



The Church and coming of age; *What role could the church play in reimagining ancient rites, or creating new ones that support young people to negotiate the liminal space between childhood and adulthood.*

Nick Wells

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## Abstract

*The Encyclopaedia of World problems and Human Potential cites the absence of rites of passage as an urgent global problem<sup>1</sup>.*

Into this context this dissertation deals with the question;

What role could the Church play in reimagining ancient rites, or creating new ones that support young people to negotiate the liminal space between childhood and adulthood?

Coming from the position of practical theology and using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative tools, this paper draws from the seminal works of Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner in exploring rites of passage. Looking more closely at Van Gennep's tripartite model of separation, liminality and reintegration. It then turns its attention to the role of youth work and youth ministry in supporting young people to transition to adulthood in contemporary society. This paper concludes by drawing the strand of my research together in order to imagine what such a rite could look like.

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<sup>1</sup> (Absence of rites of passage | World Problems & Global Issues | The Encyclopedia of World Problems, 2020)

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## Introduction

The Encyclopaedia of World problems and Human Potential cites the absence of rites of passage as an urgent global problem (Absence of rites of passage | World Problems & Global Issues | The Encyclopedia of World Problems, 2020) It claims that this has led to

‘Disorientation of youth in a culturally turbulent environment’ and ‘Inadequate recognition by institutions of the transition through adolescence’. This is an issue because as Grimes’ claims;

*“The absence of rites of passage leads to a serious breakdown in the process of maturing as a person. Young people are unable to participate in society in a creative manner because societal structures no longer consider it their responsibility to intentionally establish the necessary marks of passing from one age-related role to another” (Grimes, 2007, 91)*

Does the Church then have a role to play in responding to this crisis? If so what is that role? For this dissertation my organising question is this. ‘*What role could the church play in reimagining ancient rites, or creating new ones that support young people to negotiate the liminal space between childhood and adulthood.*’

To answer this question I will need to explore what a 'rite of passage' is? The term 'rite of passage' is a common term and is used about a great number of things, attending prom, going on your first holiday without your parents, losing your virginity, moving into your first home, the list goes on. However if these are 'rites of passage' why the claim that there is an absence of them? To explore this further I will need to go back to the source and explore Arnold Van Gennep's seminal work 'The Rites of passage' (Gennep, 1960) to discover what he believed rites of passage to be, and to uncover what their building blocks are. I will then attempt to engage with more recent developments of Van Gennep's theory in order to better understand how rites of passage might look in our own culture.

I must then, with this knowledge, establish whether the Church already has a 'coming of age rite of passage' in confirmation. To do this I will need to better understand what confirmation seeks to do and explore the roots of the "Sacrament in search of Theology" (Bausch, 1983, 92).

Another important question to ask will be who participates in confirmation? Clearly it's not just young people. I, myself, was confirmed as an adult as are many others. Also I must bear in mind that in order to be confirmed you have to have been baptised which, if it is indeed a coming of age rite of passage would surely limit its scope or at least put a road block in the way of those who might wish to use it as such.

At the centre of this inquiry are young people. The National Youth Agency defines youth as;  
*"...the developmental phase between childhood and adulthood. Typically this starts around the beginning of puberty and finishes in late teens but for many young people, dependent on personal, social and economic factors, it can start and or finish much later."*

and *“Youth workers usually work with young people aged between 11 and 25 years, although with adolescence starting younger in the modern age, the NYA recognised youth work from ages 8-25.”* (*What is Youth Work? - NYA, 2020*)

Before and during training for ordination I have spent 20 years as a youth worker working in both statutory and faith based youth work contexts. As such I understand the importance of young people having a voice and a place in shaping work done with them, and this is an important distinction to make, work done ‘with’ not done ‘to’. Therefore if there are models of rites of passage in existence within the life of the church do they have room for the voice and embodied experiences of young people? If not could there be a more generative approach? One that not only takes into account the voices of young people but one that actively engages young people in shaping such a rite of passage?

Before I draw a conclusion I will draw on my research and experience as a youth worker to imagine what such a rite could look like by identifying what foundations would need to be put in place to ensure that it was indeed a coming of age rite of passage. My hope is that by identifying ‘foundations’ rather than developing a ‘one size fits all’ course, a diversity of rites could be developed that would be embodied in the lived realities and issues faced by the groups of young people and adults co-creating them.

## **Research methods and methodology**

At the start of my dissertation journey I had a question that I was mulling over in my mind which was ‘would a coming of age rite of passage help young people transition into adulthood? And if so could the church, who have a pretty good track record with rites of passage, be the institution to develop such a rite?’ At this time I was working as a youthworker for the local YMCA and so as a practical theologian, and because at the time I found the idea of just writing a dissertation a little dry, I decided the best approach would be to co-create a coming of age rite with a group of young people whilst creatively getting qualitative feed back on the experience.



Unfortunately this never happened as I was made redundant from my job<sup>2</sup> and then Covid-19 brought about lockdown.

Fortunately all was not lost, my dissertation tutor, at the time, pointed out that as a professional youth worker with over 20 years experience, would I not already have some knowledge of young people and how they might react, question or even design this rite?

And so the 'how' of my research has changed but in reality the methods I've used haven't.

### **Practical Theology**

Before exploring the research methods I will use whilst researching my dissertation project it's important that I locate my research as a whole under the umbrella of 'practical theology.' Put simply the responsibility of practical theology is to;

*“act as a bridge between theology and the social sciences and to reflect critically upon, learn from, and endeavour to renew, reform and strengthen practice.” (Northcott, 1991)*

But it is also more than this. For me the purpose of this piece of research is to potentially develop a rite of passage that is embodied in the lived experience of young people that could help them to mark a transition in their own life whilst also permissioning them to connect with the Divine and explore spirituality. Swinton and Mowat refer to this as 'Performative Faith'; this is the idea that practical theology should enable the faithful performance of the gospel which takes seriously the complex dynamics of the human encounter with God. (Swinton and Mowat, 2016, 4)

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<sup>2</sup> The lack and insecurity of funding for youth provision in the UK are perhaps pertinent issues in exploring the need for marking coming of age rites with young people in and of themselves.

## Qualitative Research

Under this umbrella of a practical theology standpoint I will use qualitative research.

Qualitative research is hard to pin down as it uses a variety of methods;

*“Qualitative research is open ended and has a wide range of perspectives: empirical, political, sociological, past oral, gender orientated and narrative based” (Swinton and Mowat, 2016, 28)*

However Swinton and Mowat explain that what is important about qualitative research is the knowledge that it makes available to us. (Swinton and Mowat, 2016, 32) They cite McLeod (McLeod, 2001) and the three types of knowledge that can be gained through qualitative research; 1. Knowledge of the other 2. Knowledge of the phenomena 3. Reflexive knowing.

Knowledge of the other happens when a particular group of people is focused on, in my case young people. Observing a group in depth gives a greater understanding of the needs they face and in so doing gives them a voice, and helps address the tension between what we think we know about a group and their actual lived reality. (Swinton and Mowat, 2016, 32)

Knowledge of the phenomena relates to the knowledge we might gain of a particular event or occurrence. In my case this would be the knowledge acquired through observing a group of young people as they co-created the rite, took part in it and later reflected on it.

Reflexive knowledge relates to how I use my own reflection of what I have observed, but more than this it is about intentionally bringing this reflection into play with my knowledge of how I

construct my world, what knowledge and expertise do I bring? From this what can I say or do that is new or fresh (Swinton and Mowat, 2016, 33)

In my particular situation I have, for the reasons explained earlier, not been able to draw together a group of young people to observe, however as pointed out by my tutor, I do have over 20 years of youth work experience which provides me with a rich vein of knowledge to extract from when constructing an imagined rite of passage.<sup>3</sup> As well as this knowledge there are a host of other methods available in the methodology tool belt which I will unpack below.

### **Quantitative Research**

Although quantitative research will only play a minor role in my dissertation, I plan to look at statistics from the Church of England and Salisbury diocese. They should provide me with significant findings that help shape the direction of my research so they deserve to be mentioned here. While quantitative and qualitative research seem in many ways to be diametrically opposed Swinton and Mowat claim this not to be the case, instead they argue that; *“These two research types are not bipolar opposites and, in fact, in practice need each other for the development of thorough understanding”* (Swinton and Mowat, 2016, 42)

Put another way quantitative research is interested in numbers and measurements whereas qualitative research is interested in words and ‘thick description’; one tells us what has happened, one looks for the meaning in what has happened.

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<sup>3</sup> There is a hint of ethnographic study in this drawing from my experience of being a ‘participant observer’ within communities of young people.

## Document Analysis

The constraints of writing a dissertation in lockdown will mean that I have to rely heavily on the qualitative method of document analysis,

*“Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge.” (Bowen, 2009, 27)*

Document analysis can be a useful tool when used alongside other research methods, in triangulating the data. This is important;

*“by examining information collected through different methods, the researcher can corroborate findings across data sets and thus reduce the impact of potential biases that can exist in a single study.” (Bowen, 2009, 28)*

When gathering the documents to be analysed it is important to be aware both of your bias as a reader but also the bias of the author. The danger could easily be that you end up in an echo chamber with your results being biased. I was aware of this in my researching of rites of passage. Genneps ideas appealed to me so it has been useful to discover both Turner and Thomassen who have taken his ideas forward by critiquing them and applying them to modern society.

