

ANNA STRHAN



ALIENS AND STRANGERS?

*The Struggle for Coherence in the
Everyday Lives of Evangelicals*

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Even if Protestantism was not the true solution, it did pose the problem correctly. It was now no longer a question of the struggle of the layman with the priest outside himself, but rather of his struggle with his own inner priest, with his priestly nature.

Karl Marx

Introduction

[T]he human being is the connecting creature who must always separate and cannot connect without separating . . . And the human being is likewise the bordering creature who has no border.

(Simmel 1997a: 174)

In April 2012, during the run-up to the London mayoral election, Tory mayor Boris Johnson intervened to stop a planned series of posters on London buses which were due to proclaim: 'Not gay! Post-gay, ex-gay and proud! Get over it!' The adverts had been produced by a conservative Christian group, the Core Issues Trust, and were booked to appear on the buses by Anglican Mainstream together with the Core Issues Trust, both organizations teaching that homosexuality is curable through therapy and religious teaching. The posters were part of a campaign responding to the gay rights group Stonewall, which had recently run posters on London buses stating: 'Some people are gay. Get over it!' with the Core Issues Trust ads designed in the same red and white colour scheme. Johnson contacted *The Guardian* to announce that he was banning the adverts within an hour of their contents becoming public, and the story ran on the front page, quoting Johnson as saying: 'London is one of the most tolerant cities in the world and intolerant of intolerance. It is clearly offensive to suggest that being gay is an illness that someone recovers from and I am not prepared to have that suggestion driven around London on our buses' (*Guardian* 2012a).¹ His main rival in the mayoral election, Ken Livingstone, said the posters were 'damaging for anyone who believes that London is the greatest city in the world because of its tolerance' (*Guardian* 2012a), and a spokesperson for Transport for London said 'we do not believe that these specific ads are consistent with TfL's commitment to a tolerant and inclusive London' (BBC News 2012). *The Guardian* featured a longer article in addition to the

¹ The Core Issues Trust afterwards sought a judicial review of the ban. The High Court ruled that whilst the process for introducing the ban had been unfair, Transport for London acted lawfully in banning the advert, because it would cause 'grave offence' to those who were gay. *Core Issues Trust v. Transport for London*, High Court, 22 March 2013. Accessed 27 March 2013. <<http://www.judiciary.gov.uk/media/judgments/2013/core-issues-trust-v-tfl.>>

cover story, framing this in terms of an increasing mobilization of conservative Christian groups in Britain, headlined 'Conservative Christians are becoming more confident in the political arena. The anti-gay bus ads are the latest move by Christian groups hoping to replicate US politics, where religion is centre stage' (Guardian 2012b). Positioning this as part of an attempt by conservative Christian groups to bring to Britain the religio-political mix of the US culture wars, *The Guardian* linked the attempted bus campaign with anti-abortion campaigners 'taking their fight into the public arena in the UK, buying in American expertise'.

This incident and responses to it reveal the interweaving of contemporary ideals about public religion, difference, tolerance, equality, sexual morality, and cities. Johnson's comments frame London as intolerant of religious expressions that transgress principles of equality and are felt as polluting ideals of inclusivity. London here seems to stand as a paradigmatic site of modernity: the ideal of tolerance has played an important part in imaginings of cities as complex, pluralist settlements, patterned on an interplay of social distance and proximity that does not interfere but allows the other the freedom to be other. As spaces where strangers are most likely to meet, so cities can be understood as sites of civility where social lives are forged through maintaining distance, where people live with others rather than feeling the need to get close to them (Sennett 2002a: 264–5).

But this story of cities as shaped by an ethics of tolerance is bound up with a more melancholy narrative. Drawing on Baudelaire as flâneur, Richard Sennett notes that while walking in the middle of New York, 'one is immersed in the differences of this most diverse of cities', but because these scenes are disengaged, there is little vivid human encounter—'a telling moment of talking or touching or connection'. Instead, 'A walk in New York reveals . . . that difference from and indifference to others are a related, unhappy pair' (1990: 128–9). While social distance in cities may promote the freedom not to be interfered with, it can also be seen in terms of a lonely individualism. As Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, characterizing the nineteenth century as the 'Age of Individualism', each individual 'behaves as though he is a stranger to the destiny of all the others . . . As for his transactions with his fellow citizens, he may mix among them, but he sees them not; he touches them, but does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone. And if on these terms there remains in his mind a sense of family, there is no longer a sense of society' (cited in Sennett 2002b: 323). Cities are sites that heighten the complexities of social life and raise central sociological questions about plurality, tolerance, and relations with others: how do people engage with those who are different from them and what conditions of possibility does this create? How do we separate from and connect with others through the creation of physical, emotional, and imagined boundaries?

