



# Kent Academic Repository

Strhan, Anna (2016) *English Evangelicals and the Claims of Equality*. In: Religion, Equalities, and Inequalities. Theology and Religion Interdisciplinary Perspective Series in Association with the BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group . Routledge, pp. 163-176. ISBN 978-1-4724-3996-3.

## Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/58414/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

## The version of record is available from

## This document version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

## DOI for this version

## Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

## Additional information

## Versions of research works

### Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

### Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in *Title of Journal* , Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

### Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact [ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk](mailto:ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

## English Evangelicals and the Claims of Equality

Anna Strhan

In February 2011, Eunice and Owen Johns lost their High Court claim that they were discriminated against by Derby City Council as unsuitable foster carers because of their belief that homosexuality was morally unacceptable.<sup>1</sup> Their case was widely reported in the media. *The Guardian* featured an article on this - headlined: 'Anti-gay Christian couple lose foster care case' - stating that the Johns 'claimed they were being discriminated against by Derby city council because of their Christian beliefs, after they told a social worker they could not tell a child a "homosexual lifestyle" was acceptable.' The article noted that this case 'was the latest to be brought by conservative evangelicals, led by the Christian Legal Centre, over their supporters' right to discriminate specifically against gay people and not be bound by equality regulations. All the cases have so far been lost.'<sup>2</sup> *The Daily Telegraph* put a somewhat different spin on this. Under the headline, 'Our Christianity is our lifestyle: we can't take it on and off', the journalist wrote, 'Eunice Johns greets me, a total stranger, with an embrace... A minute later, when I am looking for a tissue to blow my nose, she hands me half her packet. These are the actions of a true Christian. And that's the problem. Eunice lives according to the instruction she finds in the Bible – and one of those instructions is that sex should be confined to marriage. For that reason, she and her equally beaming, gentle husband, Owen, have not been allowed to foster children.'<sup>3</sup>

At the time of this incident, I was conducting fieldwork with a congregation of conservative evangelical Anglicans in London, 'St John's.' I had initially selected this church as the site for my research because I wanted to study a GAFCON-supporting

---

<sup>1</sup> *Eunice and Owen Johns v Derby City Council and the Equality and Human Rights Commission*, England and Wales High Court, 28 February 2011 <http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2011/375.html> (accessed 26 March 2013).

<sup>2</sup> From <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2011/feb/28/christian-couple-lose-care-case> (accessed 23 June 2014).

<sup>3</sup> From <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/8355786/Our-Christianity-is-our-lifestyle-we-cant-take-it-on-and-off.html> (accessed 23 June 2014).

church.<sup>4</sup> My choice of fieldsite was therefore already determined by disagreements about equality, specifically disagreements about homosexuality in the Anglican Communion, and the original aim of my research was to explore how these tensions were experienced by members of a GAFCON-supporting church.<sup>5</sup> I wanted to explore whether they felt themselves to be marginalized, moving against the grain of a developmental secular modernity in terms of a progressive account of increasing rights and freedoms, particularly sexual freedoms (Butler 2009, 109). And if they did, how did that shape their actions and sense of self?

Portraits of conservative evangelicals circulating in the wider popular imagination tend, stereotypically, to show them as either increasingly marginalized as their lifestyles come into conflict with universalizing processes of de-differentiation – and this is often symbolized in antagonistic relations with equalities legislation – or as an emerging Religious Right, seeking to mobilize to defend their established practices. One might therefore have expected members of St John’s to see the Johns’ case as evidence of Christians being discriminated against in the name of equality. Yet members of St John’s reacted in different ways. I was interviewing Liz, a member of the church staff, a couple of days after the story broke, and it came up in our conversation. Liz was critical of how the reporting of this incident had been shaped by a Christian Legal Centre press release. She said she had read the transcript of the court proceedings, and ‘to be honest, as far as I can tell, the way that the Christian Legal Centre has presented it has been not entirely accurate really. So, I’m not sure that’s enormously helpful if Christians are saying, “we’re being persecuted,” when actually, you know, it doesn’t entirely represent the case.’ I asked her what she

---

<sup>4</sup> 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 developing 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).

