



**YOUTH ENGAGEMENT**  
*with RELIGION and FAITH*  
*in the 21ST CENTURY*

# **At the Intersection of Youth Religiosity and Civic Engagement: An Exploration into Interfaith Youth Activism in Contemporary Society**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Against the background of increasing populism and the dominance of adult-led and adult-centred framings of youth issues and activities (Bowman, 2020), there has been a rise in youth-led activism and youth leadership to address global issues. This wave of youth activism has emerged in various forms; including self-organised environmental movements such as the global school strikes (Fridays For Future ‘FFF’, 2020) and pro-democracy city shutdowns such as Hong Kong’s 2014 Umbrella Movement (The Guardian, 2014). Such acts of youth, in the context of social, political, economic and environmental conditions, have put a spotlight on young people’s role in meeting the challenges of our time and have brought about

a “paradigm shift in the perception of global youth development” (Yuen & Leung, 2021). The aim of this paper is to explore some of the motivating factors behind this increase in youth leadership on global issues and youth activism from the perspective of religion and faith as influential forces.

### ***Research Background***

In the early 21st century, particularly in Western countries, the number of youth who are formally affiliated with a particular religious tradition or institution has declined significantly, but their interest in religion and spirituality remains high (Cusack, 2011). Where understandings of religiosity have traditionally been examined in practices in

the home and at religious sites, an examination of youth engagement with religion and the influence of religiosity on the civic engagement of today's youth, requires investigation beyond such spaces, to schools, colleges, universities, forums and other spaces where young people are actively engaging alongside their peers.

Influenced by the various processes and practices of globalisation and emboldened by ideas of global citizenship that mirror religious values of justice, development, and cross-cultural learning (Scott & Cnaan, 2020), today's youth are coming together to respond to the needs of today's global population in unique and interesting ways, beyond traditional sites of civic engagement. The RfP UKIYN's Steering Committee members are a group of youth of diverse faith traditions and beliefs who represent such youth. Based on a shared commitment to learn from the past and take action in the present, they are working towards building a sustainable future together based on a strong commitment to the values of respect and peaceful coexistence.

### **Purpose of Research**

This paper aims to explore the reciprocal dynamic of young people's faith and civic engagement found in the personal experiences of the members of the RfP UKIYN SC. The primary focus of the study is on the intersection of faith and the environment, although the themes of humanitarianism and peacebuilding are closely linked, and oftentimes used interconnectedly. The study engages with a twofold take on youth engagement: written by young people about young people. This approach aims to tackle the lack of young leadership that has been widely recognised as a critical issue in traditional interfaith engagement (LSE, 2021).

### **Aim**

To gain an understanding of the ways in which young people of faith in the 21st century view religion

and faith and how it influences their engagement with social and environmental issues, particularly in the context of environmental, humanitarian and peacebuilding activities.

### **Course of Action**

To meet the aims of the study, two focus groups were held with some members of the RfP UKIYN in which discussions took place related to the themes of the research. The discussions were recorded, transcribed and analysed, and the empirical findings presented in this paper provide a rich source of qualitative data to understand the perspectives of young people.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Youth articulations of environmental challenges, including climate change, are experiencing an unprecedented moment in the spotlight (Thew, 2020) with youth movements emerging from every corner of the globe. As noted by Bowman (2020), these youth movements are intersectional and interlinked and represent the many dimensions and interconnections of the climate crisis, encompassing the complexities of the range of environmental, social and economic injustices that dominate the global space. There are many who view the youth environmental movements of today as an extension of the global Environmental Justice Movement championed primarily by African-Americans, Latinos, Asians and Pacific Islanders and Native Americans (Skelton and Miller, 2016) since the latter half of the 20th century. In that time, many scholars, including sociologist Bullard (1987), have published research in support of such movements, revealing how "environmental harms have disproportionately affected communities of colour across the United States" (Borunda 2021, see also Bullard 1987, Taylor 2000). The youth of today are standing up on the side of such movements for justice, and, utilising the positive potential and power of social media, are leading self-organised movements

and steadily gaining the support of some of the world's most influential institutions such as the UN.