These questions are central to the story of religion and secularity in modernity, and are particularly pertinent to understanding conservative

evangelicalism. The etymology of ‘tolerance’ derives from ‘to endure’ and raises the fundamental social question of how we get along with others whose views and lifestyles we disagree with. This is an issue underlying contemporary controversies about conservative forms of religion in secular modern contexts, and the evangelical movement has been a particular focus of such debates in Britain and elsewhere.² In a speech in August 2013 at the Evangelical Alliance headquarters in London, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, argued that it was a problem for the Church in Britain that it is defined by what it is against and ‘comes across too easily as negative’ (cited in *Church Times* 2013). As society has become more tolerant in relation to issues such as homosexuality, this has increasingly shaped perceptions of evangelicals as not only intolerant in their responses to others. Welby stated: ‘We have seen changes in the ideas about sexuality, sexual behaviour, which quite simply [mean that] we have to face the fact that the vast majority of people under 35 think not only that what we are saying [in opposing the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill] is incomprehensible, but also think that we are plain wrong and wicked and equate it to racism and other forms of gross and atrocious injustice’ (*Church Times* 2013). Throughout the movement’s history however, evangelicals have made large claims, drawn boundaries, and erected barriers against ‘worldliness’, and labelling of evangelicals as intolerant is not a distinctively contemporary phenomenon. The Conservative Prime Minister at the end of the nineteenth century, Lord Salisbury, expressed distaste for the movement, describing its ‘reign of rant’ and as an ‘incubus of narrow-mindedness . . . brooding over English society’ (cited in Bebbington 1989: 276).

Conservative evangelicals’ positions on a range of issues in recent years—from opposition to same sex marriage and to leadership roles for women and gay clergy in the Church, to arguments that religious freedoms are increasingly under threat—have frequently made headline news. In a de-Christianizing British context, the media increasingly present polarizing narratives of conservative evangelicals either as marginalized as their lifestyles come into conflict with universalizing processes of modernization—most often symbolized in conflicts with gay rights groups and antagonistic relations with equalities legislation—or as developing into a rising new Christian Right, seeking to

² I use the term ‘evangelical’ to refer to the broader tradition that has existed in Britain since the 1730s, marked, as David Bebbington summarizes, by characteristics of conversionism, Biblicism, activism, and crucicentrism (1989: 3). I use ‘conservative evangelical’ to refer to the tradition emerging within British evangelicalism following a rift with liberal evangelicals in the 1920s, with differing estimates of the Bible a central point of tension (pp. 181–228). Warner (2007) contextualizes tensions between charismatics and conservatives within post-war British evangelicalism, arguing that charismatics are defined by an orientation towards conversionism and activism, while conservatives tend to be shaped by Biblicism and crucicentrism (p. 240). These distinctions broadly characterize the lifeworld I describe here.

mobilize to defend established practices and extend their political influence. This book aims to move beyond stereotypical portraits perpetuated by headline-grabbing stories that largely focus on the actions of publicity-seeking campaign groups and the statements of a small number of media-savvy evangelical leaders. I address instead what it is actually like to be a member of a conservative evangelical church in a largely secular metropolitan context in which their teachings are increasingly at odds with broader cultural norms, and to explore what matters to its members. As evangelicals' moral viewpoints are frequently stigmatized by those outside the Church, exploring evangelicals' lived religion opens up what it means to try to hold on to a strong religious identity in a secular modern context and the tensions this can generate. What are the ordinary comforts, tensions, experiences, and concerns of conservative evangelicals as they negotiate their everyday lives? How do they engage with the fact that their teachings on gender, sexuality, and other religions lead to their being labelled 'intolerant' by 'tolerant' liberals?