## Autoethnography

In order to root my research in the 'real world' rather than a conceptual one I will use autoethnography as a mirror of my own experience of liminality and current situation. I will also use autoethnography as part of a Theological Reflection I will write on the concept of liminality.

"Autoethnography can be defined as 'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011, 273)

Heather Walton, in her book 'Writing Methods in Theological Reflection 'promotes the use of autoethnography as a tool for Theological Reflection because of its 'embodied 'nature and the ability it gives practitioners to reflect on and speak out of 'epiphanic moments of transformation'. Walton explains that;

"Frequently these epiphanies will be linked to embodied experiences that are rarely voiced in institutional religious contexts but nevertheless carry great significance for us." (Walton, 2014, 5)

There are different genres within autoethnography but for my Theological Reflection I will use life writing. Life writing;

"entails exploring our sense of personhood, identity, and purpose. Life writing also raises issues of authenticity and self-awareness that are particularly important as we contemplate our understanding of God." (Walton, 2014, 91)

For this reason life writing has often been used to help people explore calling as it has the ability to “mark a point where the candidate’s life journey has taken a decisive turn” (Walton, 2014, 94) Autoethnography as a research tool I hope will also help to tie together the strands of anthropology and theology held in this dissertation, and look for collision and connection between those fields.

## Flow of argument

- **Rites of passage** - I will investigate Arnold Van Gennep's book 'Rites of Passage' in order to gain an understanding of what he argued rites of passage to be and to discover what underpins them. This will help when I come to 'construct' a coming of age rite of passage in my conclusion
- **Confirmation past, present and future** - Here I investigate confirmation in order to establish whether or not it is a coming of age rite of passage. To do this I look at statistics from Salisbury Diocese and the Church of England relating to Confirmation and young people's church attendance, before exploring where this rite has come from and what its purpose is
- **Youth culture and liminality** - Having established that the purpose of Confirmation is not to act as a coming of age rite of passage, I will then explore what links there are between youth culture and liminality in order to find out if disciplines such as youth work act as coming of age rites of passage.
- **Church, youth ministry and liminality** - As I am asking 'can the church offer a coming of age rite of passage?' I look, in this section, at the church and youth ministry and ask what is its purpose? Is it to help young people transition to adulthood or into faith? and what are the implications of my findings?
- **Liminality - A theological reflection** - Here I aim to ground the concept of liminality in theology, after all if I'm arguing that the church should create coming of age rites of passage it is important to understand its theological significance.

- Using the knowledge that I have gained through my research, and the experience I have gain as a youth worker I will set out what I think the foundations of a coming of age rite of passage should be, before imaging what it could look like.
- **Conclusion** - In my final section I summarise my findings, and ask if I've been able to answer the organising question. I then end by drawing out some of what I have not been able to cover in this thesis.



### **What are Rites of Passage?**

Rites of passage is a common term and is often used to refer to events or activities that in some way mark 'coming of age.' The term is sometimes used to describe rituals such as Bar and Mitzvah or Confirmation, at other times it is used to describe experiences that take place in modern culture such as a first pint, commencing driving lessons or losing virginity. My question then is, are all of these rites of passage? What is it that makes a rite a rite of passage? What are its constituent parts? In writing this chapter I am seeking to gain a better understanding of what rites of passage are and do, or at least claim to do, in order to understand whether or not the church already offers a 'coming of age' rite of passage in Confirmation.

Arnold Van Gennep was an anthropologist, ethnographer, folklorist and social scientist who was born in 1873 and died in 1957. He is usually described as French, as France is where he spent most of his adult life and because his father was of French descent, but also as Belgian, Dutch and German due to his mother being Dutch and being born in a Germanic state.

(Thomassen, 2018,) During his life time Van Gennep struggled to have his work taken seriously with his 1909 publication of *Rites de Passage* receiving "withering criticism" in France.

(Gennep, Vizedom, Caffee and Kertzner, 2019, xxii) It wasn't until 1960, 3 years after his death, that his work around rites of passage finally received the attention it deserved due to the 1960 translation into English. In the introduction to this translation it explains;

*“the need for a translation of Arnold Van Gennep’s Les Rites de Passage has long been felt by those who were appreciative of the significance of his theoretical formulations. Although his influence has been considerable in some anthropological circles, his contribution, in general, has failed to reach the other social sciences.” (Kimbali in Gennep, 1960, v)*

Although rites of passage are now widely accepted as a concept there is still criticism of it, such as Mauss' assertion that Van Gennep's approach of “employing examples plucked willy nilly from ethnographic context from Borneo to the Congo” (Gennep, Vizedom, Caffee and Kertzner, 2019, xxiii) was not the best method. Methods aside it is also true that many aspects of ‘traditional’ rites of passage, such as, Female Genital Mutilation are now seen as abusive.

(Female genital mutilation (FGM), 2020) Whilst there are criticisms of Van Gennep's work I will not deal with them here, instead it is enough for me that the term rites of passage is widely used and their ‘absence’ is seen as an issue. I will also not explore abuse within rites of passage or ‘alternative’ rites of passage at this point due to the limitations of my word count. However this would be a useful area of study especially if working with a culturally diverse group of young people.

In his book ‘The Rites of Passage’ Van Gennep argues that all societies are made up of distinctive, separate groupings and that in ‘modern’ or ‘industrial western societies’ the only clear distinction is between the sacred and the secular. He explains that within secular society

there are distinct groups i.e. different classes which may break down into smaller groups such as landed gentry and higher nobility or management, middle management and the workers (to put his thinking into a more contemporary work place model). In these secular settings it is possible for a person to transition from one state to another as long as certain conditions are met, these could be the acquisition of wealth or property, education or promotion within the work place. In contrast, however, even in modern society, ceremonies are still needed within the world of the sacred in order to move from one stage to the next, ceremonies such as Ordination highlight the fact that you cannot simply move from one stage to the next instead there must be an 'intermediate stage'. (Gennep, 1960, 1)

Van Gennep then compares 'modern' cultures with the 'least advanced cultures'<sup>4</sup>. Van Gennep notes that in such cultures the distinction between the sacred and secular is much less defined, if anything it is the sacred which dominates the secular so that the holy is a part of everyday life. Therefore most phases in a person's life; giving birth, being born, reaching sexual maturity, take on "that special quality found in our rites of baptism and ordination." (Van Gennep, Vizedom and Caffee, 1960, 2) In studying these cultures, and the rituals they inhabit, Van Gennep was able to identify three stages of a 'rite of passage' these were 'rites of separation, transition rites and rites of incorporation' which he also refers to as preliminal, liminal and postliminal rites. (Gennep, 1960, 11) Van Gennep is keen to point out that this doesn't mean that all three stages will be equally evident in all rites of passage. Funerals, for example, tend to concentrate more on separation whilst marriage may focus more on incorporation.

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<sup>4</sup> His description not mine, but one that perhaps reflects the attitudes of the colonial western world of the early 1900's which he inhabited.

From this brief overview of Van Gennep's work on rites of passage it is possible to conclude that a rite of passage is a tripartite rite that marks a transition in a person's life from one state or stage to another, passing from separation through transition to incorporation. For centuries the Church has offered the rite of Confirmation, is it appropriate to consider this a 'coming of age rite of passage'? If it is why does the encyclopaedia of World problems and Human Potential cite absence of rites of passage as an issue? Are young people not participating in this rite in the way they once did? To help me answer some of these questions I will now explore what Confirmation is and where it came from in order to understand what role it can play, if any, in helping the church to assist young people as they transition from childhood to adulthood.

### **Confirmation past, present and future**

As I am writing about the Church and rites of passage, pertaining to coming of age, I am interested in exploring Confirmation. Confirmation in the Church of England, doesn't claim to be a coming of age rite of passage. As stated in canon law;

*"The minister shall present none to the bishop but such as are come to years of discretion and can say the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, and can also render an account of their faith according to the said Catechism."* (Section B / *The Church of England, 2020*)

However as Davidson states; "For those who have received baptism as a child, confirmation is typically celebrated in adolescence, making it the sacrament of maturity." (Davison, 2013, 77)

And Sarah Brush notes, in her paper, 'Confirmation as Theological Education', using data from the 2010/11 church statistics, "National statistics show that adolescents constitute the largest group of candidates for confirmation." (Brush, 2014, 37) This is reflected in the 2019

Confirmation statistics for Salisbury Diocese where 131 male were confirmed between the age of 12 - 19 with the largest group being 12-15 who made up 96 of the total number. Young women in the same age range accounted for 210 confirmations the largest group also being 12-15 year olds who made up 160 of the total number; whilst males over 20 only numbered 26 with only 28 women over 20 confirmed in the same time period. (Salisbury Diocese, 2020)

In 'Youth Apart' a Church of England report released in 1996 a, perhaps, more cynical observation is made;

*"Some people have said that many see Confirmation as a rite of passage out of the church rather than as a ceremony of welcome into the worshipping community" (Youth a part, 1996, 97)*

This view certainly reflects my own experience. I was asked to set up a post confirmation group by a curate friend whilst I was working as a local authority youth worker. The pattern he had observed was that children would attend church with their families through their childhood, get confirmed just before moving to secondary school but once they started at Secondary school they were never seen again.

So where did this rite which "is often called the sacrament in search of a theology." (Bausch, 1983, 92) come from? And could it be, or should it be used as a coming of age rite?

