

Rediscovering home: an autoethnography of leaving church

Caroline Yih

To cite this article: Caroline Yih (2023): Rediscovering home: an autoethnography of leaving church, Practical Theology, DOI: [10.1080/1756073X.2022.2160539](https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2022.2160539)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2022.2160539>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 29 Jan 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 121



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Rediscovering home: an autoethnography of leaving church

Caroline Yih 

School of Divinity, History, and Philosophy, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

ABSTRACT

In this article, I have used the methodology of autoethnography to reflect on my experience as a Christian navigating life post-church and the dis-ease of living with the new status of a 'done'. Within the reflection, I explore some prominent aspects of the experience such as belonging, the feeling of being orphaned, and shame, as well as the related notions of 'home' and 'unity in diversity' commonly encountered in organised religious communities. The reflection joins other emerging research efforts to understand and lend a voice to those who have chosen to or have experienced being disembedded from their faith communities and to encourage the cultivation of a hospitable space for dialogue with those beyond the sacred/secular divides.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 October 2022
Accepted 15 December 2022

KEYWORDS

Autoethnography; church leavers; dones; belonging; dechurched Christians

Introduction

I wish to engage in writing an autoethnography on my lived experience as a professed Christian who no longer has formal membership in a church for over six years. It is an exercise which I believe is a necessary first step to situate the researcher in the research before I embark on the collaborative project with Dr Katie Cross focusing on the lived experience of other Christians who are also disaffiliated with their faith communities.

Autoethnography has been demonstrated by other practical theologians to be a useful tool to produce 'meaningful, accessible, and evocative research, grounded in personal experience' (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, 2) and to 'convey the complexity and ambiguity of our religious selves' (Walton 2014, 5). I am motivated by these researchers' shared desire to use autoethnography to contribute to a deepened and considerate understanding of both the scope of the research context as well as my own experience as a researcher (Eliastam 2016, 2). As a novice in using autoethnography as a methodology, I have decided to begin this exercise with the help of another methodology which I am more familiar with – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) – to help me get started. In thinking through the ways in which I could best access the different facets of my personal experience as a dechurched Christian, I explored with the idea of turning the table around to take up the role of a participant to be 'interviewed' with the potential interview questions I would use for other recruited dechurched participants. The ensuing section comprises the narrative account of my responses to the interview

CONTACT Caroline Yih  caroline.yih@abdn.ac.uk  28A Kennedy Heights, 10 Kennedy Road, Hong Kong

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

questions followed by an extended reflection on the notion of 'belonging', one of the prominent themes uncovered from this exercise.

Dones refer in this context to Christians who were previously affiliated with a church community but have dropped their membership and involvement with the church for over twelve months or longer (Severson 2020, 2). Nones, on the other hand, refer to those who have no religious background and include those who would declare to be 'atheist', 'agnostic' or 'nothing in particular' in answering questions on religious preferences (Severson 2020, 28). There are two primary reasons behind my motivation to undertake this research on dones and nones. Firstly, I am a done myself, a displaced follower who has dropped out of church engagements but have kept the faith. Secondly, and related to the first, my experience in living with this new identity as a dechurched professed Christian has led me to be curious about the experiences of others like me. I was instantly drawn to the idea when I first heard Dr Cross talked about her new project on 'dones and nones' in a seminar. These two groups refer to those who have left their spiritual communities, and those who claim to have no religious affiliations respectively. The excitement I felt was so much more than the thrill of coming across an interesting research topic, but viscerally experienced – like I was simultaneously made exposed and vulnerable, while also comforted by being seen at the same time. I was particularly amused to know that there are many labels in use for church-leavers such as 'exiles', 'unchurched', 'lost sheep' as well as 'dones' to refer to this emergent group of church-leavers out there. I was moved by Katie's desire to explore and lend a voice to those who have chosen to or have experienced being disembedded from their faith communities. I kept thinking how pastorally sensitive Katie's motivation was as she explained that one of reasons why this research is needed was in the lack of a voice from those who have exited, thus leaving the existing narrative predominately from the perspective of church. I had this immediate urge to be a part of this research if only to be a participant. I could not wait for her to share her findings with us. Perhaps I was hoping that the findings would by some means provide certain answers for me living with the same status of a 'done' which I have found tricky at times. This trickiness in living as a dechurched believer for me lies in the responses of others in their discovery of my identity. These reactions have primarily been negative and discouraging, ranging from awkwardness to condemning judgement on me as a disgraced deviant from the faith. These problematic personal encounters reflect and resonate with Katie's observation that the lack of research on this group of church leavers has left a gap in understanding them including their reasons for exiting, the conditions of their ongoing spiritual experiences since their exit and more.