Within developed nations, rising youth civic engagement has been mostly informed by calls for justice and human rights (Ginwright & James 2002). The role that religion has played is somewhat more ambiguous. Some notable findings into youth civic engagement and religiosity in developed nations include Collins-Mayo (2012), whose study suggests that “young people seem happy enough to get by on the limited and fragmented religious resources they have” (Collins-Mayo, 2021). Furthermore, Davie (2007) found that Europe has experienced a shift in religious life away from an “obligation” to practice religion, toward a “market” of religion, whereby young people feel free to pick and choose practices from different religions that help them to live out their “authenticity,” their personal needs, desires and capabilities (Davie, 2007). This observation of authenticity and personal experience as “religion” captures what numerous scholars understand primarily as spirituality (Zinnbauer et al. 1997, Rossiter 2010, Worthington et al. 2011). The differences between religion and spirituality will be further explored in chapter 5.

In terms of faith and the environment, the literature highlights a positive relationship between religiosity and youth support, which includes measures in pollution prevention, higher taxation and voluntary pro-environmental behaviour, with a balancing or positive results for the environment (Tsimpo and Wodon, 2016). Additionally, in a study of fashion-conscious youth in Pakistan, Razzaq et al. (2018) find that religiosity has a positive impact on young people's choices for sustainable fashion.

For the most part, studies into Youth Religiosity and Civic Engagement have either focused on religiosity within a single religion, or within a more spiritual sense, whereby it is detached from traditional religions. A different avenue which may provide a useful way of exploring the relationship between youth religiosity

and civic engagement in the 21st century is through engagement with interfaith organisations and movements. Borrowing the definition offered by LSE (2021), “interfaith at its core seeks to bring together members of diverse faith communities to encourage and support dialogue and collaboration across faith traditions” (LSE 2021). Traditionally, interfaith efforts have focused on inter-religious dialogue, mediating the differences that world religions experience to promote an understanding of global citizenship. However, Manmit et al (LSE 2021) identify an intergenerational cliff: young people within the interfaith movement are primarily concerned with effective social action, rather than dialogue. Indeed, Fahy and Bock (2018) identify a realisation within the global interfaith movement, that is, a need for “a more grass-root orientated approach to interfaith engagement” (Fahy and Bock, 2018). Following from this, this paper takes the approach of interfaith to explore how the members of the RfP UKIYN are influenced by their individual religions and faiths come together towards the achievement of social and environmental change.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper conducted a qualitative inquiry using a focus group composed of eight young people aged between 18-32, of different faiths, who are current members of the RfP UKIYN SC. The empirical findings from the focus group are supplemented with a literature review on young people and faith engagement to address the research's main question. This research group provides an excellent foundation to qualitatively understand what religion and faith mean to young people today, and what they perceive as the influence to engage with social and environmental work or challenges. Sources used in the completion of this paper include a mix of journal articles, organisational archives and manuscript material, video recordings, published books, newspapers (or e-papers) and oral histories.

## Research Questions

The main research question this paper seeks to address is- **How do faith and civic engagement come together in youth activism to fuel meaningful change?** To tackle this main question, two sub-questions were created to provide a basis for the discussion for the focus group. These two sub-questions are presented below:

1. How do young people understand faith and religion in the 21st century?
2. How does religion influence young people's social and environmental engagement?

## Methodological Approach and Research Design

The methodological approach for this study was primarily exploratory using qualitative research methods to obtain relevant data. Qualitative research is considered the most appropriate in defining a deeper understanding of research (Brunt et al, 2017). Bernard (2017) also confirms that qualitative research is approved when it is aimed to gather a more personal look into human understanding in regard to their experiences (Bernard, 2017). To be properly prepared for the essential primary research qualitative research was conducted using the method of a focus group to answer the objectives of the project. This qualitative study was performed by having a focus group interview to draw information from personal knowledge and experience of the RfP UKIYN SC. The conversational semi-structured interviewing approach was important for this research, to collect convenient primary data at a convenient time from the participants in a formal way and have up to date and accurate data, collected with an interpretive approach by using interviews to emphasise information and subjectivity (Bernard, 2017).

## Process of Analysis

After transcribing the discussions from the focus group, a close reading of both sets of texts was conducted, looking out for key insights and experiences related to the paper's key topics of interest. During the process of analysis, a range of ideas and perspectives were discovered inductively through the text. The insights and perspectives were coded in NVivo through a process of thematic analysis (Gibbs, 2007).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section outlines the main findings from the empirical evidence obtained through two focus groups with youth leaders from the RfP UKIYN.

### Part 1. How do young people of faith understand faith and religion in the 21st century?

Coming from so many different directions, it is interesting to see the clear common themes emerging of how the RfP UK SC members understand faith and religion. Although committed to different faith traditions, the participants have a free interpretation of religion that does not seem to be tied to specific scriptures. Alongside many positive influences that religion has in their lives, the participants also converge on discussing several criticisms of traditional religion in the 21st century. Let us look at the latter first.

