

**Discipleship and Desire**  
**Conservative Evangelicals, Coherence**  
**and the Moral Lives of the Metropolis**

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# Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic study of the everyday religious lives of conservative evangelical Christians in London. Conservative evangelicalism has attracted increased public attention in recent years as a number of Christian groups have become increasingly visible in arguing that Christians are being marginalized in British society as their lifestyles are threatened by universalizing processes associated with modernization. Seeking to move beyond simplistic stereotypes of evangelicals that arise from polarizing media narratives, I explore how members of a large conservative evangelical congregation experience and find ways of negotiating concerns, uncertainties and human frailties that shape social life more broadly. My central argument is that their experience of God as coherent and transcendent, mediated through word-based practices, both responds to and intensifies their consciousness of internal moral fragmentation, binding them more closely in their sense of dependence on God and each other.

Situated in debates about subjectivity and modernity in the sociology of religion, the anthropology of Christianity and urban theory, I analyse how conservative evangelicals' faith is patterned through their being shaped as modern, urban subjects according to norms of interaction internalized outside the church *and* their development of moral and temporal orientations that rub against these. Their self-identification as 'aliens and strangers in this world' thus, I argue, both articulates and constructs a desire to be different within the metropolitan contexts they inhabit, rooted in a consciousness of the extent to which their habituated modes of practice, hopes and longings are simultaneously shaped by their being in the world. I demonstrate how focusing on both their embodied, word-based practices and their experience of the personality of God helps develop understanding of this form of religious intersubjectivity and its social effects, and argue that this approach opens up new avenues for understanding evangelicalism, lived religion and everyday ethical practice.

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# Introduction

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

(Simmel 1997a: 174)

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

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<sup>1</sup> This followed the precedent of London buses being the site for tit-for-tat public campaign slogans about religion in 2008. The British Humanist Association launched a poster campaign announcing: 'There probably is no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life' and different Christian groups launched rival ads, for example, those by the Christian Party, stating 'There definitely is a God. So join the Christian Party and enjoy your life' (Guardian 2009).

‘we do not believe that these specific ads are consistent with TfL’s commitment to a tolerant and inclusive London’ (BBC News 2012). *The Guardian* featured a longer article in addition to the cover story, framing this in terms of an increasing mobilization of conservative Christian groups in Britain, headlined ‘Conservative Christians are becoming more confident in the political arena. The anti-gay bus ads are the latest move by Christian groups hoping to replicate US politics, where religion is centre stage’ (Guardian 2012b).

This incident and responses to it<sup>2</sup> reveal the interweaving in the media of particular contemporary ideals about ‘public’ religion, tolerance, difference, equality, sexual morality and cities. *The Guardian* narrative, for example, positioned this as part of an attempt by conservative Christian groups to bring to Britain the particular religio-political mix of the US culture wars, linking this incident with anti-abortion campaigners ‘taking their fight into the public arena in the UK, buying in American expertise’. Whilst Johnson’s comments should be seen in the context of his attempting to appeal to traditionally non-conservative supporting, liberal sections of the electorate, they nevertheless demonstrate a framing of London as a space ‘intolerant’ of religious expressions that transgress universalizing moral norms and are felt as polluting ideals of inclusivity. London here seems to stand as a paradigmatic site of modernity, as the ideal of tolerance has played an important part of imaginings of cities as complex, pluralist settlements, patterned on an interplay of social distance and proximity that does not interfere but allows the other to be other. As spaces where strangers are most likely to meet, so cities can be understood (and loved) as sites of civility where, as Richard Sennett argues, social lives are forged through the maintenance of distance, ‘a desire to live with others rather than a compulsion to get close to them’ (2002a: 264-5).

But the story of cities as sites where indifference towards strangers can be seen as an ethics of tolerance is closely bound up with a more melancholy narrative. Drawing on Baudelaire as flâneur, Sennett notes that while walking in the middle of New York, ‘one is immersed in the differences of this most diverse of cities’, but because these scenes are disengaged, there is little vivid human encounter – ‘a telling moment of talking or touching or connection’. Instead, ‘A walk in New York reveals... that difference from and indifference to others are a related, unhappy pair’

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Independent 2012; Huffington Post 2012.

(Sennett 1990: 128-9). Thus whilst the ‘civility’ of social distance in cities may promote the freedom not to be interfered with, it can also be seen in terms of a lonely individualism and a loss of community. As Alexis de Tocqueville, describing the nineteenth century as the ‘Age of Individualism’ wrote,

Each person behaves as though he is a stranger to the destiny of all the others... As for his transactions with his fellow citizens, he may mix among them, but he sees them not; he touches them, but does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone. And if on these terms there remains in his mind a sense of family, there is no longer a sense of society.

(cited in Sennett 2002b: 323)

The nature and effects of plurality, tolerance, intolerance and our relations with others that city spaces draw our attention to are issues deeply rooted in the history of sociology as the study of the nature of human associations: how do people learn to interact with those who are different from them and what conditions of possibility do these forms of interrelationality create? How do they separate from and connect with others through the creation of physical, emotional and imagined boundaries? And how do these processes form distinctive kinds of subjects in particular times and places? These issues are also central to the story of religion and secularity in modernity, and this thesis addresses what these questions mean within religious life in London today, focusing on the everyday experiences of conservative evangelical Christians whose teachings on gender, sexuality and other religions, in tension with universalizing modern norms, lead to their being labelled ‘intolerant’ by ‘tolerant’ liberals.

The etymology of ‘tolerance’ derives from ‘to endure’ and ‘to bear’, and the issue of ‘tolerance’ raises the fundamental social question of how we relate with, how we get along or fail to get along with, others whose views and lifestyles we disagree with. The evangelical movement has throughout its history made large claims, drawn boundaries and erected barriers against ‘worldliness’, and labelling of evangelicals as intolerant and judgmental of others is not a distinctively contemporary phenomenon. The Conservative Prime Minister at the end of the nineteenth century, Lord Salisbury, expressed distaste for the movement, describing its ‘reign of rant’ and as an ‘incubus of narrow-mindedness... brooding over English society’ (cited in Bebbington 1989:



276). In a de-Christianizing British context, the media increasingly present polarizing narratives of conservative evangelicals either as marginalized as their lifestyles come into conflict with universalizing processes of modernization<sup>3</sup> – most often symbolized in conflicts with gay rights groups – or as developing into a rising new Christian Right, seeking to mobilize to defend established practices and extend their political influence. Seeking to move beyond simplistic portraits perpetuated by headline-grabbing stories and publicity-seeking campaign groups, this thesis explores the everyday realities and mundane practices, hopes and concerns of conservative evangelicals in London, in relation to questions of the ‘ordinary’ ethics of urban interaction (Lambek 2010). How do they come together, draw apart and negotiate the meaning and practical expression of their beliefs in a complex urban setting where these are identified – by themselves and those outside the movement – as countercultural? How are these connections and boundaries performed and maintained through particular practices as they move across spaces of the city that address them as different kinds of subject?

To answer these questions, I explore evangelicals’ desire for the ‘public’ expression of faith and examine their practices of speaking and listening, since it is through speaking practices in particular, articulating commitment to beliefs that transgress modern ideals, that evangelicals become labelled as ‘intolerant’. Describing how people learn to speak and listen as evangelical subjects, I analyse the particular struggles, comforts, connections with and separation from multiple others these practices create. I focus on the formation of subjectivity as a means of exploring the interpenetration of modes of relationality and practice across different urban spaces and the values these imply and shape. I argue that conservative evangelicals develop a response to the forms of fragmentation that characterize urban experience, shaped by their focus on the personality of God as coherent, which leads them to a particular consciousness of subjective and moral fragmentation in their own lives. This response thus reflects a specific kind of cultural and moral fragmentation that is inherent to their seeking to become ‘aliens and strangers’ in the immanent, earthly city and citizens instead of a heavenly City of God.

### **English Evangelicals, Modernity and Moral Fragmentation**

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Daily Telegraph 2012; Daily Mail 2012a.

When I began this project in September 2009, I intended to study a GAFCON-supporting conservative evangelical<sup>4</sup> church. GAFCON – the Global Anglican Future Conference – 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 growing acceptance of homosexual relationships in some Anglican provinces, most prominently the Episcopal Church in the United States.<sup>5</sup> I had intended to investigate how tensions related to sexuality and post-colonial ecclesiastical power structures reflected in GAFCON were experienced by members of a GAFCON-supporting church and, at the start of my study, visited a number of GAFCON-supporting churches. I chose to base my fieldwork at a large, conservative evangelical Anglican church in London, ‘St John’s’, because the church is considered by other British evangelicals, both conservative and charismatic, to be an important and influential representative of contemporary conservative evangelicalism. However, when I began fieldwork, I found that many members of the congregation didn’t know what GAFCON was and one of the unintended consequences of my asking members about it was to raise its profile. I therefore changed tack in order to focus more specifically on what the most central everyday concerns for members of the church, which appeared to revolve primarily around their sense of relationship with God and, related to this, their sense of themselves as distinctive from others around them in the city.

Yet although GAFCON as a specific focus dropped out of my analysis, the disagreements on issues of sexuality, gender and equality it indexes relate to wider themes I came to explore. Current schisms in the Anglican Communion exemplify

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term ‘evangelical’ to refer to the broader tradition that has existed in Britain since the 1730s, marked, as David Bebbington famously summarizes, by the characteristics of conversionism, Biblicism, activism and crucicentrism (1989: 3). I use the term ‘conservative evangelical’ to refer to the tradition within British evangelicalism that emerged following a rift with liberal evangelicals in the 1920s, with differing estimates of the Bible a central point of tension (ibid.: 181-228). Rob Warner provides a useful historical contextualization of the particular tensions between charismatics and conservatives within post-war British evangelicalism (2007:60 ff.). He argues that charismatics tend to be defined more by an orientation towards conversionism and activism, whilst conservatives tend to be shaped by Biblicism and crucicentrism (ibid.: 240), and these distinctions broadly characterize the lifeworld I describe here. This study will not, however, aim to define what is distinctive about conservative evangelicalism *per se*, but rather to explore the specific interrelations between modes of practice developed through participation in a conservative evangelical church and those formed in urban spaces beyond this.

<sup>5</sup> See GAFCON 2009; Sadgrove *et al.* 2010; McKinnon *et al.* 2011: 364.

tensions between forms of religion that hold onto traditionalist differentiated understandings of gender and heteronormativity and universalizing tendencies associated with modernization that challenge this. José Casanova argues that such tensions can lead to the deprivatization of religion as groups whose lifestyles and values are disrupted by universalizing processes seek to mobilize in response, for example, the Religious Right in the United States. In *Public Religions in the Modern World*, he argues that religions today are entering the public sphere both to ‘defend their traditional turf’ and to participate ‘in the very struggles to define and set the modern boundaries between the private and public spheres, between system and life-world, between legality and morality, between individual and society’ (1994:6).

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

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

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

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

(Christian Concern, not dated a)

Christian Concern's 'Equalities and Conscience' petition, the 'Coalition for Marriage',<sup>6</sup> and the Core Issues Trust bus campaign, all situate their campaigns on these issues in a broader narrative of Britain becoming progressively de-Christianized<sup>7</sup> with Christians being marginalized and sometimes persecuted. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, for example, was quoted in *The Daily Mail* as saying 'It is now Christians who are persecuted; often sought out and framed by homosexual activists', and arguing that people of faith are treated as 'bigots' (Daily Mail 2012b).

This desire for the public articulation of faith expressed in conjunction with conservative teachings on issues such as gender, sexuality and other faiths rubbing up against wider norms of equality was evident in my fieldwork. The rector of St John's, David, preached in a Sunday morning sermon, for example, that Christian fellowship should be 'energetic and corporate, public and unpopular, and selfless and sacrificial'. He stated:

We contend publicly for the objective truth of the gospel that God has done in and through Jesus, hence the unpopularity of this ... Wherever the gospel is proclaimed publicly by gospel partners, we find them engaged in conflict, as in Acts... As this country careers away from its Christian heritage, we will increasingly be considered immoral, bigoted, out-of-date.

This idea that Christianity will be considered 'bigoted' and 'out-of-date' suggests an understanding of time shaped through specific conservative evangelical moral teachings being experienced as in particular tension with universalizing modern norms of equality. Judith Butler has argued that liberal freedoms, particularly in

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<sup>6</sup> See Christian Concern 2011 and Coalition for Marriage 2012.

<sup>7</sup> The description of England as de-Christianizing is accurate in relation to indicators such as church attendance. The 2005 English Church Census shows that since 1998 there has been an overall decline in regular church attendance of 15 per cent, from 3,714,700 to 3,166,200. Of these regular churchgoers, 40 per cent attend evangelical churches. This represents a rise from 37 per cent in the same survey in 1998, and means that in 2005, on an average week 2.5 per cent of the English population attended an evangelical church (Brierley 2006a, 2006b). There is social scientific disagreement about whether church attendance can be taken as straightforward evidence of de-Christianization, as it fails to allow for the full complexity of the changing cultural location of Christianity. However on evangelicals' own measures of Christian religiosity, which would include church membership, England is de-Christianizing. Callum Brown (2009: 38) explores the history of evangelical data gathering and its interrelation with social scientific understandings of secularization and religiosity.

relation to sexual freedoms, are now 'understood to rely upon a hegemonic culture, one that is called "modernity" and that relies on a certain progressive account of increasing freedoms' (2009: 109). The uneasy relationship between conservative evangelicalism and modernity in this sense was also clear when David said in another sermon: 'the culture wars of the '60s and '70s were fought about freedom, in which sexual freedom, equality and choice were seen as inextricably linked ... But are we less free today?'

Religious responses that oppose universalizing processes are often described as a resistance to modernity, and the global strength of evangelicalism has often been explained in this sense. Its insistence on revelation as an event that establishes certain truths and its re-inscription of gender differences have been interpreted as responses to uncertainty and anxiety as other sources of meaning and security are eroded through globalization and the extension of impersonal market forces. Much recent scholarship has also explored how evangelicalism has adapted to and thrived within the conditions of modernity and postmodernity, arguing that its utilization of new media forms and the portability of its cultural practices mean that evangelicals 'belong to the present age – and almost certainly the future, as well' (Coleman 2000:3).

At the start of my fieldwork, the prominence of the language of being 'exiles' and 'aliens and strangers in this world' and of countercultural teachings on gender, sexuality, and the exclusivity of salvation in Jesus seemed, at least discursively, to correlate with interpretations of conservative evangelicalism as an anachronistic re-inscription of traditionalist values. Yet, as I spent time with members of the church, observed what they did in different places over time, and listened to what they said and noted what they did not say, the neatness of this narrative began to unravel. I started to understand the logic of their faith as patterned through their simultaneously being shaped as modern, urban subjects according to norms of interaction internalized outside the church *and* their development through participation in the church of moral and temporal orientations that rubbed up against these. Therefore when they described themselves as 'aliens and strangers in this world', this statement both articulates and constructs an ambition to be different within the metropolitan contexts they inhabit, rooted in a consciousness of the extent to which their habituated modes of practice, hopes and longings are simultaneously shaped by their being in the world.

Standard sociological portraits of evangelicals, based on survey data or short periods of research contact, often perpetuate simplistic portraits of evangelicals as a mobilizing resistance to a secular modernity. In his influential study of the beliefs and commitments of American evangelicals, Christian Smith highlights this regular portrayal of evangelicals in both academic and popular media narratives as either demons – ‘an ominous resurgence of religious oppression, a movement of radical, intolerant, and coercive zealots determined to undermine American freedoms’ – or angels, a myth ‘fostered by many religio-political conservative activists who posture American evangelicals as the country’s last bastion of righteousness in a decaying society’ (2000: 193). He points out that such mythologies offer entertaining stories for journalists (and academics) to appeal to the reading public and aid fundraising for political activists, and continue to exert a powerful hold on both secular and religious imaginations. Smith notes that much of what is reported about evangelicals is based on survey research, and whilst such research helps our understanding of some of the macro-level changes in religious participation, in itself, such information is, as Smith comments, ‘superficial and incomplete. To think that surveys alone can tell us what we need to know about evangelicals, pluralism, and politics is like believing that one can come to know New York City by flying over it in a Lear Jet. To really understand evangelicals requires conducting in-depth, face-to-face interviews and, ideally, ethnographic research’ (ibid.: 9).

Phil Zuckerman’s writing on evangelicals is an example of the kind of sociological mythologizing Smith criticizes. In an article for *The Huffington Post* entitled ‘Why Evangelicals Hate Jesus’, Zuckerman cites statistics published by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and argues that these show that white evangelicals are the group ‘least likely to support politicians or policies that reflect the actual teachings of Jesus’ and ‘the very people most likely to reject his teachings and despise his radical message’ (2011). Yet my informants’ reaction to Zuckerman’s depiction suggests a more complicated picture of their cultural locations than his narrative, based on survey data, allows. During my fieldwork, Freddie, a floppy-haired curate, mentioned Zuckerman’s article in a sermon, reading a long section of it aloud to the congregation. He said: ‘the uncomfortable things that those outside Christianity have to say often have some truth in them’, and challenged the congregation: ‘*are* we concerned with living in a way that saves your brother, or just with being happy in your own salvation?’ Freddie’s agreement with Zuckerman’s

critique of evangelical culture indicates the complexity of the moral landscape these evangelicals inhabit, how their ideals are formed both through their participation in the church *and* wider cultural norms that lead them to simultaneously stand in critical relationship with these.

There is a growing ethnographic literature on evangelicalism within sociology and anthropology, advancing understanding of evangelicals across diverse global contexts beyond the simplistic portraits Smith criticizes (e.g. Coleman 1996, 2000, 2006, 2011; Harding 2000; Guest 2007; Elisha 2008, 2011; Bielo 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Bialecki 2008, 2009; Engelke 2010a, 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Erzen 2006; Frykholm 2004; Luhrmann 2004, Luhrmann *et al.* 2010; Wilkins 2008). Within this body of work, the contribution of this thesis is my focus on cultural, subjective and moral fragmentation in the metropolis and the desire for coherence evangelicals' experience of the personality of God creates. My attention to questions of fragmentation, ethics and subject formation draws on Joel Robbins' work on these themes in his magisterial study of Pentecostal conversion amongst the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, *Becoming Sinners* (2004). Robbins' narrative of rapid cultural change in this context describes the moral struggles the Urapmin experienced through tensions between the communal forms of their traditional religion and the modern, individualistic Protestantism to which they converted. The interrelations between community, individual, morality and modernity are, however, somewhat differently located in my study. British evangelicals, like Robbins' Urapmin converts, learn to think of themselves as 'sinful' in a narrative conveying the tension of their simultaneous experience of contradictory norms of practice. However in a de-Christianizing Northern European context, my informants expressed a sense of disjunction between their sense of broader 'post-Christian', 'secular' individualism and atomization and *their* ideal of a social life together as a community.<sup>8</sup>

By studying conservative evangelicals' lives across the spaces of church, home and workplace in London, this thesis identifies and describes the processes by which they try to shape their thoughts, bodies and emotions according to an integrated Christian ideal, and the continuing difficulty of managing this in this pluralist

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Friedman comments on this distinction between evangelical movements in East Asia, where they are 'an expression of individualization and a weakening of family obligations' and in the West, where 'churches often support a process of strengthening family ties and express a search for a higher unity, whether communitarian or not' (2007: 427).

metropolitan context. Robbins conceptualizes Urapmin lives as shaped by cultural hybridity as they are caught between the values of their traditional religion and Pentecostalism (2004: 332). My informants are likewise caught between differing moral terrains, yet the term 'hybridity' does not capture the 'between' space they come to inhabit as they learn to describe themselves as 'aliens' and 'exiles' in a very different cultural location, which they characterize as post-Christian.<sup>9</sup> The central narratives of Christianity, in which the exile of Israel is re-echoed in the early Christians seeking to turn away from the world and journey towards the City of God, articulate a desire and a demand for Christians to be 'exiles', out of step with 'the world', leading to what one of my informants described as 'the tensions of ordinary Christian experience'.

I will argue that conservative evangelicals' learnt self-identification as 'aliens and strangers in the world', and their expressed desire for coherence, integrity and 'wholehearted' devotion to God, demonstrates the cultural and moral fragmentation they experience as they move between different spaces in the metropolis. As reflexively self-aware of the precariousness of their faith and the extent to which they as subjects are also shaped through wider cultural practices, I explore how routinized interactions in the church knot members of this church together in forms of interdependence that enable them to keep going in their practice of faith. Evangelicals are often stereotyped as individualistic. Yet these habituated rituals form members of St John's as subjects orientated outwards towards each other, towards others in the city, and towards God, with a strong sense of their individual insufficiency. Whilst research on evangelicals has often shown them as dogmatically certain of their beliefs and experiencing very little doubts in their faith,<sup>10</sup> I describe how my informants acknowledged experiences of doubt, struggle and uncertainty, and were self-

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<sup>9</sup> The term hybridity also denotes a sense of the stability and clear separateness of the two cultures the hybrid is formed in, which does not translate to the cultural plurality of metropolitan modernity, in which my informants are neither distinctively more nor less 'hybrid' than most other urban subjects.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Smith 1998: 29; Bialecki 2008: 379. The characterization of evangelicals as certain of their faith may be linked to the majority of studies of evangelicals focusing on US contexts where they are a cultural mainstream, even if they might self-identify otherwise. In contrast, Amy Wilkins' study (2008) of evangelical college students in a secular north-eastern university demonstrates the hard work required to reinforce their boundaries of distinctiveness. This suggests that in contexts where evangelical faith is countercultural, as in London, evangelicals are more likely to experience particular forms of struggle and uncertainty.



conscious about how their everyday practices of accountability to and sociability with each other helped maintain their faith.

The complex intersection of values and meanings evangelicals experience through their being rooted in the world and simultaneously developing an orientation towards the Kingdom of God can be seen as part of a 'distinctive Christian tension derived from simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the world, the goodness of creation and the demanding presence of an alternative kingdom' (Martin 2005: 186). Examining the everyday forms of sociality experienced as members of the church learn to direct themselves towards the transcendent orientation of Christianity penetrating into everyday, mundane time and space, this study contributes to understanding the lived textures of evangelical faith and the formation of religious subjectivities in the secular times and places of the metropolis. Before sketching how interactions during fieldwork shaped this focus, I will first outline how I gathered my data.

### **Doing Field- and Body-Work with Conservative Evangelicals**

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

head there, so that if they do not know anyone, someone in the church will chat to them over warm drinks before the service.

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

I was fortunate in the welcoming attitude that David, the rector of St John's, took towards my study from the outset. He is interested in both sociology of religion – citing sociologists such as Peter Berger and Rodney Stark in his sermons – and wider social theory, although he characterized my study as more anthropological than sociological. About half way through my fieldwork, noting that I was not especially interested in gathering statistics, he said, 'I have a friend who used to study a tribe in Kenya somewhere. I see now, *that's* what you're doing; *we're* your tribe ... I quite like that idea'. At our initial meeting to discuss what my study would involve, he said the church had often received negative publicity, so was happy that I planned to anonymize the name of the church. Thus the name of the church and all individuals here are pseudonyms, although many said they would have been happy to be cited by name. The fact that David and a couple of others I spoke to were initially concerned about my writing some kind of exposé demonstrates their sensitivity to demonizing popular portrayals of evangelicalism.

I conducted fieldwork at St John's from February 2010 to August 2011. During this time, I attended two of the three Sunday services the church holds, one each Sunday morning and evening. Most members of the church participate in weekly Bible study groups that meet during academic term times, and so from April 2010 to July 2011, I attended one of these, which I will call the 'Rooted' group, intended for individuals who have already attended the more introductory Bible study courses the

church offers, and are therefore more established members of the congregation. I also attended a student Bible study group for one term and during the holidays following this, for members of the group who were still around. I decided to concentrate on these two groups to be able to observe differences and similarities between the modes of practice of relative newcomers to the church and those who had been there some time, and thus get a sense of the *habitus*<sup>11</sup> the church was trying to encourage and the means of its formation over time.

When soliciting consent for researching these groups, with the student group, I asked one of the student leaders which group might be open to my joining. She placed me with a group of fifteen members, whom I spoke to about my project, explaining my main research questions and methods and asking them whether they were happy for me to join as a participant-observer. I think the fact that I am also a student and was willing to participate in the group's discussions contributed to their openness to my presence. Study groups at St John's are used to being observed by people who are not group members: group leaders are regularly observed by other leaders who give feedback on their teaching styles, and I think some members of the student group initially interpreted my role in this way. Several members of the student group writing dissertations in social sciences were interested in my methods and findings, and gave advice on the kinds of question they thought would work for interviews.

When seeking consent to join the Rooted group, the curate in charge of this stream of groups recommended a particular group for me to join. As I had already got to know a member of this group, Lucy, at the Sunday services I had been to, she emailed the information sheet about my project to the rest of her group, and they discussed whether they were happy for me to observe their meetings. I was informed that one member of the group had reservations; later I learned this was because she wasn't sure it would be right for a non-Christian to be part of the group.<sup>12</sup> I discussed this with Hannah, one of the group's leaders, the following Sunday, and was emphatic that I did not want to be part of the group if it made anyone feel uncomfortable.

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<sup>11</sup> My use of the term '*habitus*' follows Marcel Mauss's definition, denoting the '*exis*, the "acquired ability" and "faculty" of Aristotle', formed through particular techniques of the body that 'vary especially between societies, educations, proprieties and fashions' (2006: 74-5).

<sup>12</sup> I had not presented myself exactly as non-Christian. I had explained, when asked about this prior to joining the group, that I would describe myself as a Christian, and had been to many different kinds of church in the past, including an evangelical church as a teenager, but wasn't sure I would describe myself as a 'believer'.

