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Evangelicals, evolution, and inerrancy: a comparative study of congregational boundary work

Amy Unsworth  and Elaine Howard Ecklund

ABSTRACT

A number of evangelical Christian denominations and networks uphold a specific doctrine of Scripture, stating that the Bible is the ‘inerrant’ word of God. Those who adhere to biblical inerrancy tend to reject literary interpretations of the creation accounts in the Bible and therefore to reject evolutionary theory. Indeed, evolution rejection frequently functions as a key boundary for biblical inerrantists that must be strictly maintained. In this comparative study, we analyse interview data and other materials to uncover the mechanisms by which evolution rejection as a boundary is strengthened, maintained or weakened within two evangelical church congregations that adhere to biblical inerrancy: one in London, UK, the other in Texas, US. We find significant differences in boundary work between the two congregations and consider how the interplay of three factors—1) orientation of the congregation (internal or external), 2) religious context (minority or majority), 3) boundary salience—may lead to boundary strengthening or weakening.

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Introduction

In America, I use England as the example of how bad America’s going to get if they keep going the way that they are. And so I say, “You want to know . . . what’s going to happen to America if you don’t stand on God’s Word and stop compromising God’s Word?” I say, “You wanna know how bad it’s going to be? OK, you look over there at England, ‘cause that’s how bad it’s going to get. (Ken Ham, founder and CEO of “Answers in Genesis”, which owns the Creation Museum in Kentucky, transcribed from a talk at “Tadbury Evangelical Church”)

The words of young earth creationist Ken Ham highlight just how important the issue of evolution can be for some. In Ham’s view, acceptance of evolution was largely responsible for the decline in Christian belief in England and he wants to prevent the same happening in the United States. For him, the rejection of evolution is a key boundary for ‘true’ Christians that must be strictly maintained.

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While it is clear from survey data that some Christians, particularly those from conservative evangelical traditions, do indeed reject evolution, previous studies have not explored how such a *boundary*—a demarcation between ‘us’ and ‘them’—is strengthened and maintained within a church congregation and if there are circumstances under which it might be weakened. Furthermore, there are no comparative studies that examine differences in boundary work around the issue of evolution in different national contexts.

Here we examine boundary strengthening and weakening mechanisms with regard to the issue of evolution in two conservative evangelical congregations that both uphold the specific doctrine of biblical inerrancy. “Tadbury Evangelical” (pseudonym) is located in the UK where conservative evangelicals form a very small minority within the population, whereas “Fourth Baptist” (pseudonym) is located in Texas in the US where conservative evangelicals wield considerably greater influence.

This study makes both empirical and theoretical contributions to existing literature. Empirically, we demonstrate some of the mechanisms by which boundaries are established, maintained, and weakened within a church congregation. Theoretically, we suggest how congregational boundary work may be connected with three factors: 1) whether the church is *internally* or *externally oriented*, 2) the religious context in which the congregation is located, for example, whether it is a *majority* or *minority religious context*, 3) the boundary salience.

Background

The doctrine of inerrancy

Evangelicalism can be defined in various ways, but all definitions tend to acknowledge the centrality of the Bible to evangelicals (Bebbington 2003; Larsen 2007; Lindsay 2007). In this study, we investigate two evangelical congregations who subscribe to the doctrine of *biblical inerrancy*—the belief that the Protestant Bible is without error. The doctrine of inerrancy was developed at Princeton Theological Seminary by Presbyterian scholars, including B. B. Warfield (1851–1921) (Steinacher 2010, 1161) who was one of many authors who contributed to *The Fundamentals*. Considered to be the founding documents of fundamentalist Christianity, *The Fundamentals* were written to defend conservative Protestant theology against the perceived threat of critical and literary ways of studying Scripture that were emerging among German academics. Later, the atrocities of the First World War, together with the linking of evolutionary theory with German militarism, galvanised fundamentalist William Jennings-Bryan to undertake a national campaign against the teaching of evolution (Numbers 2006, 56–57; Marsden 2006, 170).

This issue was, and has remained, central to the so-called ‘culture wars’ in the US (Hunter 1992).

The “International Council on Biblical Inerrancy” (ICBI) was founded by Norman Geisler to “clarify and defend the doctrine of biblical inerrancy”, which culminated in the signing and publishing of the “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” in 1978. Article XII of the Statement asserts that “Scripture in its entirety is inerrant” and specifically states that scientific hypotheses must not be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood (ICBI 1978). According to this view, accepting Scripture as inerrant necessitates rejecting evolutionary theory. In contrast, higher criticism and evolution were not widely opposed in Britain and the doctrine of inerrancy was not widely propagated (Bebbington 2013, 358).

Scientific Creationism and Intelligent Design

From the 1960s, religiously motivated rejection of evolution in the US increasingly came to mean Young Earth Creationism (YEC)—the idea that the earth is no more than 10,000 years old. This idea relied heavily on the scientific-sounding arguments of ‘flood geology’ popularised by John Whitcomb and Henry Morris’s book *The Genesis Flood* (1961). The 1980s and 1990s saw the development of Intelligent Design (ID), another form of anti-evolutionism that revived a much older argument from design (Bowler 2009, 211) and has attempted to gather a broad range of anti-evolutionists under a ‘big tent’ (Numbers 2006, 380). Proponents claim that it is an evidence-based scientific theory that points towards the existence of an intelligent designer and casts doubt on naturalistic accounts of evolution (ibid, 373). They have enjoyed some success in persuading people that a serious scientific controversy exists concerning evolutionary theory and that publicly funded schools therefore have a duty to “Teach the Controversy”.¹ Most key advocates of ID accept the idea of long geological ages—an old earth (ibid, 377). It is important to note here that both YEC and ID movements appeal to the authority of science to a very great extent.

