ... in Tasmania, I had a very bad experience with one of the Australians, in the park where I was sitting. Some Australian people came and started talking and then asking where I come from. I said, ‘I’m from Afghanistan.’ ‘Where, from Afghanistan? You’re Muslim?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ ‘Oh Daesh! Al Qaeda! Mullah Omar!’ I said, ‘I’m sorry I’m not Daesh. I’m not Al Qaeda. I’m not Mullah Omar.’ ‘Yeah, but you are Muslim! Those people are also Muslim.’ The public in Australia don’t know that the Taliban, Daesh, al-Qaeda don’t love us. Those fundamentalist organisations are saying to us, ‘You are not Muslim’ ... That’s why we become refugees.* (South-east Melbourne focus group, 2018)

This story of alienation, loss and fear is extreme, but is also similar to many stories told by Muslim refugee participants. The key piece of information that seems to be missing from the popular consciousness in both Australia and the UK is the fact that, in most cases, Muslim refugees and migrants have left their home countries because of persecution by extremist Muslim groups (Kabir, 2007).

Rahmatollah was not only forced to leave his home by extremist Muslim groups, but he was then forced to live through negative experiences with racism in Australia, in which he was made out to be the same as the extremists that had forced him out of his home in Afghanistan. Rahmatollah was forced to the periphery of
Australian culture, made to belong to the edges. He said this was particularly painful because he had already been forced to leave his home country because of the danger from fundamentalist groups:

*We are affected by fundamentalist groups because we are always persecuted by Taliban and al-Qaeda, Daesh. As you know in the media, because they are Sunni Muslim, and you are Shia, they don’t believe in the Shia, they believe that Shia are not Muslim. They are saying, ‘You have to change your religion if you want to stay in Afghanistan, you have to change your religion. Or if you don’t change it, you have to leave Afghanistan.’* (South-east Melbourne focus group, 2018)

As Rahmatollah pointed out, subgroups have developed in Islam that follow quite different traditions and schools of thought. More conservative or fundamentalist groups are often highly critical of more permissive or liberal Muslims, but this is not often discussed in the mainstream Australian media.

As is the case with all religions, being a Muslim is not an exclusive identity. People also form practices of belonging and identity around other aspects of their lives (Jeldtoft, 2011). Elements of individual identity, such as ethnicity and culture, age, gender, sexuality, tastes and hobbies all influence modes of belonging. Some subcultures of Islam are organised, such as geographic communities that share a mosque, while others are more casual, such as followers of Instagram pages on modest fashion. Besides the main formalised groups, more informal, non-organised practices also exist (Ammerman, 2016; Jeldtoft, 2011). These include Muslims who adhere less closely to rituals, or who make up their own rituals or practices based on traditional culture or on their own values and needs, and also Muslims who are at odds with mainstream ideologies for a range of reasons. For example, LGBTQIA+ Muslims often struggle for recognition, rights or acceptance within mainstream society (Rasmussen, 2016) and within the Islamic legal system.

**Conclusion**

The stories of being culturally or socially positioned outside a majority that are woven across people’s accounts of online belonging, queer, intersectional family-making, searches for sobriety and refugee experience are striking. They range from single mothers
Faith stories

who have found their belonging communities online because the nuclear family remains the norm offline, to Muslim Australians and migrants who are positioned as ‘outsiders’ by Australians who ignorantly assume Muslims are extremist (see Eddo-Lodge, 2017). For those who belong to the edges of cultural formations – or culture’s ‘outsides’ – the surfaces that organise their relationships certainly have agentic power, whether people attach to surfaces – like Jenny’s love for the Flinders Ranges – or, like Louise and Nancy in Maitland, feel rejected by them. Probyn (1996) suggests that ‘the surface is not another metaphor nor yet another fad within intellectual circles: it is a profound reordering of how we conceive of the social’ (1996: 34). My research suggests this is indeed true, although surfaces reject as often as they welcome those who seek to belong.

Notes

1 Research has shown that online communities and support groups can be beneficial for people who experience a range of issues, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders, but also for practical problems such as parenting support (Haslam, Tee and Baker, 2017).

2 In April 2010, as part of the UK Government’s antiterrorism measures, hundreds of surveillance cameras were installed in Sparkbrook and Washwood Heath, two suburbs of Birmingham known for their Muslim populations. The cameras allowed police to track residents and were part of a move to monitor populations identified as ‘at risk’ of extremism (Lewis, 2012), which the counterterrorism agencies had identified as areas with predominantly Muslim populations (Lewis, 2012; see also Hussain, 2014).