This book takes as its subject the lives of a congregation of mostly white middle-class conservative evangelicals in London, and as such is situated in relation to, investigates, and mediates different understandings of the relationship between religion and modernity. Much existing sociological literature about evangelicals has portrayed evangelicalism as a unified culture that is *either* a reactionary protest against aspects of modernity, seeking to sustain traditionalist moral teachings and religious authority, *or* an accommodation to and reshaping *by* modernity, so that evangelicalism flourishes to the extent that it has affinities with processes such as globalization, individualization, and rationalization. However, to deepen understanding of what it is to be and to become an evangelical in modern, secular contexts we need to move beyond understandings of evangelical culture as a coherent, unified phenomenon that is either protest against or accommodation to modernity. This book develops such an approach through focusing on evangelicals' material practices and everyday interactions in a cosmopolitan, global city. Through examining relations between evangelicalism and urban sociality, my aim is to open up how the interplays between religion and secularism take place in everyday experience, both in the world around us *and* inside our heads, in the ways we experience ourselves.

Deepening understanding of the complexities of evangelical subjectivities, this book is a story of how a struggle for coherence becomes a central defining task of evangelical life. My central argument is that conservative evangelicals develop a response to the fluidity and fragmentation of late modernity that is shaped by their focus on the personality of God as coherent, which leads them both to desire coherence and to become conscious of subjective fragmentation within themselves. This response reflects a specific kind of cultural and moral fragmentation that is inherent to conservative evangelicalism, in their seeking to become 'aliens and strangers' in the immanent city and citizens instead of a

heavenly City of God. Identifying and examining the aesthetics of evangelicals' alienation, I describe the material processes through which evangelicals learn to understand themselves as 'aliens and strangers' and demonstrate the precariousness of their projects of staking out boundaries of moral distinctiveness from others. Through focusing on their interactions in church and in spaces outside the church and by examining the place of doubt in evangelical life, I show that evangelicals' subjectivities are simultaneously shaped through both secular norms and by moral sensibilities of their faith that rub against these. Thus I argue that their self-identification as 'aliens and strangers in this world' both articulates and constructs an ambition to be different from others within the contexts they inhabit, rooted in a consciousness of the extent to which their habituated modes of practice, hopes, and longings are simultaneously shaped by their being in the world.

I wanted to move beyond concentrating solely on issues that typically dominate public debates about conservative evangelicals—for example, debates about their opposition to same sex marriage and women bishops—and consider instead the *relative* importance of these issues in individuals' everyday lives. I therefore focus on what I found that most ordinary conservative evangelicals saw as the most significant elements of their faith: their desire for a relationship with God, and their sense of themselves as becoming 'disciples' and therefore distinctive from others. Reports of evangelicals' sense of themselves as marginalized are widely reported. I found however that while the subjects of this book *sometimes* spoke of themselves in these terms, they placed greater emphasis on their being 'distinctive' from those around them, as 'aliens and strangers'. They articulated this sense of being out of step and 'different' as related to their sense of relationship with God, which they saw as central to both their individual and communal identities. The central narrative of this book focuses on how this sense of relationship with God and related sense of their distinctiveness were formed through practices of listening and speaking, and how these interrelated in everyday experience with broader norms of interaction in urban life. Through exploring how evangelicals' sense of relationship with God, their relations with 'others' outside the Church and their subjectivities were interrelated, I develop a new approach to religious inter-subjectivity that shows how conservative evangelicals' experience of the personality of God leads them to work to form themselves as 'aliens and strangers' and their ongoing struggles with this task.

My hope is to paint a more nuanced portrait than standard stereotypes of conservative evangelicals as reactionary fundamentalists, drawing out how features of their critiques of and uncertainties about aspects of late modernity—such as individualism, consumerism, and materialism—resonate (albeit in a different register) with concerns expressed by liberals who are most likely to feel themselves at odds with them. The point of this is not to reach for a facile moral consensus where none exists, but rather to explore how the issues that

typically dominate contemporary debates on conservative evangelicalism are woven into broader moral landscapes of modernity and thereby deepen awareness of the complex textures of these. There were other stories I could have told. In this introduction, I will describe how and why I ended up telling *this* story.