#### Young people's concerns with religion and faith

Despite the clear guiding thread that young people gain from religion, our SC members were not shy to point out that traditional religion faces some difficult challenges in the 21st century. An issue that was highlighted particularly often is the intergenerational divide within faith communities:

*“I think from the Catholic sector, the church is ageing, so I think there’s a real kind of generational divide.”*

*“...bridging generations is something that is maybe missing...”*

*“The leadership is actually dealing with quite a lot as it is, and that doesn’t excuse a lack of attention on youth, but it explains it.”*

Another pervasive criticism addresses a number of essentialist takes on religion, which the participants felt perceived as outdated. In particular, according to the participants, religious institutions do not align their priorities with those of young people.

*“Especially in terms of environmental issues, some Orthodox communities don’t have education, or as much education about environmentalism or climate change.”*

*“I’m not trying to tarnish any religion hen I say this, but for me, I’ve always had a bit of an opposition to religion in general because I find that some parts can be demeaning to women...”*

*“When it comes to LGBTQ, if faiths don’t interact with those issues very well then young people do not want to be involved in religion at all because it contrasts with their own point of view on how the world should be.”*

Ultimately, participants believe that traditional religion faces issues of being out of touch with the times, and can therefore not be regarded as a singular authority in young people’s lives:

*“...there are some uncertainties when it comes to religion and it does hold me back from getting involved because I’m thinking, ...does this fit into what I believe in? Does this culture fit into what I believe in?”*

*“I think young people are increasingly not caring about religion, but I don’t think it’s because they’re lazy or don’t want to get involved ...I think it’s more ...the idea of having those views of equality and ...liberal views very close to their hearts.”*

*“Most of my friendship groups are secular. We do talk about religion,...it’s mostly organised or institutionalised religion, and that doesn’t have a good reputation in this day and age.”*

Despite voicing these clear criticisms, the participants simultaneously draw a lot of support from religious knowledge and faith traditions in their everyday lives, as will be presented now.

### Faith and religion as a guiding thread for young people

Young people of the 21st century converge on merging faith and religion with spirituality:

*“...young people are getting less and less religious, but that doesn’t mean they’re getting less and less spiritual because they might believe in God or they might believe in a higher power.”*

*“...young people nowadays are maybe more interested in spirituality rather than a certain religion or tradition or faith.”*

Faith and religion pervade young people’s daily lives in a fluid way. The young people feel “a deep sense of wonder” about life and the universe and curiosity about the world around them. Millennials are also a grateful generation, they feel a great sense of gratitude on a regular basis and they think about the meaning of life and search for it:

*“For me, faith is not really a practice, I think it is spiritual, and it is a voice in my head. I get inspired by the books I read, the videos I watch*

*and the people I listen to. Those thoughts in my mind are what goes into my behaviour.”*

*“...consciousness is really the starting point ... the awareness just grew that my thoughts, my feelings, my actions, the vibrations affect everything in the environment. I am more conscious about which thoughts I want to send to the universe and which vibrations I want to create. So, probably I have a more responsible approach than before.”*

*“...exploring more elevated consciousness, physical awareness ...by innovation, reflection and meditation. And that naturally infiltrates my daily life really. How I approach everything in life...”*

A number of participants highlighted that they have made a conscious decision to explore faith, rather than being born into a certain belief. They have an authentic faith that influences their small, daily decisions about how they behave, like our attitude when driving and how we treat our families. But it also influences the big choices that we make about our life: the house we buy, how we use our money, where we send our children to school.

*“I just started, going outside of my comfort zone and seeing outside new perspectives, I started learning about Buddhism and I just thought that having a philosophy in life is something that I didn't really have.”*

*“I didn't really have any kind of teaching that I believed in ...for me finding a philosophy, like what I found in Buddhism, one that I really connected with and resonated with, was how religion got reintroduced back into my life.”*

*“...then my search started more for spiritual wisdom and I read different philosophers and Western academics and started my own research.”*

For many young people the philosophy of the religion seems to play an important role in helping persons understand and evaluate different religious traditions and their alternatives. What attracts people to faith and religion could be summarised as a guide or framework of how they understand the world, particularly in terms of morality. It seems to provide an accessible and stable foundation from which young people make sense of the increasingly complex and interconnected world. Which became more obvious from below quotations:

*“Religion really gives you a backbone or a moral compass. You can't quantify it, but it's quite clear. Young people draw inspiration from faith in terms of morality and in terms of social-environmental issues. It's really important how our morality comes from our faith and how we then tackle issues.”*

*“There's a lot of teachings of Judaism about social action and the environment, like from looking after the planet, to looking after your neighbour. There are many, many teachings.”*

## **Part 2: How does religion influence young people's social and environmental engagement?**

The next section moves onto the findings on how young people interpret the influence that religion and faith have had on their actions in wider society. Below are the main themes that emerged from the focus group discussions.