<sup>5</sup> As would be expected of a GAFCON-supporting church, St John’s teaches that homosexuality and all sexual relationships outside of marriage are sinful, and opposes the ordination of gay bishops within the Anglican Communion. Typical of the conservative evangelical wing of the Church of England, it does not accept women bishops, or the ordination of women, and all the ordained ministers in the church were men. I selected this church as my fieldsite because it is widely regarded by those within evangelical and Anglican circles as an influential representative of contemporary conservative evangelicalism.

This is an accepted manuscript of a chapter published in D. Llewellyn and S. Sharma (eds) *Religion, Equalities, and Inequalities*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 163-176

thought about groups like the Christian Institute and the Christian Legal Centre. She answered that while she did agree with traditional evangelical teachings on marriage, she didn't think the church should expend too much energy in defending this issue publicly:

I think the things in the Bible are good for everybody. Having said that, I think that because as a society, we're probably quite far from God, in terms of ... fewer people who would claim to be a Christian, or who would espouse orthodox Christian belief and practice. I think it's unreasonable to expect people who are not Christians to behave in a Christian way, and I don't think the Bible expects that.... I don't want Christians to spend their time being angry about the world behaving like the world.

As she expanded on how she saw her faith and politics as related, she distanced herself from conservative groups such as The Christian Institute, who have argued that Christians are being marginalized through recent equalities legislation, and said that confronting socio-economic inequalities was more pressing:

The Christian Institute, I didn't particularly like their election thing,<sup>6</sup> I thought it was quite right-wing, and I thought they highlighted issues that were right-wing issues and ignored issues that actually the Bible says a lot about... I would think care for the poor and the vulnerable in society is quite important, and ... I tend to think that the state as a whole has a responsibility to that. I mean, that's a political conviction, you know, I think I would argue that the Bible has a lot to say about care for the poor.

Liz's take on the Johns' case, and her sense that her faith should encourage opposition to socio-economic inequalities rather than the perceived marginalization of Christians challenges standard perceptions of conservative evangelicals. Yet there were others at St John's who *did* interpret the Johns' case as confirming that Christians are treated unequally. A young graduate I interviewed the day after Liz saw this case as evidence

---

<sup>6</sup> She was referring to The Christian Institute's 'Election Briefing 2010': <http://www.christian.org.uk/wp-content/downloads/electionbriefing2010.pdf> (accessed 27 June 2014).

This is an accepted manuscript of a chapter published in D. Llewellyn and S. Sharma (eds) *Religion, Equalities, and Inequalities*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 163-176

of Christians being marginalized and that it was no longer acceptable to hold ‘biblical views’.

In what follows, I consider the significance of conservative evangelicals’ engagements with ‘equality’ in their self-identification as ‘aliens and strangers’ in British society. I draw here on eighteen months’ ethnographic fieldwork conducted at St John’s (2010-2011).<sup>7</sup> Through exploring individuals’ different orientations towards the narrative of Christians being marginalized in the name of ‘equality’, I show how conservative evangelical subjectivities can be shaped both through norms of interaction formed through participation in the church and through the universalizing processes they encounter in the secular spaces outside the church. I suggest that reflecting on their engagements with ideas of equality also opens onto wider questions about the significance of conceptions of autonomy, heteronomy and personhood for how people experience their locations in public life. This invites attention to what William Connolly (2006) refers to as minor traditions of European Enlightenment, forms of rationality that both depart from *and* are simultaneously shaped by the turn to the self in modernity, and a sense of freedom held together with normative impulses towards obedience and submission.

### **Religious Freedom and Equality**

Debates about the nature of freedom and equality run deep in our imagining of what a pluralist democracy should be. As modernizing, de-differentiating processes of universalization are predicated on an ideal of equality and increasingly aim at extending equal human rights and freedoms to all, religions are typically seen as responding in one of two ways. Either they accommodate to this, or they resist, in an anachronistic re-inscription of traditionalist differentiated understandings of gender, sexuality and authoritarian relationships, potentially leading some to mobilize to defend their established ways of life if these are threatened (Casanova, 1994; Woodhead, 2002). It is often attitudes towards equality in relation to sexuality that becomes a particular marker of tension. Discussing processes of application for

---

<sup>7</sup> During this time, I attended weekly morning and evening Sunday services. I participated in two weekly Bible study groups, one for students and one for more established members of the congregation, and attended other church and social events with members of the church. I conducted more formal, open-ended interviews with thirty-two members of the church towards the end of the fieldwork.