My background

I am a third-generation Christian although my parents were at best nominal believers who would occasionally attend Christmas services as their church participation. It was my maternal grandmother who played a more pivotal role in her weekly commitment in bringing me to Sunday school from an early age. My early faith was marked by two pivotal moments. The first memory was attending a Billy Graham crusade in Bristol when I was a young teen at boarding school. I remember vividly responding to his urgent and fervent call to commit my life to Christ and followed the crowds to trek

down the endless flights of steps to the football pitch with my best friend that evening. From that event, I knew my identity was marked as a Christian, but it was years later during my university years in Sydney when I came to belong formally to a church and was nurtured in my faith through being in that community.

I found my 'home' in the last church I belonged to without much planning or thoughtful deliberation. The Baptist church I was attending in Sydney recommended a church in Hong Kong when I moved there after graduation to begin my life with my husband. For the first few years of our marriage, my husband and I worshipped in two separate churches because of our language preferences. My church experiences during those years included different streams of Baptist, Pentecostal, and Anglicanism. However, after a while, especially when the children came into the scene, we decided as a family it would make more sense to worship together as a unit. That's how we came to the English-speaking ecumenical church, and it was there we set our roots down for the next two decades. Belonging to the church felt very easy and organic. Belonging meant we fitted in easily. This is unsurprising as our family, similar to the majority of the congregants, was from very similar demographics in age, education, careers and international backgrounds. We were so comfortable with each other that we embraced one of the church's popular catchphrases of 'doing life together' to the full, spending time with each other beyond Sunday services to include holidays and travelling together. To illustrate how tightly knitted we were as a community, at one stage, the church had to reflect on how the congregants can behave in ways which are more receptive and welcoming to newcomers who may find our closeness and familiarity with each other excluding and dismissive. We were urged to take two minutes at the end of the service to refrain from 'huddling up' with our close friends but to make efforts to speak to someone new.

Perhaps that is why the sudden rupture in our family's relationship with the church was experienced as more acutely painful and the waves from the aftermath continued to reverberate throughout the years. I do not wish to account fully for the event which instigated the final decision to exit here as I feel that the reasons do not impact my current experiences of navigating life as a dechurched believer. In this article, I seek to reflect and articulate the different dimensions of my experience living with my new identity in the aftermath of leaving my church community rather than focusing on what came before. I hope that by reflecting on my personal experience in navigating life and faith as a done and especially on some of the more prominent challenges that emerged stemming from the disaffiliation is a sensible first step to begin the research on others.

The decision to leave the church which had been home had left me feeling unmoored and traumatised for a few years. I felt that I was carrying on with life but all of a sudden, I have this additional bag that I was carrying wherever I went. Initially, the presence of this new piece of luggage simply felt like extra weight and a nuisance and I never thought to, or perhaps had the courage, to look inside. After a while, through many conversations with my trusted friends, I found myself occasionally curious and ready enough to peek in the bag and even found words to name them one by one. Much to my relief, most of these pieces, such as anger, sadness, and shock, would slowly dissipate with time having been sufficiently attended to with understanding and patience. In fact, as the bag got lighter over time, I would sometimes forget that it is still with me. However, I have noticed that there are a few residual pieces of these lingering feelings that have

stubbornly remained and continued to subtly yet inevitably shape the lens in which I experience the world in varying degrees and in different times. The largest one of these enduring pieces is what I have identified as 'belonging' and it is joined with two other smaller pieces: 'orphaned' and 'shame'. These residual pieces will be reflected and examined in the following sections.