Evangelicals and symbolic boundaries

Christian Smith and Michael Emerson argue that creating a sense of sub-cultural distinction is central to evangelicalism’s vitality in pluralistic societies and that evangelicals achieve this by creating and maintaining symbolic boundaries between themselves and relevant outgroups. In this way, those who hold different religious beliefs, or none at all, can be used as faith-reinforcing negative reference groups (Smith and Emerson 1998, 104–105). It is particularly important for evangelicals to maintain orthodoxy in areas of symbolic importance; the authority of the Bible is thus a key tenet for evangelicals (Reimer 2003, 80). Given that an inerrant reading of the

Bible (according to the Chicago Statement) requires rejection of evolution, anti-evolutionism can function as an important symbolic boundary because it marks out those who hold to an inerrant view of Scripture and those who do not.

Comparative congregational studies of Evangelicalism

Individuals learn particular ways of interpreting the Bible within interpretive communities (Malley 2011; Hempel and Bartkowski 2008; Bartkowski 1996; Franzen and Griebel 2013; Rogers 2013). It is therefore important not to focus solely on individuals as the unit of analysis, but also to take into account the social processes through which people's beliefs are formed and maintained within their communities of faith—their congregations. After all, the congregation can be a very significant mediator between the individual and the religious tradition with which that individual is affiliated (Demerath and Farnsley 2007, 193). Congregations have been classified in various ways according to their differing priorities. Jay Demerath and Arthur Farnsley (2007, 198) have helpfully summarised these classifications and used them to suggest four ideal types (in the Weberian sense): congregations that are *externally* oriented are classified as *Community Outreach* or *Conversionist* depending on whether their focus is this-worldly or other-worldly, respectively, while *internally* oriented congregations are classified as either *Customer Service* or *Cloistered*. This study focuses on two *Conversionist* congregations in which church growth is a priority.

There is a large literature on creationism, including, for example, numerous educational studies (see the journal *Evolution: Education and Outreach*), studies of the Creation Museum in Kentucky (Butler 2010; Homchick 2009; Oberlin 2014; Trollinger and Trollinger 2016), analysis of creationist texts (Locke 2014; Aechtner 2014), creationist study groups (Toumey 1994) and conferences (Rosenhouse 2012), historical studies (Numbers 2006; Moran 2011; Larson 2008), numerous analyses of survey data (Miller, Scott, and Okamoto 2006; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Baker 2012; Hill 2014; Unsworth and Voas 2018; Village and Baker 2013; Ecklund and Scheitle 2017; Aechtner and Buchanan 2018; Baker, Rogers, and Moser 2018), and an examination of creationism in different contexts in the English-speaking world (Coleman and Carlin 2004). However, there are few qualitative congregational studies concerned with creationism; one exception is Esther Chan and Elaine Howard Ecklund's study of mainline and evangelical Protestant understandings of evolution and miracles (Chan and Ecklund 2016). We are therefore missing important information about how and why evangelicals create, maintain or weaken evolution rejection as a boundary between those they consider to be 'true' Bible-believing Christians and everyone else. In this study, we examine boundary strengthening and weakening mechanisms with

regard to the issue of evolution in two different conservative evangelical congregations, both of which uphold the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, one in the UK, the other in Texas, US.

Conservative evangelicalism in minority and majority contexts: the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches in Britain and the Southern Baptist Convention in the US

Although the doctrine of inerrancy did not make a significant impact on British evangelicalism, it did not go entirely unnoticed. In 1922, Edward J. Poole-Connor tried to promote a British fundamentalist movement by launching what later became the “Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches” (FIEC); today, this is the only significant organisation that upholds the specific doctrine of inerrancy (Holmes 2009). There are currently only 567 FIEC congregations (see <https://fiec.org.uk/>, accessed 8 September 2017) of approximately 49,000 church congregations in Britain (Brierley 2014). The FIEC is therefore a religious tradition that is very much in the minority in Britain and always has been, although it has reported some growth in recent years (ibid).

In the US, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) also upholds the doctrine of inerrancy. In stark contrast to the FIEC in Britain, the SBC is large and wields considerable cultural authority. Barry Hankins has argued that, for much of the twentieth century, the theologically conservative SBC was close to being “coterminous with society” and that Southern Baptist life in the South amounted to being part of a cultural ethnicity (Hankins 1997). According to the Pew Religious Landscape Survey of 2014, 70.6% of the US population identify as Christian, with the largest tradition being Evangelical Protestant (25.4% of the total population), within which the SBC forms the single largest denomination. For brevity, we classify Tadbury Evangelical in the UK as existing in a *minority* religious context with regard to conservative evangelicalism and Fourth Baptist in Texas as located in a *majority* context.