This is an accepted manuscript of a chapter published in D. Llewellyn and S. Sharma (eds) *Religion, Equalities, and Inequalities*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 163-176

immigration in the Netherlands, in which applicants were asked to look at photographs of two men kissing and state whether they found the photos offensive, Judith Butler argues that those in favour of that policy ‘claim that acceptance of homosexuality is the same as acceptance of modernity. We can see... how modernity is being defined as linked to sexual freedom, and the sexual freedom of gay people in particular is understood to exemplify a culturally advanced position, as opposed to one that would be deemed pre-modern’ (2009, 105).

In recent years, as I have argued elsewhere (Strhan 2013a, 2013b, 2014), it has been possible to see this increasing tension surrounding questions of equality underlying the actions of a number of socially conservative British Christian groups who have argued that religious freedoms are being undermined in British society. The Christian Institute is one such group, campaigning – amongst other things – to defend the freedom of religion, which they describe as increasingly under threat. In 2009, they published ‘Marginalising Christians’, which positioned tensions over issues related to ‘equality’ as central within this narrative. The first page of this stated:

This growing sense of intolerance felt by Christians is made all the worse when they face hostility in the name of ‘equality and diversity’. Christians wonder why they are not being treated equally and why diversity does not include them. They feel that a hierarchy of rights has sprung up which leaves them bottom of the pile. This has led to a growing feeling that ‘equality and diversity’ is code for marginalising Christian beliefs.

(Christian Institute 2009, 5)

The Christian Institute claims that there has been a rise in cases of religious discrimination coming before employment tribunals, several of which have involved clashes related to sexuality and equality.<sup>8</sup> The Christian Legal Centre, together with Christian Concern, have also focused on bringing legal cases on behalf of Christians who claim to have been victims of religious discrimination, and acted on behalf of the Johns. Press releases from the Christian Legal Centre have led to wide reporting of these cases in national newspapers such as *The Daily Mail*, *The Mail on Sunday* and *The Daily Telegraph* (Walton et al. 2013, 54), contributing to this narrative of

---

<sup>8</sup> As Walton *et al.* (2013, 51) note, the Christian Institute were themselves responsible for bringing several of these.

This is an accepted manuscript of a chapter published in D. Llewellyn and S. Sharma (eds) *Religion, Equalities, and Inequalities*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 163-176

Christians being discriminated against in the name of ‘equality and diversity’, finding, for example, their public expressions of faith increasingly engendering hostility in secular workplaces.

Other Christians have contested these claims. In 2012, the ‘Christians in Parliament’ group carried out an inquiry into the extent to which Christians in public life experience marginalization. The report concluded that Christians in the UK might have grounds to feel marginalized, with ‘the frequency and nature of the [legal] cases indicating a *narrowing of the space* for the articulation, expression and demonstration of Christian belief’ (cited in Graham 2013, 172). Yet the report found that there was nothing approaching the ‘persecution’ that some claim:

In the United Kingdom Christians do not risk their life to meet to worship, are not prevented by the law from preaching and no do face the death penalty if they have converted from another faith. Whatever difficulties may be experienced by Christian in the UK, they are not comparable with those encountered by fellow believers in the world.

(ibid.)

With their traditionalist stance on gender and sexuality, we might perhaps expect members of St John’s to perceive themselves as increasingly marginalized in the name of equality and constrained in their public articulations of faith. Certainly, there were church members who had run into difficulties with employers or university tutors, for example, for expressing their faith commitments in public. Rebecca, a 22 year-old graduate who had attended St John’s throughout her time at university, got into trouble several times with her university tutors. She had set up a Bible study group for fellow students on her course after lectures, and gave a copy of Luke’s gospel to a student who attended, who then made an official complaint about this to her university course director. Later that year, students were given time during a lecture to chat by their lecturer, and Rebecca said that she had got her Bible out while chatting with a friend, and that the lecturer had humiliated her for doing this: ‘the lecturer... was really angry... He was like “this is science, not for fairy tales, would you put that away?”’ She received another disciplinary warning after a conversation about her faith over lunch with a Muslim student who made a complaint about this. She received another warning when a supervisor she invited to an evangelistic event

made a formal complaint against this, telling her that she had ‘crossed professional boundaries.’ Rebecca did not claim herself to be the victim of religious discrimination or try to publicize what had happened, but there were other students at St John’s on her course who were aware of what had happened to her, and the student curate mentioned these incidents one Sunday in a sermon.