Daniélou writes;

*“In the Christian initiation which took place during the Easter Vigil, Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist formed one whole, constituting the introduction of the new Christian into the Church. And, in the catecheses made to explain to the new Christians the sacraments which they had received, these sacraments are presented as immediately succeeding one another.”*

*(Daniélou, 1956, 127)*

It wasn't until later that confirmation became a separate Sacrament. In his paper 'Confirmation, Catechesis, and Communion: A Historical Survey' Boyle explains that 'Confirmation' as a separate sacrament doesn't appear on record until the 5th Century at the council of Riez in the year 439. (Boyle, 2015, 127) The reason for the separation of Confirmation from Baptism is explained by Davidson;

*“As far as we can tell, a rite of anointing, as a prayer for the reception of the holy spirit, first grew up as a component of baptism. Only later, and only in the West, was it separated so as to become the sacrament of confirmation, administered at a later stage.” (Davison, 2013, 79)*

Davidson explains that this happened because as the church grew and became more rural and far flung baptisms were done by presbyters or priests in the West, but Confirmation remained an episcopal rite. (Davison, 2013, 79)

So what is Confirmation Put simply Daniélou states that "in Confirmation [is] the sacrament of spiritual progress, while Baptism is that of spiritual birth." (Daniélou, 1956, 120)

So at its root Baptism, Confirmation and first eucharist were essentially one rite which over time became three distinct rites in the western Church. It seems clear to me that Confirmation has, at its roots never really been about 'coming of age' but rather it's about 'spiritual progress.' However we can't ignore that in our present day experience, as borne out in the statistics from Salisbury Diocese, Confirmation has largely become the preserve of the adolescent. For this reason I will use these statistics to delve more deeply into why this might be and, if possible, consider whether this 'rite' is indeed about spiritual progress. After all if most people taking part in Confirmation, which is seen as a rite of spiritual progress and initiation into the life of the church are aged between 12 and 19 in Salisbury, and if this is true in the church of England as whole, why do statistics seem to show that the church nationally, including the Church of England, is haemorrhaging young people? Is the quote from 'Youth apart' frighteningly true? Is confirmation a rite of passage out of the church? And if so why?

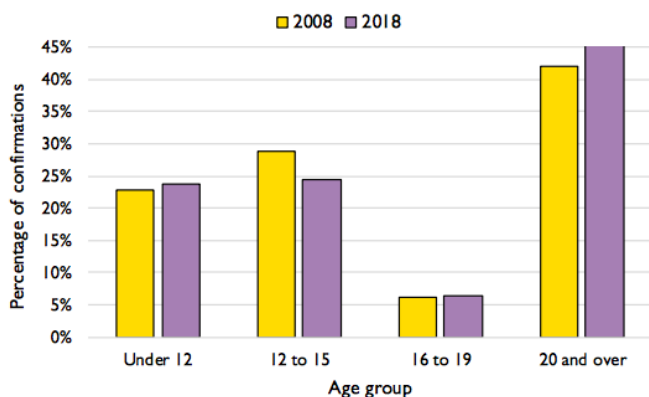
Interestingly the national picture of confirmation is a little different to Salisbury diocese with a much higher percentage of people over 20 being confirmed, however we do see that the number of people being confirmed has dropped from 27,000 in 2008 to 14,500 in 2018;

*"14,500 people were confirmed in 2018, at 1,700 confirmation services.*

*Of those people confirmed in 2018, 58% were female. Since 2008, the annual number of confirmations has fallen from 27,000 to 14,500. The age distribution of those being confirmed in*

*2018 was similar to that of those being confirmed in 2008 (Figure 14).”*

Figure 14: Age distribution of confirmations, 2008 and 2018



(Research and Statistics, 2019, 36)

This coincides with the number of children attending usual church services falling from 111,500 in 2013 to 91,700 in 2018 (Research and Statistics, 2019,

27) This seems to show that although numbers of young people being confirmed is falling they are still being confirmed in a not insignificant number, surely if we were retaining those who were being confirmed would the decline be lessened?

To conclude then, it is evident that in terms of its intention and its history confirmation was never meant as a ‘coming of age’ rite of passage. In fact it would seem that it was never meant to exist at all as a separate rite. This of course explains why even now there are many who would question why we still have it, hence the charge that it is a “sacrament in search of a theology.” (Bausch, 1983, 92) However confirmation has many defendants such as Mosby who, having once had issues with it would now support it “I now think that confirmation as a sacrament and spiritual staging post becomes a blessing and tool as we seek to foster much deeper and resilient Christian disciples to survive the complexity of our contemporary global market society.” (Mobsby and Potter, 2017, 90)



We have seen that confirmation is seen as a rite of 'spiritual progress' or as Mosby calls it a 'spiritual staging post' so there is truth that it can be seen as a rite of passage, from unconfirmed to confirmed. And whilst this doesn't mean that it's a 'coming of age' rite of passage it also doesn't mean that it can't be. The fact that so many commentators have spoken of it as a rite that happens at adolescence, or see it as the 'sacrament of maturity' would certainly lend weight to the argument that for some, especially those in institutions, such as independent schools, perhaps it does act in this way and that that has the potential to mark both coming of age and spiritual progress.

It seems clear from the statistics, however, that there are both fewer people being confirmed and attending Sunday services than 10 years ago in the Church of England. One response to this decline has been an increase in the employment of youth ministers in churches and the professionalisation of youth ministry (May, 2020). Has youth ministry, then, taken the place of confirmation? Can it in any way be said that youth ministry is, or contains elements of a coming of age rite of passage? And what of those that youth ministry seeks to engage? What are the links to adolescence, youth culture and transition? In my next section I will seek to understand the link between youth culture and liminality in order to better understand how a coming of age rite of passage might relate to young people in a contemporary setting, and to establish whether those already engaging adolescents recognise that transition.

## Youth culture and liminality

In this section I am seeking to understand the links between youth culture and liminality, to do this I must first be able to define what is meant by youth culture. The term youth culture is believed to have been introduced by Talcott Parsons (1942/1964) to define the world of young people structured around age and sex roles. He was, however, writing specifically about middle class, white American youth who enjoyed freedom from adult responsibilities. (Amit-Talai and Wulff, 1995, 3) This highlights one of the major criticisms of the idea of youth culture, the idea that there is one homogenous culture that all young people are part of. One only has to compare a group of young people from an urban setting with a group of young people from a rural setting to see that whilst there might be some similarities there will also be much that is different. These differences are evident not just in a group of young people's geographical location, in fact there are many factors that can effect what a group of young people's 'youth culture' looks like, for example gender, sexuality, faith, economic background, ethnicity, past times and taste in music, to name a few. Another important critique of youth culture is that young people are not only in contact with young people they also embedded in a society made up of people of all ages. For this reason Amit-Talai argues that;

*“Given the embeddedness, the culture/society equation can offer only two principal options for reading youth and culture. One is to focus on how children and youths learn or acquire the culture of society. Another would be to argue that the cultural constructions of youth, at most, constitute a variant of the societal or adult culture,” (Amit-Talai and Wulff, 1995, 224)*

With this in mind it would seem naive to try and argue that 'youth culture' was liminal as the very concept of a homogenous 'youth culture' is problematic. Instead I will concentrate on

those who would make up a youth culture, namely young people or adolescents. One thing that does seem to unify adolescents is transition. Cotterell tells us that “Current research views adolescents, youth and early adulthood as connected periods comprising a series of transitions” (Cotterell, 2007, 16) and Amit-Talai and Wulff “anthropologists view youth as not to be taken very seriously: occasionally amusing, yet potentially dangerous and disturbing, in a liminal phase.” (Amit-Talai and Wulff, 1995, 1) With this in mind it would seem that a closer inspection of liminality and adolescents will be in order.

### **Liminality - a closer examination**

In Van Gennep's rites of passage the liminal is the second of three stages and it marks a time of being between and betwixt, separation and reintegration. In his book 'The ritual process'

Turner writes, that adolescents;

*“..which do not have the advantage of national rites de passage... 'opt out' of the status-bound social order and acquire the stigma of the lowly, dressing like 'bums,' itinerant in their habits, "folk" in their musical tastes, and menial in the casual employment they undertake.” (Turner, 1969, 112)*

Turner seems to be arguing that by 'opting out' of the 'status bound social order' young people enter a time of 'self-imposed' liminality. Certainly what he describes has the hall marks of the liminal stage that Van Gennep writes about. For example Van Gennep writes about cutting

hair as a way of separating themselves or 'opting out' from the social order of childhood by changing their appearance (Van Gennep, Vizedom and Caffee, 1960, 167).<sup>5</sup>

The idea of adolescence being a 'liminal' state or stage isn't perhaps really surprising. When I worked as a youth worker we often described youth work as being, in part, about helping young people to transition from childhood to adulthood. As Young writes "adolescence is often perceived as a period of transition 'to adulthood' or, alternatively, the transition from 'dependence to independence to interdependence'. (Young, 1999, 24) It is important to understand that adolescence is made up of many transitions that can take place at different times for different people. Some of these transitions are more obvious than others for example the start of the menstrual cycle for females and the first ejaculation for males. Should you wish to mark these events in your own life you could easily identify when they started there's no ambiguity involved. Other changes however are more gradual and happen over time and it would be difficult, perhaps even impossible, to say when the transition had happened. One such transition and perhaps one of the most important transitions is that of establishing identity. Coleman and Hendry explain that adolescence represents the first phase of life during which the individual develops a clear personal and social identity that persists throughout life (Coleman and Hendry, 1990, 82)