However, by this point, the individual concerned had already changed her mind and made clear to Hannah that I was welcome to attend. Having got to know her subsequently, I am comfortable she would not have been easily coerced into this decision if she hadn't wanted me there, and she turned out to be especially friendly to me. Through these meetings, I was able to see and talk to individuals from these groups twice a week at church and in the small group (more frequently than I see most of my friends and family in London), and sometimes more often than this if we met up additionally during the week.

As well as attending these groups, I helped at other church events to get a sense of the different kinds of involvement with the church – or 'serving' as it is called at St John's – expected of members of the congregation. So I was on the coffee rota for the morning service for most of my time there, helped prepare and serve food at 'guest events' intended for members of the church to bring friends to, and helped steward at national events St John's regularly hosts for evangelical leaders and ministers. I also attended several mid-week lunchtime services primarily aimed at those working nearby, and went on a weekend away with all the Rooted groups to a conference centre in Berkshire. As I got to know people in the church, they also invited me to their homes, for suppers, for Sunday lunches, and I often met up with individuals for coffee or afternoon tea, in cafés or at their workplaces, when I would usually end up talking with them about my research and asking their opinions on the direction my research was taking and the interpretations I was developing.

My interactions and observations in these various spaces formed the basis of my fieldnotes. When it felt appropriate, I made notes during interactions. There is a culture of note-taking in conservative evangelicalism. Informants sometimes joked that the amount of notes I was taking during services and in study groups would have led the casual observer to see me as an especially keen member of the congregation, although one of the curates commented that seeing me writing notes as he was preaching made him nervous. At times, for example, during Sunday lunches, it did not feel appropriate to take notes during the interaction. Overall, I amassed almost 800 pages of notes typed up at my computer after I returned home from meetings, three full notebooks of handwritten notes made during interactions, and a file of transcripts of particular sermons I had listened to during fieldwork. My observations of the modes of practice I saw informants engage in within and outside the church, and the interactions and conversations I had with individuals in these different spaces thus

formed the primary source of data on which this thesis is based. Yet although data from these different settings informed my analysis throughout, I have chosen in the chapters that follow to refer only to interactions that I felt would not compromise the privacy of individuals involved. Although I use pseudonyms, because of the possibility of members of the church being able to determine the identities of some of the individuals I have referred to, I have chosen not to include sensitive details of their lives that could potentially affect their relations with others in the church or would make them feel compromised. Although everyone I spoke to in the church understood that my presence there was for research and that I was making fieldnotes on the basis of our interactions and conversations, I felt that in some settings, individuals I had got to know well tended to forget this. Thus my decisions about which details of people's lives I have referred to in this thesis have been determined by my sense of how conscious they were that I could be using data from particular interactions in my writing.

In addition to recording observations of what others said and did, I also recorded my own practical participation and emotional reactions, in services, small group meetings and other settings. Doing preparation work for Bible studies, clearing up dirty dishes when it was our group's turn on the rota, developing friendships with members of the congregation, and other modes of embodied experience over the course of my fieldwork I take as data indicative of the kinds of sociality, interaction and practice developed through participation at St John's. In *Body and Soul*, Loïc Wacquant describes how in order to understand boxing culture, the researcher needs 'to follow the unknown footsoldiers of the manly art in the accomplishment of their daily chores and to submit oneself along with them to their rigorous regimen, at once both corporeal and mental, that defines their state and stamps their identity' (2004a: 15). Given the military imagery used by conservative evangelical leaders to describe the life of faith, this is not an inappropriate metaphor to describe how the body-work involved in doing Bible studies, going to services every Sunday, and establishing relationships with members of St John's was an important part of gaining understanding of this lifeworld. As I came to learn what was expected in a Bible study, got used to the pattern of Sunday services and the forms of conversations over supper or coffee afterwards and mid-week evening meetings, I began to experience something of how participation in the life of this church related to the rhythms of life outside the church in the city. As a native Londoner, having grown up in the suburbs

and now living in an urban neighbourhood around ten minutes' train journey from St John's where several members of the congregation also live, I also tried to look on my city as strange. As I moved between church, home, university and other social spaces and reflected on the experiences, emotions and meanings afforded by these, especially in the commercial and public spaces around the church, I tried to notice the forms of mundane urban interaction and physical structures I might otherwise take for granted because of their familiarity.

However, whenever I introduced myself to individuals I hadn't met before, I explained my presence at church in relation to my study, and thereby established my position as an outsider and a distance between us. When I sat down to write fieldnotes, the process of objectification in the act of writing – dichotomizing 'I' / 'they', 'subject' / 'object' – became inscribed into my view of the world I was seeking to understand. Thus I cannot claim my embodied experiences of the rhythms of meeting together, singing hymns and listening to one another in Bible studies were the *same* as they were for members of the church. But the separations that academic practices construct should not cover over common grounds of human interaction. As Robert Orsi puts it, 'To understand, one does not have to share it ..., only to acknowledge a common human project, within the framework of different histories and different ways of being in the world. Then fieldwork becomes not a matter of taking notes but of comparing them' (2005: 174).

In addition to these forms of interaction and observation, I also conducted more formal, open-ended interviews with thirty-one members of the church. The majority of these were in the final six months of fieldwork, and my aim was to ask people to speak about their practices outside the church. I also wanted to ask individuals to talk about relations between their place of work or study and church, and how they understood aspects of evangelical moral and political life. Almost everyone I asked was happy to oblige: only two men I asked were unwilling to be interviewed. It was, however, easier to gain access to women than men, as women volunteered themselves and other women as potential interviewees. Developing friendships with individuals of the same gender is felt to play an important role in establishing networks of Christian support in this culture, and this was reflected in the

make-up of my interviews, as I ended up chatting to comparatively more women than men during and after services.<sup>13</sup>

The cultural capital of my middle-class identity doubtless eased access,<sup>14</sup> and this seemed a more significant category of my identity than, for example, my whiteness. Whilst St John's is a white-majority church, there are a significant number of individuals from (mostly middle-class, professional) Asian and African backgrounds. Not everyone at St John's is middle-class, but this is the majority culture of the church, representative of conservative evangelical culture nationally.<sup>15</sup> This was exemplified one Sunday evening when one of the curates, Jon, said in a sermon:

So I wonder what names we use for other people at [St John's]. Obviously, in our minds, because we're polite. Posh. Formal. Cerebral. Rich. Busy. Emotionally constipated. City. Studenty. Socially awkward. Hardline. Dull. Young. Academic. But for those who belong to Jesus, the first name that should come to mind is brother or sister. Whatever our cultural backgrounds, through the cross, in Christ we are family.

Jon was intending to challenge the labels people at St John's might use to describe themselves and others, but his words have the effect of constructing the sense that this *is* the culture of the church. George Herbert Mead describes an individual's sense of 'me' as coming from how she understands society as seeing her. We learn, Mead

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<sup>13</sup> This dynamic was more apparent to me on occasions when my husband, Martin, visited the church with me, and men I knew who did not necessarily chat to me after services would want to chat with him. At St John's, people who attend the church are mostly married couples attending together, or single, or have a boyfriend or girlfriend who attends the service with them. Thus my status as a married woman by myself in church was unusual and occasionally attracted comment.

<sup>14</sup> My experience here was in contrast with researchers working on conservative evangelicalism who have experienced difficulties in negotiating access in Britain and other contexts (see, for example, Wilkins 2008: 19ff.). Specific symbolic cultural markers of my identity, for example, the fact I had been an undergraduate at Cambridge, were shared with several of the church's leaders. As St John's has a culture of valuing academic study, with several members of the church with doctorates, they were also sympathetic to my being there to conduct academic research.

<sup>15</sup> For discussion of the historical background to the middle-class culture of British evangelicalism, see McLeod 1974: 151ff; Bebbington 1989: 110-11; Ward 1997: 35-44. Ward argues that because the leaders of British evangelicalism in the twentieth century were especially drawn from the upper-middle class, this had decisive significance in shaping the culture of British evangelicalism during the twentieth century.

argues, to see ourselves through the eyes of a ‘generalized other’ (1962: 154).

Included in this ‘generalized other’ is a mental personification of the feeling we have of what ‘society says’, the ‘collective conscious’. The ‘generalized other’ I have internalized gives me the sense that at least some of these labels could also be used of me, showing my closeness to the social worlds of my informants.

However as well as indicating the cultural milieu of the church, Jon’s words also point towards the complexity of evangelical subject formation that this thesis explores. His sermon signifies the ‘generalized other’ through which members of St John’s recognize themselves and form their sense of ‘me’, and thus the performance of the sermon further reinforces their collective self-identification as ‘posh’, ‘formal’, ‘cerebral’, etc. But his words *also* express dissatisfaction with this, created through engagement with the Bible, here articulated in the performance of the sermon form, through which members of the church also develop a desire to relate to each other in ways that transcend urban social stratifications.

Other incidents also demonstrated that acquiring the ‘me’ and the ‘generalized other’ are complicated and uneven processes, and these helped shape the analytical framework of this study, focusing on the formation of evangelical subjectivity. My conversations with Sam, a researcher in evolutionary biology in his early thirties, are one example. Although most members of the church seemed open to my presence in church as a researcher, Sam initially responded to me with suspicion, asking, when I first spoke to him, where my research would end up: ‘Will it be published in some double-page spread in a Sunday supplement?’ I replied that it was directed towards a thesis, but that hopefully some academic articles would emerge from it too. He then asked whether I thought their faith was totally irrational. When I responded that this wasn’t my primary characterization, he gave me some credit: ‘so you’re more enlightened than Richard Dawkins’. When I pointed out that Richard Dawkins isn’t a sociologist, and that sociologists don’t necessarily share his views, he said, ‘so I’m curious what you *do* think about us. Do you think faith makes no difference in our lives? Or do you think we’re just a bunch of well-meaning but misguided people? Or do you think we’re dangerous fundamentalists?’

These three options Sam gave me for how he saw social scientists’ views of evangelicalism are indicative of the kind of images that participate in constructions of the ‘generalized other’ as it forms the evangelical ‘me’. Several months later, his initial suspicion of me having passed, we chatted about what ethnographic writing



involved and he recommended to me a book called *The Unlikely Disciple* as a model of an outsider's perspective on American fundamentalism, which he had read while a postdoctoral researcher in Texas. He told me the book was written by a 'liberal, secular student' from Brown University, Kevin Roose, who had gone undercover to spend a term as a student at Liberty University, Jerry Falwell's conservative evangelical institution (Roose 2009). Sam said he identified and empathized with *both* the 'liberal, secular' concerns and judgements of Roose *and* the anxieties of the fundamentalists Roose depicts, conscious of both his own distance from and proximity to conservative evangelical culture in Texas.

Sam's statements indicate that the formation of conservative evangelical subjectivities does not take place through a straightforward internalization of what the 'generalized other' thinks, but also implies the internalization of values and modes of interaction that can appear contradictory, shaped through participation in different spaces. Working in the field of evolutionary biology, he is acutely conscious of how the judgements of those such as Dawkins mark him as 'other' through a perceived 'irrationality' of religious faith. Yet at the same time, he articulates a sense of connection with the 'secular' sensibilities of the author of *The Unlikely Disciple*. As I observed how participation in the church developed particular behavioural norms and how these intersected with individuals' sense of broader public perceptions of their faith, my analysis came to explore how relations with many different others – outside and within the church, with God and other sacred figures – function as sources of the self and how individuals learnt to negotiate the (often conflicting) demands of these.

Through focusing on these issues, my intention was to develop understandings of the lived experience of evangelicalism that would move beyond focusing solely on the issues that typically dominate public debates about their morality and consider the relative importance of these in their everyday lives. Wider public discussions about conservative evangelicals in the media give privileged attention to their teachings that stand in tension with liberal norms of equality, for example, opposition to women bishops or same-sex marriage. Whilst these are significant areas of contemporary moral debate, I wanted to move beyond the polarizing effect of focusing solely on evangelical engagement with such issues, which, I would argue, distorts understanding of what matters most to ordinary members of conservative evangelical congregations. I therefore chose to prioritize analysis of what most members of St John's saw as the most significant elements of their faith in their day-to-day lives:

their desire for a relationship with God and their sense of themselves as becoming ‘disciples’ and therefore distinctive from others. Whilst reports of evangelicals’ sense of themselves as marginalized are widely reported, I found that although individuals *sometimes* spoke of themselves in these terms, discursively they placed more emphasis on their sense of themselves as distinctive from those around them in the city, as ‘aliens and strangers’. They articulated this sense of being out-of-step and ‘different’ as related to their sense of relationship with God, which they saw as central to both their individual and communal identities. Thus I chose to focus on how their sense of relationship with God and their related sense of their distinctiveness were formed through particular practices of listening and speaking, shaped through their participation in the church, and how these interrelated in everyday experience with broader norms of interaction in urban life.

The narrative that developed from this centres on a story of how evangelical subjectivities are formed through the interplay of an experience of urban fragmentation and particular embodied practices that lead to a desire for coherence and wholehearted service of God. There were other stories I could have told. I hope that the story that I chose to develop might contribute to moving beyond simplistic stereotypes of evangelicals as reactionary fundamentalists and instead turn attention to how conservative evangelicals’ responses to aspects of urban late modernity in many ways resonate with concerns expressed by liberals most likely to feel themselves at odds with conservative evangelicals, through, for example, their critique of the ethical ends of individualism, consumerism and materialism. The point of this is not to reach for some kind of facile moral consensus where none exists; by focusing on how members of this church experienced difficulties and struggles in living out their desire to be formed as disciples, I also explore points of tension they felt between the ethics encouraged through their faith and those they experience as dominant in urban life outside the church. Yet through exploring their desires to speak and listen as evangelical subjects, and their difficulties in doing so, my intention is to widen the lens of understanding beyond focusing solely on the issues that tend to dominate contemporary media debates about evangelicals to explore how these, for members of St John’s, are woven into broader moral landscapes of metropolitan life in London today and thereby deepen awareness of the complex textures of these. To contextualize how this narrative took shape, I will sketch three incidents that helped clarify my thinking on specific themes that fed into this.

## *Equality, Modernity and Integrity*

Rooted Bible study groups took place after work on Tuesday evenings in St John's during the academic year 2010-11. In one of the meetings, the group discussed how they would respond to a non-Christian friend who asked them about what would happen after death to those who had never heard of Jesus. Emily, a tall, slim teacher in her early forties, responded that people who asked that kind of question were probably uninterested in the answer. Others in the group said they were less sure about this and that they wanted to discuss it. Alistair, the group's leader, an erudite lawyer in his late forties, said, 'I think there are at least three people around this table who are interested in the answer'.

'I have *often* thought about it,' Lucy said.

Alan, an insurance broker in his late fifties, who had originally raised the question for discussion, said, after a pause, 'I think it's a question about the integrity of God. Can we rest in the sovereignty of God, that He will have his people?'

'Yes... It's a question about theodicy', Alistair said.

The group spent some time discussing biblical passages they could take as evidence of God's integrity, justice and love in relation to what happens to non-Christians after death, showing considerable knowledge of particular passages in which God's justice is foregrounded, so they could rest assured that God would act according to principles of fairness towards those have never heard of Jesus. As Alistair tried to summarize the discussion before moving onto the next question the group had been asked to talk about, Lorna, a widow in her early sixties added, 'I wish people *would* ask me questions like this. Most of my friends are just so uninterested... Most non-Christians just think we're barmy. Going to church is just so alien to most people... I'd be really happy if they *did* ask me something like that'.

'I find people are just so not bothered, they're so blasé; they couldn't give a stuff about religion,' Emily said.

Janet, a lawyer in her forties, responded, 'And yet, on the BBC website, you can see what the top ten most viewed pages are, and when there's a story about religion, it's often one of the most viewed.'

'Even if people are saying negative things,' Hannah said.

‘I think *Christianity*’s hated, but there are very few negative comments about other religions,’ Emily said, ‘People are happy to slate Christianity, but wouldn’t dare say anything negative about other religions.’

‘They’re afraid of offending people,’ Lucy said.

‘I don’t know,’ Edward, a blonde banker in his thirties countered, ‘I think it’s probably the same with Islam.’

‘But most of the stories about Christianity all seem to be really *negative*, about things like women bishops, or homosexuality. They’re all so *Anglican*,’ Emily continued. ‘I’d find it really hard to have a conversation about any of those issues [with colleagues and friends]. I would just find it really hard.’

The group talked briefly about how boring they find the General Synod, then Hannah added, sensitively, how grateful she is for people like Stephen (Lorna’s late husband) who have been on Synod. Alistair, who is involved in local diocesan politics, said, ‘Actually, perhaps I *could* imagine a conversation about women bishops leading onto a discussion about the fact that actually the Bible does teach that everyone is created equal.’

Emily reiterated her reluctance to engage in conversation with non-Christians on any of these issues: ‘I just really wouldn’t want to have a conversation about anything to do with women bishops, or any of those things’.

Here we see individuals acutely aware of which of their teachings and practices rub up against contemporary cultural norms, and we see that they *want* to discuss with each other teachings about non-Christians going to hell, on which the ethical grounds of their faith are felt as in tension with broader cultural understandings of morality, suggesting that they themselves are affected by these broader norms. But we also see their reserve inhibiting their discussion of some of these issues outside the church. Whilst Lorna said she would like it if friends were to ask about her faith, this implies she would only discuss it with non-Christians if she were specifically asked, and Emily expressed a desire to avoid conversations on issues where evangelical teachings are in tension with universalizing modern values. Emily’s framing of the issue of women bishops and discussions about homosexuality as ‘negative’ seems in direct tension with how groups such as Christian Concern seek to promote public discussion of these issues following on from their conviction, expressed on the ‘Not Ashamed’ website, that ‘biblical teaching’ and values are ‘good for society as a whole’.

The group's comments about the portrayal of Christianity in the media indicate how the 'generalized other' shaping evangelical identities is an object for their reflection, and that they are sensitive to the kinds of conversation they might have that would reinforce 'negative' stereotypes. We also see how their discussions develop consciousness of the values that construct the symbolic boundaries separating them from their non-Christian friends and colleagues. Yet at the same time, they are also clearly formed as subjects within the same social structures that frame these values as countercultural and want to discuss issues where the integrity and justice of God seem to be in question, so they can be reassured that they can trust in Him.

As noted earlier, the tension experienced between universalizing, de-differentiating processes of modernization mean that when religious teachings are felt to transgress broader norms of equality, this can lead groups to mobilize and (re)enter the public sphere to defend their established ways of life. In the British media, this 'public' defence is most often evident in relation to differing stances on gender and sexuality. This conversation amongst the Rooted group however challenges the straightforward narrative of British conservative evangelical mobilization that circulates in the liberal imagination, and also suggests that members of this church want to discuss teachings that rub up against broader moral principles. As we see here then a complex weave of some of the differing norms members of St John's negotiate in their everyday lives, this opens up broader issues of everyday ethics, tolerance and public space, and how these relate to speaking about faith. This shaped my focus on how differing modes of talking (and not talking) with others – within and outside the church – form particular kinds of urban subject.

### *Embodying the Word*

Practices of listening and speaking were central to how members of St John's understood themselves as standing in intimate relationship with God, and the theoretical framework of embodied practice is the lens through which I focus on evangelical subject formation. My interest in how my informants embodied their faith was shaped both through the particular centrality accorded in the church to specific forms of practice and wider literature on embodiment and materiality. There is a tendency in writing about Protestantism to portray this tradition (sometimes somewhat monolithically) as uneasy with the mediating role in faith of both bodies

and material objects (e.g. Keane 2006, 2007; Meyer 2010). When I started my fieldwork, the critique leaders of St John's expressed of forms of Christianity they described as 'ritualistic', 'sacramentalist' or 'emotional' led me at first to interpret the culture of St John's as likewise as marked by an ambivalence towards the body and objects. Yet as I focused more closely on the habitus formed through participation at St John's, I began to understand individuals' engagement with materiality and embodiment as rather more subtle than I had first assumed. Certainly there were traces of a dematerializing Protestant Reformist orientation, which would lead, for example, ministers to state explicitly during rituals such as infant baptism that 'nothing magic is happening here'. Their stated reasons for the stance they took against, for example, charismatic worship as mediating the Holy Spirit were articulated in terms of a theology that did not see God as present only in particular moments of emotional intensity and because of their concern at the agency accorded in rituals not to objects, but to humans as the actors performing rituals, undermining emphasis on the grace of God.

Yet at the same time as members articulated a discourse that situated their culture as distinct from 'ritualistic' forms of religion, they also demonstrated concern about how broader cultural modes of embodiment impacted on their desire to be formed, through specific embodied practices, as listening subjects who learn to hear God speak in the words of the Bible. I became more attuned to their consciousness of how media consumption and other forms of interaction affect their embodied practices when members of the church staff read Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) to consider how changes in media technologies impacted on practices the church privileged as the means of forming a sense of relationship with God, for example, how shortened attention spans affected people's ability to listen to sermons.

Their reading of Postman to think about how people are shaped by media use, and their desire to think about how they might develop forms of practice that resist these shifts, implies a complicated relationship between modernity, agency and subjectivity. The mythological 'modern' Latour depicts in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) desires a purely human autonomy, uneasy about the agency objects have on us. But these evangelicals are conscious of the agency media objects have on us. Thus they seek to develop alternative forms of practice through their relations with other objects – most prominently, the Bible – that enable them to become more conscious of a sense of *God's* agency over them, understanding this simultaneously as

a process that they seek to develop their *own* and communal discipline in, implying faith in the possibility of their resistance. Orsi describes religions as practices of ‘concretizing the order of the universe, the nature of human life and its destiny, and the various dimensions and possibilities of human interiority itself’ (2005: 73). We might interpret the concerns articulated at St John’s about the agency of God, objects, society and themselves as a means of narrativizing and thereby expressing questions and uncertainties about the nature of human power and powerlessness, similar questions, albeit expressed in a very different register, to those expressed in social scientific debates about structure and agency. In my analysis I seek to address how these complex engagements with different forms of media and embodied practice, in particular the sensual bombardments and busy-ness of metropolitan space, situate conservative evangelicals’ sense of relationship to ‘modernity’ and the ideas of human subjectivity and agency these imply, as well as the social effects of this.

### *Shame and the People of God*

In a sermon series on the letter to the Hebrews at the start of my fieldwork, David preached a sermon in which he described the difficulty members of the church experience about speaking about their faith publicly as an ‘internal battle’. Inviting the congregation to identify with Moses and the original recipients of the letter, he said Moses chose ‘rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin’ and then stated how this applied to the Hebrews in the letter:

Nothing could be more appropriate for the Hebrews ... We’ve already identified at least part of the reason for their stepping back from the gospel was their social shame at associating with the people of God. There was no social status involved in being Christian. It was not cool to be Christian and part of that funny little group at work that meets to pray, or that strange little group that calls itself ‘the Christian Union’ in the hospital or the university.

He went on to give an example of how he saw this ‘social shame’ of being a Christian expressed in the lives of members of the congregation:

Nothing has changed has it? I remember talking about this to a group of Christian business people, and I said to them, 'what is the most costly aspect of being an out-and-out Christian to you at the moment in the office?' And they said, 'oh the ridicule, my reputation is at stake, I might be known as a Bible-basher'.

He stated that the author of Hebrews 'lines up shame and the social distance that might be placed between an individual and the people of God with sin and the moral battle that's going on in the individual's life' and said, 'it's my experience that that battle goes on right in the heart of every Christian believer, as the battle is raging morally, simultaneously as the battle is raging socially'.

The term 'shame' reverberated in many different contexts in my fieldwork, and the 'Not Ashamed' campaign suggests its wider circulation in British evangelical culture. David's words here indicate that members of St John's, in contexts outside the church, experience their evangelical identities with some ambivalence, and learn to narrate the subjective tensions this creates through the language of sin, internal struggle, and idolatry. The acknowledgement of shame by members of St John's points towards issues of human vulnerability, honour and morality, and opens up questions about the structuring force of wider social hierarchies shaping evangelicals' actions and self-understanding.

In an article discussing Pierre Bourdieu's methods of fieldwork, Wacquant talks about how Bourdieu spotlighted the role of shame, 'that self-defeating emotion that arises when the dominated come to perceive themselves through the eyes of the dominant, that is, are made to experience their own ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving as degraded and degrading' (2004b: 393). The fission of subjectivity implied in the emotion of shame is, Wacquant argues, both determined by and expresses wider diminishing social cohesion. The shame felt by members of St John's about their faith in contexts outside the church leads us to see how their subjectivities can be understood as the interstitial, fractured space of their being addressed as different kinds of subject in particular places. I explore how this subjective fragmentation is experienced by members of the church, and how their habituated forms of religious practice lead them to articulate and become conscious of this fission whilst developing their desire for a transcendent coherence and unity in which such tensions are reconciled.



The fracture of subjectivity is by no means particular to conservative evangelicals. However their articulated consciousness of subjective division, formed through their focus on God as coherent and their reflexive technologies of the self, makes their lifeworld a site that enables its analysis within the conditions of urban modernity and allows examination of the specific forms of cultural and moral fragmentation they experience. It is also the experience of ethnographers, as they, like British evangelicals, move between differing lifeworlds, and are likewise often aware of the disjunctures this can create through the academic practice of reflexivity. Bourdieu's multi-sited ethnographic approach, with paired field studies of Kabylia in Algeria and his childhood community of Béarn in the Pyrénées, aimed to draw attention, as Wacquant notes, to how the researcher is 'caught at the intersection of systems of difference' (Abu-Lughod, cited in Wacquant 2004b: 398).<sup>16</sup> Exemplifying this, Simon Coleman describes how his fieldwork with a Pentecostal church and the Word of Life movement in Sweden, whilst living amongst students at Uppsala University, led to a 'somewhat schizophrenic existence – moving between church and student life and contexts of intense religiosity' (2000: 14). He states that this was further complicated by discussing his work with members of the university's anthropology and theology departments, as these contexts were not separate from 'the field':

local scholars (particularly theologians) helped to define the context in which the Word of Life was interpreted in Uppsala and Sweden as a whole. If, as I have argued, we need to be aware of evangelical forms of reflexivity in comprehending processes of globalisation, we must also reflect upon our own assumptions in the analysis of a religious group whose ideology appears to contradict many of the cherished principles of academic life.