Attitudes to evolution in the US and Britain

According to the Pew Religious Landscape Survey of 2014, 58% of Southern Baptists (compared to 34% of US adults) reject evolution, selecting the option “Humans and other living things have existed in their present form since the beginning of time”. Among Independent Evangelicals in Britain (evangelicals not belonging to Anglican, Pentecostal or historic Free Church denominations), 37% believe the world was created in six 24-hour days, 46% reject plant and animal evolution, and 69% (compared to 11.6% of British adults) reject human evolution (Unsworth and Voas 2018). There is greater evolution rejection among those affiliated with these evangelical denominations than the national

averages, with a particularly large difference between Independent Evangelicals and the UK national average; despite this, there is also considerable variation in views, which led us to ask the research questions below.

Research questions

Given that frequency of religious service attendance is correlated with evolution rejection (e.g. Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Unsworth and Voas 2018), we were interested in the role that congregations might play in determining the strength or salience of evolution rejection as a boundary and in the way these boundaries might be formed, maintained or weakened. We studied two different congregations that both adhere to the theological doctrine of scriptural inerrancy, but are located in different contexts: one in a London suburb in the UK, the other in an urban area of a large city in Texas, US.

We found that evolution rejection was maintained as a strong boundary at Fourth Baptist Church in Texas through the use of distinctive discourses that focused heavily on scientific authority and ‘facts’. In contrast, active efforts had been made at Tadbury Evangelical Church in the UK to re-draw boundaries so that those who accepted evolution were no longer placed outside the bounds of conservative evangelicalism. We suggest possible reasons for these differences based on the different priorities and contexts of the two congregations.

Data and method

We conducted and analysed 19 interviews at Fourth Baptist Church, a Southern Baptist church in an urban area of a large city in Texas, in 2011–2012, and 22 interviews at Tadbury Evangelical Church, a church belonging to the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) network, located in a London suburb, in 2014. The two congregations had been selected on the basis of their similarity across a number of variables. As discussed above, the Southern Baptists uphold a doctrine of biblical inerrancy,² as does the FIEC,³ and the web sites of both churches link to their denominations’ doctrinal statements, including the statement on inerrancy. Both churches were white majority and located in relatively affluent areas. Both had large congregations for their contexts, with respective weekly worship attendances of over 5,000 (classified as a megachurch) and 350–400 (classified as a ‘larger church’ in the British context (Brierley 2009)). Both congregations were focused on growth and reported growth in numbers at the time of the study, suggesting they were externally oriented, and both were clearly other-worldly in their focus. According to Demerath and Farnsley’s classification, this makes both congregations *Conversionist* (a point we discuss below). The worship style at both churches was contemporary, but not charismatic. The Senior Pastor of

each church came from the US (somewhat surprisingly in the case of the UK church) and had been trained in theologically conservative seminaries that adhered to the specific theological doctrine of inerrancy.

Participants were mainly recruited to the study using a snowball (or chain referral) sampling method, not according to levels of scientific knowledge or personal interest in science. Permission was obtained from senior church leaders to carry out the study; these leaders were the first to be interviewed, then other leaders, both clergy and lay, were interviewed in both churches. The senior church leaders knew the identities of some, but by no means all the participants interviewed subsequently. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, covering a variety of topics related to science, including views of evolution.

Both churches made sermons available online; the sermons that covered the subject of creation in the first chapters of Genesis were transcribed and analysed. Where several respondents from the same congregation referred to a source external to their own church, such as a book or film, these were also analysed if publicly available.

All materials were analysed by an inductive approach using the NVivo software package. Transcripts were read repeatedly to identify major themes and then coded using these themes. During this process, new codes emerged and all transcripts were re-analysed using all the codes that had been developed. In the section reporting the results, we list the number of responses that fit into themes to demonstrate the validity of the theme and its ability to be generalised to the group of respondents we studied.

Results

In this article, we analyse how people in the two congregations framed the relationship between their faith and evolution, using boundary work as our analytical frame (Lamont and Molnar 2002; Ecklund, Park, and Sorrell 2011). We found clear examples of boundary strengthening mechanisms, which included both using and deconstructing the authority of science. We also found clear examples of boundary weakening mechanisms, such as offering a choice of different-but-equal positions regarding creation and evolution as well as simple avoidance of the topic. We also consider the circumstances under which boundary weakening or strengthening is likely to occur.

Boundary strengthening mechanisms

Boundary strengthening mechanisms were in general fairly distinctive. We describe below two dominant boundary strengthening discourses.

'Sciencey discourses': using the authority of science

Interestingly, we found that the most prevalent and easily recognizable boundary strengthening mechanism was to use the authority of science, usually by using technical jargon or numerical facts, to 'prove' the correctness of beliefs about divine creation. We refer to discourses that use scientific 'facts' and terminology *for the purpose of legitimating ideological positions* (Lewis 2011) as *sciencey discourses*. This mechanism was heavily employed at Fourth Baptist in Texas. The most frequently employed of these sciencey discourses (by 12 out of 19 respondents) was the use of the specific terms 'micro-' and 'macro-evolution' when talking about evolution. Respondents stated that, while they accepted that species could adapt through a process of micro-evolution, they did not accept macro-evolution, as illustrated by the following quote from a young woman who was a pre-med graduate student:

There's micro-evolution and there's macro-evolution. What I don't believe in is macro-evolution. Micro is just small changes in a population, things that adapt you to that environment. But I don't believe in macro, as in species changing to other species. I feel like when God made creation, he made them each a distinct animal type or insect type or species. (USEvang_INT12)

These terms created a clear cut-off point for the amount of evolution deemed acceptable by these evangelicals, although the idea that a clear boundary exists between micro- and macro-evolution would be rejected by the majority of evolutionary biologists. During an interview with two religious leaders at Fourth Baptist Church, one made a direct link between the church's acceptance of biblical inerrancy and necessary rejection of (macro-)evolution:

I don't think that there's a ton [of people] that would be at our church that would believe in macro-evolution. And even if they were, they probably wouldn't be throwing it out there very often... It's kind of hard to have that worldview and adhere to our statement of faith. That the Bible is God's word and it has no error and it's true and that it pertains to how we live life and how we view the world. (USEvang_INT01)

This indicates that evolution rejection is an important and active boundary for this interviewee.

Many at Tadbury Evangelical adhered to a position similar to the majority view at Fourth Baptist: they accepted change and adaptation within species, but not evolution from one species to another. However, respondents at Tadbury tended to describe this in their own words rather than using an identifiable sciencey discourse; for example, a retired 87-year-old stated:

Well, I believe in evolution to a degree . . . because you've only got to go and look around you and you can see that things change . . . but I don't think that it's evolution as the evolutionists would say . . . that everything has evolved from a fish or from something like that. (UK-INT40-EV)

Several others talked about the implausibility of one species evolving into another, but only 3 of the 22 respondents used the specific terms 'micro-' and 'macro-evolution'.

The other very distinctive sciencey discourse referred to the evidence for design. Nine respondents at Fourth Baptist talked of this, with three specifically referring to sermon(s) preached by the church's senior pastor 'Pastor Steve' (pseudonym)—for example, this young man who was a sales/marketing director for a software company:

[Pastor Steve] talked about different things, like how perfectly set the earth is within the solar system, how it's on a certain axis at a certain degree and, if it was slightly off by this much, the whole earth would be fried. And it's not just like these are theories, these are like factual evidence that have been proven, which I just love. (USEvang_INT07)

These sciencey discourses were tightly coupled to what was preached by Pastor Steve. He had spent three consecutive weeks preaching sermons on the subject of creation in late 2010. Transcription and analysis of these sermons revealed that Pastor Steve used multiple numerical facts about the universe to substantiate the idea that the order found in the natural world is evidence of a creator. These facts were also listed in the printed sermon "listening guide" with sources referred to in footnotes. This gave the appearance of scientific authority, although the only sources cited were *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Manning 2005) and *Reasons for Believing* by former SBC apologist Frank Harber (1998). After Pastor Steve recounted each incredible-sounding fact, he posed this question to his congregation: "Design or chance?" He used this rhetorical device 10 times in his second sermon on Genesis 1 and a further 16 times in his third sermon, creating a strong impression that 'design' was the only rational conclusion to draw upon hearing the scientific evidence. It is interesting to note that the sermons were not primarily dedicated to the way Scripture points to a Creator God, but to the way *science* does this.

After Pastor Steve had presented the list of facts as evidence for design, he concluded that his position as a creationist was the one that required less faith:

I do not have enough faith to be an atheist. I just don't. You take steps of faith in religion, yes. No question. Without faith, it's impossible to please God. You take steps of faith in evolution. Yes! And I submit to you that the step of faith of evolution is more than the step of faith of religion. (Pastor Steve, Fourth Baptist Church, TX)

The phrase 'I don't have enough faith to be an atheist', which was repeated several times by Pastor Steve in his sermons, is the title of a book by Norman

Geisler, founder of the “International Council on Biblical Inerrancy”, and Frank Turek. One respondent told us that the book had been the subject of study in one of the adult education classes at Fourth Baptist. The book goes into a great deal of scientific detail to argue the case for the existence of a Creator God and to refute the ‘Darwinists’. Richard Dawkins, the British evolutionary biologist and anti-religion atheist, is frequently referred to and presented as the archetypal Darwinist who ignores the evidence for design due to a preconceived ideological commitment to naturalism (Geisler and Turek 2004, 154–155).

The listening guide also listed related songs and Bible verses for people to look at during the week, recommended two intelligent design books available for sale in the church bookshop (Philip Johnson’s *Darwin on Trial* (2010) and William Dembski and Sean McDowell’s *Understanding Intelligent Design* (2008)), and gave details of an in-depth Bible study class on the book of Genesis that was taking place during the week. In this way, church members were directed towards a variety of resources that would consolidate and amplify the evidence-based rejection of evolution perspective presented by Pastor Steve. It is notable that neither he nor any participant at Fourth Baptist made any mention of flood geology or YEC Ken Ham and his organisation “Answers in Genesis”. Instead, they drew upon Intelligent Design resources, although they did this without ever using the term ‘Intelligent Design’. In contrast, the use of facts about the universe as evidence for design was not a recognizable discourse at Tadbury Evangelical.