So it is evident that adolescence is a time of multiple transitions, and as Turner pointed out in the 1960's there were parts of youth culture that bore similarities to rituals used in the liminal

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<sup>5</sup> This is an act I have observed recently when my daughter of 12 suddenly decided to have her long hair cut into a short bob. This has not only changed the way she looks, with people remarking on how grown up she looks, but it has also led to a difference in the way she carries herself, even her body language seems more mature.

stages of initiation rites, such as cutting or growing hair. However Turner recognised that the liminal stage, found in 'traditional societies', didn't work in quite the same way in 'non-traditional societies' so he coined the term 'liminoid'. Bjorn Thomassen explains that;

*"Turner came to see liminality as the key to culture. The question was this: what happened to liminality within the horizon of the modern? Did it get lost? Did it survive? Did it mutate into something else? If so, then what?" (Thomassen, 2018, 82)*

In order to better understand the links between youth culture and liminality in a modern society I will briefly investigate Turner's concept of the 'liminoid', before considering Thomassen's, as a modern scholar of liminality, critique of it. I hope that by exploring the following themes I will gain a greater knowledge of what 'liminality' looks like for young people in today's society. This knowledge will be helpful in identifying what foundations need to be put in place in order to co-create a coming of age rite of passage.

## **Liminoid**

Turner, writing in the 1960's, recognised Van Gennep's three stages of Rites of Passage in the anthropological work he did with the Ndembu, as these were traditional cultures steeped in rites and rituals. However Turner suspected that these rites and rituals had lost much of their social force in modern societies (Thomassen, 2018, 185). Turner discussed this in his essay liminal to liminoid, *in play, flow and ritual: an essay in comparative symbology (1974)*. In it he argues that in pre-industrial societies there is little time for 'play' instead work is seen as either sacred or profane. For example he argues that in early greek times liturgies were 'public

services to the Gods'. So unlike post-industrial societies Turner argues that work in pre-industrial time was both about the sacred and the profane and contained an element of 'play.'

*"Insofar as the community and its individual members regard themselves as the masters or "owners" of ritual and liturgy, or as representatives of the ancestors and gods who ultimately "own" them, they have authority to introduce, under certain culturally determined conditions, elements of novelty from time to time into the socially inherited deposit of ritual customs."*

*(Turner, 1974, 64)*

Turner also points to there being a link to liminal rites and 'play' he uses the examples of sacred games, mock-ordeals and holy fooling to name a few. What is important to note is that the main function of this 'play' isn't to have fun, that is merely a by product of it's true intent, which is to;

*"promote and increase fertility of men, crops, and animals, domestic and wild, to cure illness, to avert plague, to obtain success in raiding, to turn boys into men and girls into women, to make chiefs out of commoners, to transform ordinary people into shamans and shamanins, to "cool" those "hot" from the warpath, to ensure the proper succession of seasons and the hunting and agricultural responses of human beings to them," (Turner, 1974, 64)*

In contrast post-industrial societies are, in part, marked by the fact that there is time for recreation and play and that there is a distinct separation between the worlds of work and play. Turner also points out that there are different types of play that have different functions; Firstly 'freedom from' and secondly 'freedom to' (Turner, 1974, 68). So in 'play' or recreation you are free from institutional rules and work patterns and 'free to' take part in active and imaginative

activities as well as those that permit “freedom to transcend social structural limitations, freedom to play with ideas, with fantasies” (Turner, 1974, 68) . In other words activities such as sports or games where there are rules and roles which must be observed, but which the participant chooses to engage with and activities, such as the arts, where there are ‘no rules’ to follow instead they are used to explore, question and even reflect society back at its self. Turner acknowledges that in his paper ‘Liminal to liminoid, in play, flow and ritual’ where he refers to such activities as liminal;

*“Leisure can be conceived of as a betwixt-and-between, a neither-this-nor-that domain between two spells of work or between occupational and familial and civic activity.” (Turner, 1974, 71 )* However in his 1974 paper he comes to the conclusion that ‘liminal’ isn't an adequate description of leisure in post-industrial societies, so he instead proposes the use of the word *liminoid*; ‘oid’ meaning ‘like’ so, like liminal but different. (Turner, 1974, 64). One important point Turner does make is that in post-industrial societies the liminal does still exist especially within religions, fraternities and sects but that it is not society wide (Turner, 1974, 86) So for Turner the liminoid is different from the liminal because it is an activity that is chosen rather than an obligation. Often the liminoid is a commodity such as a play, concert or book. Turner sums it up by saying “One works at the liminal, one plays with the liminoid.” (Turner, 1974, 86) In his book ‘Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture’ Turner sums up his concept of the liminoid further by saying that the liminoid is a term which describes the many genres found in modern leisure that have features similar to liminality and often represent the ‘dismembering’ of the liminal examples might include, theatre, ballet, film, the novel, poetry, music, and art, and pilgrimage. These examples, both popular and classical, develop away from central

*economic and political processes and instead happen at the margins of society and are often experimental, idiosyncratic, quirky and subversive. (Turner and Turner, 1978, 253)*

Turners concept of the liminoid is both fascinating and helpful, is it possible that the reason traditional and institutional rites of passage are in decline in the UK is because they fail to recognise this concept? It is also interesting to me that many of the marks of the liminoid can be found in youthwork principles such as voluntary participation, creativity and informal education. For this reason it will be important to draw on these, and other, youthwork principle when considering how rites of passage can be created going forward. However, before committing to Turners liminoid I will first consider Thomassens critique of it.

### **Thomassen's critique of the liminoid**

In his book 'Liminality and the modern' Thomassen explains that;

*"We live in a world hungry for experience... We are fascinated by the boundary, and the tourism and leisure industries thrive and make big money on that fascination." (Thomassen, 2018, 189)*

The point that Thomassen is making is that there has been a growth in 'liminal' experiences and that it has been further commoditised since Turner was writing in the 1960's. In his book Thomassen looks in depth at bungee jumping and its similarity to jumping rituals in traditional societies. He comments on the explosion in 'extreme sports' and uses some of his findings to offer a critique of some of Turner's ideas around the 'liminoid.' He states that "Turner argued



too much and too little at the same time.” (Thomassen, 2018, 187) One example he gives of this is Turner’s distinction between the ritualistic and the ‘non-ritualistic’. Thomassen points out that football matches are highly ritualised and are even tied to the calendar whilst bungee jumping can be of no ritual use whatsoever, purely a means for an adrenaline rush or it can be ritualised when, for example, it take place during a ‘stag night.’

The second critique that Thomassen offers is that Turner implies that all liminoid experiences “are playful and creative in a positive sense” (Thomassen, 2018, 188) and have the potential to lead to self reflection and change within self and the wider society. However Thomassen points out that this isn’t always the case;

*“Jumping may in many cases be connected to no element of self-reflection whatsoever. It is hard to see how the performance of extreme sports could ever effect substantive changes that have an impact on the social and moral order.” (Thomassen, 2018, 188)*

For this reason Thomassen invokes the term ‘limivoid’ as it is still connected to boundary but highlights the experiential void that people experience and attempt to momentarily fill by, in the case of bungee jumping, jumping into the void, facing death and then returning to normality. Thomassen argues that the other side of these experiences doesn't result in a ‘re-generated’ person, instead it results in ‘death’ not literal death, but one that is ‘nearly felt’ purely for entertainment, before returning to normality. This leaves the participants of such experiences only partly satisfied and so leads to the pushing of boundaries to experience even more excitement, hence the rise in extreme sports, theme parks, VR and increasingly violent and sexual content in films. The problem appears to be that although we have growing access

to these experiences more and more people are left using drugs and alcohol to either help them confront or make real the most human experiences.

Thomassen ends his critique with a plea that we may need to rediscover the ability to just allow things to happen to us explaining that;

*“we need “an ‘open attitude’ towards the ‘ground’ of human existence , towards life and death, and a contemplating stance towards our role within these two poles that frame our existence; and without such an ‘open attitude’, experience will always be doomed to impoverishment”*  
*(Thomassen, 2018, 190)*

Thomassen points out that most things in life happen to us, life, death, love, loss and we have no control over them, despite modern societies best efforts. These are boundaries that life presents to us and this is why “...cultures, as Arnold van Gennep saw with illuminating clarity, respond to them in ways that are comparable” (Thomassen, 2018, 190). Turner and Thomassen have taken Van Gennep’s initial concept of liminality and expanded on it, taking into account the contemporary cultures in which they find themselves, and there is much to be said about the concepts of ‘liminoid’ and ‘limivoid’. I find it interesting that Thomassen returns to the importance of liminal experiences or rituals responding to life events in a comparable way. This implies that we should be striving to intentionally recognise that a liminal, liminoid, limivoid experience has taken place and be able to reflect on it and mark the change that it brings about. Whilst I can see the value in this I can’t imagine that many people would do this or recognise the need to do so unless they were given instruction in how to do so or set an example to follow.