(ibid.: 15)

My fieldwork led me to move between comparable systems of difference, and Coleman's caveat about the necessity of reflecting upon our own assumptions in our analysis is important. Bourdieu's reflexive sociology invites us to objectivize our

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<sup>16</sup> In her study of university students' engagement with Israel-Palestine, Ruth Sheldon also explores the ways shame reveals the ethnographer's split subjectivity in relation to experiences of different constructions of the sacred and their pollution (Sheldon forthcoming).

relations with what we study, attending to the social construction of ‘our’ knowledge about ‘others’. Taking up this invitation, I will outline how my personal and academic history play a role in the story I develop, and how this reflexive knowledge might deepen our understanding of evangelicals.

## On Being Reflexive

Whilst we will see that reflexive practices play an important role in the formation of conservative evangelical subjectivities, reflexivity is also enshrined across the social sciences as an ‘academic virtue’, helping researchers establish the truthfulness of the accounts they offer (Lynch 2000). Reflexivity is broadly understood as enabling a more objective understanding of the ‘truths’ under consideration through bringing to the reader’s attention the researcher’s subjective positions, to consider how these affect their interpretations. It is also seen as a moral duty, problematizing the different operations of power at play in the construction of knowledge and the researcher’s position in these processes. Yet the precise meaning and desirability of different forms of reflexivity is disputed.<sup>17</sup> In *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Bourdieu describes how reflexivity has mostly been understood in terms of researchers’ objectivizing their background, class location, gender etc. to take account of how these can ‘blur the sociological gaze’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 39). Bourdieu and Wacquant argue that whilst often neglected, what is *also* needed is a form of reflexivity that inscribes ‘into the theory we build of the social world the fact that it is the product of a theoretical gaze, a “contemplative eye”’ (ibid.: 70). Wacquant describes Bourdieu as critical of ‘the “textual reflexivity” advocated by those anthropologists who have recently grown infatuated with the hermeneutic process of cultural interpretation in the world and with the (re)making of reality through ethnographic inscription’ (ibid.: 41). He notes that, for Bourdieu, reflexivity is:

not produced by engaging in *post festum* ‘Reflections on Fieldwork’ à la Rabinow; nor does it require the use of the first person to emphasize empathy, ‘difference’ (or *différance*) or the elaboration of texts that situate the individual observer in the act of observation. ‘Rather it is achieved by subjecting the

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Michael Lynch’s discussion of six broad ‘categories’ of reflexivity (2000).

*position* of the observer to the same critical analysis as that of the constructed object at hand’.

(ibid.)

The importance of reflexivity for Bourdieu and Wacquant is related to – but not primarily directed towards – the virtues of humility, sensitivity and credibility that are privileged in the ‘confessional’ reflexivity commonly practised in some anthropological ethnography.<sup>18</sup> The importance of what they term ‘epistemic reflexivity’ is primarily focused on strengthening the epistemological moorings of research (ibid.: 46) through encouraging recognition of how academic analyses and the ‘innermost thoughts’ of researchers are subjected to specific determinisms through their social and academic locations and practices. Thus, in this view, reflexivity is not so much about intimist confession as it is about ‘uncovering the social at the heart of the individual, the impersonal beneath the intimate, the universal buried deep within the most particular’ (ibid.: 44). Participant observation in this view enables analysis of the conditions of possibility of the act of observation, aiming at ‘objectivizing the subjective relation to the object which, far from leading to a relativistic and more or less anti-scientific subjectivism, is one of the conditions of genuine scientific objectivity’ (Bourdieu, cited in Wacquant 2004b: 398)

The study of religion has increasingly practised both epistemic and more confessional modes of reflexivity. One form has been the critique offered by discursive, poststructuralist scholars such as Talal Asad (1993), Russell McCutcheon (1997) and Timothy Fitzgerald (2000) of how what is termed ‘religion’ is formed through particular, contingent historical discourses. Another form is practised by scholars in the ‘lived religion’ approach, whose work critically reflects on how the sociological lens through which ‘religion’ has been studied has been primarily focused, through its use of quantitative methods, on affiliation to institutions and statements of doctrinal beliefs and values as the measures of ‘religiosity.’ Working within this approach, Orsi’s work powerfully demonstrates how epistemic reflexivity enables richer understanding of the interrelationship of the worlds we study and our places within these, troubling the inscription of distance academic practice can produce. In *Between Heaven and Earth* (2005), he describes how the history of the

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<sup>18</sup> See Joe Webster’s discussion (2008) of confessional ethnography and Foucauldian ‘confessional’ reflexivity, which he argues can be brought together with Bourdieu’s approach.

study of religion constructed 'religion' according to liberal, Protestant, modernist ideals and conceptualized religious lifeworlds that differed from these norms 'unhealthy' or 'deviant'. He argues against this moralistic urge to construct figures of otherness in the study of religion, and calls instead for attention to the common humanity that researcher and informant share. He describes this approach as a third way between confessional theology and radically secular scholarship, as 'an in-between orientation, located at the intersection of self and other, at the boundary between one's own moral universe and the moral world of the other' (2005: 198). This 'entails disciplining one's mind and heart to stay in this in-between place', as we learn to recognize ourselves in the stranger and the stranger in ourselves (ibid.).

Orsi proposes that autobiographical methods can help us move beyond moralizing judgements in the study of religion, since, as Bourdieu argues, they help us objectify our own subjective relations to our objects of study and thereby interrogate what is at stake in the (unavoidable) process of academic objectification. The conversation between researcher and participants will always take place, as Orsi highlights, on a stage established by the networks of relationships brought to the conversation by the participant and the researcher, and is addressed, using particular theoretical frameworks, to specific audiences. Therefore attending to the ghosts – personal and academic – that haunt the researcher's religious imaginary is part of an academic commitment to scientific objectivity, enabling us to offer accounts that attend to the conditions of the production of knowledge.

Complex autobiographical relationships with communities and individuals being studied reconfigure the relationship between self and other, near and far.<sup>19</sup> Undertaking any form of ethnographic study places the researcher in this position of stranger within a spatial field. This is so even when writing about a lifeworld with which we are intimately familiar: the act of writing, objectivizing those close to us and our own practices in the pursuit of establishing knowledge of social reality establishes a distance between the researcher as 'subject' and the 'object' of knowledge; in the act of observing (*theorein*) and describing a social world, the researcher must retire from it more or less completely (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 70). But this process of objectivization can, when researching religious traditions close to us, reveal how those 'objects' of knowledge that have formed us as subjects

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<sup>19</sup> Bourdieu described his multi-sited ethnography as 'doing a *Tristes Tropiques* in reverse' (cited in Wacquant 2004b: 395).

also play a role in shaping the subjectivities of our participants. Thus sociological attentiveness to what had seemed in close proximity to the researcher's own experience can be an interpretive device that enables her to move beyond navel-gazing re-flection to address what connects us with and separates us from what had seemed near at hand.

My decision to research Anglican evangelicals can be partly linked to the intimacy of my knowledge of this lifeworld, through my own teenage involvement with the charismatic evangelical movement. I grew up attending the local liberal, Anglo-Catholic parish church with my parents and brothers in a leafy suburb of south-west London. But in addition to this, as a teenager I regularly attended a charismatic evangelical Anglican church and youth group, after a school friend invited me to a Christmas 'guest event' at her church, and so across these different kinds of religious space, secular school, home and friendship groups, I, like my informants, negotiated the meaning and performance of my faith. My intense involvement with this thriving church – at the time very influenced by the then recent Toronto Blessing – and desire to probe the history and teachings of Christianity motivated my decision to study theology as an undergraduate. At university, beginning with my engagement with the 'masters of suspicion' – Freud, Marx, Nietzsche *et al.* – in my first term, through to my embracing Don Cupitt's atheist Christianity during my Master's degree, I moved away from evangelicalism, whilst retaining a commitment to my Christian identity.

My teenage involvement with and gradual path away from evangelicalism shaped some of the prejudices I came to hold against the movement, whilst also motivating my desire to understand its social effects better. These judgements I came to hold – for example, that evangelicals' attitudes towards other faiths are intolerant, their teachings on gender roles misogynistic, their views on homosexuality homophobic – should be seen as related to how social scientific knowledge of evangelicals has often been inscribed. My judgements were in part developed through my formation in a liberal humanities department as an undergraduate, and indicate how the liberal, academic gaze comes to construct conservative evangelicals as 'other', albeit mundane and familiar (cf. Harding 1991). But these judgements are also instructive as data relevant to understanding the lived realities of evangelical experience. Whilst studying in a liberal theology department played a part in shaping how I came to objectify the movement I parted company with, my value judgements were also formed through my participation in broader social structures, friendships

and relationships, in which evangelical teachings on a variety of issues were counter cultural in the late 1990s, and today are even more so.

Labels given to evangelicalism by those outside the movement constitute important data for understanding its contemporary formation: evangelicals participate in many of the same structures – for example studying and working in liberal universities, or consuming mass media – in which this labelling process takes place. It is, however, not only the case that these structures form a background context framing evangelicalism. To understand the lived experience of conservative evangelicals, we need to understand the force of these structures, often in tension with the norms of their faith, in shaping subjectivities. The same cultural structures that lead Boris Johnson to label the Core Issues Trust bus adverts as ‘intolerant’ also affect evangelicals’ practices and values and how they come to understand others’ views of their faith. My informants frequently reiterated that evangelicals are stereotyped both in the media and in the popular imagination as intolerant (especially of other religions), sexist, homophobic, and judgmental, and sermons also reflect this consciousness and the emotional effects it has. George, one of the curates, stated in a sermon, for example, that evangelical teachings on sexuality and other areas would lead ‘the world’ to ‘hate’ them:

You will be hated if you stick with the words of the Bible. Because many of the things that the New Testament writers said are very, very unpopular today. They’re unpopular morally because they have all kinds of things to say about sexual ethics. They’re unpopular because they’re narrow, exclusive: Jesus is the *only* way, this is the *only* truth. They’re unpopular because they’re just out of chime with our society, on various different topics, from work, to the place of men and women in marriage, just doesn’t say the same as what our society says. And people will hate you if you stick with some of the things that the Bible says.

Thus we see that the sorts of judgement I came to make against evangelicalism as a student, and that have helped focus the liberal lens by which academic knowledge of evangelicals has been constructed, are those that evangelicals also see as projected onto them by broader society. These cultural ‘flash points’ then gesture towards the different sources of cultural authority that today are seemingly in tension with

evangelical sources of moral authority, which evangelicals have to negotiate their responses to in their everyday lives. In the pluralist, cosmopolitan context of London, this can be a difficult process.

Focusing on my own experience of evangelicalism, both personal and academic (not that the two can be neatly separated), and how this relates to my field site, troubles simplistic constructions of otherness. The distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’ created by the objectifying theoretical gaze as it has often been directed at evangelicals is too simplistic, as members of St John’s inhabit similar social locations to sociologists, anthropologists and religious studies scholars and thus have been shaped by their formation in, for example, universities where liberal political ideals are the norm. Indeed, in the small group I spent longest with, half the group had, like me, an undergraduate degree in a humanities subject from either Oxford or Cambridge. Thus the narrative I develop seeks to move beyond constructions of evangelical ‘others’ and depict the everyday realities of how conservative evangelicals experience and find ways of negotiating anxieties, concerns, sensitivities, vulnerabilities and human frailties that characterize social life more broadly, and consider how this shapes and is shaped by their modes of urban dwelling.

## **Order of Chapters**

The first two chapters of this thesis situate the analysis of following chapters in relation to debates on modernity, cities and the study of religion. Chapter 1 provides an overview of Georg Simmel’s writing on cities and the ethics of interrelations between individual and collectivity implied in urban modes of interaction. I consider his approach in relation to wider literature on evangelicalism. I propose that Simmel’s approach to monotheistic religion as offering a source of coherence and unity in modernity provides a lens through which to analyse the extent to which conservative evangelical faith offers a creative response to conditions of cultural fragmentation. In Chapter 2, I draw together the concepts of body pedagogics, interrelationality and subjectivity. My aim here is to develop an approach that is sensitive to these questions of coherence and fragmentation through focusing on how conservative evangelicals work to form themselves and each other as disciples through the habituation of particular embodied disciplines. I argue that to understand evangelicals’ lived experience requires attending to their sense of relationship with God: following

Simmel, my thesis will argue that the personality of God exerts agency in shaping their subjectivities and that their learnt orientation to His transcendence locates immanent / transcendent tensions within their bodies as they seek to internalize His voice and shape their thoughts and practices according to His desires.<sup>20</sup>

The remaining chapters describe the everyday practices of members of St John's, moving through different aspects of Simmel's narrative about religion and urban modernity and focusing on the specificities of their word-based practices, which conservative evangelicals see as central to their formation as believers. I begin, in Chapter 3, with their speaking practices, and explore how these point towards experiences of cultural and subjective fragmentation as they move across different city spaces. I then turn in Chapter 4 to address their 'listening' and consider how this shapes their distinctive sense of relationship with God and their subjectivities in relation to modern ideals of autonomy and rationality. In both these chapters, I consider how the ideals for speaking and listening in public and private spaces articulated by the leadership of St John's are experienced in the lives of its members.

Central to conservative evangelicals' listening practices and desire to speak is their sense of relationship with God. In Chapter 5, I show that the personality of God, mediated through their listening as coherent and requiring their coherence, increases their consciousness of their moral fragmentation, a tension they narrate through specific idioms of sin and idolatry. I argue that this awareness of subjective division increases their desire for God, and I describe how the ways they understand themselves as relating to Jesus's death provides an emotional release from these tensions. I suggest that their learnt sense of guilt serves to bind them more closely in their sense of relationship with God in an on-going process as they seek to understand themselves as forgiven and these tensions ultimately reconciled by God, whilst simultaneously identifying themselves as sinful. Chapter 6 addresses how this orientation towards the coherence of God's character is bound up with a sense of His transcendence, which leads to a consciousness of His absence. I argue here that conservative evangelicals' focus on word-based practices in a busy metropolitan context, in which it is easy to lose focus on the transcendent, can generate experiences

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<sup>20</sup> I use the gendered 'Him', 'He', 'His' etc. when referring to God throughout, as this was how members of St John's referred to God, although during one talk on the doctrine of God, the minister described God as 'neither masculine nor feminine'. I will explore in Chapter 5 how masculine idioms make a difference in how individuals learn to relate to God's character.



of uncertainty and doubt and a sense that their becoming disciples requires hard work and struggle. This final chapter describes how this leads individuals to develop relationships of accountability with each other that encourage them to keep going in their faith. I show how through individual and communal practices, members of St John's work to incorporate themselves into a wandering body that is in the process of turning away from the immanent city and seeking to make a passage through time to the City of God beyond time, a turning away that is, however, often interrupted and difficult.

# Chapter 1

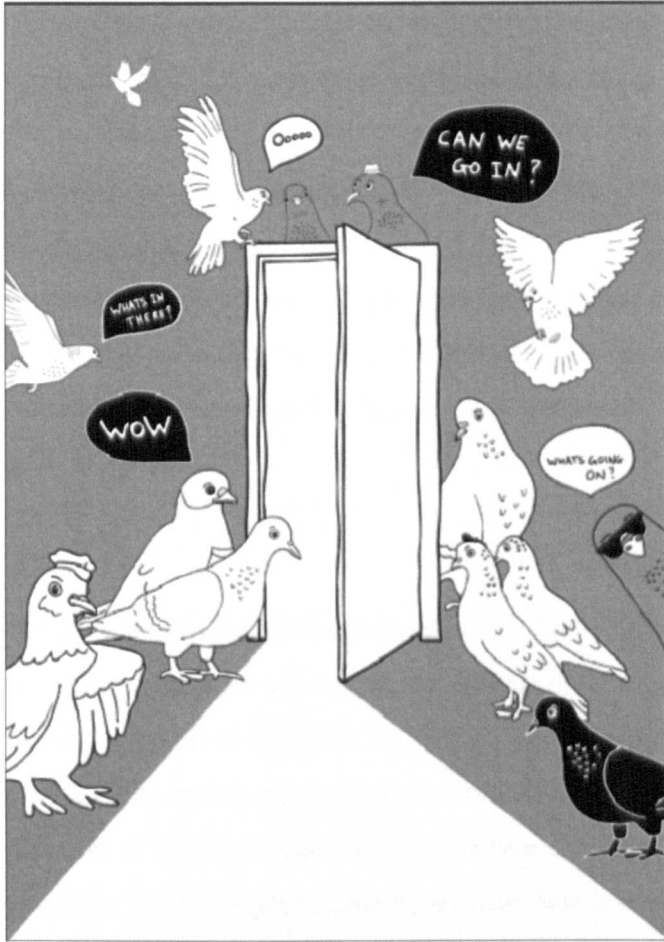
## Modernity, Faith and the City

We are constantly circulating over a number of different planes, each of which presents the world-totality according to a different formula; but from each our life takes only a fragment along at any given time.

(Simmel, cited in Levine 1971: xxxviii)

In January 2011, the London branch of the University and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF) held a week-long mission, entitled 'Invited', that several members of St John's were involved with. The week was organized around speakers from different churches giving short talks over lunch at different campuses of the University of London colleges, and each evening there was an event at a large nineteenth century church off a busy commercial street in central London. When I arrived for one of these evening events, the church furniture had been rearranged so that chairs were gathered in groups of seven or eight around coffee tables each with a candle, bowls of nuts and neon-bright strawberry sweets. The room had dimmed lighting filtered in soft blue and pink hues, and cardboard figures of line-drawn, cartoon pigeons on the church's central stage. These pigeons were a prominent motif for the evening: the covers of the small paperback copies of Luke's Gospel placed on all the chairs featured an image of pigeons gathered around an open door, and this formed the background to the slides that the speakers from UCCF used. I asked a student from St John's I was sitting with why there were these images of pigeons everywhere. He replied that they had been sitting in a room in the Royal Festival Hall

when planning the mission, ‘and this pigeon flew in, and everyone was trying to get it out. In London, pigeons are unwanted... nobody wants them’. He said one of the students was a designer, and they took this idea of the pigeons as symbolizing people in London who are excluded, and the open door conveying the idea ‘that they are invited in’.



(UCCF 2010)

In his 1909 essay ‘Bridge and Door’, Georg Simmel, perhaps the first sociologist of space, describes human beings as making sense of the world through a capacity to connect and separate things, and argues that this guides all our activity.<sup>1</sup> This process of ordering and distinguishing our sensory experiences shapes physical, emotional and imagined space, leaving material marks in the world around us: ‘In the

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<sup>1</sup> Fran Tonkiss develops an insightful analysis of this essay by Simmel and his ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ and their relevance for urban theory in *Space, The City and Social Theory* (2005, especially Chapters 2 and 6) which informs my discussion in this chapter.

immediate as well as the symbolic sense, in the physical as well as the intellectual, we are at any moment those who separate the connected or connect the separate' (Simmel 1997a: 171). Bridges and doors are material and social facts that emerge from the human will to connect and separate, and these confront us as objective conditions that then direct our action. Simmel writes:

Whereas in the correlation of separateness and unity, the bridge always allows the accent to fall on the latter, ... the door represents in a more decisive manner how separating and connecting are only two sides of precisely the same act ... By virtue of the fact that the door forms, as it were, a linkage between the space of human beings and everything that remains outside it, it transcends the separation between the inner and the outer. Precisely because it can also be opened, its closure provides the feeling of a stronger isolation against everything outside this space than the mere unstructured wall. The latter is mute, but the door speaks.

(ibid.: 172)

Simmel draws our attention here to the doubled nature of lines of division: 'the separation of objects, people or places is always shadowed by the idea – the "fantasy" or the danger – of their connection' (Tonkiss 2005: 31). Throughout its history, urban analysis has explored how boundaries run through cities and the active effects of physical lines of division. It has also examined the relation of these boundaries to the meanings of urban spaces and the rhythms emerging from tensions between 'significations' received by separated urban spaces (ibid.: 32).

The image of the door and pigeons used in the Invited mission demonstrates a symbolic line dividing Christians from non-Christians, imagined as the unwanted and unloved upon whom Christian students are encouraged to feel compassion and invite them through the door that separates them. This draws together several themes suggestive of the place cities have often occupied within religious imaginations. Here we see an idea of London as a secular, lost city in need of redemption, where the church is located as a community of belonging and salvation. But this boundary of separation is understood as porous, enabling connection and movement across it, as the city is also imagined as presenting particular opportunities for the circulation of the gospel through which others will be incorporated into the church.

A sense of separation between ‘church’ and ‘city’ was, during my fieldwork, frequently articulated in the moral register of differing values, with London described as in the lure of the twin idols of money and sex, simultaneously shaped by an individualistic modern dream of self-determining autonomy. Yet, this articulated distinction from the perceived values of the non-Christian metropolis at the same time demonstrated, as I will show in subsequent chapters, the shadow idea of Christians as also connected with and affected by the dominant moral milieu they desired to separate from.

The understanding of the city as space of moral disorder resonates in the narratives of the Bible, beginning in Genesis with Cain’s building of the first city after killing Abel and the dream of building the city and tower of Babel into the heavens and its subsequent destruction. Yet at the same time, hopes for the city as a space of righteous order are symbolized in the building of Zion and the desire for a City of God, hopes which have also helped shaped the contours of Christian imaginings of the city. The earliest beginnings of Christianity took place in the cities of the Mediterranean, with Acts telling the story of the birth of the church beginning in Jerusalem with the ascent of Christ and moving to its conclusion in Rome, the urban centre of power and empire, with St Paul ‘proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ’ (Acts 28: 31, ESV<sup>2</sup>). The urban St Paul played an important role in establishing the emphasis on the universality of the Christian message, and this spatial dimension of his biography is not insignificant. Alain Badiou argues that Paul’s particular emphasis on the universality of the truth of the Christ event as addressed to *all*, irrespective of markers of social difference, was affected by his encounter with cultural plurality as he travelled amongst the cities of the Mediterranean:

Recall that Paul was born into a well-off family in Tarsus, that he is a man of the city rather than a man of the country ... His style owes nothing to those rural images and metaphors that, on the contrary, abound in the parables of Christ. If his vision of things fervently embraces the dimension of the world and extends to the extreme limits of the empire ..., it is because urban cosmopolitanism and lengthy voyages have shaped its amplitude. Paul’s universalism comprises an

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<sup>2</sup> The translation of the Bible I use throughout is the English Standard Version, as this is the version used at St John’s in church services and Bible study groups.

internal geography, which is not that of a perennial little landowner.

(2003: 21)

Cities within the lives and imaginations of Christians have been crossed by boundaries of separation, both moral and physical, as they have sought to be different from the moral disorder the city represents, whilst themselves affected by lines of separation, concrete and symbolic, already marked out. This urban imagination has also been shot through with a desire to speak across these lines of cultural difference and separation ‘to proclaim the kingdom of God’ to all, potently symbolized in Paul preaching the gospel in public city spaces of the Roman Empire.

This complex interweaving of desires, dreams, hope and fears about cities in the Bible still runs through the lives of conservative evangelicals in London and other cities today as they draw on these narratives in shaping their identities and those of others. An article on the ‘Reaching the Unreached’ website, part of a network of conservative evangelicals ‘working to make Jesus famous in the tough areas of the UK’, for example, articulates these ambitions for the spread of Christianity through and beyond cities: ‘Cities are places of influence ... If Christians want to reach the world and transform culture, we need to focus on cities’ (Chester 2010a).<sup>3</sup> The author, a conservative evangelical minister from Sheffield, writes that the disorder of cities also makes them spaces receptive to the gospel: ‘Most Christians think of the city as a hard place or a dark place. But the *opposite* is true.... Always, always, *the more urban a place is, the more troubled and the more plural – the more people have responded to the message of Jesus*’ (ibid., emphasis in original). He contrasts cities in the contemporary world, spoiled by ‘rejection of God’, with a future city: ‘the Bible’s vision of the future, of God’s future, is a vision of a new city, a renewed city, God’s city. Jesus died outside the city so that we can be welcomed into God’s city...’ He argues that ‘In the meantime, the Christian community is a city within the city. We are an outpost, a glimpse, a foretaste of God’s new city..., a place of welcome for outsiders.’ Christians are, he writes, themselves outsiders within the city: ‘Christians belong to God’s city so we don’t quite fit in – we’re like temporary residents. Yet at

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<sup>3</sup> See Callum Brown’s *The Death of Christian Britain*, Chapter 2, for a portrait of how these forms of engagement with and ambitions for cities are rooted within the history of British evangelicalism. Chester’s words, for example, express the sentiments of nineteenth century evangelist Henry Drummond, ‘For the City is strategic ... He who makes the City makes the world’ (cited in Brown 2009: 26).

the same time we are to do good to the city in which we live' (ibid.).

In this chapter, I frame this study of conservative evangelicals in London through the work of Georg Simmel and compare his approach to the relation between individual, social order and subjectivity with standard sociological approaches to relations between religion, cities and evangelicalism. Arguably 'the first and most penetrating theorist of modernity' (Lash and Urry 1994: 13), Simmel's work is pertinent for engaging with the city dweller's engagement with others and the issues of tolerance and intolerance that, as I outlined in the Introduction, are central to debates about the place of conservative evangelicalism in public life, including on London buses. But his work also explores the subjective effects of living in cities as spaces of difference and cultural plurality, and suggests that religious faith offers a sense of coherence in the personality of God that responds to a cultural and subjective fragmentation that is symptomatic of the condition of modernity. At the same time, the religious orientation towards coherence that follows from this further leads to the experience of a different form of fragmentation inherent within and specific to religious faith. These different themes in Simmel's work form the key threads that run through my analysis.