‘Different worldviews’

A large number of respondents at Fourth Baptist (8 of the 19) used the specific term ‘worldview’ in a way exemplified by this quote:

if you believe something about faith, your belief about science will follow . . . so they’re intertwined. For example, if somebody believes that there is no God, everything is random, then their science views will align with that. They won’t believe there is a creator and such. I believe the primary clash is between different worldviews.
(USEvang_INT12)

Respondents thus used a social-constructionist-type argument to dismiss claims from mainstream science about evolution, because it emerges from a ‘naturalistic worldview’, and simultaneously to elevate specifically Christian or biblical interpretations of evidence as having equal validity as mainstream science. In this way, Christian or biblical worldviews were viewed as clearly distinct from secular worldviews, with each producing their *own* scientific accounts of life, which are incommensurate and in direct competition.

Relatedly, in one of his sermons, Pastor Steve outlined five different positions ranging from Young Earth Creationism to evolution and notably referred to *all* of these as theories. He very clearly told his congregation where the boundary

lay by identifying the three acceptable creationist positions for his congregation—Gap Theory, Day/Age Theory, and Literal Six Days Theory⁴—and stating that acceptance of evolution results in loss of faith:

The other two [atheistic and theistic evolution], you're off the ranch, okay? And you've got to check your Bible and that's why the other two result in people jettisoning the faith. That's why they result in those things of leaving the faith and saying, "No, I don't believe in God any more."

It is interesting that Pastor Steve does not insist on belief in creation in six literal 24-hour days, although this is his personal position. For him, the important point is to reject evolution.

The theme of scientists' commitment to a naturalistic worldview was greatly emphasised in the Sunday services. In the introduction to his second sermon on Genesis, Pastor Steve showed a short clip from the film *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* of 2008, a high-grossing documentary which argues that any scientist who dares to suggest that there might be an intelligent designer is 'expelled' from the academic community (see Nisbet 2009 for an analysis of the film). The film plays to American patriotism, using archival footage, interviews, and narration to contrast the freedoms in the United States with the Communism, atheism, and Anti-Semitism of Europe. In the clip shown during the sermon, a number of academics discuss how a person's worldview might influence their interpretation of scientific facts. Interestingly, three of the respondents in the clip are British scientists or mathematicians and two of them—John Polkinghorne (University of Cambridge) and Alister McGrath (University of Oxford)—are known for promoting theistic evolution, a compatibilist view of evolutionary theory and Christianity, and speaking out against ID. However, in *Expelled*, their cultural authority as Oxbridge professors is used while their words are decontextualised and woven into a new narrative to support Intelligent Design.

Pastor Steve also recommended that people watch *Expelled* themselves; the DVD was available in the church library. The film makes heavy use of interview footage with Richard Dawkins in which Dawkins clearly states the link between his own atheism and his acceptance of evolutionary theory. The narrator then states that "Most evolutionary biologists share Prof. Dawkins's views". Similar to the previous example of the book by Norman Geisler, here is another example of the way Dawkins's specific case is generalised to most or all evolutionary biologists.

Boundary weakening mechanisms

Talking theology, not science

Among members of the congregation at Tadbury Evangelical, the most common discourse concerning evolution was one of boundary weakening.

Notably, this was almost always accompanied by strengthening another boundary: respondents commonly insisted that, although the exact details of how and when God created were unimportant, they strongly affirmed that God was indeed creator (in 7 out of 22 interviews). Given that this discourse appeals to Christian tradition and Scripture for its authority, we refer to it as a *theological* discourse, in contradistinction to the *sciencey* discourses identified above. For example, one respondent, a 37-year-old school teacher, was leading a women's Bible study group on Genesis at the time. She adopted a boundary weakening strategy when discussing creation:

We studied Genesis 1 the other week in Bible study . . . and I said, "You know, let's not get bogged down in 'did God create the world in 6 days and how old is the earth and what about dinosaurs?'" . . . Whether you believe in the Big Bang or evolution is almost irrelevant from Genesis 1, it is the fact that God did create it and has a purpose. (UK-INT43-EV)

This discourse functions to shift attention away from the difficult and potentially divisive issue of acceptance or rejection of evolution or the Big Bang by emphasising instead the idea of a powerful Creator God, an uncontroversial idea in evangelical theology and therefore what might be called a 'core boundary'.

Offering a range of positions

Young Earth Creationism had been actively taught at Tadbury Evangelical under the long-serving previous Senior Pastor, but 'Pastor Matt' (pseudonym), who had been Senior Pastor for three and a half years at the time of our study, was trying to move the church away from a strict adherence to this position. We found several examples of attempts by the church's leaders to engage members in discussion about creation/evolution and to weaken evolution rejection as a boundary by presenting a wide range of positions as equally valid and thereby re-framing creation beliefs as a 'secondary issue'. Pastor Matt had preached a sermon series on the book of Genesis at Tadbury Evangelical in early 2010. In notable contrast to Pastor Steve at Fourth Baptist, he did not himself adopt a defined position with regard to creation and acceptance/rejection of evolution, nor did he prescribe any for his congregation. Instead, he made it clear that his motivation was to remove what he deemed to be unnecessary barriers to the Christian faith:

I don't feel the need to kind of defend the old Earth . . . but I do feel the need to make sure that people die on the right hill . . . so . . . I don't want people losing their faith and saying they can't believe in Christianity because, in order to be a Christian, they have to believe that the Earth is relatively young, 10,000 years old. (Pastor Matt, Tadbury Evangelical Church)

Conversely, Pastor Steve's sermon at Fourth Baptist had clearly exhibited boundary strengthening against evolutionist positions (see above). However, his sermon also exhibited boundary weakening: by presenting three different creationist positions as equally valid, he weakened the boundaries between them. This perhaps functioned to unite the different kinds of creationists likely present in this large megachurch congregation against the real enemy in his view: evolution.