Belonging in a church

I will start with a closer examination of the largest identified pieces remaining in the bag: belonging. The experience of detaching and moving away from the tight-knit church community had brought me to come face to face with 'the pain of disconnection and the nostalgia of memory' (Weaver 2003, 439) which led me to wonder on the fragility of my prior belonging. The aftermath of displacement had left me to reflect and to reassess on my previously held place in the church and if I truly was as secure, seen, and embraced as I thought I was. It drew my attention in a fresh way to the subtle yet significant divergence between the concepts of belonging and inclusion. Did I truly belong or was I simply included? What constitutes the ties which binds us together as a church and do we only learn of the strength of these ties when they are tested? This delicate but important difference reminded me of something Professor John Swinton had once said on belonging,

To belong you need to be missed. People need to be concerned when you are not there, your communities need to feel empty when you are not there. The world needs to be perceived as radically different when you are not there. Only when your absence stimulates feelings of emptiness will you know that you truly belong. Only when your gifts are longed for can community truly be community. (Swinton 2012, 183)

In contrast to this description of belonging, my experience in the months of my exit has left me awakened to the realisation of my flawed sense of belonging in my previous community. I had thought I securely belonged, yet the lack of response from the community translated to me that my departure had in fact left no marks, my absence was not noticeable, at least not enough to instigate efforts to reach out from concern or even curiosity for our departure. Perhaps I only held a functional value and since my formerly held roles were capably replaced, the community moved on without a pause and it was 'business as usual'. On reflection, the deafening silence which filled the span of time in my adjustment and processing of my exit caused more pain and confusion than the reason which led to my family's decision to leave in the first place. Related to this lingering pain in re-thinking of belonging are the two smaller remaining pieces in the bag of emotions which we will turn to examine next: orphaned and shame.

If Swinton was correct that one needs to be missed and the emptiness from one's absence grieved to truly belong, my relationship with my last church had failed that test. Our family simply disappeared from the scene on Sunday mornings and even though I cannot be certain if our absence had generated any sense of emptiness, I have experienced it to be otherwise, evidenced from the silence and lack of response from the community since then. It was as if we were never there. How fragile were our ties to the community which we had served and set down roots in as home for over two decades? How did I come to this understanding of belonging in the church which

is so fundamentally different from my connections and expectations of other organisations such as my place of work or the social clubs I had memberships in?

Church as 'home'?

The rhetoric of home

One explanation which came to mind that may have contributed to my different expectations of belonging was the commonly used rhetoric of home in the church. The understanding of participation in a community of worshippers is often drawn from the image of belonging to a home or the indispensable interdependence of each organ within the body. All this has shaped me to believe that I was more firmly embedded in the relational lattice in the community than my experience had revealed to me. Instead of finding this home as one constituting of and displaying the foundational qualities of homelike-ness such as security, acceptance, nurture, and even love, I have witnessed and experienced this home to resemble a façade, operating almost as a business model with its goal on the success in the smooth operation. Any issues which may interfere with this goal causing a disruption in its pace or potentially threatening the status quo of its existing set-up are considered deviants of with its transactional focus and a place which permits little room for doubts or questioning of the 'family rules' within the organisation.

The image and understanding of the church as a home had been embraced by me wholeheartedly, solidified over the years from the teachings and other catchphrases advocated in the community. One such catchphrases, doing life together, mentioned earlier is a good example to illustrate how I may have unquestionably come to accept the intimate bonding and relationships formed in the church to be different from my affiliations with other organisations. The expression was frequently used by congregants and the pastors to describe the distinctively tight-knit community of the church to newcomers, in efforts to highlight the commitment of the members as well as the depth of relationship which is being cultivated. The nature of this relational network resembles that of a family where it is more usual than not for members to have a relationship outside of the Sunday services. Doing life together often means members treat and consider each other as they would their families. Gatherings between congregants throughout the year especially during festival times such as Christmas and Thanksgiving are regular occurrences and some families even plan holidays together. Using my family as an example, for over a decade our home hosted over twenty people from the church bi-weekly, gathering on these alternate Saturdays for what was called 'life group', which according to the church's website, 'aims to connect the Church through hospitality and fun'. During these times, the adults would gather for fellowship, bible study and worship over cups of tea while the children play and the time together would conclude after dinner, usually quite late into the evening, to meet again the following morning at church. Through these regular gatherings, there was a real sense that the group was indeed doing life together. Not only did our children grow up with this extended family of church aunts and uncles who knew their names, the adults also bonded over the years having had the opportunity to share moments of concern, joy, struggles through the many ups and downs in life. Immersed in such a culture of intimacy and mutuality in the church understandably brings about a different set of expectations and understanding of belonging within it than other institutional affiliations.