This highlights to me that there is still a need mark passages, perhaps through ritual. At the start of this chapter I explored the liminal and youth culture in its broadest sense, however what I'm proposing in this dissertation is to ask what could the church offer in way of coming of age rites? Up to this point I have touched mainly on 'statutory' youth work models and theory as this is the sector I am most familiar with when it comes to youth work practice, and it's clear there is a recognition that youth work is about helping young people to transition from childhood to adulthood. However in order to move my argument forward I will need to look at past and current models of youth ministry to see how they relate to rites of passage and to see what awareness, if any, there is of youth ministry helping young people to transition from one phase of life to the next.

### **Church, Youth Ministry and Liminality**

In exploring youth culture and liminality it is clear to me that many writers and practitioners, in the field of Youth Work, recognise that Youth Work, is in part, about helping young people

to transition from childhood to adulthood. Of course 'Youth Work' is a broad term, there are many different organisations who would identify what they do as Youth Work. These organisations vary in their motivation, aims and purpose and therefore how they practice.

As a professionally qualified Youth Worker, who has practiced within the Statutory youth service for most of my 20 year career, the question of what is and isn't Youth Work can be decided by measuring practice against 'The nature and purpose of youth work' as defined by the National Youth Agency;

*"1.1. The purpose of youth work is to facilitate and support young people's growth through dependence to interdependence, by encouraging their personal and social development and enabling them to have a voice, influence and place in their communities and society. ([infed.org](https://www.infed.org) 2020)*

This statement makes clear that the purpose and motivation for Statutory Youth work is to help young people transition from dependence through independence to interdependence. (Young, 1999, 24) It recognises the young person as an autonomous individual who has the potential, if it's not already being realised, to play an active participative role within wider society. What it doesn't state is what this will look like, there is a recognition that each individual will have their own circumstances and needs, it is for this reason that Statutory youth work is not 'done' to young people but 'with' and 'alongside' the young person who participates voluntarily in the work, which responds to the need of the young person ([infed.org](https://www.infed.org) 2020)

Organisations, such as faith based, and specifically christian youth work, are harder to define. There isn't a central body for Christian youth work but instead different Churches and charities whose aims and purposes differ wildly, as they are usually defined by their own theological convictions. However there has, since the early days of Christian youth work, been debate over whether the purpose of Youth Work should be Evangelism or Social Action. (Pugh, 1999) Being able to better understand the aims and purposes of Christian youth work will help my understanding of whether or not it recognises what it does as helping young people transition from one life stage to another. Understanding this will be an important step in my argument, if christian youth work is about helping young people to transition from childhood to adulthood could it act as a rite of passage?

Different authors on opposing sides of the youth work as evangelism or social action argument consider the purpose of christian youth work to be quite different. Ashton and Moon argue that "Christ does not teach us to support the personal development of young people so that they may realise their full potential. We are instead to call them to repentance and faith, because only in that way can they realise their full potential." (Ashton and Moon, 1995, 27)

Whereas Danny Brierley argues, only a few years later, in his book 'Joined up, An introduction to Youthwork and Ministry' that some christian youth workers reject informal education as a model (Statutory youth work would come under the definition of informal education) because of Christ's call to mission (Mt. 28:19,20) however Brierley argues that; *"This is not necessary. Education is concerned not so much with the activity of teaching as with the evidence of*

*learning, and the responses it elicits. If conversion is primarily about change then all informal education is in the business of conversion.” (Brierley, 2003, 86)*

He then goes on to argue that we must take into account what role youth workers play in conversion. Is it, as evangelicals have traditionally understood, something done to others or is it that people convert themselves, empowered by the holy spirit, having been informed by informal educators?

Even today the debate goes on, Gough who argues for return to a ‘biblical frame work’ for youth work asks the question;

*“If we were to pull a loose thread, would we find the Scriptures woven into the entire fabric of our practices, right through to the initial conception and underlying strategies? Or would we, perhaps, find a basically humanistic approach to youth ministry, shunted into a slightly different direction, with some Christian ideology thrown in?” (Gough, 2018, 2)*

Whereas practitioners like Root, as argued a recent podcast about his book ‘The end of youth work’, says that the aim of Christian youth work is to help young people live a good life, a life, reframed through the cross. (Root, 2020)

It seems clear to me that both side of the debate see the purpose of youth work as transitioning young people into a life of faith, even if they differ on approach. What seems to be lacking is the awareness that young people are also transitioning to adulthood and no links to rites of passage are made. For these reasons, and to avoid confusion going forward I will refer to Christian youth work as ‘youth ministry’ due to its focus on transitioning into, and then nurturing faith.

There will of course be expectations of what that looks like, depending on the theological conviction of the practitioner. Whereas 'Youth work', though still interested in spiritual development, it aims to help young people explore "values, beliefs, ideas and issues" (What is Youth Work? - NYA, 2020) is less interested in the convictions of the practitioner and more interested in the needs of the individual young person.

One of the key observations I have noted when looking at youth ministry material and resources of whatever standpoint is the seeming lack of voice and participation from young people themselves. More recently Root talks about 'the good life' (Root, 2020) and Gough we might conclude is interested in a 'biblical life' - but there appears to be little engagement in the questions of who gets to decide what a good life or a biblical life actually is? In contrast youth work in its methodological approach of informal education holds the voice and participation of young people at its very foundation. Therefore can youth ministry with an unarticulated, covert or even explicit aim of 'conversion' or discipleship-making ever be anything other than an imposition on to a young person? If there is little or no space for the participation and shared direction holding of what happens within a youth ministry relationship how can there be any chance for liminoid play?

Much of the literature I have read covers topics of longevity of those involved in youth ministry or flourishing youth ministry numbers or provision, titles of popular youth ministry books bear this out...

'Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry - Doug Fields' (Fields, 2009)

'Sustainable Youth Ministry - Mark DeVries' (DeVries, 2008)

'Rebooted, Reclaiming Youth Ministry for the Long Haul' - Tim Gough (Gough, 2018)

However there are very few titles about what role young people take in being empowered to lead themselves or to take part as active citizens. Whilst youth ministry remains an activity in doing 'at' and 'to' young people without consultation or shared responsibility, the opportunities for young people's own negotiations of transition to the adult Christian life are limited. There may well be a question here about what a healthy adult christian is at all. What is the catechism of youth ministry? What is the desired learning outcomes for those young people who form part of youth ministry programmes?

Rites of passage rely on participation, voluntarily or not. For this reason then the space to ask questions (not the questions prescribed by adults) or opportunities to be creative and to play free from the need to have fully-formed creed-abiding answers is vital. Can a creedal religion ever really advance an approach to work alongside young people which allows for their own questions and answers, doubts and heresy? Does experiential learning have any place within church youth provision?

With this in mind can an argument be made that youth ministry is more akin to the rites of passage observed and described by Van Gennep, after all he himself contends that even back at the turn of the 1900's rites of passage as observed in pre-industrialised societies were largely absent in post industrial societies except in the magico-religious institutions such as Churches. (Gennep, 1960, 1)



I wonder, therefore, if Youth ministry has taken confirmation's place as a vehicle to transition young people into the magico-religious institution of the Church, whilst teaching them 'creedal' truths? Is there correlation between a youth ministry, who's aim is to transition a young person into the life of the church and the ceremonies that Van Gennep wrote about? Van Gennep talks about the role of ceremonies in helping to transition tribe members through the different stages of their lives. There is a sense that these stages and transition provide security and guard society from injury and discomfort. (Gennep, 1960, 3) And that the roles need to be fulfilled for society to function, so there is little to no choice for individuals, instead members of society;

*"...pass from defined position to another which is equally well defined. Since the goal is the same, it follows out of necessity that the ways of attaining it should be analogous, if not identical in detail"*(Gennep, 1960, 3)

I find it interesting that many of our rituals in the church work in the same way baptism, confirmation, marriage, ordination they 'guard' the church by admitting people into its life and help them find a defined position... Church member, child, young person, church warden, PPC member, priest, Children's worker, LLM etc. Some of these roles have changed little over the centuries, possibly even millennia, and so the ceremonies have changed as little as the roles they help to define. Confirmation is a good example of this.

If this is that case can an argument be made that youth work is more akin Turner's liminoid having been developed in a post-industrial society. Is there truth in what Turner claims that one works at the liminal but plays with the liminoid? That isn't to say that all youth ministry looks like formal or classroom based education, though its roots in Sunday schools might

explain an uneasy relationship with informal education. But there is a sense, on the whole, that practitioners of youth ministry are working towards young people arriving at a largely predetermined destination be that conversion, church membership or confirmation. Whereas youth work contends that the destination is less specific and will be identified with the young person through the more 'playful' model of informal education.

Another liminoid mark of youth work is that of voluntary participation. Turner makes it clear that the liminoid is chosen rather than an obligation. (Turner, 1974, 86) Of course many youth ministers would argue, perhaps rightly in some cases, that young people attend their youth programs of their own free will. Having attended church youth groups myself as a young person I can testify that there was certainly a sense that I went because I enjoyed it, more so for the Friday night socials, but I can't deny that there was pressure from my family and youth worker and wider church to attend, after all not attending regularly, especially on a Sunday might cause me to become like the proverbial coal that falls from the warmth of the fire, destined to turn cold and go out. So whilst I was never told that attendance was mandatory it was certainly implied even if the motivation was good. Whereas my time as a youth worker in a statutory setting was all about identifying needs and creating, in collaboration with young people, opportunities to learn and grow and if they wished to engage of their own choice, if not they could just use the space as they wanted. Providing they were safe and others were safe from harm they could come and go as they wished.