For Pastor Matt at Tadbury Evangelical, there seems to have been a pivotal moment regarding the subject of evolution. During the interview, he recounted the memory of a person who had shown an interest in the Christian faith and attended the course "Christianity Explored" at the church, but who had been "really, really put off" by the insistence by one of the course leaders that a person could not accept evolution and be a Christian. This had been a matter of huge regret for the pastor. Notably, it also demonstrates how important the issue of evolution acceptance was for this would-be convert. In a similar vein, one of the church elders at Tadbury Evangelical stated in very clear terms that he believed Young Earth Creationism was harmful to evangelisation efforts:

The evangelical church, in this country—and America, for that matter—is still, to an extent, stuck with Young Earth Creationism and I think [that] single-handedly has done more damage than almost anything else I have come across in keeping people away from the Christian faith. (UK-INT27-EV)

There is a striking contrast between this church leader's fears that Young Earth Creationism will 'keep people away' from Christianity (presumably meaning those who are not Christian) and Pastor Steve's fears that acceptance of evolution will result in people, presumably Christian, 'jettisoning' Christianity.

Pastor Matt was greatly inspired by pastor and best-selling author Timothy Keller; he quoted from his books during sermons and strongly encouraged church leaders and other members of the congregation to read them or listen to his podcasts. An astounding 16 of the 22 respondents at Tadbury Evangelical referred to Keller as an influence. In one of his best-known books, *The Reason for God*, Keller similarly downplays the importance of evolution in the interests of evangelism:

Since Christian believers occupy different positions on both the meaning of Genesis 1 and on the nature of evolution, those who are considering Christianity as a whole should not allow themselves to be distracted by this intramural debate. (Keller 2009, 94)

In the interview, Pastor Matt clearly stated that he would happily be in "fellowship, ministry, and partnership" with people who hold the "complete evolution paradigm for understanding the development of life", thereby

affirming that evolution acceptance/rejection was not an important boundary for him.

In addition to sermons on the first chapters of Genesis, Tadbury Evangelical had run a short series of sessions about creation and evolution in their topical “Focus Group” evening programme. In one of the sessions, a young earth creationist had presented their view and, in another session, Pastor Matt had presented an alternative view based on a more literary interpretation of Genesis. In the final session, all the speakers physically enacted the idea that evolution acceptance/rejection was a secondary issue. Pastor Matt described that

we all sat together as a panel, and we are all loving each other, friends, we are in ministry together, supporting each other, happy to agree to disagree, and we just took questions from the congregation.

This strategy therefore involved presenting a number of different viewpoints as equally valid and was similar to that employed at Fourth Baptist to weaken boundaries between the different ‘old earth’ and ‘young earth’ creationist positions. However, while this strategy was used to unite conservative Christians to strengthen the boundary *against* evolution acceptance at Fourth Baptist, the presentation of different-but-equally-valid positions at Tadbury Evangelical was used to weaken boundaries between *all* possible positions regarding creation and evolution.

Avoidance

However, it seems there was a limit to the extent to which the leaders wanted to push the re-framing of the evolution issue at Tadbury Evangelical. One longstanding member, a 52-year-old man, spoke about one of the re-framing events, describing how difficult it had been to hear church leaders refer to some portions of Scripture as “poetic”, which had elicited some “vehement” responses. When asked how the church had dealt with this potentially divisive topic, he said:

Yeah, it was a bit, it was, sort of, like . . . “Mmm . . . let’s move on to something else, shall we?” Pretty quick. . . [laughter]. It really was . . . “OK . . . right . . . we don’t want to get, we don’t want to fall out over this . . . erm . . . let’s talk about something else . . .”
(UK-INT41-EV)

This quote demonstrates that the attempts to weaken evolution rejection as a boundary had come at a somewhat painful cost to the church. Therefore, avoidance seems to have been adopted as a strategy after the active engagement and re-framing had been attempted. Whereas evolution rejection in the form of Young Earth Creationism had historically been actively maintained as a boundary in this congregation, discussions about these beliefs were now avoided.

Rejection of boundary strengthening

Another event at Tadbury Evangelical illustrates the internal tensions the church experienced in trying to move away from Young Earth Creationism without excluding the committed young earth creationists who had been part of the congregation for many years. Fairly late in the study, one of the respondents mentioned that the young earth creationist organisation “Answers in Genesis” (which is behind the Creation Museum in Kentucky) had held a seminar in the church hall just a few months previously, at which its founder, Ken Ham, had spoken. Ham strongly believes that acceptance of evolutionary theory is responsible for the historic decline in religious belief in England and for large numbers of conversions from Christianity to atheism in the present-day United States. The epigraph of this article is a quote from Ham’s transcribed talk at Tadbury Evangelical, in which he used the godlessness of England as a warning of what the US could become if Christians compromise and accept evolution.