EVANGELICAL ANGLICANS, MODERNITY, AND MORAL FRAGMENTATION

Ethnographies inevitably end up exploring different questions from those you set out with. When I began this project, I had intended to study a GAFCON-supporting evangelical church. The Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) took place in June 2008, when 1,200 Anglican bishops, clergy, and laity met in Jerusalem, many boycotting the Lambeth Conference of that year. The event grew out of transnational alliances that had developed since the mid-1990s in opposition to the growing acceptance of homosexual relationships in some Anglican provinces, most prominently in the Episcopal Church in the United States (GAFCON 2009; Sadgrove et al. 2010; McKinnon et al. 2011: 364). As GAFCON and other ecclesiastical clashes over issues of equality have generated media attention, I wanted to explore how tensions related to disagreements over gender and sexuality in the Anglican Communion were experienced by members of a GAFCON-supporting church, and, at the start of my study, I visited a number of such churches. I chose to base my fieldwork at a large conservative evangelical Anglican church in London, ‘St John’s’, because this church is considered by other British evangelicals, both conservative and charismatic, to be an important and influential representative of contemporary conservative evangelicalism, with links to other prominent conservative evangelical churches in the USA, Australia, Nigeria, and other global contexts. As is typical of a GAFCON-supporting church, St John’s teaches that homosexuality and all sexual relationships outside marriage are sinful, and opposes the ordination of gay bishops in the Global Anglican Communion. It is also representative of the conservative evangelical movement within the Church of England in opposing women bishops, and does not accept the ordained ministry of women in the Church: all the ordained ministers and elders in St John’s were men.³

When I began fieldwork, however, I soon discovered that many members of the congregation didn’t know what GAFCON was, and were generally—especially the younger members—uninterested in Church politics. As one

³ Women who had responsibilities for ministry with women in the congregation were on the senior leadership team.

man in his twenties put it, ‘we leave it to our leaders to deal with things like that, and trust that they have wisdom to make right decisions on our behalf’. Therefore, as one of the unintended consequences of my asking people about GAFCON was to raise its profile, I changed tack to focus on what appeared to be more significant concerns for members of the church. Yet although GAFCON as a specific focus dropped out of my analysis, the disagreements on sexuality, gender, and equality it indexes relate to wider themes that did concern church members. Current schisms in the Anglican Communion exemplify tensions between forms of religion that hold onto traditionalist differentiated understandings of gender and heteronormativity and universalizing tendencies associated with modernization that challenge this. José Casanova’s pioneering work on public religion argues that such tensions can lead to the deprivatization of religion as groups whose lifestyles and values are disrupted by universalizing processes seek to mobilize and enter the public sphere to ‘defend their traditional turf’ (1994: 6) in response, for example, the Religious Right in the United States.

It is possible to see these logics in play in GAFCON. However, they are more evident in calls by some socially conservative British Christian groups for the ‘public’ articulation of faith, particularly since the introduction of the Equality Acts of 2006 and 2010. The ‘Not Ashamed’ campaign by the pressure group Christian Concern, launched in December 2010, exemplifies this. The website of this group states:

More than any other person, Jesus Christ has shaped our society, for the good of all. The values and freedoms that flow from Him have been embedded in our culture and laws, bringing great benefit to our nation . . .

Yet the truths, values and behaviour consistent with that foundation are under attack, to the detriment of the whole of society. There is mounting pressure to exclude Jesus Christ from public life, consigning Him instead to the realm of the ‘private and personal’. Increasingly, Christians are encountering attempts to restrict their freedom to speak and live in accordance with biblical teaching in the workplace and in public life . . .

In these challenging times Christians need to stand together and speak clearly of Jesus Christ as ‘good news’ not only for individuals but for society as a whole.

(Christian Concern, not dated a)

Christian Concern’s ‘Equalities and Conscience’ petition, the Coalition for Marriage,⁴ the Core Issues Trust bus campaign, and the Christian Legal Centre’s appeals to the European Court of Human Rights to ‘protect the freedom of Christians to live in accordance with their Christian beliefs’⁵ are all situated in a broader narrative of Christians being marginalized and

⁴ See Christian Concern 2011 and Coalition for Marriage 2012.