James, an investment analyst I interviewed, also ran into difficulties in attempting to evangelize.<sup>9</sup> He had, together with his office’s Christian group, distributed an evangelistic pamphlet he’d written to all 1500 of his colleagues at his firm before work one morning. By 7.45 that morning, James had been summoned to company’s head of human resources, who, James told me, had said to him, “‘What you have done [James]” – these were his exact words – “is no different from giving people an invitation to join a Nazi rally, or an invitation to join a jihad...” He was absolutely furious, so I apologized for any sort of offence caused – it wasn’t meant to cause offence.’ The head of human resources told James that he had to go round to all his colleagues and apologize in case the pamphlet had caused anyone offence. James said that no-one had been offended by it, and said, ‘it took me about thirteen minutes to realize that this was just the best possible thing that could have happened, because it took me three and a half hours to go round the whole firm, and this was a work-sponsored opportunity to have one-on-one follow-up time with every single individual in the firm.’ When I asked him why he thought the head of human resources had found what he had done offensive, James narrativized his experience according to biblical idioms of Christians being persecuted: ‘Jesus promises that Christians will be opposed, and Christians will be persecuted and will be hated. So the response wasn’t a surprise.’

Ministers at St John’s often mentioned incidents such as these in sermons. We might expect this, together with the media prominence of cases such as the Johns, to encourage a sense amongst members of St John’s and other conservative evangelicals that Christians are being increasingly marginalized in public life. This narrative was certainly articulated by ministers in several sermons. In a sermon on ‘Secularism and Multiculturalism’, focusing on Daniel 3, David, the rector of St John’s, said to the congregation: ‘the New Testament refers to us as aliens and exiles in a foreign land. We’re not in the promised land and we live under pagan rulers, in a world under

---

<sup>9</sup> This incident is also discussed in Strhan 2013a.

This is an accepted manuscript of a chapter published in D. Llewellyn and S. Sharma (eds) *Religion, Equalities, and Inequalities*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 163-176

God's judgment.' He described multiculturalism as 'a new political doctrine that pretends to be what it is not, using all sorts of right-on labels, like diversity, tolerance, equality, in order to pretend that everybody is free to practice their culture in our liberal society'. 'We're not really multiculturalist', he went on, and said that laws provide a framework 'where cultures can co-exist up to a point. And through our beliefs we recognize that some things are bad and some things are good, and so we impose the values of our faith system upon the citizens of a nation through a legal system.' He then said that this led to particular forms of exclusion:

Some secularists, in their ardent, you might say fundamentalist pursuit of their faith system - under the cover of multiculturalism that sounds so diverse with the claims to equality and liberality - seek to ban the freedom of speech, both by ejecting certain people from the public square ... or by refusing to allow some people to speak at all. Now I don't want to rehearse that to you, you work in offices where freedom of speech is banned, and you work for government health organizations and education institutions that are illiberal, secularist, and now prepared to allow you to speak freely and openly.

He related this sense of a secularist public sphere to the experiences of members of the congregation:

This Wednesday I had lunch with three business guys ... and each one spoke of incidents in the last five years where they'd been summoned to give account and reprimanded for things they had said to colleagues about Jesus. Multicultural liberal diversity? No, illiberal, intolerant, secularist fundamentalism. This is not multiculturalism or liberal diversity. It is totalitarian. And let me say, it is exceedingly dangerous ... because in your secularist fundamentalism, ... you ban from the public sphere the possibility of discussing and openly criticizing and weighing and condemning the relative value and truth claims and moral values as to what is good and bad in the different religions and no religion. And ... you make it impossible for people to say, oh actually, we think that is wrong, sinful, bad for society and untrue, and that is a very, very dangerous position for a culture to end up in. And yet the brainwashed automata of the liberal establishment march, almost zombie-like

with their politically correct ideals towards the ideal of western secularism, and bow down.

He gave examples of how he saw this exclusion working out in practice:

Here is a head teacher who proudly presides over a secularist school. She will not allow the relative merits and truth claims of one religion over another or over no religion to take place ... on the grounds of 'diversity' ... Here's the dean of a Cambridge college, the students are organizing a mission to explain and openly, publicly promote the truth of the Christian faith. They're knocking on the doors of their fellow students, offering a copy of Mark's gospel. And the dean of the college, on the grounds of diversity, bans the handing out of gospels. Here is the HR department of the National Health, the hospital, the education system. And somebody speaks to a patient, or a friend, or a colleague, about the truth claims of Christianity, they're summoned to the HR department.