I begin by outlining the central themes of his brilliant and influential 1903 essay, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', which explores the social and subjective effects of cities as culturally plural spaces where people are confronted with an overwhelming quantity of stimulations. The response to this, he argues, is a retreat into the self in public spaces, as the urban dweller learns to don a calculating, rational mask, interacting with others in increasingly instrumental modes. This way of being together in the city implies a minimal ethic of tolerance in terms of not interfering with others who may be in very close proximity, allowing them to be strangers and patterning the 'mundane manoeuvres of everyday routine (not making eye contact on the sidewalk, ignoring the weird intimacy of the crowded subway)' (Tonkiss 2005: 11). As Tonkiss describes, Simmel's approach examines at a microscale how these everyday interactions 'play out a broader tension between individuality and collective life, a more general trade-off between autonomy and community. In the modern city, as elsewhere, individual freedom goes together with impersonality and anonymity' (ibid.). This metropolitan logic of impersonality and reserve however runs in tension with the evangelical norm - symbolized in Paul preaching in Rome - of declaring the gospel to all, concerned with those who are understood as lost and seeking to address

them with a proclamation of ‘the kingdom of God’. This thesis will explore that tension.

Simmel’s work is also particularly relevant in this context because of the attention he draws to how the increasing plurality and differentiation of cultural forms in modernity, exemplified in the metropolis, leads to both social and subjective fragmentation, as the individual is unable to assimilate the multiplicity of sensations confronting her. After outlining how Simmel addresses these issues of plurality and fragmentation, I turn to consider standard sociological narratives of the place of religion in cities, in which urbanization has played a central role in both theories of secularization and counter-theories of cities as thriving sites for religious activity. I show how these have shaped understandings of evangelicalism as either straightforwardly accommodating to or resisting modernity. In the final section of the chapter, I turn back to Simmel, to explore how his work on religion opens up a more nuanced approach to understanding conservative evangelicalism. I outline Simmel’s argument that the personality of God in monotheism, as One, offers a promise of coherence that transcends disunity and fragmentation, simultaneously as religion is itself a cultural form that contributes to the experience of subjective fragmentation as it introduces orientations and values that are in tension with those in broader society. I draw this focus on fragmentation and transcendence in Simmel’s work together with Sennett’s description of how early urban Christians sought to direct their attention away from the earthly city towards a transcendent spiritual city, with the effect that their ritual practices drew them more closely together. These forms of collective religious practice are, Sennett argues, at odds with a contemporary master image of an individual, detached body at rest shaping life in cities today. I conclude by suggesting that Simmel’s and Sennett’s approaches to cities and religion provide resources to advance understanding of the complexity of evangelical lifeworlds, enabling us to explore the interrelation of differing values shaping religious lives in metropolitan modernity.

### **Subjects of the City: Simmel and the Metropolis**

Cities are complex and dense concrete physical realities, yet our experiences of them are also shaped at the levels of perception, emotion, memory and desire. Georg Simmel’s analysis of modernity explores the interrelation of space, time, the senses,



embodiment and culture in the formation and experience of modes of 'sociation', with the metropolis addressed as the paradigmatic modern site in his work. Simmel's focus on the development of a specifically urban subjectivity opens onto wider themes about the nature of interaction with others in cities and of wider social order in modernity. As Tonkiss notes, this concern with subjectivity allows a means to explore 'much broader questions regarding the modern social condition and what Simmel sees as its central problematic – the uneasy relation between individuality and collective life, played out more vividly than anywhere else in the lonely and crowded spaces of cities' (Tonkiss 2005: 113).

In 'The Metropolis and Mental Life',<sup>4</sup> Simmel contemplated how individuals respond to the sensory bombardment, fluidity and range of experiences characterizing modern urban life. The essay examines how cities produce particular forms of subjectivity, moving between the analytical registers of individual personality, mundane modes of interaction and the nature of collective order. In Simmel's sociological approach, routine forms of social practice and interaction are interlinked with wider issues of social order. The key questions running throughout his work address tensions between social collectivity and individualism, exploring how processes of individualization associated with the Enlightenment interact with the depersonalizing 'sovereign powers of society', and how individuals resist 'being levelled, swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism' (Simmel 1971b: 324). In 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', he brings to life this central problem of modernity with particular vividness and clarity. As Tonkiss notes, one of the pleasures of this text more than a century later 'is in part the tremor of recognition for anyone who has ridden a subway or enacted the drama of the crowded street' (2005: 115). The aim of this essay, Simmel states, is to investigate the relationship the city as a social structure promotes 'between the individual aspects of life and those which transcend the existence of single individuals' through investigating 'the adaptations made by the personality in its adjustment to the forces that lie outside of it' (1971b: 324-5).

The human is, as Simmel describes in 'Bridge and Door', a creature who differentiates, who makes sense of things by drawing distinctions and making

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<sup>4</sup> The essay was praised by Louis Wirth as 'the most important single article on the city from the sociological standpoint' (cited in Frisby 1997: 13). For discussion of Simmel's influence on Robert Park and the Chicago School of urban sociology, see Levine 1971: xlix-lviii.

connections between sensory impressions, but in the metropolis, this capacity to filter perceptions encounters an excess of stimulations and sensations that challenge this. In the modern city, we are faced by overwhelming waves of random visual, mental and other sensory forms, so that the basic condition of metropolitan life is overstimulation, and it becomes difficult to process the multitude of cultural forms we see and hear 'daily, everywhere, and in the most mundane ways' (Tonkiss 2005: 116). This intense sensory stimulation of city life is a source of attraction for some and has the potential to overstimulate to distraction. Simmel argues, however, that it more often produces an adjustment of the senses in a disposition of detachment, what he terms a 'blasé' attitude. This works against the process of categorization and differentiation by flattening impressions and encouraging a mode of detachment, shown, for example, in avoiding eye contact with the stranger pressed up close on the tube train. Tonkiss describes the prescience of his description of urban practices of detachment:

Simmel's Berliners in the early twentieth century had to effect this kind of social distance by themselves. Now, the mobile technologies of the personal stereo or telephone have made technical what otherwise was simply learned. These are devices which realize the logic of urban detachment perfectly. Immersed in a private soundscape, engaged in another interactive scene, you can set limits to the city as a shared perceptual or social space.

(2005: 117)

Simmel argues that this stance of detachment is also bound up with the money economy, which effects an increasing impersonality in social relations. In this economy, the world has been transformed into 'an arithmetical problem and ... every one of its part[s] [fixed] in a mathematical formula' (1971b: 327). As the money economy throws all into circulation, fragmenting stable and constant relations and creating more transitory constellations, the city dweller learns to deal with the continuous shift of external stimuli through increasingly abstracted processes of rationalization, which shape urban logics of practice. The impersonality of money as a form affects social interactions, which become increasingly patterned through a dominance of quantitative values over qualitative, and rationalizing, instrumental, one-sided modes of engagement, with 'all float[ing] with the same specific gravity in

the constantly moving stream of money' (ibid.: 330).<sup>5</sup>

Simmel describes the circulation of money and the values of monetary transaction as also shaping the temporality of urban interactions, leading to a dominance of 'now' time.<sup>6</sup> The city dweller's experiences of time, focused on the present, become governed by logics of precision, calculability and exactness. 'The technique of metropolitan life in general is not conceivable', he writes, 'without all of its activities and reciprocal relationships being organized and co-ordinated in the most punctual way into a firmly fixed framework of time which transcends all subjective elements' (ibid.: 328). He notes that 'the lack of the most exact punctuality in promises and performances would cause the whole to break down into an inextricable chaos', commenting, 'If all the watches in Berlin suddenly went wrong in different ways even only as much as an hour, its entire economic and commercial life would be derailed for some time' (ibid.).

These urban norms of indifference and calculating exactness have the effect of abridging social contact, marking and maintaining psychological barriers of separation between individuals (Tonkiss 2005: 117). Simmel remarks that the disposition of reserve shades into 'not only indifference but more frequently than we believe, it is a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion' (1971b: 331). These ideas of separation and solitude as conditions of urban life have been taken up in wider social analysis. This reserve and indifference on the one hand appears a melancholy story of urban coldness and rationality. As the earliest sociologists were focused on exploring the effects of the massive upheavals of capitalist industrialization in Europe, a common thread running through accounts of urbanization has been a nostalgic contrast between the intimacy of social relations in small-scale rural community life and the impersonal individualism seen as characterizing urban life, such as that Ferdinand Tönnies drew between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*.

This contrast between familiarity in small towns and metropolitan solitude underlies Simmel's essay. Yet despite the seeming coldness and instrumentality of human relations he describes in cities, Simmel is, as Sennett notes, 'a celebrant of

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<sup>5</sup> The ways the money economy shapes metropolitan social interactions, described towards the end of the metropolis essay, takes up this central theme in his work that he had earlier explored extensively in *The Philosophy of Money* (2004), originally published in 1900.

<sup>6</sup> This prefigures Walter Benjamin's celebrated treatment of homogenous, empty time in modernity (Benjamin 1999: 225; see Frisby 2004: xxiii).

difference' (Sennett 2012: 38). The blasé, indifferent attitude Simmel describes as the distinctively urban disposition is fundamentally social: this is a form of non-interference that is the only manageable way of being together with so many countless strangers in crowded, fluid city spaces. As Tonkiss argues, this dissociation and psychological separation Simmel identifies 'is in fact a basic form of urban sociation, one that allows us to coexist with all these largely unknown others. Refusing interaction is not... merely a matter of social withdrawal but is instead a primary condition for urban social life, securing individual calm together with relative social peace' (2005: 11).<sup>7</sup> Thus for Simmel, whilst there were psychological costs to the sensory bombardment of urban life, he saw the differing range of cultural forms in the city as offering the potential for greater freedom, and the presence of strangers as enriching social life. As Sennett writes, 'life with others is bigger, richer' (2012: 38).<sup>8</sup> The forms of difference the metropolis offer enlarges individuals' horizons, and the city, like the individual person, forever transcends its own immediate sphere, with a 'functional magnitude beyond its actual physical boundaries' (Simmel 1971b: 335). This expansion of horizons shaping the urban imagination affects, as we will see in Chapter 3, how members of St John's locate the possibilities afforded by the metropolis for the spread of faith beyond the city.

Simmel argues that the city dweller placed in a small town will experience a sense of limitation, as small town life enables the surveillance of individuals' actions and attitudes. But whilst Simmel celebrates urban difference, he expresses ambivalence about modern metropolitan freedom:

The mutual reserve and indifference, and the intellectual conditions of life in large social units are never more sharply appreciated in their significance for the independence of the individual than in the dense crowds of the metropolis because the bodily closeness and the lack of space make intellectual distance

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to suggest that this form of urban indifference necessarily translates into more than the negative freedom of not being interfered with. Gill Valentine notes a 'worrying romanticization of urban encounter' in some strands of urban literature which 'reproduce a potentially naïve assumption that contact with "others" necessarily translates into respect for difference' (2008: 325).

<sup>8</sup> Sennett notes that Simmel's concern with questions of urban sociality and cultural difference can be linked with his own experiences of social marginality, anti-Semitism preventing him, for example, from gaining a permanent academic position until middle age (2012: 37-8).

really perceivable for the first time. It is obviously only the obverse of this freedom that, under certain circumstances, one never feels as lonely and deserted as in this metropolitan crush of persons. For here, as elsewhere, it is by no means necessary that the freedom of man reflect itself in his emotional life only as a pleasant experience.

(1971b: 334)

Whilst city life frees the individual from limiting traditional social ties, there is a danger that becoming an object of indifference to others can lead to a sense of insignificance.<sup>9</sup> In this context it is easy to see the heightened appeal of forms of community that religious institutions can offer in the city.

In addition to the flattening of sensation in the rationalizing, blasé attitude of the city dweller, Simmel sees urban plurality as having further subjective effects in the experience of fragmentation and the problem of maintaining a unified personality. The urban subject is 'constantly circulating over a number of different planes, each of which presents the world-totality according to a different formula; but from each our life takes only a fragment along at any given time' (Simmel, cited in Levine 1971: xxxviii). As cities are crossed by physical and symbolic lines of separation, the city dweller, moving between different planes, is addressed as a different kind of subject in these. Robert Park captures this well:

processes of segregation establish moral distances which make the city a mosaic of little worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate. This makes it possible for individuals to pass quickly and easily from one moral milieu to another, and encourages the fascinating but dangerous experiment of living at the same time in several different contiguous, but otherwise highly separated worlds.

(cited in Tonkiss 2005: 14)

As only fragments of the personality are involved in most everyday urban interactions, the experience of life in the city leads to a sense of subjective fragmentation, as the individual cannot assimilate all the diverse cultural forms they face in the over-optional experience of city life, each with their own associated norms

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<sup>9</sup> Simmel argues that such feelings of insignificance can lead to an impulse to exaggerate individual qualities through, for example, particular fashions (1997g: 197-201).

of practice. In ‘the buildings and in educational institutions, in the wonders and comforts of space-conquering technique, in the formations of social life and in the concrete institutions of the State’, Simmel writes, ‘is to be found such a tremendous richness of crystallizing, depersonalized cultural accomplishments that the personality can, so to speak, scarcely maintain itself in the face of it’ (1971b: 338). Whilst all social interactions inevitably make a plurality of claims on individuals who simultaneously belong to different groups, and all human subjectivities are therefore formed at the intersection of cross-cutting interests and expectations, Simmel sees this process as intensified in the metropolis. This theme of subjective fragmentation resonates strongly with how conservative evangelicals come to understand themselves as divided by moral struggles, articulated in the language of sin and idolatry. Following Simmel, I will argue that in the lives of conservative evangelicals in London, their sense of God as coherent leads to a heightened awareness of this fragmentation and a desire for their own subjective coherence.

Simmel argues that the effect of the money economy in the metropolis also lead to a loss of meaning. As the means of exchange becomes predominant, the ultimate end and significance of transactions is forever deferred:

A feeling of tension, expectation and unresolved insistence runs through modernity ... as if the main event, the definitive one, the actual meaning and the central point of life and things were yet to come. That is certainly the emotional outcome of that excess of means [associated with the money economy], of the compulsion of our complicated technique of life to build one means on top of another, until the actual end which they were supposed to serve recedes further and further towards the horizon of consciousness and ultimately sinks beneath it.

(1997b: 251)

As many members of St John’s work in financial services, this sense of tension and deferral of meaning that Simmel sees effected by money has particular pertinence for framing their cultural locations.

This difficulty Simmel highlights of finding a sense of secure order and purpose and of constructing and maintaining coherence has been a central problematic of sociology. The idea that the experience of modernity is one of fragmentation has

been widely articulated. W.B. Yeats, for example, captured this sense of the fleeting, fragmentary and ephemeral nature of modern life in his poem ‘The Second Coming’:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

(Yeats 1992: 184).

In the lines preceding this – ‘Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer’ – we get a sense, as Mike Featherstone describes, of the ‘inability to find the way home, to return to the lost point of coherence and order’ (1995:1). Whilst contemporary cultural theorists display acute sensitivities to the ephemerality, fragmentation and accompanied sense of uncertainty that are intensified under conditions of globalization, this theme has long been central to understandings of modernity. Historian Carl Schorske, for example, describes high culture in *fin de siècle* Vienna as entering

a whirl of infinite innovation, with each field proclaiming independence of the whole, each part in turn falling into parts. Into the ruthless centrifuge of change were drawn the very concepts by which cultural phenomena might be fixed in thought. Not only the producers of culture, but also its analysts and critics fell victim to the fragmentation.

(cited in Harvey 1989: 11)

Or as Karl Marx put it, ‘All that is solid melts into air’ (1988: 58).

Within the study of religion, the effects of this cultural and subjective fragmentation under conditions of increasing plurality have often been understood as central to a narrative of secularization. This is not, however, Simmel’s story. His brilliantly sketched picture of metropolitan modernity is ambivalent, not a nostalgic longing for rural community, and opens onto wider critical questions about the possibilities and constraints of our being together with others, the nature of tolerance, public space, individuality, the psychosocial effects of money, and the forms of disconnection, sociality and freedom that cities necessitate and enable. Simmel’s approach encourages attention to these wider questions of social order through analysis of routine, mundane practices and forms of sociation, and their effects in

shaping urban subjectivities. This has the potential to advance understanding of contemporary evangelicalism through opening up how norms of reserve, indifference and a minimal ethic of tolerance characterizing modern cities interrelate with desires for evangelism and the ambition to proclaim the gospel to *all* people everywhere, a logic also shaped by the urban beginnings of the church in the ancient cities of the Mediterranean. Before considering how Simmel saw religion as responding to the conditions of modernity, I will outline some of the dominant ways cities have been examined in the study of religion, and how that has shaped standard understandings of evangelicalism.

### **Cities, Secularization and the Sociology of Religion**

The founding fathers of sociology were concerned with the nature of modernity and the consequences of the social upheavals associated with industrial capitalism. They mostly theorized the changing social location of religion they saw taking place around them in terms of urbanization equating to secularization. Although religious cultures have been present in cities for thousands of years (cf. Mumford 1961), classical sociological approaches to the link between religion and cities were developed during a period of mass urbanization, with the nineteenth century having seen the growth of London, for example, from one million to six million (McLeod 1996: xx). Patterns of church decline during this period were explained as inextricably linked with urbanization. For this reason, the lived experience of urban religiosity has mostly not been a specific field of inquiry in the study of religion.<sup>10</sup> In *Gods of the City*, Orsi argues that this sense of ‘urban religion’ as something of an oxymoron has been bound up with a sense of nature as a sacred form, for example, Mircea Eliade’s view of the modern city as the outcome of processes of secularization, an ‘end product of a long history of spiritual alienation and decline’ (Orsi 1999: 42). Alasdair MacIntyre’s depiction of urbanization is also articulated in these terms:

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<sup>10</sup> This is in contrast with the field of religious cultural and social history, in which the place of religion in cities and the interrelations of this with secularization has been an area of analysis (see for example, Kent 1973; McLeod 1974, 1996; Brown 2009). Brown argues that ‘the clerical myth of the unholy city’ and the link between narratives of urbanization and secularization became partly cemented into historical scholarship because of historians’ use of sermons expressing such sentiments and statistics collected by evangelical organizations tracing declining church attendance (2009: 29-30).



When the working class were gathered from the countryside into the industrial cities, they were finally torn from a form of community in which it could be intelligibly and credibly claimed that the norms which govern social life had universal and cosmic significance, and were God-given. They were planted instead in a form of community in which the officially endorsed norms so clearly are of utility only to certain partial and partisan human interests that it is impossible to clothe them with universal and cosmic significance.

(cited in *ibid.*)

Orsi's edited collection marked the beginning of a turn towards specific interest in how cities produce distinctive kinds of religious experience and practice, how religion in cities 'recasts the meaning of the urban environment and the city re-creates religious imagination and experience' (*ibid.*: 44). Orsi describes urban religion as 'the site of converging and conflicting visions and voices, practices and orientations, which arise how out of the complex desires, needs, and fears of many different people who have come to cities by choice or compulsion (or both), and who find themselves intersecting with unexpected others' (*ibid.*). His own ethnographic portraits of the Roman Catholics he has studied in different cities vividly evoke this specifically urban form of religion he describes. Most work within this turn to the study of urban religion has been concerned with different forms of immigrant, ethnic minority and diasporic religious lifeworlds. Because conservative evangelicalism has often been especially prominently located in suburban areas, there has been comparatively little focus on the lived experience of middle-class conservative evangelicals in contemporary metropolitan spaces.<sup>11</sup>

The narrative of urban religious decline Orsi describes has also long been opposed, with different forms of religion in cities seen as either pockets of resistance to metropolitan modernity or highly modernized lifeworlds. These differing narratives of relations between urbanization, modernization and secularity have influenced

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<sup>11</sup> See Brierley 2006b: 85-88 for more detailed analysis of the geographical locations of churchgoers across different traditions in the context of England. Eileen Luhr develops an insightful historical analysis on the influence and interrelation of evangelicalism and suburbanization in American cultural life (2009). Recent studies of middle-class evangelicals in the United States by Omri Elisha (2008, 2011) and James Bielo (2011a, 2011b) have offered illuminating portraits of the urban religious lives of American evangelicals in the context of a megachurch in Tennessee (Elisha) and the Emerging Church movement (Bielo), but there has been little attention to middle-class British urban evangelicalism.

understandings of evangelicalism, which has historically thrived in towns and cities under conditions of capitalist industrialization whilst often simultaneously articulating an understanding of the city as a space of moral disorder in tension with religious life, exemplified by the Congregationalist John Blackburn's words to a mechanics' institute class in London in 1827:

The metropolis of a great empire must necessarily be, in the present state of human society, the focus of vice. Such was Ninevah, such was Babylon, such was Rome – SUCH IS LONDON. Here, therefore, is to be found in every district, the theatre, the masquerade, the gaming-table, the brothel. Here are to be purchased, in every street, books that ... tend to weaken all moral restraints, and to hurry the excited but unhappy youth who is charmed by them into the snares of pollution, dishonesty, and ruin.

(cited in Brown 2009: 19)

Brown argues that such moral critiques of the unholy city by nineteenth century British evangelicals, who collected evidence charting the nation's 'religious decline', also played a determining role in shaping secularization theory and the key part played by urbanization within this (ibid.: 33).

This argument that urbanization leads to secularization has been put forward in various forms by sociologists and historians, and several features of this relate to key themes of Simmel's analysis of metropolitan life. In his study of working-class religion in Berlin, London and New York, Hugh McLeod summarizes three key forms of this argument.<sup>12</sup> The first focuses on the demographic upheavals associated with industrialization in the nineteenth century. As McLeod notes, the major population shifts that took place during this period presented churches with logistical problems, which most were not able to adequately resolve. Some workers, for example, remained very mobile after moving to towns and could not form close relationships with any particular congregation, whilst others who were more settled gave up practices that had been meaningful in a rural context, but no longer seemed so in an urban environment (McLeod 1996: xxi).

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<sup>12</sup> There are of course other notable variations on secularization theory that I do not discuss here because of my focus specifically on those elements of secularization theories that relate directly to urbanization.

The second form of the argument sees cities as by nature pluralistic spaces: because surveillance of practices, attitudes and beliefs by employers, the church, or magistrates was not possible in cities, differing subcultures could flourish, which meant that, in nineteenth century Europe, religion declined as the urban population enjoyed greater freedom than they could elsewhere (ibid.: xxii). Some sociologists, most prominently those drawing on Weber, have developed this argument to suggest that this pluralism encourages relativism, which breeds scepticism and then challenges both the social support and plausibility of any one religious tradition (ibid.). The third form of the argument proposes a further psychological relationship between urbanization and secularization, positing, as in Simmel's metropolis essay, that cities develop a rationalizing and mechanistic disposition, and transcendent or supernatural realms lose their credibility. Whilst Simmel does not see this process of rationalization as necessarily leading to secularization, Weber influentially argued that bureaucratic and instrumentalist modes of engagement became an 'iron cage', leading to the 'disenchantment of the world' (Weber 2001: 123).

Peter Berger's influential secularization theory draws on all three forms of this argument, but, influenced by Weber, posits this third element as the most decisive factor in the process of religious decline. In *The Sacred Canopy* (1969), he describes religions as legitimating social institutions by locating them 'within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference' (1969: 33). In this way, the transient and fragile constructions of human activity are imbued with a sense of ontological security and permanence (ibid.: 36). Berger argues that rationalization is the decisive variable in the process of secularization and that this takes place in ever-extending institutional contexts around the globe, with particular psychosocial effects. He describes how the technological, bureaucratic and pluralizing processes of modernization associated with capitalistic-industrialism engender feelings of anxiety and confusion, and lead to a loss of a sense of belonging and an experience of psychological 'homelessness'. Processes of social differentiation lead to pluralism, while at the same time, bureaucratic and managerialist forces contribute to individualization and a process of 'subjectivization', as individuals experience themselves as their own source of moral authority and meaning. However, because social identities require recognition and support from external sources such as religious traditions and institutions, this process of meaning-making is precarious. As mobile populations during periods of urbanization lacked the support of durable agencies that would reinforce sources of

value and identity, this engendered increasing existential uncertainty.

Berger argues that subjectivization offers two possibilities for religions: they can 'accommodate themselves to the situation, play the pluralistic game of religious free enterprise, and come to terms as best they can... by modifying their product in accordance with consumer demands', an approach described as cultural accommodation. *Or* they can 'entrench themselves behind whatever socio-religious structures they can maintain and construct, and continue to profess the old objectivities as much as possible as if nothing had happened', an approach described as resistance to the processes of modernization and subjectivization (1969: 153).

As explanatory models, several scholars have argued that the intrinsic significance of urbanization has been exaggerated in these accounts of secularization. McLeod's historical study of the religious lives of people in London, Berlin and New York from 1870-1914 aims to complicate the generalized links that have often been assumed between urbanization and secularization and provide a more nuanced view of the complex constellation of factors that led to the decline of church attendance and professed religious commitment in the West between the later seventeenth century and the late twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> McLeod argues that amongst these, the primary driver for secularization was not urbanization but the advent of religious toleration as a political principle beginning in England, the Netherlands, and some British colonies in North America, gradually moving across other parts of Western Europe, preceding the mass urbanization associated with industrialization (1996: 201).