I am aware that because of my background in professional youth work I may have painted a picture of youth work as superior to youth ministry, at least as far as current educational models

go. I do think there is some mileage in the idea that youth ministry is more akin to Van Gennep's observations of Rites of passage and liminality especially in the area of movement from defined position to equally defined position. (Gennep, 1960, 3) Whereas youth work plays with the idea of potentiality, not what is going to be, or what is determined, but what may be. (Turner and Turner, 1978, 3) It will be important, therefore, to ensure that when I come to imagine a coming of age rite of passage I rely on youth work principles, which allows for potentially, if I want the rite to engage with young people who are part of a modern secular culture. Of course it's important to state that I am speaking 'generally' and it must be understood that there will certainly be areas of youth ministry that play much more with potentiality than the defined position. When comparing the liminoid and liminal I must take into account current critiques such as Thomassen's of the liminoid who asserts that this idea of not transitioning to a defined position leaves people forever dwelling on and breaking the boundaries "However, the more we seek to break the boundaries, the more boring it becomes" (Thomassen, 2018, 189) As we have seen Thomassen then argues that this feeling of boredom leads to people seeking evermore extreme experiences hence his term of limivoid (Thomassen, 2018, 190) The other issue with the limivoid experience is that "the other side of the experience is no longer a transformed or regenerated person" (Thomassen, 2018, 188) In fact he goes further to claim that there maybe a cultural fear and denial of liminality and indeed of the transformative experience (Thomassen, 2018, 189)

So, as I look to move towards establishing a theological underpinning for liminality, and ultimately to imagine a coming of age rite of passage, I must take Thomassen's critique into account, I must contend, therefore that on the whole Youth Ministry, due to its agenda to

move young people from one defined position to another, does, at one level look like a rite of passage but, in most cases, without ritual elements to mark the transitions. The exceptions being baptism or confirmation, however as we have seen both rites are about transition to faith rather than coming of age.

Some of what Turner contends about liminal and liminoid, I believe, if not perfect, is true. We do live in a society that seem much happier to expect 'potentiality' we want to be told that we can be anything, perhaps this is why show like the 'X factor' and 'Britain's Got Talent' are so popular. But having no fixed arrival point can leave people lost in the liminal. I certainly experienced this when working as a Youth worker, ultimately it was often age that decided when we'd stop working with a young person regardless of whether they had successfully transitioned into adulthood, after all what does that even look like?

So I must ask is there another way forward? Is there a way for the church to work with young people to develop coming of age rites of passage that recognise the importance of potentiality, by drawing on informal models of education, rather than arrival at a defined dogmatic positions?

## **Liminality - A theological Reflection**

### **Why a Theological Reflection?**

I have been writing about liminality, a field familiar in the discipline of anthropology. If I am to argue that the church has a role in helping young people to transition from this liminal state it will be important to understand a theology of liminality. Rather than exploring an 'academic' argument for such a theology I will instead embody it in my own lived reality by theologically reflecting on my own 'liminal' state of being an ordinand which will mean that I will be writing in the first person. I hope that by reflecting I will be able to establish a theological

underpinning for liminality that will help me answer my organising question and inform the rite of passage I create.

### **Theological Reflection**

I am a practical theologian, in fact I don't think I know how not to be. So whenever I've written papers during my three years studying for my MA they've always been rooted in the present situation that I find myself in, be that family life, work or parish. That's not to say that the links are always explicit, but certainly as I'm writing them I'm reflecting on how the knowledge I'm gaining can be useful in the ministry I am involved in now and in the future.

For me it is important that my dissertation is also rooted in practical theology, I would hope that what I write might be useful in my own ministry and perhaps also in the wider church. For this reason I want to understand the theology of liminality rather than see liminality as a purely academic concept. It's also important to me that any theology is embodied, so I have decided to explore the theology of liminality by theologically reflecting on my, now extended, liminal phase as an Ordinand. Reflecting on this stage of my own rite of passage to ordination, which both Van Gennep and Turner recognised as one of the few rites of passage in modern society that still use ceremony, will be useful both for me personally but also as I seek to understand how a theology of liminality impacts the wider church, especially a church and wider society forced into a liminal 'betwixt and between' reality due to the covid-19 outbreak and subsequent lock-down.

Due to the personal nature of this TR I have decided to use Autoethnography, as explained in my methodology. Using Autoethnography will also, I hope, bring connection between the anthropological and theological threads of this dissertation.

### **'Always lent but never Petertide'**

Much like Mr Tumnus who declared that in Narnia it was always winter but never Christmas Luke Larner's twitter handle describes how many Ordinands, due to be ordained this year feel "Always lent but never Petertide." (@lucaslarner) It's strange, although I know Lent is over and we're now in the season of Eastertide, Lent feels like unfinished business and the promises of Petertide seem to have retreated into an unseen, unknowable future. And although it feels like I'm on a treadmill I know that I am still moving forward, even if the end never gets nearer, because as I journey I keep passing the charred, burnt out corpses of what should have been; Last residential at college, last Ordinand's tea party, last tutor group social, all now acting like macabre cairns on an endless pilgrimage. We are Israel wondering in the desert for 40 years.

One lesson I'm learning is that being in a liminal state with no clear end in sight is draining but not unfamiliar and it isn't necessarily negative. As mentioned previously ordination is clearly a rite of passage, a transition from one defined role to another defined role. An outside observer might be tempted to think that the liminal stage of this rite of passage begins when your Bishops Advisory Panel recommends you for training or perhaps when you formally become an ordinand. And there's a sense in which this is true however I think I've always had this feeling of being betwixt and between. It's as if my sense of calling to the priesthood has always been there but it's only since I formally began to investigate my vocation that I've had the

vocabulary necessary to put that calling into words. That being said I would, if pushed, identify the formal start of my training as being the point at which my horizons changed. This was marked for me by the feeling of being a stranger in the profession that I had previously enjoyed, fellow ordinands also commented on the feeling of being an imposter in their place of work. We were all feeling the pull towards the next threshold and so the jobs and roles that we had inhabited for many years lost their ability to satisfy, despite the fact that they will still useful and important roles within the wider society.

I've been in this liminal space for nearly 3 years now, the original date for ordination has been rescheduled from June to September, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and whilst we have a provisional date for ordination there is no guarantee that the date won't move again. Even if it doesn't Bishop Nicholas could choose to not ordain me if he so wished. I'm aware that this sounds pretty bleak, that's certainly the picture I painted in the opening paragraph of this section and at times, if i'm honest, it does feel bleak. However being present in this liminal space and reflecting on it for such a long time has taught me about myself, God and my calling which according to Rohr should come as no surprise; *"Without standing on the threshold for much longer than we're comfortable, we won't be able to see beyond ourselves to the broader and more inclusive world that lies before us."* (Guerin (Ed), 2020, 18)

I will try to highlight the main themes of learning here...

### **Identity and belonging**



One of the joys and challenges of studying non-residentially has been that of identity. I've been privileged enough to have had experience of training residentially, all be it from the vantage point of the dutiful 'ordinand spouse', and from my current situation as an ordinand in a non-residential college. My view is that when it comes to identity there is a huge disparity between the two pathways, when Ruth (my wife) was studying at Ripon College, Cuddesdon her role as an ordinand was clearly defined. Being an ordinand was held in high regard within the community, on more than one occasion we were reminded that their's was the 'highest calling.' In contrast I have found that training non-residentially has meant that I've tended not to identify foremost as an ordained but rather as 'the primary care giver to my children' or, whilst I held the role as 'Youth worker'. In fact college residential weekends have been useful in reminding me that I am indeed an ordinand, I didn't dream it all up, it is in fact a reality. The other difference is the regard that is given to the role, rather than being told mine was the highest calling most of my colleagues, when I worked temporarily at Tesco, had no idea of what an ordinand was and when they found out seemed more interested in knowing whether I was allowed to have sex or not than they were in congratulating me for getting through BAP successfully.

Rather than being a negative I believe this ambiguity, highlighted by spending an extended period in a liminal space, around identity and subsequently worth and belonging has been a positive experience. Strangely what I've experienced is probably more closely related to what should happen within a rite of passage, part of the point of the liminal stage is about letting go of who we are in order to embrace who we will become. This is what happens In Revelation 3:20 where Jesus stands on the threshold and knocks, we have a choice do we join Jesus in that liminal space protecting ourselves from the fear of change and transition by clinging on to what

and who we have been in the past, or who we think we ought to be in the future? Or do we embrace the potentially that Christ offers when we choose to find our identity in him? Does Colossians 3 in fact describe a tripartite rite of passage? Colossians 3:2 Separation, 'Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,' Colossians 3:3, Liminal 'for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.' and Colossians 3:4 Reintegration 'When Christ who is your[a] life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.' (The Holy Bible, 2015, 187)

We have seen that the issue of identity is important for young people, therefore it will be important to recognise this in a rite of passage created with, and for young people. However I would suggest that it should be a chance to question and reflect on identity rather than forcing an identity onto the participant

### **Losing Control**

One of the most terrifying things about exploring vocation is the loss of control. From the moment you first visit the DDO to the moment you are finally ordained a Deacon and then Priest you are relying on others to make life changing decisions for you. The DDO decides whether or not your sense of calling is valid and worthy of exploration, they and their team have the final say in whether or not to send you to BAP, the BAP panel discern if your calling to ordained ministry is real and recommend you for training to your Bishop. Power is then held by your tutors, Principal and Training Minister who could advise your Bishop that you're not ready for ordination. And finally the Bishop ultimately gets to decide whether or not to ordain you, letting go is never easy, control freaks need not apply! Of course in the normal run

of things you could just make a pretence at letting go. That isn't to say that you can control any of the above, you can't, but you can look to what, in that liminal space you can control, other people, how people perceive you, situations etc. And when you know that there will be an end, an exit from this liminal space you can perhaps just batten down the hatches and ride out the loss of control until you reach that time of reintegration. Sometimes we need to be reminded that we're not in control of not being in control.