Other factors which may have contributed to the difference in how I came to understand my place in and ties with the church as distinctive to other forms of belonging to communities of shared locale or interest may be rooted in another commonly embraced concept of the 'body of Christ'. The familiar concept of the church as the body of Christ has a well-established place in the ecclesiological thought and discourse stemming from its use in the Pauline corpus in reference for the church (Hultgren 2002, 125). Within this body, members are called to be 'the people of God' (Minear 2004, 66) to embody and exemplify the ecclesiological image of the body of Christ. Membership in the church is portrayed to be radically different from other affiliations. Each part within this body has an invaluable role to use their gifts or grace bestowed and no individual is more insignificant or dispensable to the overall wellbeing of the whole (1 Cor12:14-20). Each part is not only essential and valued within the body for the optimum functioning of the body of Christ, but each member is securely rooted in, submitted to, and incorporated into Christ, the Head and the cornerstone of the Body by means of the Spirit in baptism (1 Cor 12:12-13). Members are not only more than numbers, but are called to relate with each other in love and humility, faithfully fulfilling our calling within this foundational lattice of organic and authentic relationships as we live out our lives within and outwith the walls of the church.

The rhetoric of unity in diversity

Besides the expression of doing life together and the theological concept embedded in the church's teaching of the body of Christ, on reflection, another reason which may have contributed to my understanding of the church as home comes from another catchphrase: 'unity in diversity'. Similar to doing life together, this expression was well used by the community and proudly embraced as a distinguishing feature of the church. In fact, the first statement on the church's website states clearly that unity in diversity is the core value of the community. It is not surprising that the ideal of creating a united identity from diversity embedded within the catchphrase is such a welcomed and advocated feature of the church's vision. Under most circumstances within or outwith the church, being able to draw and harness the gifts, strengths, and experiences from dissimilarities and to become an amalgamated new formation is always beneficial. However, with the extensive heterogeneity of this community constitutive primarily of expatriate families and English-speaking Chinese worshippers with diverse international backgrounds, the ideal of embracing intermixture is particularly appealing. Unity in diversity becomes both attractive and pragmatically necessary for such an eclectic community to create a ready identity and accord. Instead of being alienated by the wide range of differences in terms of country of origin or denominational background, the individual members bonded swiftly not in spite of, but because, of these differences. Since most of the families from the church are either in Hong Kong due to work or have returned to live here having spent considerable periods of time overseas, there is often a shared sense of transiency and rootlessness amongst them. Having left the familiarity of their previous home environment overseas to relocate here in Hong Kong and having to navigate challenges including language and cultural differences may contribute to the eagerness to cultivate a home away from home with others in similar circumstances, which the church community readily offers.

Prior to this reflection, I had not thought much about this stated vision and had accepted it as a helpful guidepost for expected behaviours and attitudes to welcome