David's sermon encouraged members of the church to expect hostility if they attempted to speak of their faith 'openly and publicly' to others. In other sermons, he explicitly framed this as arising because of tensions with norms of equality, asking the congregation, 'are you not finding that to speak openly of your faith, to make mention publicly of your views of sexuality, or gender, or other faiths, the absolute supremacy of Christ and the impossibility of salvation through any other religion..., are you not finding that as you say these kinds of things, you're facing increasing hostility?'

David's words index a sense of conservative evangelical teachings increasingly rubbing up against universalizing de-differentiating norms and a narrative of modernity which, as Judith Butler argues, is articulated in terms of a 'certain progressive account of increasing freedoms' (2009, 109), most often in relation to sexual freedoms. David explicitly articulated this uneasy relationship between conservative evangelicalism and progressive secular modernity in another sermon on gender and sexuality, stating: '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?'

Although it is issues related to sexuality that most frequently command attention in conservative evangelicals' relations with liberals, other social norms

This is an accepted manuscript of a chapter published in D. Llewellyn and S. Sharma (eds) *Religion, Equalities, and Inequalities*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 163-176

predicated on hierarchy rather than more equal, horizontal democratized relationships were also perceived as flashpoints of tension. In the sphere of family life, church leaders taught that the family should be ordered under the headship of the husband, with the wife submitting to him and the children obeying both parents. This is a broadly typical marker of conservative evangelical cultures. Bryan Turner notes that in the United States, conservative evangelicals have also since the 1980s reasserted the importance of male headship, and this assertion ‘was seen to be a necessary step in restoring the family that is in turn seen to be fundamental to the continuity of Christianity and to the health of the nation’ (2011, 81). At St John’s, this emphasis on obedience was seen as increasingly countercultural. David said in a sermon on family relationships: ‘I’m aware that this cuts right across the trend of much of our culture, which at its worst extreme has enthroned a child’s individual rights above that of their God-given duty to their parents’. This idea of ‘rightly-ordered’ hierarchical relationships extended not just to family relationships, but was seen in terms of a cosmic order including a recognition of ‘the rule of God’, so that familial relationships were ‘a working out of the redeemed community, restored order, with the anarchy of Genesis 3 now, under Christ, put back in its proper place and overturned.’

The tensions conservative evangelicals experience in relation to equality should be seen as bound up with this sense that their impulses towards submission and obedience to a divine authority – which is then reflected in their ideas of submission in church and family life - were increasingly at odds with more horizontal cultural norms of autonomy and self-determination. David said in one sermon, ‘what stops people accepting God is that they don’t want to submit to Him. When it comes down to it, they don’t want someone else deciding how they should live, their autonomy is too important to them ... This is what we call sin’. Church members also articulated this sense. In one of the Bible study group discussions I observed, Hannah, a group leader asked the group what they would avoid mentioning as possible ‘costs’ of Christianity to people considering becoming Christians. One member, Emily answered, ‘obedience and rules’. Alistair, another group leader, said, ‘I think it really is very countercultural. We live in a society that really stresses autonomy, our being our own bosses and doing things *our* own way, so the idea of living in obedience to God just really goes against everything that our culture tells us. I don’t think it was that way fifty years ago’. Emily then said that faith means ‘living in a way that is not

This is an accepted manuscript of a chapter published in D. Llewellyn and S. Sharma (eds) *Religion, Equalities, and Inequalities*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 163-176

about living for me, but about living for Jesus, doing what *He* wants. If I think of most of my colleagues, they're pretty egotistical, to be honest, and living with Jesus as Lord would seem quite different from their ideas of freedom'. This is not to say that members of St John's did not also value freedom, but that their conception of freedom was different from the ideal of self-determination emphasized in liberal political philosophy, such that, as theologian Graham Ward describes, 'what characterizes this Christian agent is a surrender, a sacrifice' (2009, 185). There are also affinities here with Kant's conceptualization of morality and the self. Although Kant is often seen as the pre-eminent Enlightenment figure marking a cultural shift towards the autonomy of the human over heteronomous submission to God, Connolly describes how we might also see in Kant's writing a 'minor tradition' of Enlightenment, through his emphasis on obedience to the moral law within the self as intrinsic to rationality, a cultivation of surrender as integral to freedom (Connolly 2006, 81).