Toleration allowed an increasing number of unorthodox forms of religion and secularity to flourish legally. The simultaneous development of new media forms enabled the circulation of publications that questioned aspects of Christian doctrine and practice, views that previously would have been expressed only in private. This emergence of toleration challenged the social and cultural dominance of state-supported churches and allowed a religious 'free-market' to develop. As the monopoly of established churches was eroded, they had to compete against non-conformist and secularist movements, so that 'For the first time, religious affiliation became at least partly a matter of personal choice' (McLeod 1996: 204). McLeod

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<sup>13</sup> McLeod also notes that other historians have problematized the intrinsic relations posited between secularization and urbanization, citing, for example, Brown's argument that secularization was not caused by urbanization, with church attendance higher in Scottish towns during the mid-nineteenth century than in rural areas, with towns generating forms of religious revival (McLeod 1996: xxii).

notes that some religious organizations ‘responded effectively to the imperatives of the free market, and have prospered accordingly; others have remained stuck in the old ways, and have suffered severe decline’ (ibid.). In England, church decline was most marked in the first half of the twentieth century, and McLeod states that the most significant group in this process was the middle class, and suggests that ‘the leitmotif was individual freedom and rejection of the dogmatism and puritanism of the nineteenth century religion and ethics’ (ibid.: 203). He argues that this phrase ‘reached its climax in the 1960s, when the revolt in the name of personal choice swept across the whole Western world’ (ibid.), as in Berger’s account.

McLeod warns however that it is ‘misleading to interpret the whole religious history of the last three hundred years in the light of the drastic decline suffered by the churches in the 1960s, and consequently to exaggerate the extent of secularization in the nineteenth century, or even in the first half of the twentieth century’ (ibid.). Some elements of processes that gather under the umbrella term ‘modernization’ have favoured religious growth, whilst others have contributed to secularization, but these, as he notes, do not always correspond with standard theories of secularization. Secularization theorists such as Berger have argued that the most ‘modern’ sections of the population, whose worldviews and interactions were shaped by science, technology and rationalized models of business, were the most likely to reject religion. McLeod argues that the evidence for late Victorian London suggests ‘exactly the reverse was true: the group most involved in organized religion was the upper middle class and the group least involved was the unskilled working class’ (ibid.: 205).

McLeod’s account challenges the contrast that has dominated classical theories of secularization between ‘the religious countryside’ and the ‘secular city’, noting that the extremes of collective religious practice and non-practice were equally found in both. What characterized the city in the nineteenth century was not absence of religion but pluralism, as there was significantly less religious diversity confronting people in rural areas than in any city (ibid.: 208). He concludes by noting that individualization presented a particular challenge to socialism and Roman Catholicism – both of which had promoted a sense of meaning and purpose through belonging to a great collective organization – and argues that in this individualizing context, ‘it is probably no coincidence... that the most prosperous branch of Christianity is now evangelical Protestantism’ (ibid.: 209).

Whilst McLeod's work demonstrates the complex weave of social, political and intellectual factors that contributed to secularization and the contingent relation of this with urbanization, the most influential sociological studies of evangelicalism have tended to engage with more straightforward, orthodox secularization theories. Specifically, they have often sought to address the question Berger posed of how evangelicalism as a religious culture confronts pluralist modernity, and have mostly answered this through theories of cultural accommodation or resistance.<sup>14</sup> Rejecting the thesis that urbanization causes secularization, and opposing the grounds of secularization theory more broadly, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke have argued that urbanization fuels the growth of religions. Like McLeod, they posit that the pluralism accompanying urbanization stimulates a religious 'marketplace', in which different religious groups are forced to compete with each other for 'customers'. This leads to an increasing array of distinctive religious 'brands' with the result that the customer is in this situation, they argue, *more* likely to find something that caters to her taste (Finke and Stark 2005). In this context, religious groups that utilize entrepreneurial methods to market their products most effectively will be those most likely to thrive. They argue that people want their religions to offer rewards such as miracles, and to impart 'order and sanity' to the human condition. Religious organizations, such as conservative evangelical churches, which offer these are likely, they argue, to be the most attractive, even whilst they also make stringent demands on what the customer must pay to obtain for these rewards (ibid.: 282).

Considering the English context, statistics demonstrating declining church attendance throughout the twentieth century do not straightforwardly fit with Stark

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<sup>14</sup> James Davison Hunter, a former student of Berger, offered one of the most influential examples of the 'cultural resistance' approach to evangelicalism. In *American Evangelicalism* (1983), he argued, drawing on survey data from the Princeton Religious Research Centre, that American evangelicalism has thrived because it has been 'sheltered' from the processes of modernity, with evangelicals living disproportionately in rural and small town areas. His approach is mostly rejected, since the demographic and economic location of evangelicals no longer corresponds with his thesis. Dean Kelly (1972) and Laurence Iannaccone (1994) offer an alternative approach to explain the strength of conservative evangelical churches, termed 'strictness theory'. They argue that by demanding an absolutism in terms of beliefs and high levels of behavioural conformity, such churches produce high levels of commitment amongst their members, and that this commitment engenders a sense of meaning. Others have seen the growth of conservative evangelicalism as part of a global rise of religious fundamentalism and have explained this in economic terms. Lester Thurow's approach is an example of this, positing that those who lose out economically or face economic uncertainty in the new global economic order retreat into religious fundamentalism (1996).

and Finke's general theory of religious growth caused by processes of pluralization<sup>15</sup> although their argument that religions that impart a sense of order thrive does, as I will show, correspond to a certain extent with the appeal of St John's for its members. Steve Bruce also argues that urbanization and industrialization can give rise to religious revival movements. He suggests that the growth of evangelicalism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be partly explained in this way. Through dissenting non-conformist traditions, 'the formerly deferential middling and lower orders marked their withdrawal from the old system of dependency on parson and squire, asserted their autonomy, and embraced the religious values and practices that endorsed their recently acquired socio-economic and democratic aspirations' (Bruce 2002: 34). At the same time, evangelical culture encouraged self-discipline, hard work and sobriety, which assisted these orders in their upward mobilization in society (ibid.). However, Bruce sees urbanization as in the longer term undermining community life and thereby contributing to secularization, even if in the short term it causes an increase in religious participation and historically led to the growth of evangelicalism.

Christian Smith's influential approach to American evangelicalism has attempted to move beyond the either/or of the cultural accommodation/resistance explanations. Referencing Berger, Smith argues that when the old 'sacred canopies' split apart, ripped pieces of fabric fell to the ground and 'many innovative religious actors caught those falling pieces of cloth in the air and, with more than a little ingenuity, remanufactured them into umbrellas' (Smith 1998: 104). In the pluralistic modern world, Smith argues, people no longer need 'macro-encompassing sacred cosmoses to maintain their religious beliefs. They need only "sacred umbrellas," small, portable accessible religious worlds – religious reference groups – "under" which their beliefs can make complete sense' (ibid.).

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Brierley's analysis based on the 2005 English Church Census shows that greater London is the only county in England to have seen an increase in church attendance in the twenty-first century. He notes that London has 11 per cent of the churches, but 20 per cent of the churchgoers, and that its churches are on average twice as large as those outside the capital. It is also home to 23 per cent of evangelical churchgoers, 53 per cent of Pentecostals, and 57 per cent of churchgoers aged 20-29 (2006b: 249-50). This might to a certain extent accord with Stark and Finke's thesis, however London's singularity in terms of church growth in comparison with other pluralist urban contexts in England suggests that it is not *only* plurality that contributes to this, but a range of other factors to do with London's cultural specificity as a global metropolis. Brierley's forthcoming London Church Census (expected 2013) will help provide greater statistical clarity regarding contemporary patterns of churchgoing in the capital.

Within this framework, Smith has developed ‘subcultural identity theory’, an influential<sup>16</sup> approach that explains American evangelicalism’s continued vitality in terms of both its cultural engagement *and* the symbolic boundaries of distinctiveness of practice and belief it maintains. He argues that American evangelicalism maintains its strength as a religious movement ‘precisely because of the pluralism and diversity it confronts ... American evangelicalism ... is strong not because it is shielded against, but because it is – or at least perceives itself to be – embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it’ (ibid.: 89). These cultural conflicts and sense of threat enable evangelicalism to thrive, since without these it would ‘lose its identity and purpose and grow languid and aimless ... [T]he evangelical movement’s vitality is not a product of its protected isolation from, but of its vigorous engagement with pluralistic modernity’ (ibid.). Although Smith’s approach does not focus specifically on urbanization, he argues that pluralism, which characterizes cities and has been an intrinsic element of classical secularization theory, contributes to the strength of evangelicalism: ‘modernity’s cultural pluralism can actually positively benefit religious subcultures by providing a greater variety of other groups and subcultures against which to “rub” and feel distinction and tension’ (ibid.: 116).

Smith’s study shows that American evangelicals experience a sense of distinction from ‘the world’, and that this distinction is reinforced through discourses of ‘us’ and ‘them’ that are omnipresent in evangelical discourse. Smith explores how for some evangelicals, this creates a sense that they are on the receiving end of hostility from ‘the world’, located more specifically as the mass media, public schools and feminists, and leads to the feeling of being demoted to ‘second class citizenship’ (ibid.: 140). This does not mean that evangelicals are defensive or wounded though, and Smith argues that they also place significant emphasis on the important of contentment, openness and self-assurance, and expressed ‘very little doubting’ (ibid.: 29, 145).

Whilst there are elements of these different approaches that relate to conservative evangelicalism in the British context, several features of these accounts fail to resonate with the lifeworlds of members of St John’s. The repeated emphasis by both members and leaders of St John’s of a sense of moral struggle and their own

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Guest’s (2007) ethnographic study of St Michael le Belfrey in York, which explains charismatic evangelicalism’s strength in this context with reference to Smith’s thesis, in terms of its being a ‘culturally engaged orthodoxy’.



sinfulness might seem to correspond to Smith's thesis of evangelicals as 'embattled and thriving'. Yet his account of their sense of certainty and self-assurance does not ring true with my informants' articulated sense of 'shame', an emotion suggesting complex forms of simultaneous connection with and separation from others outside the church, which Smith's methods (mostly based on telephone interviews) are unable to account for. This is perhaps partly related to the difference in socio-cultural location between middle-class conservative evangelicalism in London, where it is a cultural minority,<sup>17</sup> and evangelicalism in the United States, where according to the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, 45 per cent of American Christians identified as 'a born again or evangelical Christian', representing 34 per cent of the total national adult population (Kosmin and Keysar 2009).

The sense of cultural distinctiveness evident at St John's and the tensions this creates raise questions about the lived experience of engaging with pluralism in metropolitan modernity that standard sociological approaches to evangelicalism fail to address. Whilst analyses of the effects of rationalizing and pluralizing processes of modernity recognize how social processes shape subjectivities, approaches such as Berger's focused on questions of plausibility leave little room, as Mellor and Shilling note, for exploring people's embodied creative potentialities within this or the effects of differing emotional orientations (Mellor and Shilling 2010: 29).

Simmel's approach to everyday mundane exchanges of the metropolis, and the subjective fragmentation and tensions people experience as they move across different spaces, provides an alternative approach to understanding the subtleties of the interplay of conservative evangelicalism and modernity. Like McLeod, Simmel moves us beyond straightforward narratives of urbanization as either leading to secularization or stimulating religious growth, and evangelicalism as either resistance or accommodation to modernity, allowing us to analyse the extent to which it simultaneously provides a creative response to, is shaped by *and* contributes to

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<sup>17</sup> Whilst according to 2001 Census figures for Great Britain, 71.8 per cent of the population describe themselves as Christian, the cultural meanings attached to Christianity in Britain that these answers signify (cf. Day 2011) are differently located than in the United States, and specific evangelical affiliations are a minority in comparison with the American context. The 2005 English Church Census, for example, showed an estimated 2.5 per cent of the English population attending an evangelical church on an average Sunday (Brierley 2006b: 52). Even though 23 per cent of these evangelical churchgoers are located in London (ibid.: 249), this still represents a far smaller comparative constituency of evangelical affiliation that in most parts of the United States (see, for example, Pew Forum 2010).

conditions of cultural fragmentation.

### **Coherence, Desire and Transcendence**

As cities are sites of difference confronting the individual with a range of cultural forms, so the urban subject can, as Simmel argues, be seen as fundamentally divided and fragmented, and this, as already noted, has been theorized as the condition of modernity. Whilst Weber describes the pluralization of values as denying the possibility of any sense of ultimate unity or coherence (1948: 356), Simmel sees religion as offering individuals creative resources to draw together diverse fragments of their experiences into a coherent order and unity (cf. Shilling and Mellor 2013). In 'Religion and the Contradictions of Life', Simmel argues that religious practices, through creating an orientation to a transcendent beyond cultural fragmentation, bring 'peace to the opposing and incompatible forces at work within the soul, by resolving the contradictions they create' (1997e: 36), offering a pattern of coherence and unity. Simmel sees the subjective effect of encountering and moving between differing cultural forms as creating in individuals a desire for a sense of coherence, for a transcendence in which life 'manifest[s] itself beyond all forms in its naked immediacy' (1997c: 90).<sup>18</sup>

Simmel emphasizes that this desire for an unmediated transcendent is ultimately unattainable, with this very idea of moving beyond cultural forms itself only mediated and experienced through our immanent experience of cultural objects. In Simmel's view, this promise of coherence has to be transcendent: 'The point of our religious endeavor must be placed... in a sphere beyond the empirical world, because it would be impossible to reconcile our manifold and diverse spiritual concerns in an empirical context' (1997e: 37). Simmel argues that the personality of God exemplifies this promise of transcendent coherence, experienced as opening up a pure unity in the religious life. He describes the religious orientation towards the transcendent divine as structured in terms of desire: every fulfilment of desire also contains within it a further longing, reaching an 'ultimate climax' in the feeling an individual has for God

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<sup>18</sup> Frédéric Vandenberghe (2010) develops an extended analysis of how Simmel views the transcendental grounding that religiosity offers as linked with the constitutive activities of the Ego. The reductiveness of this reading is at odds with the form of interrelational empiricism I will outline in the following chapter.

in terms of simultaneously both having and not having (ibid.: 39).

Whilst this desire for a divine transcendent enables the individual to draw together the fragments of life in a sense of unity, Simmel also sees religion as contributing to the experience of fragmentation, introducing orientations that sit in tension with those developed through participation in other social structures. Thus the sense of coherence that religion allows in response to modern conditions of fragmentation is both present and always deferred (ibid.: 43). I will examine Simmel's approach to the personality of God further in Chapter 5, but it is worth underscoring that one of the specific advantages of his work in developing understanding of the intersubjectivity of evangelicalism is this specific attention he gives to the personality of God. His work opens up questions not only of evangelicals' intersubjective engagement with the multiple forms of difference they encounter in the metropolis, but also how they connect with and experience God as 'other' and the agency this has in forming their subjectivities.

This interrelation of transcendence and cities as spaces of difference is also a central theme Richard Sennett explores in *Flesh and Stone* (2002b). Sennett's focus on how the central narratives and images of the body within Christianity shaped the interactions of Christians in ancient and medieval cities provide resources to take forward Simmel's focus on fragmentation and transcendence through considering the extent to which culturally sedimented narratives and practices of Christianity have agency in forming conservative evangelical lifeworlds today. *Flesh and Stone* is a provocative study of the interrelation between dominant images of the body and the construction and lived experience of urban space in pivotal moments in the history of cities in the West. Unlike Simmel, however, Sennett argues that the condition of subjective fragmentation is not a distinctive characteristic of metropolitan modernity, as civilization has always worked to confront people with differing forms of experience and contradictions that cannot simply be pushed away. Sennett's attention to forms of Christian practice shaped in urban contexts predating modernity therefore invites us to consider the extent to which these have agency in shaping conservative evangelical lifeworlds in London today. His work also enables us to explore how these interrelate with the contemporary logics of urban interaction he describes. I will briefly outline the central aspects of his approach that have relevance for this study.

The history of Western cities Sennett traces shows different responses to embodied others shaped as people learn to relate to their own bodies through

particular images of power. He argues that unhappy, stressed experiences of our bodies make people more aware of the world we live in, and encourage us to respond to others, whereas a passive relation to bodily pain and pleasure encourages indifference to others. He outlines how throughout the history of civilization these themes have been recast in master images of the body. Some of these images, he argues, have attempted to convey the unity of the body as a system and emphasized unity, wholeness and coherence, whilst others have presented this though 'a more sacred image of the body... a source of suffering and unhappiness', which encourages people to 'acknowledge this dissonance and incoherence in themselves' and to be more aware of the sufferings of others (ibid.: 25). Whilst Stoics cultivated passivity towards their own and others' bodily sensations, he describes their Christian heirs as seeking to combine an indifference to their own bodily pain and pleasure with 'an active engagement in the pains of their brethren' (ibid.). This was bound up with how Christians related to master images of the body offered in descriptions of God in the Bible.

Sennett draws attention to how Yahweh was a wandering God, and Christians learnt to identify themselves likewise as exiles and strangers, a self-identification still prominent at St John's today. Writing about early Christians in Rome, Sennett described how the narrative of exile was spiritualized into an understanding of the people of God as not 'at home' in this world. Learning this orientation towards a heavenly City as 'home' required loosening attachments to the immanent places in the earthly cities where these Christians lived. St Augustine 'expressed this injunction as the Christian's obligation to make a "pilgrimage through time"', which entailed attempting 'to break the emotional bonds of place' through specific embodied practices (Sennett 2002b: 130). The early Christians had to develop this orientation through particular rituals, such as baptism and Eucharistic meals, through which they sought to direct their attention away from their own bodies towards the transcendent Word and Light. Sennett argues that as they learnt to focus on the narrative of the transcendent Word's movement to and from flesh in incarnation and ascent, this roused in them a sense of their individual incompleteness and embodied vulnerabilities. 'Crucified for man's sins,' he writes, Christ's 'gift to men and women is to rouse a sense of the insufficiency of the flesh; the less pleasure His followers take in their own bodies, the more they will love one another' (ibid.: 371).

In contrast with the orientation to the body these Christian rituals created,

Sennett argues that the master image of the body in contemporary Western cities such as London is an increasingly passive and solitary body at rest. This, he writes, was shaped through the technological development of mundane comforts such as forms of seating on public transport and armchairs. Thus, for example, 'Leaning back in a spring-held, tilting office chair is a different experience from leaning back in a wooden rocking chair; to experience comfort, the body moves less; the springs do the work of the feet' (ibid.: 342). As ancient cities had public spaces where strangers came alive to each other in the performance of rituals, the modern city by the early twentieth century lacked these forms of public space. Whilst eighteenth century coffeehouses had been sites for gathering information and sharing news, in the modern cafés, much as Simmel identified, the café-goer expected to be left alone rather than talk to others, and 'the café thus provided a space of comfort which joined the passive and the individual' (ibid.: 347).

At the same time, modern urban architecture further served to detach city dwellers from each other. Sennett describes how central heating, new forms of ventilation, the development of electric lighting and elevators meant that new urban buildings could be constructed that were entirely sealed from the streets around them, like those that surround St John's today. He describes the Ritz Tower in New York, which opened in 1925, as an example. Then the tallest building of its kind in the Western world, it was both efficient and dramatic, with the engineering of heat and air meaning that apartment dwellers in the building no longer relied on the window for the circulation of air and light. 'Even today,' he writes, 'when the Ritz Tower is surrounded by other skyscrapers and Park Avenue is a hideous scene of traffic congestion, inside the building one has a great sense of calm, of peace, in the heart of the world's most neurotic city' (ibid.: 349). As these modern designs eased the burdens of work and compensated for tiredness, they lightened the body's sensory weight and suspended it 'in an ever more passive relation to its environment. The trajectory of designed pleasure led the human body to an ever more solitary rest' (ibid.: 375).

Sennett's narrative resonates with Simmel's analysis of cities as characterized by increasing detachment and individualization. Challenging modern emphases on individualistic self-sufficiency, Sennett argues that a disturbance of the self and awareness of fragmentation and individual insufficiency, such as that historically formed through Christian rituals marking individuals' belonging to a collectivity, is

necessary to turn people outwards in compassion towards others. His approach, like Simmel's, does not see subjective fragmentation arising with cultural plurality in cities as necessarily engendering meaninglessness, but rather as offering the potential for self-transcendence and for people to draw together. His analysis therefore invites the question of whether this is realized in conservative evangelicalism today in this modern, urban context.

## Conclusion

In the following chapters, I will consider the extent to which conservative evangelical culture in London is patterned on this interplay between the image of wholeness that, following Simmel, the personality of God offers, and the acknowledgement of fragmentation and individual incompleteness formed through Christian rituals which historically encouraged individuals to turn towards each other in their efforts to follow Christ towards the City of God. Sennett describes God as a master image of self-sufficiency and, like Simmel, emphasizes His wholeness, coherence and unity. He argues that it was not through the idea of God but rather through the embodied, ritual practices of Christianity that individuals became conscious of their incompleteness. Whilst I will explore how the collective practices of evangelicals today still work to draw people together, I will also show, in Chapter 5, that although conservative evangelicalism likewise emphasizes the coherence and unity of God, their simultaneous understanding of Him as *desiring* His people also sows the seeds of an alternative understanding of the self as individually insufficient and seeking to be turned outwards towards others.

This study seeks to analyse whether conservative evangelicals' practices of listening and speaking, as the means by which they learn to form a sense of relationship with God and orientation towards transcendence, turn them outwards beyond the self. I will explore how this historic Christian orientation Sennett describes interrelates with modern urban comforts and logics of interaction that tend towards privacy, detachment, self-sufficiency and rationalization as individuals move through different city spaces. Thus I will seek to unpick assumptions that evangelicalism thrives because of its homology with modern individualism and privatization and address the questions that Simmel and Sennett raise about the interrelation of embodiment, religious practice, cities and plurality. To what extent do

conservative evangelicals' religious practices entail a normative tilt towards a sense of individual insufficiency? How do these affect their connections with and separations from others and their self-identifications in the metropolis today? To what extent do these encourage them to address discordances within the self and how does this shape their subjectivities? How is their experience of the personality of God implicated in this, and what does this reveal about the interplay of fragmentation and coherence in their everyday lives?

Addressing these questions requires an approach that looks at how subjects move through different urban spaces and engage with a multiplicity of 'others' across these. The follow chapter draws together the concepts of body pedagogics, interrelationality and subjectivity to develop an approach that will allow this.

## Chapter 2

# Embodiment, Interrelationality and Ethical Subjectivity

My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension'...

[M]y body is not only an object among other objects, but an object which is *sensitive to* all the rest, which reverberates to all sounds, vibrates to all colours, and provides words with their primordial significance through the way in which it receives them... [T]he body... is that strange object... through which we can consequently 'be at home in' that world, 'understand' it and find significance in it.

(Merleau Ponty 2002: 273, 275)

As I walked towards St John's one Sunday evening in late November 2010, a young couple walked ahead of me into the church, the man wearing a warm-looking winter jacket and jeans, and the woman wearing a short skirt, nude tights and knee-high, high-heeled boots. I was by that point used to the fact that women at St John's do not necessarily dress especially modestly for church, but nevertheless, her outfit struck me as somewhat insubstantial for the chilly late autumn weather. The theme for that service turned out to be sex, or more specifically, as Freddie explained at the beginning of the sermon, 'sexual immorality and sexual temptation'. I sat next to Kate, a lawyer in her late twenties I had got to know on the Rooted groups' weekend away. After the congregation had sung the opening songs and recited the confession together, a young man with blonde hair, probably in his twenties, wearing jeans and a blue checked shirt, came to lead the prayers. He prayed, as the congregation sat with



bowed heads and eyes closed, 'Lord, we can find it hard to believe that we are forgiven, as we walk around in blemished, sinful bodies. Help us to believe the promises of your Word'.

The passage for that evening was 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. When Freddie stood up to preach, he opened by describing the situation facing the church in Corinth and comparing this with London today:

The Corinthian culture and our culture are ... very, very similar. Corinth was sexually liberated, they had a Las Vegas, or an Amsterdam sort of reputation, the red light district was official, and many of the prostitutes worked for the temples. But a church in that culture is always gonna have to battle to live God's way, isn't it? And it's the same with our culture, and the danger is, it'd be the same with our church. We live in the middle of a city that is a lot like Corinth, where for the most part, young people care very much about sex, are very interested in it. Very easy to have the same attitudes and therefore the same behaviour. And faced with that sort of battle in Corinth, some of the men had begun visiting those temple prostitutes, verse fifteen.

Freddie said while you would have expected Paul to 'come up with some practical solution' for the Corinthians, 'cold showers, sex addiction groups, that kind of thing ... in fact, he goes after their thinking. He wants them to change their minds utterly on sex and about their bodies in particular. He expects that that sort of change of thinking would transform their lives and their behaviour'. Freddie said that wider contemporary culture treats sexual desire much like hunger, as an appetite that needs satisfaction, and warned:

If you try and live as a Christian but think about your body the way the rest of the culture does, then sexual immorality will destroy you, like as not ... Sex is not all you are, and sex is not all your body is for. Your body was certainly not meant for sexual immorality, your body has a much more important purpose, do you see it? Your body is meant for the Lord ... So our culture says, 'be free, satisfy your natural appetites, your body is your own,' and *this* is the piece of Bible thinking you need in your brain: My body is *not* my own, it is the Lord's... He [Paul] begins with a question, verse 15, 'Do you not know that

your bodies are members of Christ?’ That is basic to what happens when you become a Christian. We, as a church, we are Jesus’s body, so each of our bodies is a tiny part of His body, we are united to Him, and the point here is wherever you go, Jesus goes because you’re united to Him. So if you take your body to the prostitute, Jesus goes to the prostitute...

Start the day with verses like this, wake up in the morning, remind yourself that the body you admire in the mirror is for Jesus and is His body. So instead of whatever you think your body looks like ... it’s actually a small section of Jesus’s toenail or whatever you’re looking at, and whatever you do today with that body, you do with Jesus’s body. And what I do with His body matters to Him ... Read this verse just before regular times of temptation ... Maybe read this before the Sunday night, watching the film on the sofa, or whatever it is for you. Read this verse: her body is part of Jesus’s body, my body is part of Jesus’s body, so ... flee sexual immorality.