The church had accepted the venue booking from Answers in Genesis; however, the church leaders had decided that they would not actively promote the event to their congregation because they “didn’t agree with the way Ken Ham presents his view . . . in which it actually seems as if he questions whether people can be Christians” (UK-INT45-EV) if they do not accept Young Earth Creationism. This indicates a concern about creation beliefs being invoked as a boundary that divides Christians. Another respondent, again highly critical of Ham, was more concerned about unnecessary boundary activation between those who are Christians and those who are not:

Evolution’s a major part of his [Ham’s] attack, you know, evolution is ridiculous. That was the thing I had the most issue with. It’s saying that “oh, you secular people, you’re deluded and ridiculous”. It was kind of having a laugh at secularism. I don’t think that’s helpful, you know. If ever you want to have an open, honest dialogue with someone, you don’t start by laughing at them. (UK-INT46-EV)

The strategy employed by Ham, of ‘othering’ those perceived to have a completely different, and rival, scientific worldview, was not well received at Tadbury Evangelical.

Conditions for boundary weakening

In summary, we found boundary strengthening discourses primarily employed at Fourth Baptist in Texas and boundary weakening discourses more common at Tadbury Evangelical. However, it was certainly not the case that multiple boundaries were simultaneously weakened at Tadbury and it was not undergoing a more general liberalisation. For example, women were excluded from leadership roles (except for leading other women) and homosexuality was not considered permissible. These observations led us to ask, what are the

conditions under which previously strong boundaries might be weakened? Based on our data, we suggest that the salience (or prominence) of the boundary beyond the walls of the congregation is one important factor in answering this question.

A number of respondents at Tadbury Evangelical (6 out of 22) reported that the issue of creation/evolution was far less salient than it had been previously and that the debate had ‘moved to the side-lines’. The Youth and Families Pastor reported that, when he had taught on Genesis a few years earlier, he had not been asked a single question about evolution. Two people who had both been involved in street evangelism reported, in separate interviews, very similar experiences; the question of evolution used to come up a lot, but this was no longer the case:

I think when I first started talking to people about Jesus, you know, years ago when I first came to London and started doing it, the question of evolution came up a lot. To be honest, it hardly ever comes up for me now, when I talk to people. People aren’t so worried about that in general. At least that’s my experience. (UK-INT32-EV)

Conversely, at Fourth Baptist Church, the Minister to Students said in the interview that “students struggle with it [evolution] a lot” because “what is presented in the classroom” is contrary to “what the value of their parents is or is taught in the word of God”. He therefore covered the topic of creation in Bible study topics with students, particularly because parents “want that done but don’t know how”. He also remarked that there were now “a lot more Christian resources in regards to creation beliefs”. Another religious leader at Fourth Baptist, commenting on whether scientific issues ever came up in the congregation, remarked:

You know, I think it pops up when it’s a political issue. Or when it’s a school issue. Evolution in school is probably one of the things that in church life we talk about the most. . . When [something] becomes a political hot topic, it tends to be something that the church talks about. (US_Evang_Int3)

When asked whether there were any scientific issues that people struggled with, yet another church leader at Fourth Baptist identified “creation vs. evolution” as “a big one”, saying “that’s gonna be a big front door issue”. The term ‘front door issue’ is found in popular theories about church growth that encourage church leaders to think strategically about how to attract people into their churches, through the *front door*, and how to prevent them leaving through the *back door*. It seems this leader says that the church’s position on creation and evolution is a big factor in determining whether someone is likely to walk through the front door.

Taken together, the quotes demonstrate that, at the time of the study, evolution remained highly salient as a boundary between the congregation of Fourth Baptist and secular culture and, according to participants, this was

largely due to concerns about the content of science curricula in mainstream secular schools.

Discussion and conclusion

Our cross-national comparative study shows how the boundary work around the specific issue of evolution rejection differs significantly between two different conservative evangelical congregations, even though both subscribe to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.

There was evidence of boundary strengthening and boundary weakening in both congregations, but the boundaries were drawn differently, likely for different strategic reasons, related to priorities and context, as discussed below. Furthermore, we identified a number of mechanisms that were employed to strengthen or weaken evolution rejection as a boundary. At Fourth Baptist, boundaries were drawn very strongly against any form of evolution acceptance, although there was evidence of boundary weakening between different Christian creationist positions. The boundary strengthening mechanisms were fairly easy to identify; they consisted of a set of related and overlapping discourses. Most common was the deployment of *sciencey discourses*, together with a discourse about *different worldviews* that questions scientific authority on the basis of the materialistic worldview from which it is perceived to derive. These discourses are common in both YEC and ID movements (Numbers 2006; Butler 2010; Trollinger and Trollinger 2016).

In contrast, we found predominantly boundary weakening mechanisms deployed in relation to evolution rejection at Tadbury Evangelical in London. These included the “Focus Group” events where attempts had been made to re-draw boundaries so that evolution acceptance was regarded to lie within the bounds of the church’s conservative evangelical tradition, but without alienating or excluding the committed young earth creationists within the congregation. This resulted in a dominant discourse that used more *theological* language, insisting that the details of creation do not really matter, accompanied by strengthening a key boundary: that God is indeed the Creator. This weakening/strengthening mechanism is similar to the boundary work identified among missionaries by Jared Bok (2014). Relatedly, we also found rejection of Ham’s boundary strengthening approach and attempts to avoid the topic as far as possible.