those joining from different denominations or were at different places in their faith trajectories. To me, it is a reminder to not judge others who may look, act, speak, believe, love differently from myself. Our belonging and our place at the community is derived solely from our relationship with Christ, with whom we have been incorporated into the Body and bound by the Spirit. Under this understanding, it was natural and easy for me to embrace the church's professed ideal of unity in diversity. Differences become inconsequential when we gather in the context of the church to worship and to turn our attention communally to Christ, the Head of the Body. Yet, as I dwell in reflection and remembering my times in the community, I am brought to wonder if this interpretation was as universally embraced, or if there were others who have experienced it differently from my initial simplistic whole-piece understanding of the vision. In my reflection for this paper, I was brought to remember different people who have joined and left the community for reasons other than relocation, but for more personal grounds. I wonder if part of the pretexts for their exit might be related to the disparity between their interpretation and hope for this ideal and their experience of it in practice. As an example, I am wondering what specific types of diversity have in fact been welcomed into our community besides the earlier mentioned varieties in international and denominational disparities. How were diversities such as socio-political and economic issues welcomed, embraced, and be made part of the existing body? How did our church examine, learn, wrestle, and discover in concrete ways to create a receptive, welcoming, safe, and respectful space for others from the more extreme ends of the spectrum in terms of diversities in all walks of life? Why were other churches, similarly operating as English-speaking ecumenical faith communities, have more success in becoming homes for, and drawing in a large congregant of, seekers from the LGBTQ+ communities as well as refugees and the homeless into their body? It suddenly dawned on me that besides the differences in race, accents, and doctrinal formation, the community was in fact quite homogenous in nature. Could it be that the comfort and ease experienced within this community was not in fact directly resulting from the success in attaining unity in diversity but rather due to the actual absence of true diversity that would demand the body to constantly return to the professed value and seek ways to tangibly live it out? How has the community responded to diversities apart from the earlier mentioned ones? How have they proactively created a receptive space for other forms of diversities and the related alternate needs, questions, and voices to dwell and incorporated into a united body? Since I have not sought out others who have left and had the opportunity to research further on their experiences, and since this is an autoethnographic piece, I can only use myself and my family's experience as a point of reflection here. As mentioned earlier, I do not wish to go into details on our family's decision to exit our church. However, amidst the underlying force which finally drove us to leave behind this home were our questions to the community related to how the church regarded and handled alternate voices which may potentially disrupt the cosiness and stability of the existing state of affairs. Congregants who had particular needs, especially chronic and urgent needs, such as those who live with mental illnesses, disabilities, or those undergoing financial hardships or with a non-heterosexual sexual orientation, are few and far between in the church. I wondered, as I wonder now, if their absence is a reflection of how these individuals or families experience the church. Was the body experienced by them to be a safe and welcoming place for their differences to find a home and for them to flourish within it? The response from the

community once we asked these questions had been evasive and defensive, with efforts to highlight the diversity which were in place and to firmly remind us of the community's priority which was to focus on faithfully shepherding those who were already in the community. Repeatedly, we were made to feel that such reflective pondering on the church's professed vision and potential areas for growth was not encouraged and may even be negatively construed as ingratitude.

Orphaned

Having been immersed in such a tight-knit community where our lives were interlinked and braided together vastly beyond Sunday mornings, it is not surprising that our decision to part with the church and navigating life in the aftermath to be more complicated and challenging than would otherwise. Belonging to the community had become such an integrated part of our family's identity and way of life for over two decades after all. In fact, for our two youngest children, this lifestyle which centred and revolved around the church and its community was the only one they had known up to that point. Leaving the church thus impacted not simply our place of worship but also rocked our family both collectively and individually on many other aspects. In short, one of the most painful and challenging facets of the initial experience was the shock of feeling orphaned. No longer having the routine of preparing for teaching and our home to host dozens of people on alternative Saturdays, and the place to gather on Sunday, our weekends were oft sore reminders of the enormity of our decision and its related repercussions. Our identity which had come from belonging to and having a core role in the community dissolved together with our exit. No longer was our presence anticipated in that space or by the people within that community. No longer did we belong to and have a formal membership with an established worshipping community. Being officially dechurched made me feel orphaned both spiritually and socially for a while. I found myself standing and looking out across the wide expanse outside of the boundaries of my now former home, wondering what to do with the newfound freedom and necessity to figure out what's next. How do I continue seeking God and remaining in an intimate relationship with my faith without the safety structures of communal practices? What does the deafening silence tell me about my prior belonging? Am I unfaithful because I chose to not remain in the body? These questions were amongst others which echoed and challenged me in my orphaned state. I knew enough about transitions and grief to not rush the process and refrained from running off in different directions attempting to fill that unsettling void. Instead, I did my best to stay still in this unfamiliar terrain allowing whatever emerge to greet me, hoping that I will not be consumed in the process. The painful experience of feeling orphaned, was never about regretting the decision to leave the church for us. The conviction and clarity of parting with this community of faith had not wavered for me despite the discomfort of navigating life post-church and the dis-ease of living with the new status of a done. However, the certainty of our choice to leave the church did not make the departure less traumatic and painful to process and to make sense of. I continue to be shaped and have my faith refined through the experience even to this day. The many questions which had surfaced in the orphaned experience became effective chiselling tools moulding my faith and clarifying my beliefs on an ongoing basis.