Yet despite this sense of increasing tension between conservative evangelical moral teachings emphasizing norms of obedience, and universalizing, de-differentiating processes of modernization, the ways members of the church negotiated their engagements with ideas of equality in their everyday lives was at times more ambiguous.

### **Ambiguous Engagements with Equality**

While ministers at St John's described equalities legislation and diversity policies in a narrative locating Britain as moving away from its Christian cultural heritage and towards a secularist modernity inhospitable to their values, as Butler (2009) describes, members of the church did not necessarily feel likewise. One young lawyer invited me to an event in her firm on 'Faith and Ethics' in the workplace, where they had invited an evangelical minister, a rabbi and an imam to talk. She said that events like these, and the fact her firm's Christian group were allowed to use office rooms and advertise in the newsletter, were a direct result of her firm's diversity policy. Other church members I interviewed described diversity policies as a good thing in preventing discrimination against gay colleagues.

While church leaders described a paradigmatic, heroic evangelical subject who speaks publicly about her faith – including expressing countercultural viewpoints

This is an accepted manuscript of a chapter published in D. Llewellyn and S. Sharma (eds) *Religion, Equalities, and Inequalities*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 163-176

on gender and sexuality even if this will engender hostility - most church members felt anxious speaking about issues where their faith rubbed up against norms of equality. Many articulated their rationale for avoiding these issues as saying that they would prefer to talk about 'more positive aspects' of faith, for example, an accountant who lived with a gay housemate and said she had never mentioned her beliefs about sexuality to him. A trader I interviewed said that talking about sexuality with non-Christians would be 'the wrong way round to start a discussion ... I don't expect somebody to accept a biblical morality if they haven't accepted God is God ... Why should they? I don't think it works to preach a morality. The first thing to do is for them to recognize who God is, and *if* they do that, *then* what is said [in the Bible regarding sexuality] has to be reckoned with.' Gemma, a teaching assistant, said it would be wrong for her to be judgmental of non-Christian colleagues for not behaving according to Christian teaching: 'If they're not Christians, there's no reason for them to be living otherwise, the internal consistency of their own lifestyle makes perfect sense'. Lucy, a member of the church staff, said she wouldn't want to address the issue of unmarried cohabitation with non-Christian friends: 'I wouldn't feel comfortable, if they're not Christians, saying they ought to change what they're doing'.

Therefore although organizations such as Christian Concern argue for the rights of Christians to express their beliefs publicly, and encourage the public articulation of faith through campaigns like the 'Not Ashamed' campaign,<sup>10</sup> members of St John's had rather more ambivalent engagement with these ideals. The unwillingness of many church members to talk about these issues outside the church suggests that running in tension with a 'prophetic' ideal in which these moral norms are understood as universally applicable, a principle of toleration also shapes their subjectivities, so that expressing their views is felt as impinging on the other's right to live according to their own private, moral norms. Through seeing non-Christians' morality as essentially none of their business, and emphasizing the pragmatic impetus to focus on 'more positive' aspects of their faith, church members are able to make coherent sense of the seeming tension indexed in their reluctance to speak with non-Christians about issues where their moral viewpoints are in tension with norms of equality. Research by Anderson *et al.* (2011) with evangelicals in New York City

---

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.notashamed.org.uk/> (accessed 27 June 2014)

demonstrating similar engagements with LGBT groups indicates that this pragmatic norm of tolerance shapes lived encounters in other urban settings likewise.

Some members of St John's had experienced more uncomfortable moments when colleagues had directly asked about their views on some of these issues. Jo, a physiotherapist in her early twenties, described a time when a colleague had asked her, in front of other colleagues, what she thought about the widely-reported case of the Bulls, the bed and breakfast owners who were taken to court by a couple in a civil partnership, Steven Preddy and Martyn Hall, for refusing to allow them a double room.<sup>11</sup> She said she had replied 'people can have a personal view, but we should abide by the law', and when asked directly what her views on homosexuality were, she had said, 'I have views', without revealing what those were, adding, 'I was a bit chicken about it.'