### **Connection to others/ relational experiences**

Religion and faith influence how youth understand their position in the world in relation to others. They spoke about it giving them a sense of connection, or “oneness” with the world around them and that being a source of inspiration for activism:

*“...in terms of my Unitarian faith ...the root of the name Unitarian which means a unit, the idea of a single thing regarded as a member of a group, and that influences everything for me. That’s the starting point in terms of my understanding of myself in this place, of my relationship to God or the divine or the infinite, the universe, ...it all comes from that idea of one sort of essential oneness.”*

Some participants also spoke of a sense of community extending to all humans and an understanding of shared humanity and global community:

*“...idea of human dignity, the idea of us all being part of one, I suppose human family.”*

*“We’ve grown up in an era of globalisation ...the idea of a global citizen is an identity that many young people are naturally imbibing. The kind of qualities and values of a global citizen like justice and development and cross-cultural learning is what young people are embracing ...youth coming together based on a lot of these values which are rooted in religious traditions, with a shared sense of wanting to do good.”*

For some youth, this sense of connection to others that their faith and religion gives them a sense of responsibility and duty towards helping/supporting others:

*“In my own society I am trying to become a teacher and that has been influenced by a connection that I get from the faith with other people. Connecting with other people is important, being open, learning from one another. It really made me understand that I feel more comfortable with being involved with lots of people rather than sitting at a desk.”*

## Important teachings that inspire and guide good actions

The participants spoke about the ways in which religion’s moral teachings help them to deal with important concerns such as how one should live a good life and be a good human:

*“Religion really gives you a backbone or a moral compass. You can’t quantify it, but it’s quite clear. Young people draw inspiration from faith in terms of morality and in terms of social-environmental issues. It’s really important how our morality comes from our faith and how we then tackle these issues.”*

*“With its focus on human happiness and alleviating the causes of suffering, Buddhism has made me more reflective of society and of the ways in which it either promotes or negates human happiness. It makes me look at how we do things (in society) and ask, is that working for the happiness of people? Is that causing suffering? This has influenced me in a way that I feel more in tune with others and their experiences rather than just focusing on myself, my success, my personal happiness, ...this influence has grown stronger ...made me study for a masters in Sustainable Development. I want to stop injustices or ways of living that are harmful and damaging to others and the planet we live on ...stop the suffering.”*

Young people also spoke about the important teachings and lessons on equality and empowerment found in traditional religious teachings and how learning about these in a contemporary setting provided them with ideals to work towards in their social action efforts:

*“...we learnt about women and female warriors (in Sikh traditions) and how they fought for the rights of others as well, the female*

*bodyguards. All of that connected with me, made me the person that I am today, being involved in a sort of youth activism that will fight for people's rights,*

*...women's rights and advocacy in history."*

Having presented the findings, we shall now discuss them in context with the literature review. We identified three main themes from our primary research area.

## Discussion

How do faith and civic engagement come together in youth activism to fuel meaningful change?

### Religion and Spirituality

Religion matters to young people, but they may be more comfortable using different terminology because of the negative connotations of the word 'religion' in contemporary society. Religion and spirituality can be two words that are aspiring to the same things, in essence, things like goodness, connection, community, awareness, morality, etc, but the problem that youth seem to have with 'religion' is in rigidity and authority that the word 'religion' arouses in young people's mind which can seem to go against their values. This finding aligns with Davie (2007) in that young people do not seem to feel obliged to practice religion but "pick and choose practices from different religions that help them to live out their 'authenticity', their personal needs, desires and capabilities". In fact, this authenticity is a key tenet to widely known definitions of spirituality (Zinnbauer et al 1997, Rossiter 2010, Worthington et al 2011). Religion and spirituality intersect but whereas religion is understood to be practiced within formal structures, spirituality represents "more experiential dynamics of personal meaning and transcendence" (Worthington & Sandage 2001).

Yet, even if young people might feel less obligated to practice religion, it is also clear from the findings that young people do perceive an obligation to tackle intersectional problems like injustice, which is informed by their religion. Thus, it appears that our participants are mostly identifying their personal experience and self-expression as spiritual, but that religion provides an indispensable foundation to this experience.