Freddie emphasized that ‘the Bible isn’t ... down on sex’, but challenged the congregation to think about ‘how much sex figures in our thinking about our friendships here, and in our thinking about our behaviour here and our time here and what we speak about here ... How many times leaving the house having got ready to come here do you look at the mirror ... on the way out and think, “mm, sexy”?’ As I spoke to Kate after the service, she said that she found the sermon ‘challenging’. She said she tended to think of sex in terms of rules, and saw the sermon as challenging that. She added she did tend to think a lot – ‘too much, perhaps’, she said – about what she looked like when going to church, ‘as it’s here I’m most likely to meet someone’. As she said this, I take note properly of how she’d presented herself: smart looking beige jumper, pearl necklace, skinny jeans, knee-high brown boots, shiny auburn hair in a stylish bob, subtle mascara, rosy cheeks and freckles. She would not have looked out of place in a magazine story about a weekend in the Cotswolds.

The contested significance of the body throughout the history of Christianity derives in part from the centrality of the doctrines of the Incarnation and Resurrection: the transcendent God becoming flesh and redeeming humanity through a suffering and dying body, in a sequence of descent / ascent that marks a pattern for Christians to follow in their spiritual journey. Much writing on Christian practice in both history

and the social sciences has focused on the asceticism this paradoxical narrative introduces into the social order, on how the invisible soul has been elevated above the visible body. Yet, as Fenella Canell notes, ‘Christian doctrine in fact always also has this other aspect, in which the flesh is an essential part of redemption... [T]his ambivalence exists not just in theory, but as part of the lived practice and experience of Christians’ (2006: 7).

This ambivalent attitude towards the body was evident in multiple ways in this evening service at St John’s: through what Freddie preached about sex, and the idea of changing the body through changing *thinking* about the body – learning to imagine one’s own body as part of Jesus’s body – and this way of thinking being achieved through the embodied practice of repeating verses from the Bible. This idea of the importance of thinking about the body differently was practically mediated through Freddie’s preaching a sermon, the significance of this as the means by which God addresses His people learnt by members of the church through the habituation of the embodied practice of listening. This incident also suggests individuals’ self-consciousness about how their presentation of their bodies in clothing and interactions with each other function to make the church not only a space for the worship of a transcendent God, but also a sexualized space that can lead to what Freddie described as ‘sexual immorality and sexual temptation’. Caroline Walker Bynum’s assessment of Thomas Aquinas’s ambiguous conceptualization of the body seems to reverberate in this church in London today: ‘The concept of the body implicit here is not entirely coherent or consistent... Aquinas is ambivalent about body itself. Body is the expression, the completion, and the retardation of soul’ (cited in Griffith 2004: 23).

Ambivalence about the flesh is not, however, the unique preserve of Christianity. In *Re-forming the Body*, Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling describe modernity as also ‘Janus-faced’ in its divergent cultures of embodiment, characterized by both Enlightenment ideals of rationality and Cartesian dualism and also ‘another modernity: that of Schopenhauer’s “senseless will”, Nietzsche’s “will to power”, Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, and the reassertion of sensuality in baroque culture’ (1997: 131). Cultures of embodiment in modernity are, they argue, shaped by the uneasy interrelation of these differing phenomena. Simmel’s writing on turn of the century Berlin captures how the metropolis intensifies this uneasy cohabitation, with the multitude of sensual experiences cities afford combined with the increasing

abstraction and rationalization governing everyday life shaped by the money economy.

Ambivalence about the body has also shaped the study of religion and the construction of 'religion' as an object of study more broadly. In this chapter, I will outline how focusing on embodied practice allows us to understand the nature of conservative evangelicals' interactions with others and the everyday ethics implied in this, opening up understanding of how they are formed as particular kinds of subjects by, with and for others. I begin by locating my focus on speaking and listening practices in relation to the broader turn to the body and materiality in the 'lived religion' approach, and outline the theoretical shift this marks in the study of religion. In relation to my specific focus on conservative evangelicals' word-based practices, I describe how the work of Webb Keane and Simon Coleman has opened up attention to the interrelation of Protestant linguistic practices and the formation of modern subjectivities. Their work helps frame my focus on how conservative evangelicals' speaking and listening practices intersect with urban logics of interaction, and the effects of this in forming their subjectivities as divided.

In the second half of the chapter, I turn to outline how each of the concepts of body pedagogics, practice, interrelationality and subjectivity are helpful for developing an account of conservative evangelicals' everyday experiences in the metropolis. I begin by outlining the concept of 'religious body pedagogics' in the work of Shilling and Mellor, and suggest this can usefully be brought together with Foucault's work on technologies of the self. However, as conservative evangelicals' desire for particular kinds of listening and speaking practices is inseparable from their sense of relationship with God, understanding their lived experience requires an approach that is sensitive to their forms of connection with (and distance from) the divine. I suggest that Bruno Latour's irreductionist empiricism offers this. In the final section of the chapter, I consider why the conceptualization of 'subjectivity' developed by Simmel is specifically helpful for attending to experiences of fragmentation and the nature of objectification in metropolitan modernity. Despite these diverse theoretical influences, my priority is to harness them to the narrative explanation of the lived experience of conservative evangelicalism that the subsequent chapters unfold. Thus my overriding concern in this chapter is to explicate what it means to depict conservative evangelicalism as a form of embodied practice

and relationship within urban space and to situate the approach I develop in relation to broader currents in the study of religion.

### **Studying Evangelical Embodiment**

‘What difference does Christianity make? What difference does it make to how people at different times and in different places understand themselves and the world? And what difference does it make to the kinds of questions we are able to ask about social process?’ (Cannell 2006: 1). Within the history of anthropology, as Cannell notes, these are relatively recent questions. They were central to classical sociology, with Weber in particular demonstrating the agency of Protestant culture in the formation of capitalist modernity and arguing for a comparative sociology of religion. Yet despite the centrality of religion in the work of the founders of sociology, religion throughout much of the twentieth century has been a neglected area of the discipline, particularly in the decades following the 1960s as declining participation in institutional religion in the West was accompanied by theories of the secularization of society.<sup>1</sup>

Writing in 1983, Bryan Turner argued that sociology of religion ‘has not played a role in or constituted a part of any major theoretical debate in modern sociology’ (1983: 3), and Gordon Lynch comments that ‘it is an unfortunate irony that at the same time as questions about the social significance of religion have become pressing for academics, policy-makers and wider publics, we are reaping the fruits of the relative lack of engagement with these questions by social theorists and researchers over the past forty years’ (2012: 73). Mellor and Shilling argue that the methodological default position of many sociologists throughout the twentieth century has been to treat religion as always the ‘dependent variable’, relative to other economic, political cultural phenomena deemed more significant, thereby effacing the analytical significance of religion (2010: 27).<sup>2</sup> It is possible to see these tendencies as underlying some of the dominant sociological approaches to evangelicalism considered in the previous chapter, which posited it primarily in terms of a response

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<sup>1</sup> See discussion of these broader trends in the study of religion in Lynch 2012.

<sup>2</sup> David Smilde and Matthew May analyse the treatment of religion in major sociology journals over the last thirty years in a working paper for the Social Science Research Council, demonstrating that there has been an increasing shift towards treating religion as an independent rather than a dependent variable (2010).

to the uncertainties of modernity, rather than analysing the agency evangelical culture also exerts as it interacts with processes of modernization.

Turner argues that one of the reasons for the marginal contribution of sociology of religion to broader debates in social theory for much of the twentieth century was an inward-looking preoccupation with the question ‘what is religion?’ The difficulty of providing a satisfactory answer to this question, he states, dominated debates about secularization with ‘the effect of inducing a certain theoretical sterility and repetitiveness within the discipline. The endless pursuit of that issue has produced an analytical cul-de-sac’ (Turner 1983: 3).<sup>3</sup> Moving beyond this theoretical impasse, Turner argues that bringing ‘the corporality of the individual and the corporation of society’ into view allows examination of the significance of religion ‘in the interchange between nature and culture in the formation of societies and the creation of human attributes’ (ibid.: 12, 13). He highlights that the word ‘religion’ is derived ‘from *religio* – the bond of social relations between individuals’ and that ‘sociology’ comes from ‘*socius*, the bond of companionship that constitutes societies’ (ibid.: 8). Thus he describes sociology generally and sociology of religion in particular as ‘concerned with the processes which unite and disunite, bind and unbind social relationships in space and time’ (ibid.), and argues for the central importance of embodiment and material modes of production in analysing these processes. These were also Simmel’s central sociological concerns, as his work explored the nature of individuality and collective life, and the freedoms, constraints and conditions of possibility that ‘modernity’ allows. Thus, following Turner, I will not focus on addressing what ‘religion’, ‘secularity’ or ‘Christianity’ are, but will explore how conservative evangelicalism in London shapes and is shaped by processes that ‘bind and unbind’ particular kinds of relationships in the times and spaces of the metropolis.

Since Turner argued for the importance of focusing on embodiment in 1983, there has been a marked turn towards practice, the body and materiality in the study of religion. This can be seen, as Manuel Vasquez notes, as ‘but an installment of age-old epistemological debates in Western thought’ (2011:21). Within the history of sociology, the body has been, as Shilling argues, ‘something of an *absent presence*’ (1993: 11). Whilst the sociology of the body and of the emotions are now established

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<sup>3</sup> Coleman argues that preoccupation with what ‘Christianity’ is within anthropology of Christianity is also theoretically limiting, running the risk ‘of resurrecting afresh the idea of an encapsulated, autonomous religious phenomenon’ (2010: 803).

areas of enquiry, classical sociology rarely focused on embodiment as a specific area of inquiry. This did not mean that the body was absent, as the study of the structure and workings of society are inseparable from human embodiment,<sup>4</sup> but the body was not a central focus of interest (cf. Shilling 1993: 9).<sup>5</sup> Within the sociology of religion, the body has also been an absent presence, as the discipline has tended to focus on beliefs, values and attitudes, neglecting practice and embodiment as specific areas of inquiry. This neglect of the body has not marked anthropology in the same way, and the recent turn towards practice and embodiment in the study of religion has been influenced by work on materiality, practice and mediation within anthropology (e.g. Miller 1987; Asad 1993; Latour 1993, 2005) and by broader social theory focused on embodied practice (Bourdieu 1984, 1990; Foucault 1979) and the lived body (Merleau Ponty 2002).

Whilst increasing interest in embodiment is part of a broader materialist turn in the social sciences, within the study of religion it is also specifically bound up with a reflexive concern about academic constructions of 'religion', sensitively articulated by scholars working in what has become known as 'the lived religion' approach.<sup>6</sup> Drawing on cultural and ethnographic approaches, lived religion scholars have attempted to refocus the study of religion on 'everyday' spaces outside the boundaries of religious institutions, and this emergent literature has offered evocative ethnographic descriptions of how it is through routine and often mundane actions that religious lifeworlds are formed. This approach is a move against several features of established sociological approaches to the study of religion. Meredith McGuire argues, in *Lived Religion*, that there is a need is 'to challenge scholars of religion, especially sociologists, to rethink fundamental conceptualizations of what we study and how we study it' (2008: 4). Her dissatisfaction with large-scale quantitative research methodologies is bound up with how such methods frame 'religion' primarily through relation to established religious institutions and particular statements of belief or value, and fail to engage with the complexities and nuances of

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Shilling 2005: 24-46 for discussion of how Marx, Durkheim and Simmel all engaged with the nature of embodiment and emotion in their analyses of modernity.

<sup>5</sup> There were of course exceptions to this, e.g. Marcel Mauss (2006), Norbert Elias (1994).

<sup>6</sup> See Lynch 2012 for discussion on 'the lived religion' approach as a specific cultural turn within the study of religion. Lynch notes that the turn to 'lived religion' can be identified as emerging as a discernible movement in the study of religion with the publication of David Hall's (1997) *Lived Religion in America*.

religious lifeworlds that cannot be ‘stuffed into ... [a] questionnaire’s categories’ (2002: 196).

Scholars working in the lived religion approach have argued that prominent sociological methods of inquiry, privileging survey data on religious beliefs, values and affiliation to religious institutions, perpetuate a particular Western construction of religion that effaces the importance of bodies and objects in the practice of faith. Moving beyond this ‘to make visible all aspects of their religious lives that have been made invisible by the social construction of religion in Western societies’, lived religion scholars have called for approaches that explore the messiness of how religious lifeworlds flow beyond the orderliness of these categories and the coherence of doctrine (McGuire 2008: 66).

Orsi, McDannell and others have argued that the study of religion has been shaped by broader political landscapes and the history of higher education in the West. In this context, scholars formed in liberal Christian traditions formulated ‘a vision of “religion” that developed out of liberal and modernist Christianity [which] acquired a normative status in the work of nineteenth- and twentieth- century scholars of comparative religion’ (Orsi 2005: 189). Orsi describes how this construction of ‘true’ religion – rational, respectful, ‘unmediated and agreeable to democracy... emotionally controlled, a reality of mind and spirit not body and matter... concerned with ideal essences not actual things, and especially not about presences in things’ – shaped a broad lack of interest in practice and embodiment in the study of religion (ibid.: 188).<sup>7</sup> He argues that these established approaches worked to normalize forms of religion that conformed with elite, liberal norms as ‘healthy’ and exoticized those that do not as ‘other’, thereby fortifying the self (ibid.: 198). To move beyond this moralizing construction requires, as Orsi describes, attending to how it is through the practices of an experiencing body that the sacred can become real and opening up attention to shared grounds of human experience. Lived religion scholars have

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<sup>7</sup> McDannell’s pioneering on the material culture of religion has drawn attention to how ideas of ‘proper’ religion reflected social hierarchies: it was the religion of highly educated male ‘specialists’ in religion that was the standard focus of scholarly attention. The neglect of bodily, material and visual forms of religious practice, McDannell argues, stems however not only from gendered power relations, but from the influence of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy within the earliest history of Christianity, in which ‘There is a cosmic hierarchy that proceeds from the body and soul downward to matter. To turn from spirit toward the bodily realm is to move toward evil, the negation of the spiritual’ (1995: 9).



therefore worked to refocus the study of religion through a lens that is attentive to embodiment, emotion and materiality.

Reacting against the historic academic construction of religion as rational and emotionally controlled, lived religion scholarship has focused on forms of religious embodiment and practices that involve the body often in heightened emotional states. McGuire, for example, argues: ‘Collective embodied experiences, such as singing or dancing together, can produce an experiential sense of community and connectedness... Without the full involvement of the material body, religion is likely to be relegated to the realm of cognition (i.e. beliefs, opinions, theological ideas)’ (2008: 115). This implication that there could be forms of religion – i.e. those that focus on beliefs, opinions – that do not fully involve the material body has the potential to reinforce the mind/body dualism she sees as operative in standard sociological approaches, since surely *all* forms of religious practice, including those privileging belief, all involve the material body. There seems an ironic suggestion in McGuire’s work that the messiness of religious practices outside the boundaries of institutions is somehow more ‘real’ religion than its social construction in the West, rather than acknowledging that academic practices are also a form of realizing religion in ways that do not necessarily stand outside of the social lifeworlds of people we study. Because scholarship in the lived religion approach has reacted against a Protestant construction of religion, there has therefore been little attention to the material practices of those who embody a self-consciously rational, cognitive, word-based lifeworld.<sup>8</sup> My specific focus on the speaking and listening practices of conservative evangelicals in this thesis therefore provides a window into how the kind of construction of religion that lived religion scholars are reacting against (i.e. highly rationalized, focused on belief, in many senses privatized) *has* been internalized in some contexts and the consequences of this.

Anthropology has had a longer focus on embodiment. Scholarship on evangelicalism within the anthropology of Christianity has focused particular attention on charismatic and Pentecostal cultures.<sup>9</sup> Within this literature, words and

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<sup>8</sup> The material culture and embodied practices of these kinds of Protestant cultures have, however, been the focus of religious historians See, for example, Schmidt 2000; Hall 2006.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Poewe 1994; Coleman 1996, 2000; Austin-Broos 1997; Luhrmann 2004; Robbins 2004; Meyer 2008, 2010; Bialecki 2008, 2011; O’Neill 2010a, 2010b. Coleman outlines the reasons why these Christian cultures have had particular significance within anthropology, allowing renegotiation of notions of the local and traditional and examination

language have become a specific focus of inquiry (cf. Bialecki 2011: 680). This is perhaps not surprisingly given that Protestants, including Pentecostals and charismatic evangelicals, place significance on the centrality of words in their faith. Susan Harding's research on Christian fundamentalists in the United States emphasized the central importance of rhetoric and narrative techniques over ritual in conversion (2000: 44-60). Coleman argues that her approach is however limited because of its divorcing of language from sensual forms and consequent neglect of how words affect the material world and the converted individual (2006: 168). Coleman's work on Pentecostalism and the Word of Life movement in Sweden and Keane's study of the encounter between Calvinist missionaries, their converts and those who resisted conversion in the colonial Dutch East Indies and post-independence Indonesia have pioneered reflection on how the centrality accorded to words in Protestant cultures is achieved through specific embodied performances. Both also address how Protestant language ideologies shape the formation of particular kinds of subjectivities. My focus on the speaking and listening practices of conservative evangelicals will draw on these approaches to the corporeality of words to examine the specific interplay between different urban logics of interaction and experiences of moral fragmentation and the desire for coherence. How then do their approaches situate the relation between words, subjectivities and modernity?

Keane's broader project, influenced by the work of Latour, is concerned to highlight the inevitability of material forms and processes of objectification in communication and language, tracing how religious doctrines

only become real to the extent that there exist concrete semiotic practices by which they can be embodied, experienced, and transmitted... [T]hose practices will be subject to such factors as logistics, aesthetics, economics or prior history... Their push and pull must be understood within what could be called an economy of language practices and ideologies.

(Keane 2004: 443-4).

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of how such missions are 'a sign of and response to modernity' (2010: 799). Chris Hann argues that this focus has skewed the terms of anthropological debate on Christianity by excluding particular Christian lifeworlds (2007). Harding (2000), Crapanzano (2000), Elisha (2008, 2011) and Bielo (2009) have also focused attention on non-charismatic, conservative Protestant lifeworlds, but this literature is small in comparison with that on charismatic evangelicalism and Pentecostalism.

In *Christian Moderns*, Keane traces the relations between language practices, agency and personhood. His account demonstrates how particular Protestant practices shaped modern subjectivities as individualized and autonomous, with language being conceptualized by ‘moderns’ as beginning in the self. An example of this is how the semiotic form of the creed locates agency in the self through objectifying belief as an internal state. He points out that the Apostles’ Creed states an objective claim (that Jesus Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, etc.): ‘As such it appears to be merely a proposition. But it begins with the explicit first-person assertion, “I believe”. It asserts the speaker’s alignment with the claims... Moreover, it publicly reports that alignment’ (2007: 71). Thus, the repetition of the creedal form ‘entails a normative tilt toward taking responsibility for those words, making them one’s own’ (ibid.). Keane’s account shows Protestant language practices as having, as Jon Bialecki describes, a ‘centripetal’ force in the kinds of subjectivity they create, which created the conditions for the emergence of the secular, individualized, autonomous subject of modernity (Bialecki 2011: 682). At the same time, Keane aims to trouble the conceptualization of individualized subjectivity he describes as characterizing ideologies of modernity through showing how the borders of self and other are porous, as ‘our’ language always comes from another.

Bialecki contrasts Keane’s account with Coleman’s, which he describes as positing a ‘centrifugal’ conception of subjectivity. Coleman’s analysis draws on anthropological theories of exchange to argue that sacred words can be understood as ‘things’ and that as these circulate they demonstrate the porosity of the subject formed through the objectification of particular forms of language. Whereas for Keane’s moderns, the normative tilt towards sincerity requires that speaking originate in the self, Coleman describes how the Pentecostals he studied consciously internalize external sacred words from the Bible through practices such as memorizing particular verses. In this way ‘the mind and body of the believer are to be colonised by the transcendent world of the Spirit, with sacred language as the mediating vehicle between the two’ (Coleman 2000: 127). The individual then externalizes what they have received in performances through which words ‘are turned into physical signs of the presence of divine power’ (ibid.: 131).

Coleman’s approach draws on Daniel Miller’s Hegelian understanding of objectification as a process of becoming, as the subject is created and developed

through an ongoing process of externalization and sublation (Coleman 1996: 109). In this sense, there is both a centrifugal force to the externalization of words and a centripetal force as the subject reabsorbs these external forms and thereby reconstitutes the self. This process of objectification implies, Coleman argues, ‘a Foucauldian technology of the self ... whereby inner and outer states are objectified and monitored in order to maintain a socially derived ideal’ (ibid.: 115). The self that is created through these processes is understood as a kind of ‘living icon’, colonized by the Spirit and sacred language and thereby representing ‘principles of collective faith and truth’ (ibid.). This collectivity, in the context of the global Word of Life movement, is not tied to the local spatial community, but rather through the circulation of words in portable forms such as videos and cassettes encourages a ‘translocal religious consciousness not tied to any particular institution or national culture’ (ibid. 124). Thus ‘Believing does not appear to depend on belonging’ in the sense of connections to a bounded religious community (ibid.).

The work of Keane and Coleman demonstrate how this focus on the embodiment and the performance of word-based practices open up theoretical questions about the nature and boundaries of the self in modernity. Informed by their approaches, my focus on word-based practices arises from conservative evangelical understandings of these as the means by which individuals form a relationship with God and as symbolizing boundaries of moral separation, marking them as different from others around them. Focusing on these therefore illuminates the interplay of broader modes of relationality and desire in the metropolis. This contributes to literature on religious subject formation by addressing how within a highly modernized and differentiated metropolitan context, individuals can struggle to perform ideals promoted within their religious culture as they move across different spaces. Building on the work of Keane and Coleman, I will draw specific attention to how conservative evangelicals’ use of words in the metropolis indexes particular kinds of moral fragmentation, and how this intersects with their experience of the personality of God. I will show that the unity and transcendence of God’s personality, mediated through their word-based practices, has agency in leading conservative evangelicals to become conscious of subjective divisions, desiring greater moral coherence and seeking to form themselves as ethical subjects according to logics of integrity and wholehearted service of God, an effort encouraging their self-identification as ‘aliens and strangers’ in the city. Whilst anthropological focus on

ritual has deepened understanding of the formation of Christian subjectivities, the locus of examining these has often been confined to the specific setting of a particular religious culture. To understand conservative evangelicalism within the spaces of a complex, pluralist city requires an approach that examines the interrelation of modern, urban norms of practice and those encouraged through the church. The work of Mellor and Shilling on ‘body pedagogics’, brought together with Foucault’s conception of ‘technologies of the self’, offers this, providing an approach sensitive to the complex interrelations of religious practices and broader cultural modes of embodiment.

### **Body Pedagogics**

In *Social Theory and Religion*, James Beckford argues that much sociological theorizing about religion is problematic because it lacks the theoretical resources to account for how religion (and its frontiers with non-religion) is interrelated in increasingly complex and subtle ways with other social, cultural and political phenomena (2003: 9-10). Taking up his call for scholars of religion to be more attentive to developments in wider social theory to advance understanding of the continuing social significance of religion and its increasing prominence in many forms of public life, Mellor and Shilling argue that new approaches to the sociological significance of religion can draw productively on established disciplinary resources. In ‘Body Pedagogics and the Religious Habitus’, they draw on Durkheim, Weber and Luhmann to develop an approach attentive to the complexities of religion in the contemporary world. Their approach follows Durkheim’s understanding of embodiment as ‘actively implicated in the internalization and reproduction of religious social facts’ (Mellor and Shilling 2010: 28). They argue that his engagement with embodiment has been overlooked by interpreters who have either prioritized emotions or cognitive factors ‘without acknowledging that *both* are important aspects of human embodiment for Durkheim’ (ibid.: 29). The specificity of ‘religion’ within their account draws on Berger and Luhmann, both of whom ‘remind us that being “religious” is to do with the adoption of specific modes of (transcendent) orientation

to (immanent) social realities' (ibid.: 30).<sup>10</sup> The body pedagogics approach examines how transcendent experiences that intersect with and shape particular orientations to the immanent social world are formed through and contingent upon 'distinctive techniques, rituals and cultural systems' (ibid.).

Mellor and Shilling use the phrase 'body pedagogics' to denote the centrality of embodiment as the experiential mediator of religious social facts and the basis on which 'a creative religious habitus' might be the outcome of these processes (ibid.: 28). They propose that the study of body pedagogics involves 'an investigation of the central institutional *means* through which a religious culture seeks to transmit its main embodied techniques, dispositions and beliefs, the *experiences* typically associated with acquiring these attributes, and the embodied *outcomes* resulting from these processes' (ibid.). They argue that this is distinctive from other approaches to religious embodiment through its 'corporeal realism,' which 'recognise[s] and respect[s] the distinctive ontological properties of what is involved in the attempted transmission of religion, in people's experiences, and in the actual embodied outcomes of this process' (ibid.). Specifically, they suggest that this helps us examine how religious practices, techniques and experiences have significant consequences for forming '*embodied orientations* to the self and world, characterised by a *transcendent* configuration of *immanent* social realities' (ibid.), and enables us, following Weber, to analyse the directional logic towards the world formed through these means. This extends approaches to embodied and emotional forms of religious practices within institutional contexts by exploring how embodied techniques are affected by broader social and cultural factors that may inhibit as well as enhance the reproduction of particular religious cultural forms.

The body pedagogics approach is similar to Marcel Mauss's focus on 'techniques of the body' and Michel Foucault's conception of 'technologies of the self'. In 'Techniques of the Body' (2006), Mauss focuses on specific embodied techniques through which a particular habitus<sup>11</sup> is formed. The body pedagogics

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<sup>10</sup> This can be compared with Birgit Meyer's theory of religious aesthetics, which also attends to forms of religious mediation between immanence and transcendence through the study of religious sensations (2008, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Mauss's approach influenced Bourdieu's definition of *habitus* as 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them' (Bourdieu 1990: 53).

approach extends this by focusing not only on the cultural specificities of particular body techniques but also addressing the experiences these allow and the means by which these are carried between persons, space and time. Foucault's focus on 'technologies of the self' in his later work can be fruitfully drawn together with the body pedagogics framework to explore how conservative evangelicals' embodied practices create particular orientations towards self and other as they seek to form themselves as particular kinds of subjects. While Mellor and Shilling argue that Foucault was uninterested 'in what the body was or how people experienced their embodied selves emotionally as well as cognitively' and tends towards discursive reductionism (2010: 30), Foucault himself in his later works draws back from these tendencies of his earlier work. In 'Technologies of the Self', he states, 'Perhaps I've insisted too much on the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of self' (1988: 19).