⁵ See Christian Legal Centre 2014.

increasingly persecuted as Britain becomes progressively de-Christianized.⁶ The former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, for example, was quoted in the *Daily Mail* (2012) saying that Christians are now ‘persecuted’, being ‘sought out and framed by homosexual activists’, and he argued that people of faith are treated as ‘bigots’.

When I first began fieldwork, I found this desire for the ‘public’ articulation of faith articulated together with a sense of conservative teachings on issues such as gender, sexuality, and other faiths rubbing up against wider norms of equality strikingly evident in what the church leaders were saying. The rector of St John’s, David, preached in a Sunday morning sermon, for example, that Christian fellowship should be ‘energetic and corporate, public and unpopular, and selfless and sacrificial’. He stated: ‘We contend publicly for the objective truth of the gospel that God has done in and through Jesus, hence the unpopularity of this . . . Wherever the gospel is proclaimed publicly by gospel partners, we find them engaged in conflict, as in Acts . . . As this country careers away from its Christian heritage, we will increasingly be considered immoral, bigoted, out of date.’ This idea that Christianity will be considered ‘bigoted’ and ‘out of date’ suggests a sense of temporality that is shaped through moral teachings being experienced as in tension with universalizing modern norms of equality. Judith Butler has argued that liberal freedoms, particularly in relation to sexual freedoms, are now ‘understood to rely upon a hegemonic culture, one that is called “modernity” and that relies on a certain progressive account of increasing freedoms’ (2009: 109). An uneasy relationship between evangelicalism and modernity in this sense was also implied when David preached in another sermon: ‘the culture wars of the ’60s and ’70s were fought about freedom, in which sexual freedom, equality and choice were seen as inextricably linked . . . But are we *less* free today?’

Religious responses that oppose universalizing processes are often described as a resistance to and protest against modernity, and the global strength of evangelicalism has often been explained in this sense. Conservative evangelicals’ re-inscription of gender differences and insistence on revelation as an event that establishes certain truths have been interpreted as responses to the fluidity of meaning and existential anxieties, as other sources of security and authority are eroded through globalization and the extension of impersonal market forces. Much recent scholarship has also explored how evangelicalism has adapted to and thrived within the conditions of modernity and postmodernity,

⁶ The description of England as de-Christianizing is accurate in relation to indicators such as church attendance. The 2005 English Church Census shows that since 1998 there has been an overall decline in regular church attendance of 15 per cent, from 3,714,700 to 3,166,200. Of these regular churchgoers, 40 per cent attend evangelical churches. This represents a rise from 37 per cent in the same survey in 1998, and means that in 2005, in an average week, 2.5 per cent of the English population attended an evangelical church (Brierley 2006a, 2006b).

arguing that its use of new media forms and the portability of its practices mean that evangelicals 'belong to the present age – and almost certainly the future, as well' (Coleman 2000: 3).

At the start of my fieldwork, the prominence of the language of being 'exiles' and 'aliens and strangers in this world', and of countercultural teachings on gender, sexuality, and the exclusivity of salvation in Jesus seemed to fit with interpretations of conservative evangelicalism as an anachronistic re-inscription of traditionalist values. Yet, as I spent time with members of the church, observed what they did in different places, and listened to what they said and noted what they did not say, the neatness of this narrative began to unravel. I began to understand the logic of their faith as patterned through their simultaneously being shaped as modern, urban subjects according to ethical norms internalized outside the church *and* their development through participation in the church of moral and temporal orientations that rubbed up against these.