Shame

Closely related to the experience of feeling orphaned was the second piece of lingering emotion which comes from living as a dechurched believer – shame. This uncomfortable condition was experienced as a deep sense of self-consciousness and ‘uncontrollable exposure’ resulting in a feeling of inadequacy as a person who is at risk of rejection and ridicule (Pattison 2000, 71). The acute vulnerability which came from feeling exposed in the homeless displaced state of a done extended beyond the disorientation of orphaned to include the feeling of disgrace and humiliation. This aspect of the experience as a done stems from the external responses from others, especially from believers having learnt of my new status. Amongst the repertoire of reactions, shame is frequently veiled carelessly over by other expressions such as surprise and awkwardness. Even though I am sure that most of these people had not intentionally set out to shame me, nevertheless their subsequent and oft unsolicited retorts would always leave me feeling more lonely, alienated and judged in my orphaned state, ‘as unlovable, unsatisfactory and unwanted’ (Sanders, Pattison, and Hurwitz 2011, 85). Mixed in with their horror of discovering my dechurched status was the swift certitude that I had committed ‘the ultimate Christian disgrace – “backsliding”’ (Jamieson 2002) and in desperate need for rescue. Two common reactions from these well-meaning friends can be recalled: deep regret in not knowing sooner so they could come to my aid and rescue me from this dire mess to guide me back to the fold, or alternatively, a firm admonition of the scriptural teaching on the body of Christ. None of these responses made me feel seen, accepted, or safe enough to engage further with them. In their responses which left no communal space for listening and mutual exploration, they had made up their mind and delivered the verdict on me. I was given the ‘apostate label’ (Fazzino 2014, 253) having made the grave mistake joining other deviants ‘leaving the holy cloisters of a faith environment for the evils of the secular world’ (Sawyer 2016, 9). The dynamics in the encounters would instantly shift between us and I would usually retreat and not attempt to engage further. While these encounters further intensified my destabilising orphaned experience, they have also alerted me to reflect on my own relationships with others, especially those who were on different faith trajectories from mine. I was drawn to wonder and to examine for similar blind spots causing me to have unknowingly alienated others by my own insensitivity and presumptuousness. I was taught an invaluable lesson on humility through these encounters, and they have buttressed my resolve to explore the experiences of others like me who are travelling on the wide-open space outside of the church institution.

Rediscovering home

On reflection, I may have lost my home as a done, yet I have found a new home outwith the institutional community in the secular, messy, uncertain, and fractured world. Within this initially unfamiliar and daunting great expanse of my new home, God continues to show up and I have since found belonging through practices which persist to nurture me spiritually, to stay in connection with my faith and with those around me. Not only have I retained my faith despite the fear expressed by other believers, but the experience of displacement had gifted me with the opportunity

to re-discover, or rather, discover for the first time, what it means to live out my faith concretely in my everyday life. I have learnt to seek out and find my church, not only during Sunday services or in gathering of believers, but I have found it by the hospital bedsides in my role as a chaplain, in conversations with friends, on hikes, or the hospital stairwells wordless and exhausted after particularly difficult visits with patients. I have come to find a renewed sense of belonging in my new home, in these everyday encounters where Christ is communicated, and redemptive grace is at work. My new home may not be easily summed up with a few memorable slogans, nor possesses the doctrinal certitude in responding to the complexities and ever-evolving needs of the world beyond the sacred/secular divide, yet I have discovered that it is nonetheless a locus where faith is birthed, embodied, refined, and sustained and where Christ is at work and reigns.