Within this later work, Foucault describes practices constituted in Greco-Roman philosophy in the first two centuries A.D. as forms of 'care of the self' and practices of the self in Christian spirituality and monasticism. Through this he develops an approach to understanding the hermeneutics of the self. Foucault defines 'technologies of the self' as:

permit[ting] individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality... [This] implies certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes.

(ibid.: 18)

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Mellor and Shilling differentiate their account of *habitus* as 'the contingent *outcome* of religious practices and beliefs' from Bourdieu's conception, in which *habitus* is both *medium* and *outcome* of the embodied transmission of cultural phenomena (Mellor and Shilling 2010: 30n2). My use of the term follows more closely its use by Mauss and Mellor and Shilling.

This is helpful to frame how members of St John's train themselves to think differently about their bodies through reading the Bible and listening to sermons, learning to discipline their thoughts and sexual desires through internalizing an understanding of the self as part of Jesus's body, a technology they would themselves describe as a form of 'discipleship'. Foucault's terminology is often criticized as aestheticized, with morality becoming 'a matter of style, pleasure and intuition..., turning oneself into an artifact', and this being 'a subject-centred morality with a vengeance' (Eagleton 1990: 368, 394). Yet Foucault is clear that the engagement with the self is a thoroughly social process, not an exercise in solitude. He describes technologies of the self as 'not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group' (cited in Campbell 2010: 27).<sup>12</sup>

Foucault describes practices of 'care of the self' as inseparable from morality and ethics. He defines 'morality' as 'the set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies such as the family (in one of its roles), educational institutions, churches, and so forth' (1985: 25).<sup>13</sup> These may sometimes be formulated as a coherent doctrine, but they may more often be 'transmitted in a diffuse matter, so that, far from constituting a systematic ensemble, they form a complex interplay of elements that counterbalance and correct one another' (ibid.) Morality also, he states,

refers to the real behavior of individuals in relation to the rules and values that are recommended to them: the word ... designates the manner in which they

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<sup>12</sup> This is part of Foucault's thesis that modern societies are shaped through the integration of two distinctive forms of power relation: 'the mode of the *polis*, structured according to principles of universality, law, citizenship and the public life and the mode of what Foucault calls "pastoral power", which instead accords an absolute priority to the exhaustive and individualized guidance of singular existences' (Gordon 1987: 297). The modern state is for Foucault, as Gordon outlines, both individualizing and totalizing. His focus on 'technologies of the self' is part of this exploration of the individualizing aspects of governmental rationality ('governmentality' in his own phraseology), a theoretical concern that has affinities with the formation and effects of rationalization in modernity in Weber and Simmel (cf. *ibid.*: 300 ff.).

<sup>13</sup> Throughout, although I tend to use 'morality' with this sense of rules of action and 'ethics' in relation to implicit logics of interaction implied in socially situated forms of practice, I follow Keane in treating a strict separation of these terms as unwieldy and difficult to maintain, a difficulty that, as he argues, 'may ultimately reflect the dialectical relations between [these] modalities' (2010: 65).



comply more or less fully with a standard of conduct, the manner in which they obey or resist an interdiction or a prescription; the manner in which they respect or disregard a set of values. In studying this aspect of morality, one must determine how and with what margins of variation or transgression individuals or groups conduct themselves in reference to a prescriptive system that is explicitly or implicitly operative in their culture, and of which they are more or less aware.

(ibid.: 24-5)

Considering evangelical body pedagogic modes of speaking and listening in terms of the 'morality of behaviours' invites attention to the particular logics of behaviour and value that evangelical culture seeks to reproduce, and how these interact with other norms of interaction.

Foucault argues that subject formation involves more than just learning to follow rules of behaviour: it is also to do with 'the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice' (ibid.: 27). He considers, as an example, the differing reasons an individual might recognize and acknowledge for their practising a norm of conjugal fidelity. Moving away from the determinism of his earlier work, his focus on practices of 'care of the self' sees individuals as performing ethical work on themselves, 'not only to bring one's conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one's behavior' (ibid.). This formation of ethical subjectivity is 'a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal' (ibid.: 28). This process requires that the individual acts on himself, 'to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself' (ibid.).

This ethical self-formation, like any moral action, is bound up with a relationship with the reality in which it takes place (ibid.). Foucault's turn to ethics in his later work can be seen as move away from the reductionism that followed from his earlier work in which all social life could be read as outcomes of the disciplining effects of 'power' and 'knowledge'. Yet understanding the motivation for ethical self-formation nevertheless raises questions about knowledge. By what means do individuals come to know the nature of the reality in which their actions and ethical

self-formation have significance? For conservative evangelicals, as we will see, their desire to form themselves as subjects acting in accordance and obedience to what God commands is bound up with their coming to understand God as the really real, whose moral commands are understood as having greater authority than those they experience as normative in the secular city.

Examining religious technologies of the self in the complex, pluralist space of the metropolis therefore allows us to consider how individuals experience the intersection of dominant – and sometimes incommensurable – moral codes shaping everyday practice and how their subjectivities are formed through establishing relations to these. As the behavioural codes of conservative evangelicalism summon the individual to recognize herself as an evangelical subject and discipline her thoughts and body according to the values of her faith, deepening our understanding of evangelical lifeworlds requires attention to the body pedagogic means by which this process takes place. How does the individual learn to act on herself and others in response to the demands of her faith? How is this bound up with forming a relationship to the reality in which these actions are carried out? And what kinds of experience and interaction with others do these practices shape?

To return to Cannell's question – what difference does Christianity make? – Foucault's 'technologies of the self' and the body pedagogics approach enable us to explore how practices encouraged within a contingent historical Christian culture shape orientations to the social order and form individuals as subjects in particular ways. Let us briefly consider how these approaches have been applied to Christianity. Mellor and Shilling argue that within Christianity, as individuals are incorporated into a church, social identities and bonds are transcended simultaneously as the seeds of individualism are sown: in emphasizing the importance of conforming to the will of God, Christian teaching and practice also foregrounds the centrality of individual *consent* to this (2010: 31). As the individual body receives redemption through coming to believe in the Word of God or receiving the Body of Christ in the Eucharist, it 'becomes itself a source of redemption, in the sense that ultimate religious meaning becomes incorporated within the individual' (ibid.: 32). This carrying of a self-transcendent meaning and sense of salvation within the self then 'facilitates a cutting across "immanent" ethnic, economic or cultural loyalties, creating an inter-corporeal and reflexive space for Christians to experience and reflect upon them in a critical manner' (ibid.).

Mellor and Shilling argue that whilst Christian body pedagogics attempt to shape frameworks of thought, the ‘directional logic’ of the religion is as much to do with the embodiment of an orientation towards social realities it generates as to do with its cognitive plausibility. They note the centrality of the New Testament teaching ‘that Christians are *called out* of the world (John 15:19), and ... that this involves *changing their bodies* so that they walk, talk, desire, think and feel in a way that is entirely at odds with their previous existence’ (ibid.: 33). As mentioned in the previous chapter, in *Flesh and Stone*, Sennett describes how the ritualized practices of early Roman Christians, such as baptism, the Lord’s Supper and the veneration of martyrs, provided the embodied means by which Christians attempted to sever their emotional attachments to the present city through orienting their attention to the City of God, giving them ‘the strength to uproot themselves, to make the pilgrimage through time’ (2002b: 148). Whilst the means of this transformation whereby the individual body marks the Christian as ‘called out of this world’ have varied across time and space, anthropological literature on Pentecostal conversion has conceptualized this transformation in terms of ‘ruptures’, shaped by particular practices, with the effect of locating ‘immanence / transcendence tensions primarily in the individual body’ (Mellor and Shilling 2010: 33, cf. Robbins 2010: 648, Bialecki 2009: 118). This conceptualization of faith in terms of rupture does not translate exactly to conservative evangelicalism in London, in which both the broader social and cultural context and individuals’ lives have been shaped by the historical influence of Christianity. Yet the body pedagogic formation of an immanence / transcendence tension Mellor and Shilling describe is, as we will see, helpful for understanding their everyday experiences of faith and the particular kinds of struggles individuals experience.

For Foucault, techniques of confessions and moral self-reflection, inseparable from each other, are central to the formation of the Christian subject. Foucault acknowledges that Christianity requires ‘a duty to accept a set of obligations, to hold certain books as permanent truth... not only to believe certain things but to show that one believes’ (1988: 40), but he characterizes it as ‘not only a salvation religion, it’s a confessional religion’:

Each person has the duty to know who he is, that is, to try to know what is happening inside him, to acknowledge faults, to recognise temptations, to locate

desires, and everyone is obliged to disclose these things either to God or to others in the community and hence to bear public or private witness against oneself. The truth obligations of faith and the self are linked together.... It's not the same in the Catholic as in the Reform tradition. But the main features of both are an ensemble of truth obligations dealing with faith, books, dogma, and one dealing with truth, heart and soul.

(ibid.)

Jeremy Carrette argues there is an overdependence on the verbalization of truth in Foucault's account, and notes the importance also of silence. Whilst Foucault locates the importance of silence in relation to operations of power that silence particular subjects in regimes of oppression and denial, Carrette emphasizes that there are a range of registers and natures of silences (2000: 30). Taking this forward we can consider how within conservative evangelicalism, individuals seek to discipl(in)e themselves and each other through different kinds of silence, including the silence required to listen to another and to God, as well as practices of speaking, confession and self-reflection, as the means by which Christ's redemption is located in their individual and collective body as a church.

Foucault's particular attention to the place of 'morality' in subject formation and the relations individuals form towards specific values builds on the body pedagogics approach by opening up examination of how conservative evangelicals are conscious of the contradictions with which they have to live as individuals called out of the world and seek to form their relations to particular codes of behaviour. It thus provides us with a means to consider the extent to which conservative evangelicals' formation as subjects enables them to understand their place in the social order according to a Christian narrative of coherence, as Simmel posits, that responds to experiences of contradiction and moral fragmentation.

The term 'practice' is central to the conceptualization of both body pedagogics and technologies of the self. It is worth briefly highlighting the significance of this term, which has become central within lived religion scholarship and anthropological approaches to embodiment.<sup>14</sup> Whilst the term 'praxis' has a history within Marxist approaches, it was the work of Pierre Bourdieu that was especially influential in

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Asad 1993; Klassen 2008; Bender 2012.

effecting an analytical shift towards ‘practice’ in both sociology and anthropology (cf. Zito 2008: 75). Drawing on Bourdieu, Courtney Bender highlights how the turn to ‘practice’ in the study of religion emphasizes elements of hybridity, making do, habituation, instability, and the potential for change (Bender 2012: 274). Bender argues for an analytical shift away from ‘practices’ as ‘things’ which might appear to be ‘self-evidently “religious”’ to the verbal form of ‘practising’, thereby redirecting attention towards the processes that make things ‘religious’. Such an approach, she suggests, also allows attention to how religion is always also entwined in the lived practice of other cultural forms, such as law, politics, family life, and education (ibid.: 275).

Bender illustrates her argument for this shift towards ‘practising religions’ with vivid vignettes of chance interactions between strangers in places of movement. These reveal how ‘practising religions’ is also practising other things, including secularity, and suggests that in these encounters, practising religion shapes and perpetuates particular forms of subjectivity and social distinction. In this way, by shifting our attention to practising,

we move away from a view that it is religious people or individuals (or groups) that are keepers or containers of religion who then mobilize or play out ‘religious practice’ in an unmarked social landscape. Instead, we consider how both the self and the social world are constitutively interlinked, made for and by the other ... Religious and all other practices are thus socially embodied: ‘knowing’ culture involves habituation and participation in heterogeneous social settings.

(ibid.: 280).

Sociological studies of evangelicals, when they have attended to embodied practices rather than beliefs, have often operated with a view of individual agents who ‘mobilize or play out’ their religious practices in response, for example, to cognitive uncertainties and anxieties caused by modernity, rather than attending to the specificities of how these practices are interwoven in a dense fabric of cultural norms

which shape subjects who make and re-make their social worlds with and for each other.<sup>15</sup>

In order to develop an account that fully attends to the interrelationality of conservative evangelical body pedagogics and technologies of the self we need an approach that draws into question the nature of ‘the social world’ that is being made. Foucault describes how within Christian history, ‘the individual is summoned to recognize himself as an ethical subject’ (1985: 32). To understand the body pedagogic means of this ‘summoning’ and the nature of evangelicals’ *experiences* of speaking, listening, confession and silence, we need to attend to their modes of interaction with others, indeed, how senses of ‘otherness’ are created, and, in this context, specifically draw their experiences of the personality of God into view. Pierre Hadot argues that Foucault’s approach to ‘practices of the self’ fails to explore the means by which people learn to identify with ‘others’ outside the self. He suggests, for example, that the turn towards interiorization that Foucault traces in modernity is in fact a different mode of relation to exteriority, ‘a new way of being-in-the world, which consists in becoming aware of oneself as a part of nature, and a portion of universal reason’ (Hadot 1995: 211).

I will suggest that the interrelated concepts of subjectivity, subjectification and objectification allow us to explore how these means of identification with and separation from others are produced, and how these are implicated in the formation of ethical subjects. Michael Lambek also notes that Foucault’s approach to ethics does not focus on ‘the exigencies of actual practice ... which always entails articulation with other persons, nor, perhaps, is he attending sufficiently to those dimensions of virtues like responsibility or cohabitation that respond in the first instance to the call of the other’ (2010: 25). Thus to explicate the lived experience of how conservative evangelicals’ orientations towards their bodies, rules of conduct and interaction, and themselves as subjects, are formed requires an approach that allows attention to the affective forms of their relationality with others – including God as an other – who address them with multiple and sometimes incommensurable demands for response. Let us consider how the work of Latour helps develop this and how this broader move to relationality within which his work is situated helps draw our attention to the nature

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<sup>15</sup> See Miller’s critique of the approach to subjectivity developed by Berger and Luckmann, in which he argues there is too much emphasis placed on the ‘creative subjectivity of the agent’ (1987: 65).

of associations with material and non-human actors in the making of religious lifeworlds.

### **Irreductive Interrelationality**

Moving away from mechanistic metaphors that conceptualize social life in terms of structures, in recent years, social theorists have increasingly turned towards metaphors of relations, liquid flows, assemblages, processes, networks and mobilities to evoke the dynamic and changing constellations of the contemporary social world.<sup>16</sup> Within this turn, Latour's work has been especially influential in drawing into question what we mean by 'the social', extending sociology as the study of 'associations' – the processes by which particular forms of connection are formed in space and time – to include forms of relationality with non-human actors (Latour 1993, 2005). Simmel likewise saw sociology as the study of 'sociation', and his own work was also attentive to the agency of objects and cultural media in shaping subjectivities and the social world. For Simmel, this focus on association was not a technical question about the processes of relationality or networks, but related to the normative effects of particular forms of connection and differentiation.<sup>17</sup>

In his approach to religion, Simmel considers the nature of human desire for God, extending understanding of religious sociation to include forms of relationality with the non-material. Within this, as discussed in the previous chapter, he did not only consider *human* attachments to God, but also the agency of the personality of God as creating an orientation towards a transcendent source of coherence, which introduces a specific form of fragmentation into the social order. Within sociology, this question of the nature of interrelationality with God and other sacred figures has mostly been avoided due to concerns that this raises metaphysical questions beyond the empirical limits of the subject. Chapman, Naguib and Woodhead also argue that one of the reasons so little has been written about God by social scientists is because "God" has become the great taboo of the post-war period' (2012: 173; see also Woodhead 2012: 25). Yet, as they argue, relations with supernatural beings are of

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example Bauman 2000; Massumi 2002; Deleuze and Guattari 2004; Urry 2007; Thrift 2008. Cf. Olli Pyythinen's illuminating discussion of this turn in social theory (2010: 3).

<sup>17</sup> Simmel's approach to sociation can be compared with pragmatist focus on relationality and the formation of political and ethical life in modern pluralist societies.

importance and are amenable to social scientific study, since they ‘are mediated by words, symbols, actions and other things which we can investigate, whether or not their referents are “real”’ (Chapman *et al.* 2012: 173). Within anthropology, relations with sacred figures have often been constructed as fetishistic in colonial encounters.<sup>18</sup> Yet, as Orsi notes, many scholars of religion find explanations of religious experience purely in terms of the social and psychological limiting, recognizing that they ‘fall short of the realness of the phenomena they purport to describe and explain in people’s experience. And not just this: social accounts that pretend to be exhaustive distort those experiences and diminish them, *precisely as* historical and cultural phenomena. Such explanations are empirically insufficient, in other words’ (2012: 84).

Orsi’s own work on mid-twentieth century Catholic cultures in the United States has sought to engage with the ways sacred figures become real presences in the lives of individuals, and in the anthropology of Christianity, there is a growing body of literature addressing the nature of interrelationality with the divine or the transcendental (Luhmann 2004; Lurhmann *et al.* 2010; Engelke 2007; Meyer 2008, 2010).<sup>19</sup> Standard sociological theorizing about religion tends however to bracket out questions opening onto describing the ontological contours of sacred figures that often stand at the centre of experience and desire within the context of a particular religion. Such accounts therefore, as Orsi argues, fall short of engaging with the lived experiences of social reality, for example, the ways in which for a Pentecostal woman, ‘Jesus has an existence that is greater than the sum of her intentions, desires, needs, hopes, and fears, and ... cannot be completely accounted for with reference to her social circumstances. He has a life of his own in her life’ (2012: 85). Thus if, as the body pedagogics approach encourages, we are to develop a *realist* account of conservative evangelicalism in London, we need an account that engages with the complex textures of these individuals’ experience of Jesus and God as real in their everyday lives.

Latour’s object-oriented ontology has been influential in helping refocus the study of religion on what its ‘modern’ constitution has effaced: the material practices

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<sup>18</sup> See discussion of the discourse of fetishism in Keane 2007: 176-96 and Latour 2010: 2-7.

<sup>19</sup> For studies in this area outside anthropology, see David Morgan’s pioneering work in the field of religious visual culture (e.g. 1999, 2007, 2012), which has also been influential on anthropological approaches (e.g. Meyer 2008). See also Lynch 2010 and Berns forthcoming.



and mediations by which religious lifeworlds are formed.<sup>20</sup> Here I want to suggest that Latour's more recent work on modes of existence also opens up more expansive means of understanding 'the social' in everyday lived religious experience by inviting attention to the agency of both material and non-material actors, including sacred figures, and the 'thingly' properties of words and concepts.<sup>21</sup> Latour's 'irreductionist' approach offers conceptual tools to attend not only to forms of sociation between humans, but also allows room for non-human actors, including, in my analysis, God, in ways that avoid the kinds of metaphysical speculation that worry social scientists.

Latour's approach to 'modes of existence' is grounded in his broader project of showing the instability of the binary that is posited between 'facts' and 'socially constructed knowledge'. His specific emphasis on 'irreduction' aims to draw attention to the resistance of all 'objects' to either the explanations of a 'realist' scientific approach – the 'fact' position – or the explanations of a social constructionist 'fairy' position:

Once you realize that scientific objects cannot be socially explained, then you realize too that the so-called weak objects, those that appear to be candidates for the accusation of antifetishism, were never mere projections on an empty screen either. They too act, they too do things, they too *make you do* things. It is not only the objects of science that resist, but all the others as well, those that were supposed to have been ground to dust by the powerful teeth of automated reflex-action deconstructors... Is it not time for some progress? To the fact position, to the fairy position, why not add a third position, a *fair* position?

(2004: 242-3)

The influence of Feuerbach on Marx, and the secular roots of sociology as a discipline differentiated from theology, have influenced sociological approaches that have either treated sacred figures as projections of human needs or as epiphenomena of broader social and economic processes, i.e. as 'weak objects', or bracketed out questions concerning transcendental orientations altogether.

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<sup>20</sup> See for example, the work of Tweed (2006), Keane (2007) and Vasquez (2011), all of whom draw on Latour in developing approaches to materiality.

<sup>21</sup> See also Coleman's (1996) analysis of how attending to words as 'things' within charismatic evangelicalism opens up examination of the directional logic of relations between individual and different forms of community, both real and imagined.

By questioning the binary that has constructed sacred figures as ‘weak objects’, Latour’s approach asks us, when considering evangelicalism, to take seriously the ways in which God, Jesus and other non-material actors have particular kinds of agency in individuals’ lives. This does not mean entering into theological speculation, but rather recognizing that as evangelicals experience God as real in their lives, any empirical account of their lives needs to take account of how these relationships affect and are affected by their relations with other social actors, and to explore the material means by which these relationships are formed and experienced.

In his call for attention to be given to ‘the holy’ in the study of religion, Orsi argues that such an interrelational approach should avoid the use of the phrases ‘believe in’ and ‘have faith in’: ‘because the holy is met as the really real..., this renders otiose such terms that in their modern meanings connote subjective experience on a stark subjective / objective grid’ (2012: 104).<sup>22</sup> Latour, like Orsi, encourages social scientists to move beyond the binaries of the subjective / objective grid and realist scientist / social constructionist. To do this, he proposes that to understand social realities empirically we need to acknowledge their ‘gathering’. Drawing on Heidegger’s articulation of the ‘thingness of the thing’, this approach is not an examination of the conditions of possibility of a fact, but rather ‘a multifarious inquiry launched with the tools of anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, history, sociology to detect *how many participants* are gathered in a *thing* to make it exist and to maintain its existence’ (Latour 2004: 246). Latour notes that the closer we draw to things, the more we see how they always resist ‘fact’ and ‘fairy’ explanations. The examples he gives are suggestive of how things closest to us – ‘the God to whom I pray, the works of art I cherish, the colon cancer I have been fighting, the piece of law I am studying, the desire I feel, indeed the very book I am writing’ – always resist being fully accounted for by either type of explanation (ibid.: 243).

Latour’s approach, in attending to not just people, but things, facts, gods and other nonhuman entities, allows us to explore how forms of interrelationality between different actors have agency in shaping practices, values and orientations to these. Bryant, Srnicek and Harman describe Latour’s realism, attending not just to the agency of people, but also things, facts, gods and other nonhuman entities, as ‘irreductionism’. In this:

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<sup>22</sup> For this reason, I am also uncomfortable with descriptions of individuals’ relations with God and other sacred figures as ‘imagined others’, as, for example, in Sharp 2010.

all entities are equally real though not equally strong insofar as they act on other entities. While nonhuman actors such as germs, weather patterns, atoms, and mountains obviously relate to the world around them, the same is true of Harry Potter, the Virgin Mary, democracies, and hallucinations. The incorporeal and corporeal realms are equally capable of having effects on the world.

(Bryant, Srnicek and Harman 2011: 5)

This 'irreductionism' has potential for advancing our understanding of evangelical lifeworlds: extending the body pedagogics and 'techniques of the self' approaches, this irreductionism *also* invites us to consider how incorporeal entities, such as concepts, doctrines and sacred others are mediated and experienced as real through specific body pedagogic means and how these act within the process of ethical subject formation. Latour states that work is 'rare in ethnography, no less than in theology, ... that respects the exact ontological contours of religious beings' (2011: 329). Part of the challenge of the turn towards practice, embodiment and materiality in the study of religion is to consider the experience of these ontological contours of God and other non-material actors in everyday religious experiences. This can be compared with Orsi's call for re-attention to 'the holy':

The experience of the holy blurs certain boundaries of the real as moderns conceive it: between here and there, for instance, the past and the present, or between one person and another. It also unsettles boundaries dear to modern ways of knowing: between academic disciplines ..., between accounts of conscious knowing and the unconscious; and especially between the imaginary and the real. It requires a new theoretical vocabulary, which is why the experience was so generative of neologisms and why I have resorted to the  $2 + 2 = 5$ .

(2012: 104)

Attempting in his recent work to get away from the language of 'construction' with its 'metaphorical baggage of constructivism' and unsettle the subjective / objective grid that effaced the agency of what were posited as constructed, 'unreal', weak objects, Latour suggests that Étienne Souriau's term 'instauration' is more

useful. The term ‘construction’, he states, draws attention to the *subject* who constructs, whereas ‘saying of a work of art that it results from an instauration, is to get oneself ready to see the potter as the one who welcomes, gathers, prepares, explores, and invents the form of the work, just as one discovers or “invents” a treasure’ (Latour 2011: 311). Instauration thus allows for the agency of the ‘thing’ as well as the human in the gathering, and ‘allows exchanges and gifts that are interesting in other ways, transactions with rather different types of being, in science and religion as well as in art’ (ibid.).

Developing this realism, Latour emphasizes the importance of prepositions in ways that have significance for delineating the lived experience of evangelicalism. Following William James, Latour states that it is undignified to call oneself an empiricist yet to deprive experience of what it makes most directly available: relations’ (ibid.: 306).<sup>23</sup> He argues for a radical empiricism that puts experience ‘at the centre of philosophy by posing a question that is both very ancient and very new: if relations (prepositions in particular) are given to us in experience, *where then* are they leading us?’ (ibid.). He suggests that prepositions defined as modes of existence might enable us to go beyond the bifurcation of nature that insists on ‘the strict separation of objectivity and subjectivity, science and politics, the real world and its representations’ and see how these bifurcations are the effects of a particular history (ibid.: 305). He questions whether the deployment of this understanding of modes of existence as given through different forms of relations (prepositions) might ‘allow... a total rephrasing of the question of knowledge? Can the bifurcation of nature be brought to an end?’ (ibid.: 306).<sup>24</sup> He cites a passage from Souriau that shows how it

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<sup>23</sup> Nigel Thrift, like Latour influenced by William James and Alfred North Whitehead, criticizes some manifestations of this particular philosophical lineage, ‘which can end up by positing a continuity of and to experience about which I am skeptical, by employing an ethological notion of the pre-individual field in which the event holds sway and which leads to “buds” or “pulses” of thought-formation/perception in which “thought is never an object in its own hands”’ (2008: 6). Latour avoids this by his explicit attention to distinctions between *different* modes of being.