In his influential work on US evangelicals, Christian Smith highlights the regular portrayal of evangelicals as either demons—'an ominous resurgence of religious oppression, a movement of radical, intolerant, and coercive zealots determined to undermine American freedoms'—or angels, a myth 'fostered by many religio-political conservative activists who posture American evangelicals as the country's last bastion of righteousness in a decaying society' (2000: 193). Smith points out that such mythologies offer entertaining stories for journalists to appeal to the reading public and aid political fundraising, and continue to exert a powerful hold on both secular and religious imaginations. Phil Zuckerman's writing on evangelicals is an example of this kind of sociological mythologizing. In an article for *The Huffington Post* entitled 'Why Evangelicals Hate Jesus', Zuckerman cites statistics published by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and argues that these show that white evangelicals are the group 'least likely to support politicians or policies that reflect the actual teachings of Jesus' and 'the very people most likely to reject his teachings and despise his radical message' (2011). Yet my informants' reaction to Zuckerman's depiction suggests a more complicated picture than his narrative, based on survey data, allows. During my fieldwork, Freddie, a floppy-haired curate, read a long section of Zuckerman's article aloud in a sermon, and said: 'the uncomfortable things that those outside Christianity have to say often have some truth in them', and he challenged the congregation: '*are* we concerned with living in a way that saves your brother, or just with being happy in your own salvation?'. Freddie's agreement with Zuckerman's critique of evangelicalism indicates the complexity of the moral landscape evangelicals inhabit, how their ideals are formed both through their participation in the church, *and* wider cultural norms that lead them to simultaneously stand in critical relationship with these.

There is a growing ethnographic literature on evangelicalism within sociology and anthropology, advancing understanding of evangelicals across

diverse global contexts beyond the simplistic portraits Smith criticizes.⁷ Within this body of work, the contribution of this book is twofold. First, in focusing on how evangelicals' sense of relationship with God has particular social and subjective effects in their lives, leading to experiences of cultural and moral fragmentation, I develop a new approach to religious intersubjectivity that opens up the complexity of evangelical subjectivities. Second, in examining the everyday ethics shaping middle-class conservative evangelicals' lives in an urban context, my aim is to deepen understanding of the interrelations of Christianity, 'the urban', ethics, and modernity. Through this, I develop an anthropology of shame, guilt, and doubt that shows the work that is required to maintain evangelical subjectivity in a context such as London.

My attention to questions of fragmentation, shame, and subject formation draws on Joel Robbins's work on these themes in his magisterial study (2004) of Pentecostal conversion among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. Robbins's narrative of cultural change describes the moral struggles the Urapmin experienced through tensions between the communal forms of their traditional religion and the individualistic Protestantism to which they converted. The interrelations between community, individual, morality, and modernity are, however, differently located in my study. British evangelicals, like Robbins's Urapmin converts, learn to think of themselves as 'sinful' in a narrative conveying the tension of experiencing contradictory norms of practice. However in a de-Christianizing Northern European setting, my informants expressed a sense of disjunction between a broader 'post-Christian', 'secular' individualism and *their* ideal of a social life together. By studying evangelicals' lives across the spaces of church, home, and workplace, this book identifies and describes the processes by which they try to shape their thoughts, bodies, and emotions according to a unified Christian ideal, and the continuing difficulty of managing this in a secular, pluralist context.

The central narratives of Christianity, in which the exile of Israel is re-echoed in the early Christians striving to turn away from the world and towards the City of God, articulate a desire and a demand for Christians to be 'exiles', out of step with 'the world', leading to what one of my informants described as 'the tensions of ordinary Christian experience'. This book explores how conservative evangelicals' self-identification as 'aliens and strangers in the world' and their desire for coherence demonstrates the cultural and moral fragmentation they experience. As reflexively self-aware of the precariousness of their faith and the extent to which they as subjects are also shaped through wider cultural practices, I describe how routinized interactions in the church knot individuals together in forms of interdependence that enable them to keep going in their

⁷ See, for example, Bialecki 2008, 2009; Bielo 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Coleman 1996, 2000, 2006, 2011; Elisha 2008, 2011; Engelke 2010a, 2011, 2012, 2013; Erzen 2006; Frykholm 2004; Griffith 2004; Guest 2007; Harding 2000; Luhrmann 2004, 2012; Luhrmann et al. 2010; Wilkins 2008.

practice of faith. Evangelicalism is often described as individualistic. Yet these habituated rituals form members of St John's as subjects orientated outwards towards each other, towards others in the city, and towards God, with a strong sense of their individual insufficiency. While previous research concerning evangelicals has often shown them as dogmatically certain of their beliefs and experiencing very little doubt,⁸ I show how my informants regularly acknowledged experiences of doubt and struggle, and were self-conscious about how their everyday practices of sociability with each other helped maintain their faith.