Other members of the church were, like Liz, more explicitly critical about efforts to make tensions over equality focal issues in evangelicals' political engagements. When I asked Alastair about relations between faith and equality legislation, he said 'it's still too early to know exactly what the effects will be.' He said he did think that when people talk about equal rights, 'it's the rights of Christians that get pushed to the bottom of the pile.' Yet he said that there was a problem with organizations focusing their campaigns on this, in that they 'tend to be very negative about everything'. He added that there was also a problem in this 'getting framed around protecting the family, as if that's distinctively Christian. It doesn't reflect the views of Christians who struggle with same-sex attraction, or those who are, like me, single and heterosexual.' He also said that 'the most important difference to people's lives is not whether family values are upheld, but whether they are in a relationship with God.' He expressed a classical liberal political sensibility, saying that government 'should not tell people how to live, but give me the freedom to live as I choose without interference with others.' He said that while defending freedom of speech was important, some of the issues that some groups have been defending 'are not worth the effort... It's worth challenging someone's dismissal if that's unjust, but it is not worth fighting for the right to wear a cross at work.'

---

<sup>11</sup> Preddy and Hall v Bull and Bull (2011) Bristol County Court, 18 January 2011, [online] <http://www.judiciary.gov.uk/Resources/JCO/Documents/Judgments/hall-preddy-bull-judgment.pdf> (accessed 16 August 2012).

It is worth noting, however, that although a small number of church members expressed disagreement with the church's teaching on issues related to equality (for example, in relation to opposition to women bishops), this was a small minority within the congregation. Individuals' reluctance to speak about such issues (in contrast with their leaders' willingness to preach about them) indicates differences in their and their leaders' symbolic investment in these particular moral issues. Yet in small group discussions, it was taken for granted that members agreed with the church's stated positions on issues such as gender and sexuality, for example, their teachings on male headship. This is in part related to the urban context of St John's. With other evangelical churches in relative proximity, if individuals disagreed with the church's position on these issues, they moved on to a more liberal church. When I asked one of the curates about this, he said that at St John's 'we set the bar high in terms of our requirements about belief', and that people who left the church were not necessarily moving away from Christianity, but to churches that were 'less demanding'. The urban setting of St John's therefore contributes to its relative homogeneity in terms of practice and culture and a greater sense of detachment from other more liberal churches, both in the local area and throughout London.

## **Conclusion**

Stereotypical portraits of conservative evangelicals perceiving themselves as marginalized increasingly circulate in the wider public imagination, and if we look at the statements of evangelical leaders and the work of groups such as Christian Concern, it is easy to see why. Yet ethnographic focus on the practices of members of St John's complicates straightforward narratives of evangelical mobilization. Studying their practices across different spaces enables us to understand their subjectivities as formed through the complex intersection of traditionalist teachings on gender and sexuality in tension with universalizing norms of equality, their simultaneous inhabiting of liberal, pluralist spaces outside the church that shape their sensibilities as in many ways secular, and their sense of relationality with God and each other.<sup>12</sup> Norms of equality make moral claims on how they articulate their faith

---

<sup>12</sup> For more on their sense of relationship with God and each other in relation to this, see Strhan forthcoming.

This is an accepted manuscript of a chapter published in D. Llewellyn and S. Sharma (eds) *Religion, Equalities, and Inequalities*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 163-176

across different social spaces, with the result that they do not necessarily want to fight the battles that some socially conservative Christians groups are calling them towards.

The actual engagements of members of these churches with ideas of equality are rather more subtle therefore than they are often represented. Hannah was somewhat sanguine about the changing cultural location of Christianity, saying:

I think Christians-, we have had a state of affairs for a long time, and that state of affairs no longer exists, and I wonder whether it's right to go on demanding that ... You know, the blasphemy laws are hugely weighted in favour of Christians, and maybe that's inappropriate now. Maybe it's inappropriate for Christians to say that we shouldn't have to listen to blasphemy... Some of the things, I just wonder whether we've had a glorious hundred years or whatever it is, and maybe it's moved on, maybe we need to learn as Christians to live in an alien world, and to accept it's going to lead to as it does in so many other parts of the world it's going to lead to persecution.

This expectation of a coming persecution, together with a sense of becoming increasingly countercultural, were common narrative threads, as individuals learnt to understand their hierarchical understanding of relationships within society and with God as increasingly at odds with wider society.