### Collaboration and liberal or 'global' values

The interfaith collaboration fits in better with the way young people of today experience work which has been shaped by processes and practices of globalisation. The rise of Global Citizenship and Global Values which are also referred to by some young people as 'liberal values' which can oftentimes seem to rub up against more traditional/orthodox/conservative views and values found in organised religions. Young people feel that a commitment to global or liberal values, such as justice, equality, equity, cross-cultural collaboration, is more important than sticking rigidly to religious teachings that may go against such values.

In an 18-country study of youth on global citizenship identification, Scott and Cnaan (2020) identify that youth (defined as 18-29 years) who identify with religious beliefs and practices are "less likely to align with global citizenship tenets." Carlisle and Clark (2018) study of Christianity in the US confirms other studies "that contend religion is not promoting pro-environmental behaviours" (Carlisle and Clark, 2018). Furthermore, Yuen and Leung (2021) agree that such acts of youth leadership, in the context of social, political, economic and environmental conditions, have brought about a "paradigm shift in the perception of global youth development" (Yuen and Leung, 2021). Which justifies Bowman's (2020) acceptance of the environmental, social and economic issues, that are intersectional and heavily interlinked. Where also the understanding and acceptance of the global values by our participants, which is very unique.



## Shifting mindsets across generations

Young people within the scope of this research expressed their openness and motivation to work with others of different faiths, religions and beliefs for social or environmental action. Some participants have experienced seclusion from other faith communities, which has partially motivated them to engage in interfaith activities today. This is an attitude that arguably represents a shift with the current generation who are more likely to work with people who share their goals, rather than only with those who share their religious beliefs.

Today's biggest issues are transboundary and do not only affect certain groups/ populations, they are a concern for everyone. Young people are increasingly understanding the world based on concepts that support this reality including interconnectedness and interdependence which help the required shift in mindset from looking out for oneself/one's own, to looking out for everyone as a global community (Bowman 2020). This intersectionality, the blurring of social, environmental and economic injustices, seems to be mirrored in how young people understand religion in the 21st century. The traditional differences between religions were hardly mentioned as practical issues for young people, as they instead focus on the spiritual commonalities between their traditions.

Contemporary research identifies the generational divide based on older generations prioritising interfaith dialogue compared to younger generations who are primarily concerned with social actions (Fahy & Bock 2018, LSE 2021). The research participants partially echo this sentiment. However, inter-religious dialogue was a topic that occurred more often than these studies might perhaps suggest. Participants voiced their interest in learning from people of other faiths through dialogue beyond religious borders, which seems to be strengthening their understanding of their own role in society and the changes that they want to effect (Davies 2007).

## CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to demonstrate, by examining the sustainable practices of globalisation, the ideas of global citizenship that mirror religious values of justice, the development, and cross-cultural learning and show how today's youth are coming together to respond to the needs of the global population with raising awareness, educating themselves and taking action for sustainable development and for a better future within their religions. Moreover, this research tried to show the impact of adaptation of the faith by young people into their daily lives, and how they can engage and raise awareness of the social and environmental issues, particularly in the context of environmental, humanitarian and peacebuilding activities, as well as, how they can educate themselves, within the faith and collaborate with individuals of other faiths for common actions. As a result of the epistemological research and the literature review, in relation to the thematic analysis, there were key findings of the research, which will display conclusions. The key findings of this chapter will answer the objectives of the research and outline the main points of action and policy recommendations from youth participants of our focus group.

### Action Points and Policy Recommendations

Below is a summary of the main points of action and policy recommendations from youth participants with our focus groups:

Greater focus on initiatives that actively work on relationship and community building with a particular focus on dialogue and creating spaces for conversations.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is a compulsory part of school's national curriculums so children can learn skills in compassion or empathy or having dialogue from an early age.

Stronger partnerships based on interfaith and cross-faith collaboration whereby diverse groups reach out to each other to work towards common issues. This could take place, for example, by having designated social action days.

Religious and faith leaders showing leadership in society by acting on social and environmental issues and being role models for community members by “leading by example”.

Adults acting as advocates and allies for children and young people by actively fighting for their involvement in decision-making processes, creating more opportunities for youth in leadership and decision-making positions and championing causes important to today’s youth, such as climate change.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>NGO(s)</b>	Non-profit Organisation
<b>Qs</b>	Questions
<b>RfP UK</b>	Religions for Peace United Kingdom
<b>RfP UKIYN</b>	Religions for Peace United Kingdom Interfaith Youth Network SC Steering Committee
<b>UN</b>	United Nations

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