The complex intersection of values and meanings formed through evangelicals being both rooted in the world and developing an orientation towards the Kingdom of God is part of a 'distinctive Christian tension derived from simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the world, the goodness of creation and the demanding presence of an alternative kingdom' (Martin 2005: 186). Examining the forms of sociality experienced as members of St John's learn to direct themselves towards the transcendent orientation of Christianity penetrating into mundane time and space, this book contributes to understanding the lived textures of evangelicals' faith and their religious formation in the secular times and places of the metropolis.

DOING FIELD- AND BODY-WORK WITH CONSERVATIVE EVANGELICALS

The urban thoroughfare off which St John's is located is always far quieter on Sundays than on weekdays, yet on arriving before the 6 p.m. evening service, a steady stream of casually dressed people are walking towards the church from several surrounding tube stations, most having taken public transport to get there, with a few arriving on bicycles. Off the main road, in the shadow not only of glass-fronted commercial buildings but also of an oak tree pre-dating but dwarfed by these, small groups of young people stand in the stone-paved square in front of the church, waiting to meet friends before the service. Coming in from the cold, dark London streets, the inside of the church is warm and light, with conversation humming around the high-ceilinged, stone-floored room. The large space feels clean and bright, with utilitarian modern chairs arranged in rows facing a low stage and prominent wooden pulpit, but medieval history still tangibly present in the carved stone memorials and font. People hang their coats and scarves on rails by the door and chat in groups by the bookstall or over tea and biscuits in a side chapel. When there are lots of newcomers to the church—for example, in September, when new

⁸ See, for example, Bialecki 2008: 379; Smith 1998: 29.

students and graduates starting work in the city arrive—there is often a sign put up over this side chapel, ‘Arrivals Lounge’, so that if new visitors don’t know anyone, someone in the church will chat to them over warm drinks before the service.

When I first visited the church, the individuals I sat next to were encouraging about the possibility of my conducting research there, and offered to put me in touch with church leaders or to meet me before the service if I wanted to visit again. Because St John’s is a large church—the three Sunday services each averaging about five hundred in attendance—various methods of welcoming newcomers are encouraged. In each service there is a five minute break to chat with neighbours, and ministers regularly remind the congregation to invite newcomers to coffee or supper after the service. Whenever I arrived early for a service and sat by myself, someone would inevitably come over to chat within a couple of minutes, and this culture of speaking to new people helped me get to know a range of individuals in the church.

I was fortunate in the welcoming attitude that David, the rector of St John’s, took towards my research from the outset. He is interested in both sociology of religion—citing sociologists such as Peter Berger and Rodney Stark in his sermons—and wider social theory, although he characterized my study as more anthropological than sociological. About halfway through my fieldwork, noting that I was not especially interested in gathering statistics, he said: ‘I have a friend who used to study a tribe in Kenya somewhere. I see now, *that’s* what you’re doing; *we’re* your tribe. I quite like that idea.’ At our initial meeting, he said the church had often received negative publicity, so was happy that I planned to anonymize the name of the church, and the name of the church and all individuals here are pseudonyms, although many said they would have been happy to be named.

I conducted fieldwork at St John’s from February 2010 to August 2011. During this time, I attended two of the three Sunday services the church holds, one each Sunday morning and evening. Most members of the church participate in weekly Bible study groups during academic term times, and from April 2010 to July 2011, I attended one of these, which I call the ‘Rooted’ group, intended for individuals who have already attended the more introductory Bible study courses the church also offers. In addition I attended a student Bible study group for one term and during the holidays following this. I decided to concentrate on these two groups to observe differences and similarities between the practices of relative newcomers and those who had been at St John’s some time, and to get a sense of the *habitus* the church was trying to encourage and the means of its formation over time.⁹ It would have

⁹ My use of the term ‘*habitus*’ follows Marcel Mauss’s definition, denoting the ‘*exis*, the “acquired ability” and “faculty” of Aristotle’, formed through particular techniques of the body that ‘vary especially between societies, educations, proprieties and fashions’ (2006: 74–5).

been interesting to explore the church's methods of childhood socialization, but since most of those I got to know described university as particularly formative in their faith—and with British evangelicals devoting significant attention and resources to students—focusing on the student groups and the Rooted group provided more insight into the means through which individuals were incorporated into this culture. The prominence of students (and relative paucity of children) at St John's was also down to its central London location: many middle-class members of the church moved out to the suburbs when having children in their late twenties and early thirties, because of high property prices in inner London. The specific demographic composition of the congregation was therefore shaped by a high percentage of students and twenty-something and older individuals (many of whom were single) working in London, many of these travelling up to half an hour and sometimes longer to get to the church, and a smaller number of (mostly relatively affluent) families with children living closer to the church.