Moving on

As a result of the renewed sense of belonging in my new home as a dechurched believer, the distressing and destabilising experiences of being orphaned had consequently subsided with it. That is not to say that all the questions which have emerged during my orphaned experience have since been satisfactorily resolved. Yet, I have found that there is room in my new home for questions and even doubts to coexist with faithfulness. Unity in diversity here is not dependent on maintaining the smooth operational dynamics of the institution and belonging is not on the ease of networking nor compatibility of its members. Instead, it exists in the tension held by the committed willingness of those within it to be challenged and to re-examine our professed faith with our concrete practices and their impacts on our neighbours as we do life together. As for the other lingering stone of shame, I wish I could report that it no longer exists or affects me. It remains an alienating and unpleasant experience each time requiring conscious efforts for me to recover. However, I can see that even the experience of shame has shifted in nature somewhat, from being debilitating to one which I am able to harness as a reminder, albeit a painful one, to be more alert to my own insensitivity to create a hospitable space for my neighbours. As for now, I do not know if I will permanently retain this status of a done. I no longer feel compelled to seek out affiliation with another church from the need to try and assuage the unpleasant impacts from orphaned or shame. I am still constantly reflecting on, attuning to, and surprised by my learning from navigating life with my new identity living out my faith in the sacred–secular divide. I am certain I will continue to make new discoveries on an ongoing basis, but the biggest learning thus far is the deeply humbling, instructive, and transformative lesson from the alienating and diminishing encounters with those who are in the church. These painful and shaming experiences have powerfully alerted me to my own previously held presuppositions and how they limited my ability to create and hold a hospitable space for others who are on different locations in their faith trajectories. In living out my faith without the previous structures and communal practices from regular participation in an institutional church setting has led me to solidify my daily practice to more earnestly seek out and to ‘attend to God in the Everydayness of Life’ and ‘to learn to recognize the sacredness of our everyday lives and the subtle yet beautiful ways in which we can learn to love God in all that we do’ (Swinton 2009, 11). I am hopeful that my experience will not only

help me be more mindful in creating a safe, respectful, and empathic space in my upcoming research and to contribute to understanding the experiences of the growing community of dones and nones, but also to further shape, clarify, and deepen my faith wherever home is.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Caroline Yih is an honorary post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland and Chung Chi Divinity School, Chinese University of Hong Kong. She completed her PhD (Practical Theology) from the University of Aberdeen and her ongoing research focuses on trauma and disenfranchisement.

ORCID

Caroline Yih  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7051-3915>

References

- Eliastam, John. 2016. "Interrupting Separateness, Disrupting Comfort: An Autoethnographic Account of Lived Religion, Ubuntu and Spatial Justice." *HTS: Theological Studies* 72 (1): 1–8. doi:10.4102/hts.v72i1.3488.
- Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner. 2011. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Forum: Qualitative Research Sozialforschung* 12 (1): 1–18.
- Fazzino, Lori. 2014. "Leaving the Church Behind: Applying a Deconversion Perspective to Evangelical Exit Narratives." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29 (2): 249–266. doi:10.1080/13537903.2014.903664.
- Hultgren, Arland J. 2002. "The Church as the Body of Christ: Engaging an Image in the New Testament." *Word and World* 22 (2): 124–132.
- Jamieson, Alan. 2002. *A Churchless Faith*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.
- Minear, Paul Sevier. 2004. *Images of the Church in the New Testament*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Pattison, Stephen. 2000. *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Sanders, Karen, Stephen Pattison, and Brian Hurwitz. 2011. "Tracking Shame and Humiliation in Accident and Emergency." *Nursing Philosophy* 12 (2): 83–93.
- Sawyer, Angela. 2016. "Ex-Churched in Secular Exile." *Zadok Papers* 217: 8–12.
- Severson, B. 2020. *Not Done Yet: Reaching and Keeping Emerging Unchurched Adults*. Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.
- Swinton, John. 2009. "Practicing the Presence of God: Earthly Practices in Heavenly Perspective." In *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for End-of-Life Care*, edited by John Swinton and Richard Payne, 3–16. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Swinton, John. 2012. "From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness." *Journal of Religion Disability & Health* 16 (2): 172–190. doi:10.1080/15228967.2012.676243.
- Walton, Heather. 2014. *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*. London, UK: SCM Press.
- Weaver, Alain Epp. 2003. "On Exile: Yoder, Said, and a Theology of Land and Return." *Cross Currents* 52 (4): 439–461. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24460632>.