Further ethnographic research on the practical engagement of members of different religious groups with issues of equality across different social spaces has the potential to open up the salience of conservative religious beliefs seemingly in tension with norms of equality in practically shaping individuals' social interactions. Although members of St John's sometimes articulated a narrative of Christians being marginalized, most in practice did not want to transgress the implicit public / private binaries shaping norms of interaction to allow an ethic of toleration, however minimal. Focusing on how their lived experiences and practices interrelate with and respond to norms of freedom and equality and with ideas of the public sphere troubles simplistic liberal stereotypes of conservative evangelical otherness. It also invites attention to how we think about modes of public rationality and culture in relation to forms of religious life that conceptualize the social order and the human subject according to norms of submission and obedience primarily, rather than according to the horizontal norms of individual autonomy and freedom that pervade contemporary society.

This is an accepted manuscript of a chapter published in D. Llewellyn and S. Sharma (eds) *Religion, Equalities, and Inequalities*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 163-176

Rather than thinking of these cultures primarily as antagonistic reactions against modernity, perhaps we might find ways to consider what it might mean to attend to alternative, minor traditions of Enlightenment thought (Connolly 2006, 92) in which modes of obedience are not necessarily held in tension with ideals of freedom and toleration, and thus explore possibilities for what it means to develop a deeper, more multidimensional - and perhaps more agonistic - pluralism in the late modern age.

### **Acknowledgements**

This research was supported by the Leverhulme Trust, under the Early Career Fellowship Award Scheme, and my doctoral fieldwork was funded by a University of Kent doctoral studentship.

### **Cited**

Anderson, J. R.M. Vanderbeck, G. Valentine, K. Ward and J. Sadgrove. 2011. New York encounters: religion, sexuality, and the city, *Environment and Planning A* 43, 618-33.

Butler, J. 2009. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.

Casanova, J. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Connolly, W. E. 2006. Europe: A Minor Tradition, in *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, edited by D. Scott and C. Hirschkind. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

The Christian Institute. 2009. *Marginalising Christians: Instances of Christians being sidelined in modern Britain*. Newcastle: Christian Institute.

GAFCON. 2009. *Being Faithful: The Shape of Historic Anglicanism Today*. London: Latimer Trust.

This is an accepted manuscript of a chapter published in D. Llewellyn and S. Sharma (eds) *Religion, Equalities, and Inequalities*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 163-176

Graham, E. 2013. *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Christian Theology in a Post-Secular Age*. London: SCM Press.

McKinnon, A.M., M. Trzebiatowska and C.C. Brittain. 2011. Bourdieu, Capital and Conflict in a Religious Field: The Case of the 'Homosexuality' Conflict in the Anglican Communion, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 26(3), 355-70.

Sadgrove, J., R.M. Vanderbeck, K. Ward, G. Valentine and J.

Andersson. 2010. Constructing the boundaries of Anglican orthodoxy: an analysis of the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON), *Religion* 40(3), 193-206.

Strhan, A. 2013a. The Metropolis and Evangelical Life: Coherence and Fragmentation in the "lost city of London", *Religion* 43(3), 331-52.

Strhan, A. 2013b. Christianity and the City: Simmel, Space, and Urban Subjectivities. *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 4, 125-49.

Strhan, A. 2014. English Evangelicals, Equality and the City, in *Globalized Religion and Sexual Identity: Contexts, Contestations, Voices*, edited by H. Shipley, Leiden: Brill.

Strhan, A. Forthcoming 2015. *Aliens and Strangers? The Struggle for Coherence in the Everyday Lives of Evangelicals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Turner, B. 2011. *Religion and Modern Society: Citizenship, Secularisation and the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walton, A. with A. Hatcher and N. Spencer. 2013. *Is there a 'Religious Right' Emerging in Britain?* London: Theos.

Ward, G. 2009. *The Politics of Discipleship*. London: SCM Press.

This is an accepted manuscript of a chapter published in D. Llewellyn and S. Sharma (eds) *Religion, Equalities, and Inequalities*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 163-176

Woodhead, L. 2002. 'Introduction: Studying Religion and Modernity', in *Religions in the Modern World*, edited by L. Woodhead, P. Fletcher, H. Kawanami, D. Smith. London: Routledge.