When soliciting consent for researching these groups, I asked one of the student leaders which student group might be open to my joining. She placed me with a group of fifteen members, whom I spoke to about my project, explaining my research questions and methods, and asking whether they were happy for me to join as a participant observer. I think the fact that I was also a student and willing to participate in discussions contributed to their openness to my presence. Bible study groups at St John's are used to being observed: group leaders are regularly observed by other leaders who give feedback on their teaching styles, and some of the students initially interpreted my role in this way. Several of the students who were writing dissertations were interested in my methods, and we chatted about the kinds of question they thought would work for interviews.

When seeking consent to join the Rooted group, the curate in charge of this stream of groups recommended a particular group for me to join. As I had got to know a member of this group, Lucy, at the Sunday services I had been to, she emailed the information sheet about my project to the group, and they discussed whether they were happy for me to observe their meetings. I was informed that one member of the group had reservations. I discussed this with Hannah, one of the group's leaders, the following Sunday, and emphasized I did not want to be part of the group if it made anyone uncomfortable. By this point, the individual concerned had already changed her mind and told Hannah that I was welcome. Having got to know her subsequently, I am comfortable she would not have been easily coerced into this if she hadn't wanted me there, and she turned out to be especially friendly to me. Through these meetings, I was able to see and talk to individuals from these groups twice a week at church and in the small group (more frequently than I see most of my friends and family in London), and sometimes more often than this if we met up additionally during the week.

I also helped at other events to get a sense of the different kinds of ‘serving’, as it is called at St John’s, expected of church members. So I was on the coffee rota, helped prepare and serve food at ‘guest events’, and helped steward at national evangelical events hosted at St John’s. I also attended mid-week lunchtime services aimed at those working nearby, and went on a weekend away with all the Rooted groups to a conference centre outside London. As I got to know church members, they invited me—and often my husband too—to their homes, for suppers and Sunday lunches, and I met up with people for tea and coffee, in cafés or at their workplaces. When it felt appropriate, I made notes during interactions. There is a culture of note-taking in conservative evangelicalism, and informants sometimes joked that my prolific note-taking would lead the casual observer to see me as an especially keen evangelical, although one curate commented that seeing me writing notes while he was preaching made him nervous.

My observations of informants’ modes of practice inside and outside the church and the interactions and conversations we had in these different spaces were my primary source of data. Yet although data from these different settings informed my analysis throughout, I have chosen to write here only about interactions that I felt would not compromise the privacy of individuals involved. Although I use pseudonyms, because of the possibility of members of the church being able to determine each others’ identities, I chose not to include sensitive details of their lives that might make them feel compromised. Although everyone I spoke to understood that I was there for research and that I was making fieldnotes about our interactions, in some settings I felt conscious that individuals I had got to know well tended to forget this. Therefore my decisions about which details of people’s lives I have included here were determined by how conscious I perceived they were that I might use data from particular interactions in my writing.

As well as recording what others said and did, I also noted my own participation and emotional reactions in services, small group meetings, and other settings. Doing preparation work for Bible studies, clearing up dirty dishes when it was our group’s turn on the rota, developing friendships with members of the congregation, and other experiences from fieldwork I take as data indicative of the kinds of sociality developed through participation at St John’s. Loïc Wacquant describes how, to understand boxing culture, the researcher needs ‘to follow the unknown footsoldiers of the manly art in the accomplishment of their daily chores and to submit oneself along with them to their rigorous regimen, at once both corporeal and mental, that defines their state and stamps their identity’ (2004a: 15). Given the military imagery conservative evangelical leaders use to describe the life of faith, this is not an inappropriate metaphor to describe how the body-work involved in doing Bible studies, going to services every Sunday, and forming relationships with members of St John’s was an important part of understanding this lifeworld.