We suggest that the interplay of several factors, specifically the internal/external orientation of the congregation, the majority/minority religious context, and the boundary salience led to boundary strengthening against evolution acceptance in one context and boundary weakening in another.

As described previously, both churches were theologically conservative; yet they were also externally oriented *Conversionist* congregations highly concerned with church growth. This makes them interesting cases for the

study of boundary work because to grow they need to include more people within their bounds, but without compromising their distinctive religious identities. We argue that it is important to consider a congregation's orientation in conjunction with its *religious context*. If an externally oriented congregation is located within a majority religious context—in a context where large numbers of people outside the congregation belong to broadly the same religious tradition as those inside—this will significantly affect the boundary work. We describe Fourth Baptist, a megachurch, as located in a *majority context* with regard to conservative evangelicalism, whereas Tadbury Evangelical on the outskirts of London was in a *minority context*. Previous research has shown that most megachurch growth in the US is not due to new conversions, but is explained by large numbers of people joining megachurches who previously attended smaller churches (Chaves 2006). Although Fourth Baptist was externally focused beyond its own congregation, it was not particularly engaged beyond its own religious tradition, given that, in its majority context in Texas, significant growth was possible without needing to convert people. Instead, the focus seemed to be on retaining people within the conservative evangelical tradition, particularly young people of school age, by maintaining boundary strength. The church evidently drew on resources from the Intelligent Design movement, enabling them to unite and mobilise different kinds of creationists against a common enemy: naturalistic evolution. Several resources strengthened boundaries by using Dawkins as a *negative reference* (Smith and Emerson 1998, 104–105) to demonstrate that evolution acceptance necessarily leads to atheism.

In contrast, Tadbury Evangelical, being located in a minority context, could not hope to achieve much growth without conversion. We observed that a formerly strong boundary between conservative evangelicalism and evolution acceptance had been intentionally weakened and that this boundary *weakness* continued to be maintained through recognizable discourses that deliberately downplayed the importance of the topic. This was to ensure that potential converts, who, in the UK, would almost certainly accept evolution, would not be unnecessarily excluded from conservative evangelicalism.

Another important factor is boundary salience. According to Smith and Emerson's analysis (1998), evangelicals thrive on maintaining a sense of embattlement with mainstream culture; therefore, active boundary weakening is unlikely to take place in a conservative evangelical church when an issue is highly prominent in public discourse, even, we suggest, in congregations that are strongly conversionist. It was notable in Tadbury Evangelical that several interviewees reported a decrease in salience of creation and evolution as a topic and that the boundary weakening activities took place well after the "New Atheist" publishing phenomenon of the mid-

2000s⁵ and the bicentennial celebrations for Darwin Day in 2008, both of which had resulted in increased coverage about creation and evolution in the national press.⁶ Conversely, it was evident that the issue of evolution remained salient for study participants in Fourth Baptist, largely because the teaching of evolution in schools has remained a live political issue in the US, in a way that would not currently be possible in the UK with its largely centralised political and educational systems. Jeffrey Guhin (2016) also found evolution a highly salient boundary for US evangelicals.

Despite the importance of the three factors just described—1) the focus of the congregation (internal/external), 2) the religious environment within which it is located (majority/minority), 3) the level of boundary salience—it seems unlikely that the Senior Pastor at Tadbury Evangelical would have instigated active boundary change around the subject of creation and evolution without some catalysing factor. This was almost certainly the personal encounter between Pastor Matt and the would-be convert who had been repelled by the strongly voiced creationist beliefs of a member of the congregation—a significant event because it clearly brought the specific boundary of evolution rejection into conflict with the absolute key priority of the church: conversionism.

This study highlights the importance of carrying out congregationally based qualitative research to investigate boundary strength and salience within religious communities, an approach that complements, extends, and challenges existing survey-based research that has tended to focus on measuring various propositional beliefs of individuals. Having demonstrated this in our detailed comparative study of two congregations, we highly recommend further investigation of boundary work in comparative qualitative congregational studies.

Notes

1. This is the campaign of the Discovery Institute—a politically conservative non-profit think tank based in Seattle, Washington, which advocates ID.
2. “[The Bible] has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter.” (THE 2000 BAPTIST FAITH & MESSAGE, see <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>, accessed 2 August 2018)
3. “The Bible as originally given is in its entirety the Word of God, without error and fully reliable in fact and doctrine.” (FIEC Doctrinal Basis, see <https://fiec.org.uk/about-us/beliefs>, accessed 2 August 2018)
4. Pastor Steve defined Gap Theory as “an unknown amount of time between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2”. In Day/Age Theory, “‘Day’ is poetic or relative therefore could be ages”. According to Literal Six Days Theory (Young Earth Creationism), “In 24 hour periods God creates with the appearance of age”.
5. This period saw the publication of several popular scientifically oriented atheist books, (dubbed “New Atheist”): *The God Delusion* (2006) by Richard Dawkins, *The End of*

- Faith* (2004) and *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006) by Sam Harris, *God is Not Great* (2007) by Christopher Hitchens, and *Breaking the Spell* (2006) by Daniel Dennet.
6. This is based on a search of the Lexus Nexus database of UK national newspapers.

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