It's interesting that being in control of your life, your finances, your future is always seen as a good thing, to not be in control of those things is to be lazy, unprepared and unambitious but of course the idea that we're in control is a myth, dwelling in a liminal state reminds you of this, and not all liminal spaces are ritualised. Pain, be it physical or emotional, forces us into that liminal state. Taylor writes that;

*"Pain is provocative. Pain pushes people towards the edge, causing them to ask fundamental questions such as "why is this happening?" And "how can this be fixed?"... Pain strips away all the illusions required to maintain the status quo, pain begs for change. (Taylor, 2009, 156)*

One example of pain highlighting our lack of control and forcing us into a liminal space is the story of Job. Job was a good man, he was good to his family and he worshipped God he believed that his wealth and prosperity was a blessing from God. So when things go wrong all certainties are called into question. Taylor writes;

*"the world does not work the way he thought it did. His family is not safe. His health is not sure. Perhaps God is not who Job thinks God is?" (Taylor, 2009, 165)*

Lingering in a liminal state be it ritualised or brought about through pain reminds us that we are not in control, that how good we might think ourselves to be counts for nothing, doing doesn't change anything. It's in these times that instead of doing we have to learn to be, to be loved and excepted as we are, not as we'd like to be or as we hope others see us. This is liberating because if our being isn't dependent on our doing we can become more like the 'the birds of the air' not worrying about what we can't control and instead learning to surrender; *"Only when we learn to let go of the familiar, the defined and limited, are we able to embrace the ultimate otherness of life. Only when we go beyond our violent impulse will we find our greatest desire: the mystery of the divine."* (Guerin (Ed), 2020, 96)

Letting go isn't easy at the best of times but it will be important in a rite of passage. A challenge or activity that removes participants from their comfort zone might temporarily induce this feeling and give them something to reflect upon.

### **Creativity, Imagination and play**

One of the marks of the liminal is that by placing the participant outside of the normal structures and limitations of society it provides space to imagine, create and play. Thommassen explains that;

*"the qualities pertaining to the concept of liminality are perplexing. On the one hand liminality involves a potentially unlimited freedom from any kind of structure. And this sparks creativity and innovation, peaking in transfiguring moments of sublimity... on the other hand liminality also involves a peculiar kind of unsettling situation in which nothing really matters, in which hierarchies and standing norms disappear, in which sacred symbols are mocked at and*

*ridiculed, in which authority in any form is questioned, taken apart and subverted;”*

*(Thomassen, 2018,1)*

This description from Thomassen seems to highlight that liminality can both bring forth ‘new life’ through the creative power it evokes and the possibility to damage even dismantle societal structures as we know them.

The Church of England, whilst offering immense freedom and breadth, is built on a foundation of authority, hierarchies and sacred symbols therefore they should, in theory at least, be very concerned by their ordinands; Who having spent several years in this between and betwixt world, should by now be ready dismantle the ‘whole bloody lot.’ However visit your average theological institution and instead of anarchy you tend to uncover the horror that is conformity. Now I must be careful here, what I’m not saying is that ordinands finish their journey the same way they started. Being in this liminal state does affect us and stretch us. I’ve yet to meet an ordinand who hasn’t been transformed in some way, whether it was the young fervent Anglo Catholic who started the process with the belief that modern worship was an ‘abomination’ who now, having been in the college band with myself and several others, meets up with us once a year to play as part of the ‘Cuddesdon collective’ a worship band made up of past Cuddesdon residents. He now claims that this style of worship has brought new life to his faith whilst still retaining his love of the Anglo-Catholic style of worship and spirituality that brought him to faith in the first place. Or the evangelical who started the process convinced that homosexuality was a sin, who when confronted by the reality of having to study with people who were gay had to reevaluate his beliefs. Clearly change does happen what, however, you

don't see so much of is people looking at the foundations, the structure the hierarchy and asking why? Should ordinands be more like my two year old son who is constantly asking why? We tell him he has a tummy full of whys? Should all ordinands have tummies full of whys? If they do why aren't we hearing them and if they don't what's gone wrong, or right depending on how you look at it? Turner argues that in order for neophytes not to go 'overboard' in their potential to deconstruct society safety barriers are put in place;

*“That this danger is recognised in all tolerably orderly societies is made evident by the proliferation of taboos that hedge and constrain those on whom the normative structure loses its grip during such potent transitions as extended initiation rites in “tribal” societies and by legislation against those who industrial societies utilise such “liminoid” genres as literature, the film and the higher journalism to subvert the axioms and standards of the ancient regime - both in general and in particular cases.” (Turner, 1978, 14)*

Does the act of formation intentionally, or other wise do this? My wife Ruth, whilst training for ordination, wrote a poem about this.

Formation

Conformation

Conformation of conformity

Me squeezed into a too tight, uptight, cassock shaped mould.

(Wells, 2019, 7)

Rather than a 'tummy full of whys' being feared should they not be encouraged? Not as acts of violence, and I don't mean that in only the physical sense, but encouraged in the creative sense. Should our time in formation be a time to question, imagine, create and play? Is this not more

akin to the life that Jesus lived? A liminal life lived on the edges of society “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Matthew 8:20 A life that turned over tables, undermined authority and claimed “the last will be first, and the first will be last” Matthew 20:16 Is the calling to be prophetic as Jesus was, a calling to the creative edges? Is this not what a rite of passage should do? Tom Gunning thinks so;

*“When Gennep discovered a blueprint for the creative process within the tripartite structure of rites of passage, he invited us to glimpse a potential enshrined in human identity. We are created to create, to leave the familiar, to cross thresholds and give birth to bold new ideas. We are invited to the borderlands of the known, to imagine a new earth, healed not scorched, rested not exploited, and regenerated by human ingenuity and innovation “ (Guerin (Ed), 2020, 28)*

It seems clear to me that any rite of passage created with young people should encourage critical questions and innovations but should also give them the tools to creatively channel those questions and feelings raised in order that their voice can be a positive challenge to both the church and wider society.

### **Theological Reflection: Conclusion**

I suppose part of the reason I chose to write a theological reflection on liminality was to see if the liminal was theological. In my brief investigation it has become clear to me that both the liminal and the wider concepts of rites of passage are found at the centre of the Christian faith. This is clearly seen in the correlation between the Pascal mystery of death, resurrection, and rebirth and the tripartite process of separation, transition and incorporation found in Van Gennep’s rites of passage. It is also clear to me that as Christians we are called to a strange

existence, one where we are called to believe that we are incorporated into the life of Christ, symbolised through the rites of baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist. And yet as Jesus prayed;

*“I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.” John 17: 14-15 (The Holy Bible, 2015, 104)*

So to be ‘in Christ’ mean we’re also called, as the church, to be a liminal people, threshold dwellers living a prophetic life that offers the world an alternative reality, that reality being divine love.

### **Embodied Resistance: A Manifesto**

In this section I will draw the strands of what I have learned from my research and theological reflection together in order to imagine what a coming of age rite of passage could look like if offered by the church.

Under normal circumstances I would want to co-create a coming of age rite of passage with young people involved at every stage of its development. However due to the current lockdown and social distancing this has not been possible. Instead I have decided to create an ‘imagined’ rite of passage based around issues that young people have identified as important to them. In my conclusion and through my dissertation I have made the point that the lack of



coming of age rites of passage is an issue and that the gap left has in part been filled by youth work and ministry. Whilst I contend that neither can, in and of, themselves fully replace a missing rite due to the lack of ritual I do agree that there is much to be taken from the informal model of education that informs youth work practice. I believe that the model of informal education better captures the idea of 'potentiality' that Turner argues exist in the liminoid than the more formal educational models, such learning the creeds by rote, as used to happen in some confirmation classes. Informal education is defined thus;

*"Informal education is the wise, respectful and spontaneous process of cultivating learning. It works through conversation, and the exploration and enlargement of experience." (Jeffs and Smith, 2011)*

This quote highlights the seemingly obvious, that this is a relationship there is the 'educator' and the 'pupil.' The informal educator in this creating of a rite, is taking on the role of 'elder,' there is an acceptance that this elder has past this way before and whilst they may not have all the answers they do have experience and this is important because if there is no elder who do young people learn from? Grimes picks up on this "...if Wise elders don't initiate adolescence, won't adolescents initiate themselves?" (Grimes, 2007, 2)

And so I have identified the first two foundations for the imagined rite;

- 1) It uses informal education as a model
- 2) There is an elder who will work with young people as they develop their rite.

As I've no young people to work with I have decided to use research done by Youth Parliament UK to identify the issues they face. In 2018 they surveyed 825,000 young people and the following were the top 5 issues that young people face today.

- Protect the Environment
- Put an end to Knife crime
- Mental Health
- Tackling Hate Crime
- **Curriculum to Prepare Us for Life<sup>6</sup>**

(Climate emergency declared biggest issue facing young people « UK Youth Parliament, 2020)

The final issue is interesting as it seems that young people recognise that there is a gap in their formal education this is what they say about this point "Schools should cover topics like finance, sex and relationship education and politics." (Climate emergency declared biggest issue facing young people « UK Youth Parliament, 2020) This brings me to the next two foundations;

3) It embodies the genuine needs and issues young people face

4) We look to see how and where these needs and issues are embodied in the teaching of Jesus.

The next foundation might seem obvious but I think it is important to state

5) A Ritual must be co-created that intentionally and explicitly marks the tripartite rites of passage.

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<sup>6</sup> My bold type

As well as being embodied into the lived reality of young people lives I think that it's important that the rite should locate the young person in the liminal society of which they are apart and teach them that to be a part of the church is to be a threshold dweller, and all that that entails.

therefore my last foundation is

6) Participants must be sent out and equipped to be threshold dwellers.

With these foundations in mind this is what my imagined rite of passage would look like...

### *1. Separation*

In order to clearly mark the first stage of this rite of passage we would arrange a residential. It would be important for this to be somewhere secluded, in order for the separation to be effective use of social media would have to be limited or banned.

The purpose of this residential would be to, as a group, create a manifesto. It would ask questions about what kind of people do we want to be? What issues are important to us? What do we want the world to look like when we become adults? The residential would culminate in a presentation ceremony, in front of invited guests. To do this we would create sessions and activities that utilised a range of learning styles, so for example if one of the issues raised was "how do we protect the environment" we might do a session that takes us out into nature. We could meditate on the fact that many of Jesus parables are based in nature and think about how we could, as we move into adulthood, practically act in order to protect the environment.

As well as sessions there would be space for reflection and the opportunity to speak to an 'elder'. There would also be the task of creating a piece of art that represents yourself. This

would be a piece of work done individually, whereas the sessions and the creation of a manifesto would be collective.

## ***2. Liminal***

This would be marked by getting lost. Obviously the activity created for any stage would have to take into account the young people involved in it and address questions such as what are their ages? Are there any disabilities we need to be aware of? Assuming it would be safe to do so we'd want to let each individual, starting from a different spot, make their own way to where the ceremony would be held. On the way they would be asked to look for symbols of their own passage to adulthood ie signpost, crossing a bridge on which they could reflect

## ***3) Re-integration***

The final part of this rite of passage would be a ceremony at which they would publicise their manifesto. The guests at the ceremony would be significant adults that the neophytes had identified as having played an important part in their life up until now, The ceremony would start with each individual bringing the art work that represents them and placing it in an exhibition space, in which would be pieces of art that had been made by and represent the significant adults who had been invited. After this the Neophytes would read out their manifesto to their guests proclaiming what type of person they wish to become, the guests would then affirm what has been presented and promise to help those presenting to fulfil their promises. At this point each neophyte would be presented to their own chosen elder; It could be someone from church, a relative etc who would act as a 'wise council' someone they can go to in times of need. This would highlight that this ceremony doesn't end with the participant

suddenly fitting into a defined role, instead this ceremony acts as a cairn marking an ongoing transition. This is further born out by the giving of a gift, something that represents that the participants will at the end of the ceremony be sent out to be 'threshold dwellers'.

I hope that by identifying 'foundations' for a rite of passage I have been able to show how the church could develop coming of age rites of passage that respond to the lived realities of the young people in there communities.

## **Conclusion**

It has been evident to me since the outset of this paper that the absence of rites of passage is seen as an urgent global problem (Grimes, 2007, 91) The very fact that it is included as a problem within The Encyclopaedia of World Problems and Human Potential (Absence of rites of passage | World Problems & Global Issues | The Encyclopedia of World Problems, 2020) gives credence to this assertion. The Encyclopedia states that an absence of rites of passage have led to the ‘Disorientation of youth in a culturally turbulent environment’ and that there has been ‘Inadequate recognition by institutions of the transition through adolescence.’ which means that;

*“Gradually they have become indifferent and listless. They have a sense of frustration and alienation and feel themselves undervalued and powerless. Feeling that they are being manipulated to ends that do not reflect their aspirations, many have become weary.”*

*(Disorientation of youth in a culturally turbulent environment | World Problems & Global Issues | The Encyclopedia of World Problems, 2020)*

Of course there may be those who would question this assertion and state that there are indeed rites of passage available to young people in western society should they wish to engage with them; One such rite being Confirmation. However as I hope to have shown this claim of confirmation acting as a maturation rite is a conflated one. There are those like Davidson who claim it to be the ‘Sacrament of maturity’ but this, to me, seems a strange claim. It’s true that confirmation has historically been undertaken by adolescents who were baptised as children but this is no longer the social norm in the way it once was and we are now seeing less children baptised and fewer of those being confirmed.

Another important point to make is that the purpose and intention is not, and never has been to act as a coming of age rite of passage but rather as 'spiritual staging post' (Mobsby and Potter, 2017, 90) We should also remember that this was a rite developed in pre-modern society, a society more akin to the societies that Van Gennep observed when he first wrote about rites of passage in Africa in the early 1900's, than our own. It is in looking at the work of Turner and Thomassen that we realise that for most of society rites of passage are much less defined and tend to use less ritual so if we are looking for a rite of passage that the church can offer the society in which it finds itself we must ask would confirmation be fit for purpose? This isn't so say it can't be or shouldn't be used but rather would it be a journey to far for an adolescent who had little or no contact with the church?

My next question was what, if anything, has taken its place? I argue that amongst other things youth work and youth ministry have played an important role in engaging positively with young people, however there are shortfall in both models. Youth ministry is often to prescriptive with the end goal being 'conversion' which mean the young person is 'done to' whereas youth work is more interested in helping young people to transition from childhood to adulthood, however the destination can be vague ( the opposite of conversion) so how do you know when and if you've arrived? In both cases there is also the problem that in most cases there will be the arbitrary cut off point, usually at 18. At this point the young person is often left to fend for themselves, they are now 18 they are now adults?

So it seems that we are back to square one, youth work and youth ministry have done and will continue to do great things with, for and to young people but can it really mark a transition

without a rite? If we were to look at them as rites of passage youth ministry would be more akin to what Van Gennep observed, with regards to how the liminal is seen and treated ie that you are moving from a defined role (non-believer, un-confirmed etc) to another, defined role (Believer, confirmed.) Interestingly this means that there is not necessarily an intention to transition young people into adults. Whereas youth work with its less defined destination is more akin to Turner's 'liminoid' that deals with potentiality rather than defined roles.

At this point we should consider Thomassen's critique of Turner's work when he argues that the liminoid isn't always the positive creative state that Turner claims it to be. Instead he asserts that we are seeing more dissatisfaction with people going to greater extremes in order to fill what he calls the liminoid. For Thomassen it is important that we recognise that in life we go through experiences and transitions that we have no control over, birth death, sexual maturity etc and that as Van Gennep observed we mark them in a comparable way (Thomassen, 2018,190)

Grimes in his book 'Deeply Into The Bone, Re-Inventing Rites of Passage' agrees, he argues that whilst we can pass through life without marking transitions, and that in the short term there may be no harm in this it can have a negative effect in the long term ;

*"in the long haul, however, people often regret the failure to contemplate a birth, celebrate a marriage, mark the arrival of maturity, or enter into the throes of death. The primary work of a rite of passage is to ensure that we attend to such events fully, which is to say, spiritually, psychologically, and socially. Unattended, a major life passage can become a yawning abyss*



*draining of psychic energy, engendering social confusion, and twisting the course of the life that follows it. (Grimes, 2007, 5-6).*

Whilst the church does have rites I would argue that it doesn't have the right rite that could serve the wider society, in which the church finds its self, and which it is charged to serve that could act as a coming of age rite of passage. For this reason I proposed to create an outline for a generative approach to the co-creation of a coming of age rite of passage.

So to answer my question, yes, I do believe the church has a role to play in creating coming of age rites of passage. The church has a wealth of experience, resource and expertise. However it may have to be willing to engage young people in a new way, where the end goal is helping young people mark the transition to maturity because that in itself is seen as important and of benefit to society.

### **Limitations of Research**

In a 15,000 word thesis there are clearly limitations, whilst researching for this paper I have uncovered many questions and avenues that I would have liked to have explored but have had to resist. Also, as mentioned previously, writing at the time of a world-wide pandemic has limited my access to materials and young people with which to co-create a rite of passage. Some of the areas I would have liked to have explored, had the word count allowed, are how effective are 'secular' rites, such as school or college prom, in acting as a coming of age rite. I would also liked to have researched in more depth the effectiveness of a coming of age rite of passage both in modern and traditional societies in order to establish what benefits they bring to the lives of

the young people that participate in them. One way I could have achieved this would have been to interview participants that took part in co-creating a coming of age rite of passage over an extended period of time in order to establish what effects positive or otherwise it has had on them. Also further investigation into the role 'alternative' rite play in minimising harmful practices such as FGM would have perhaps highlighted the urgency for positive rites of passage and helped me to engage intentionally on the role rite of passage play in a variety of cultures thus bring a wealth of diversity to my research.

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