<sup>24</sup> Latour’s focus on prepositions might appear self-defeating in its use of a linguistic form – prepositions – to attend to the materiality of modes of existence. While there is not scope here to discuss the philosophy of language that this approach implies, one could argue, following Heidegger’s articulation of the inarticulable relationship between words and things, that prepositions might encourage us to attend to the reality of those forms of relationality that are brought to presence in language while simultaneously revealing their being beyond language (cf. Strhan 2011).

is in attending to prepositions that we can draw closer to understandings things' different modes of existence:

The modulations of existence *for*, existence *before*, existence *with*, are just so many types of the general mode of the synaptic. And by this route one can easily cure oneself of the over-importance given in certain philosophies to the famous man-in-the-world; because the man before the world, or even the man against the world ... are also real. And inversely, there is also the world in the man, the world before the man, the world against the man. The crucial thing is to get the sense that existence in all these modulations is invested neither in the man nor the world, not even in them together, but in this *for*, in this *against* where the fact of a genre of being resides, and from which, from this point of view, are suspended the man as much as the world.

(cited in Latour 2011: 331)

The turn towards materiality in the study of religion has shown sensitivity towards how the academic construction of religion is the effect of a particular history that has often rendered invisible the agency of objects and bodies. Latour here brings into yet clearer focus the challenges of finding ways to describe the dynamically relational nature of *all* forms of existence, including relations with God, Jesus and other non-material actors and others 'before' and 'after' in time, and exploring the forms of affectivity implied in and across these modalities of relationality.

Drawing on Latour, Thomas Tweed argues for an understanding of religions that emphasizes their interrelational formation, specifically the means by which they enable movement 'across' and 'with' and the means by which they are a form of 'dwelling'. He writes that 'Religions designate where we are *from*, identify whom we are *with*, and describe how we move *across*' (2006: 79). This emphasis on religion as a means of 'dwelling' resonates with Merleau-Ponty's description of how it is through our bodies that we can be 'at home' in the world, drawing attention to how these forms of interrelationality are emplaced, in the context of this study, within modes of experiencing and shaping city spaces. Yet, as discussed in the previous chapter, Christianity is patterned on a logic of learning to understand 'home' as the transcendent Kingdom of God, an orientation that exerts pressure on the everyday times and spaces and spaces of the immanent city. Thus, whilst we will see that there



is a sense that conservative evangelicals' modes of interrelationality are a means of dwelling 'at home' in the world, we will also see how their body pedagogic modes also encourage a sense of being not 'at home' in the world.

Latour invites us to develop prepositional modes of description to describe how conservative evangelicals dwell with, but are also simultaneously oriented *towards* and sometimes *against* the world, as they experience God *in* them, the disciples *before* them, act *for* each other, etc., and the relational flows and stymies of these connections and separations moving in different directions. In subsequent chapters, I will explore the extent to which the continued reverberation of this Christian narrative of exile in London today is both a way of dwelling in and finding meaning in the world, responding to the conditions of fragmentation and impersonality Simmel outlined as characterizing metropolitan modernity. I will also address how this is also a way of becoming *not* at home, as individuals seek to discipline their thoughts and bodies according to the address of a transcendent ideal that calls them as strangers out of the world. This requires attention to the intersection of differing modes of address and interrelationality that are formed through conservative evangelicals' simultaneous dwelling within London and seeking to direct their orientation away from the city towards a transcendent other. It also requires exploring the means by which these identifications of self and other, subject and object, are formed through specific practices and contingent histories. The final concept I wish to draw on to develop this is 'subjectivity'.

### **Subjectivity, Objectivity and Desire**

Several scholars have criticized the concepts 'subjectivity' and 'intersubjectivity' as limiting in the study of religion. Turner, for example, argues that focus on the subjectivity of the social actor in the sociology of religion – 'manifested in the analysis of religious beliefs, world-views, definitions of alternative realities, commitments to the sacred cosmos and so forth' – has resulted in neglect of rituals and practice through focus on the cognitive (1983: 3-4). Jean and John Comaroff have also argued against 'intersubjectivity' as privileging, according to a modern Western notion of the human subject, an understanding of society, culture and economy as the 'aggregate product of individual action and intention' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 10, cited in Orsi 2005: 170). They argue that the agency and creativity of the human

over the social order is exaggerated in intersubjective ethnographic accounts and that these lead to limited understandings of the social and cultural through a decontextualized focus on dialogical encounters between anthropologist and informant. The Comaroffs argue that to construe others' gestures, 'we have to situate them within the systems of signs and relations, of power and meaning, that animate them' (cited in *ibid.*).

The main issue that Turner and the Comaroffs have with subjectivity and intersubjectivity is to do with the intentionality of the human actor and decontextualized individualism they take the terms to imply. It is possible to argue that some work in the lived religion approach, even while focused on practices and embodiment, does seem to imply an intentionality on the part of the individual social actor who seems to play out their religious actions with a considerable degree of agency and choice.<sup>25</sup> However, neither the concepts of subjectivity or intersubjectivity necessarily entail the neglect of practice or the broader social contexts the Comaroffs highlight, nor do these terms necessarily imply inattentiveness to operations of control and constraint that shape the formation of religious subjectivities (cf. Orsi 2005: 171). Indeed, these issues seem to be implied within the concept subjectivity, which invites attention to how the subjection of subjects takes place through practices in which forms of power inhere, leading people towards certain kinds of interaction and relationality, shaped by the conditions of our human embodiment. As Bender notes, 'religious agency – indeed all social agency – is shaped in practice and must be analyzed from within the space of social possibilities made possible through practice' (2012: 283). Focusing on subjectivity does not then imply the givenness, as theologian Graham Ward suggests, of atomized, 'modern, secularized individuals' (2009: 189), but rather draws into question how the formation of subjectivities takes place through forms of identification with and separation from particular others formed by practices that delimit future possibilities. But why is the concept 'subjectivity' needed here in addition to the concepts of body pedagogics and interrelationality?

Attending specifically to the negotiation of differing logics of practice and the moralities associated with pluralist metropolitan spaces, the concept of subjectivity helps us construe the effects of the interrelations of these. We will see that particular

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<sup>25</sup> See for example McGuire's emphasis on choice in her descriptions of religious hybridity (2008: 210-13).

practices always intersect with, and are sometimes caught in tension with, other logics of practice, and this is where the concept ‘subjectivity’ becomes especially important and builds on the focus on body pedagogics, practice and interrelationality. In Simmel’s approach to subjectivity, as Olli Pyythinen notes, the individual is ‘only an intersection, a crossroads... where “social threads tie themselves”’. The individual is thus not an absolute, final element, but an “assembled being”, traversed and given to us by a specific set of relations’ (2010: 39). Yet, subjectivity is not reducible to a bundle of subject positions, as if these were somehow independent of each other. Whilst formed through the experience of differing social norms of practice and discourse, subjectivity is also the space of the interconnection of these, providing ‘the ground for subjects to think through their circumstances and to feel through their contradictions’ (Biehl, Good and Kleinman, cited in Prasad 2012: 363).

There has been a tendency in dominant sociological approaches to evangelicalism to treat this lifeworld in the simplistic terms that leads Turner to critique the place of ‘subjectivity’ in sociology of religion as too focused on specific beliefs or commitments. Standard approaches, based on quantitative approaches or brief periods of research contact, have failed to acknowledge how evangelicals’ subjectivities are formed through the interconnection of differing and sometimes contradictory currents and the extent to which evangelicals are often conscious of these through particular reflexive modes of practice. To develop more nuanced understandings of evangelicalism, we need a concept of subjectivity as the space where these cross-cutting currents of practice intersect and are shot through with dreams, desires, memories and perceptions. And as subjectivity entails the experience and negotiation of differing logics of practice in the ways we respond to others, this is inseparable from the realm of the ethical.

While social theorists have characterized modernity as socially and culturally fragmented, as discussed in the previous chapter, Simmel specifically draws attention to the subjective effects of these wider external forms of fragmentation, arguing that under these conditions, it is difficult to maintain a coherent personality. Simmel’s approach to subjectivity follows a Hegelian understanding of subjectification / objectification, in which the subject can only be constituted through differentiating subject-object relations, with this process in modernity being significantly influenced



by the modes of exchange shaped through the money economy.<sup>26</sup> In *The Philosophy of Money*, he sets out this understanding, stating that ‘The distinction between subject and object is not as radical as the accepted separation of these categories and in the scientific world would have us believe’ (2004: 66). He describes mental life as beginning ‘with an undifferentiated state in which the Ego and its objects are not yet distinguished; consciousness is filled with impressions and perceptions while the bearer of these contents has still not detached himself from them’ (ibid.). As discussed in the previous chapter, Simmel sees human beings as characterized by a capacity to connect and separate things, and this capacity for differentiation guides the formation of subjectivity as always inseparable from objectivity, as the subject is only able to recognize itself as a subject through the recognition of the existence of other subjects external to the ‘I’ (ibid.). This formation of the subject takes place not only through objectification of what is external to the subject, but also through objectification of the subject, as ‘we can observe, know and judge ourselves just like any other “object”’ (ibid.: 67). Subjectivity depends then on the creation of distance, including the reflective distance that allows the individual to become conscious of herself.

This process of subjectification / objectification however does not just produce an intellectual worldview: ‘the distinction between the desiring, consuming, valuing subject and the valued object’ also shapes practical activity and interaction (ibid.: 68). However acts of enjoyment and consumption transcend subject-object relations, as within ‘such moments we have an experience that does not include an awareness of an object confronting us or an awareness of the self as distinct from its present condition. Phenomena of the basest and of the highest kind meet here’ (ibid.). Simmel describes the enjoyment of an art work in these terms: ‘here “we forget ourselves”, but at the same time no longer experience the work of art as something with which we are confronted, because our mind is completely submerged in it, has absorbed it by surrendering to it’ (ibid.). Simmel characterizes the distance between subjects and objects in terms of desire, with the space of desire depending on objects’ resistance to our desires. The value of the object emerges from the contrast between subject and desired object, and those objects that resist our desire are more valued: ‘we call those objects valuable that resist our desire to possess them. Since the desire encounters

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<sup>26</sup> See Miller 1987: 68-82 for a detailed comparison of the process of subjectification / objectification in Simmel with Marx and Hegel’s approaches.

resistance and frustration, the objects gain a significance that would never have been attributed to them by an unchecked will' (ibid.: 69).

In modernity, new forms of cultural production present the subject with an increasing number of objects, and the individual finds that other subjects also desire these objects. As Miller notes, the values of objects become then further objectified, and as the process of exchange of objects becomes a condition of human relationships, this entails increasing abstraction, as things are no longer valued for their intrinsic qualities but rather for what makes them exchangeable (1987: 71). In Simmel's account of modernity, money as the dominant means of exchange leads, as discussed in the previous chapter, to the increasing impersonality of social relations between people,<sup>27</sup> and to the overproduction and circulation of multiple cultural forms and commodities, which follow their own logic as they become detached and independent from their producers<sup>28</sup> (1997c: 76). For Simmel, subjectivity entails not only the externalization of the process of objectification but is a dynamic process of internalization of objects: 'Individuals must include *these* constructs and constraints within themselves, but they must really include them within the individual *self*, and not simply allow them to continue to exist as objective values' (1997d: 58). Thus the

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<sup>27</sup> At the same time, in contrast with a Marxist approach, for Simmel, 'money is the accomplishment of freedom and potential equality' (Miller 1987: 73). Just as for Simmel the indifference and separation between individuals in city spaces allows certain kinds of freedom, so he understands money as potentially liberating in widening obligations to a far larger number of people and thereby lessening the hold of the more intense social obligations that might characterize a non-monetarized social order. In a monetarized society, payment for services does not depend on personal relations, but the abstract value accorded to the service. There is an irony in this, in that, as Miller notes, 'the same condition which favours the emergence of equality as an ideal may provide the means for further refinement and exactitude of inequality', as lack of money becomes a lack of freedom (ibid.). At the same time, the abstraction of money also allows the development of principles such as socialism and gender equality, as it enables people to be 'regarded as fundamentally equal to one another, bereft for purposes of social construction of their personal characteristics' (ibid.: 75).

<sup>28</sup> Simmel clarifies his use of the term 'culture': 'we speak of culture when the creative dynamism of life produces certain artefacts which provide it with forms of expression and actualization, and which in their turn absorb the constant flow of life, giving it form and content, scope and order: for example civil laws and constitutions, works of art, religion, science, technology and innumerable others. But a peculiar quality of these products of the life process is that from the first moment of their existence they have fixed forms of their own, set apart from the febrile rhythm of life itself, waxing and waning, its constant renewal, its continual divisions and reunifications' (1997c: 76). He uses the term 'objective culture' to describe these cultural forms that have become 'independent' and autonomized from individuals' existences.

formation of subjectivity requires both the externalizing, differentiating movement of objectification and the internalization of these external cultural forms within the self.

Miller notes that Simmel differs from Marx in stressing not only the nature of production in industrialized societies, but also consumption, seeing the quantitative increase in material culture in modernity 'as constructive of new developments in the very possibilities of societies. Whether the objects are books, furniture, or cars, individuals are seen by Simmel as increasingly coming into relationship with them, not as producers who fail to recognize their products, but as consumers who have to determine their own development in this world of goods' (Miller 1987: 76). However, the overproduction of cultural forms in modernity makes the subjective assimilation of all these cultural objects impossible, and this leads to fragmentation. Simmel describes the 'countless objectifications of the mind: works of art, social forms, institutions, knowledge' that confront us as 'like kingdoms administered according to their own laws, ... demand[ing] that we should make them the content and norm of our own individual lives, even though we do not really know what to do with them, indeed often feel them to be a burden and an impediment' (1997f: 92).

Simmel characterizes modern subjectivities as formed then through the response to the overwhelming nature of the sheer quantity of differing forms of culture and sensation that everyday life presents us with. In the previous chapter, we saw that Simmel sees monotheistic faith as providing a response to this condition of fragmented subjectivity in the promise of coherence and unity it offers. As God becomes the object of faith, as transcendent He represents an absolute object of a desire that can never be satisfied within immanent social conditions. We will see that this articulates distinctive features of conservative evangelical faith in the metropolitan spaces of London today.

Thus Simmel's distinctive conceptualization of subjectivity, drawing on Hegel, enables us to attend to how forms of difference and connection are specifically created in metropolitan modernity and the social effects of these. Within the conditions of the industrialist capitalist modern city with its myriad cultural forms and sensations, it allows us to consider how conservative evangelical subjectivities are shaped in responding to the multiple cultural practices, things and others – including God and Jesus, whose demands they also seek to respond to – that address them in different ways. Drawing this together with Foucault's focus on the morality of behaviours invites us to consider how as individuals learn to respond to these multiple

demands they are in the process of forming themselves and being formed as ethical subjects. Their responses to these demands imply their relations to differing codes of behaviour and the ways in which they negotiate these in everyday interactions in the city.

## **Conclusion**

These concepts of body pedagogics, interrelationality and subjectivity will allow an account of conservative evangelicalism in London sensitive to how ‘self and the social world are constitutively interlinked, made for and by the other’ (Bender 2012: 280), opening up what is invested in these experiences and processes of identification and separation between ‘self’ and ‘other’. The body pedagogics approach developed by Mellor and Shilling allows investigation of the increasingly complex ways in which religion is interrelated with a variety of other social and cultural phenomena in the contemporary world. In the metropolitan context of London, it specifically allows me to investigate how the embodied practices shaped through participation at St John’s intersect with broader urban norms of interaction. As Mellor and Shilling outline how the teachings of Christianity call Christians to be strangers in this world, entailing a demand to change modes of behaviour, so Foucault’s attention to ‘techniques of the self’ provides resources to think through how conservative evangelicals seek to form themselves, through specific embodied practices, as ethical subjects according to the behavioural norms of their faith, which they locate as out of step with those dominant in the city around them.

As conservative evangelicals seek to form themselves as ethical subjects according to the logics of their faith, understanding their lived experiences requires explicating how their ethic of obedience and desire for coherence arises not only through their connections with each other but also out of an experience of desire for a God who is understood as moral purity and unity. My narrative will consider how His personality has agency in shaping their subjectivities as they form a sense of relationship with Him through particular listening and speaking practices. Developing this approach requires the notion of ‘interrelationality’ to draw into focus the affective qualities of their being addressed as subjects across different urban spaces and how this divine personality is a social actor, shaping their interactions with others in the city and forming how they think of and experience themselves.

As this sense of relationship with God, and desire to be subject to His demands, is something conservative evangelicals experience as countercultural in London, the orientation to morality they develop is also felt as at odds with broader cultural norms. The concept ‘subjectivity’ provides a means of exploring the effects of negotiating incommensurable logics of practices in the city and how these senses of separation between self and other, subject and object are the result of contingent practices and histories. This, together with interrelationality, invites us to consider the affective qualities implied in the often excluded middle of relationality, between self and other, subject and object. What is *in* the address, where the self is put into question and is being made and re-made through the responses that are given to, with and for others?

My analysis in the following chapters describes forms of practice that will help advance understanding of the directional logics of conservative evangelicals’ orientations to self, other and world. I begin by exploring conservative evangelical speaking (*with, to, for* etc.) and listening (*to, with, in* etc.), and how these practices are implicated in the formation of particular kinds of subject and instaurate the social and an understanding of reality through their norms of association. Speaking and listening are fundamentally relational practices – whether one speaks for, with, to or against another – in which the boundaries between self and other are called into question, as the self can be both individuated and transcended in speaking and listening. This focus on word-based practices in the city draws into question the norms of how people learn to speak with and listen to others who are different from them, and what they want to say but are unable to. How are these desires and tensions shaped and constrained by particular logics of interaction, and bound up with broader ideals about how we live together in city spaces? What forms of connection, separation, freedom, individuality and community do these enable? Focusing on subjectivity allows exploration of the logics of interaction at work in everyday evangelical lives: under what conditions do people speak or not speak to others in workplaces, schools, on the streets and elsewhere as a practice of civility? And what does this mean for how we understand the values shaping ideas of public, private and intimate spaces in the metropolis?

Let us turn to examine the modes of speaking to (and not speaking to), listening with, longing for, difference from, through which evangelical subjectivities are formed, and the orientations towards self, other, and the social order these allow

as they respond to the multiple demands addressed to them by many others, which are the basic civic problems, pleasures and intensities of living in the metropolis. Despite the ambivalence towards the body noted at the start of the chapter, we will see that it is through specific forms of embodied practice that individuals learn to be both 'at home' in the world, and experience themselves as 'called out of that world' as disciples and separate from those around them, leading them to desire God and experience their own bodies as the site of tensions between immanence and transcendence. We will begin with practices of speaking, exploring how evangelicals' desire to speak of their faith to others is formed through participation in the church, but often experienced as constrained in secular spaces of the city, leading to a consciousness of subjective fragmentation.

## Chapter 3

# Speaking Subjects: Difference, Indifference and Moral Fragmentation

[A]s the modern public expands, it shatters into a multitude of fragments, speaking incommensurable private languages.

(Berman 1983: 17)

I had arranged to meet James, an investment analyst in a large, multinational corporation in the city in a café he suggested round the corner from his office. When I arrived at the café, which at 5.30 p.m. was still busy, James was already there, finishing a meeting with a client. As I waited for him, I surveyed the large selection of teas available, and sat at one of the rustic wooden tables with a pot of Earl Grey. James' schedule was tight, and I was grateful he had made time to talk to me. Aged thirty-six, tall and blonde, wearing jeans and a red fleece, James first started going to St John's after graduating from Durham and beginning work in the city. As we talked, he told me about his experience of evangelism during his time working in the city, describing how he had set up a Christian prayer group in his firm, which had organized carol services for the company. He said that he was aware, however, that whilst around 200 people had regularly been along to the carol services, there were 1500 people in his office, and was 'wracking my brains for a way, if I couldn't get my colleagues to the gospel, how could I get the gospel to all my colleagues?'

A few years before that, he told me, he had written ‘a little sort of tract’, which took the six principles Warren Buffett uses before making any investment decision, and ‘applied them to the claims of Jesus Christ, to see whether He was a good investment’. Some of his friends encouraged him to get this written up and published professionally, and he decided, in order to ‘get the gospel to’ his colleagues, to hand a copy of the published booklet and an invitation to a follow-up talk with a guest speaker to every single person at his firm. About half his Christian group were supportive and helped him with this; ‘the other half didn’t want anything to do with it’. To prevent any accusation they were doing this in company time, they distributed these before 7.30 a.m. one morning. By 7.45 a.m., James had been summoned to the 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 him to go round to all 1500 of his colleagues, take the pamphlet back and apologize in case it had caused anyone offence. James 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’.

James’ practice of evangelism in this corporate environment – meeting up with other Christians regularly in meeting rooms in the office to pray about how to ‘reach’ the rest of the firm, planning Christmas carol services, and walking round to put copies of a Christian pamphlet he has written on colleagues’ desks – helped shape his experience of the city as populated by ‘the lost’ who are in need of redemption and as a space that is hostile to Christians. When I asked why he thought the head of human resources had been so angry, James said, ‘I don’t know whether he felt threatened. What I do know is that Jesus promises that Christians will be opposed, and Christians will be persecuted and will be hated, so the response wasn’t a surprise’. But James does not see his ‘witness’ to his colleagues only through distributing his tract and organizing carol services: he described working hard and



doing a good job for his firm as a means through which he could be seen as 'blameless' and therefore also as a form of evangelism at work.

It is possible to discern in his actions some differing values: his use of Buffett suggests admiration for capitalist investment principles, yet his rewriting of this to focus on what are sound investments 'for life' indicates his sense of the limitations of investment culture and desire for a source of meaning rooted elsewhere, which his relationship with Jesus answers. Likewise, as a good evangelical, he has internalized the desire to tell his colleagues about his faith and feels that he should be a witness for Christ in the workplace, but this is bound up with a disposition of reserve, which means he would not strike up conversations about his faith unprompted, and so is paradoxically grateful for the 'minor persecution' he experienced, which allowed him to have conversations with colleagues about his faith which otherwise would not have happened.

As James' desire to share his faith with his colleagues led to his actions being labelled 'offensive', having breached norms of everyday workplace interaction, examining how members of St John's practice evangelism illuminates differing logics shaping their forms of separation from and connection with others. This reveals both the cultural fracturing of the city through processes of segregation establishing different moral milieu that members of St John's move through and their desire for a coherence in their lives that transcends these forms of fragmentation. I begin by outlining how ideals for evangelistic speaking are articulated at St John's, and the particular emphasis accorded to this within conservative evangelicalism. I then show how the leadership of St John's aim to encourage a specific habitus through which members of the church feel both compassion for and distinction from what David describes as 'this desperately lost city of London' and develop the desire to speak 'publicly' about their faith in workplace and other social spaces on issues where the church's moral teachings are felt as countercultural. I then outline how individuals often struggle with this, revealing how their subjectivities are formed through the complex interaction of behavioural norms associated with different social spaces they inhabit. As they become conscious of tensions in their logics of practice shaped through their simultaneous inhabiting of differentiated city spaces suffused with differing moral norms, they narrate their subjective fragmentation according to biblical narratives, that enable them to draw these fragments together into an overall pattern of coherent meaning that shapes their sense of self.

## **Spatial ambitions: ‘public and unpopular’**

The centrality of the idea of conversion throughout the history of evangelicalism has made the duty to preach the gospel to others a privileged duty of the believer, bound up with the conviction that a person is justified and redeemed through faith in God. Following a theological trajectory from Martin Luther, justification by faith became one of the distinguishing doctrinal elements of evangelicalism in the eighteenth century: acceptance by God, in this tradition, came through faith, not works, and this required individuals having heard the gospel, so that they could respond in faith. The quest for souls in evangelistic and missionary movements drove evangelicals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries out to distant mission fields and encouraged them to take their faith out to the people through house-to-house visitations and other forms of missionary work in the British inner city areas increasingly populated by ‘the non-churchgoing masses’ (Bebbington 1989: 6, 118; Brown 2009: 46). This orientation towards conversion shaped styles of preaching in church services with the aim of drawing in outsiders, as the language of sermons was ‘adapted to the supreme task of implanting the gospel in the hearers’ from different social backgrounds (Bebbington 1989: 118). The desire to express the gospel in terms clear and relevant to the non-Christian and thereby act as a ‘witness’ to Jesus underpinned James’s use of the language of investment culture in his evangelistic pamphlet, and has shaped the style of contemporary evangelistic projects across different evangelical traditions, such as The Alpha Course, developed by the charismatic Anglican church, Holy Trinity, Brompton.<sup>1</sup>

The nature of mission has however become an area of disagreement in contemporary British evangelicalism. Within the history of the evangelical movement, forms of missionary engagement with non-Christians have often extended beyond preaching the gospel to modes of philanthropy, and activism on issues of social justice and humanitarianism, from William Wilberforce’s campaign against the slave trade to the involvement of organizations such as Tearfund in the ‘Jubilee 2000’ and ‘Make Poverty History’ campaigns. Although some conservative evangelicals may be involved in social justice movements and humanitarian work, there is a

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<sup>1</sup> See also Engelke (2011) on how evangelicals in the Bible Society work to stress the Bible’s relevance for understanding the contemporary world.

particular emphasis placed within contemporary conservative evangelicalism on an understanding of mission in terms of ‘preaching the gospel’ and *verbal* evangelism, articulated in relation to the doctrine of justification by faith, in contrast with contemporary charismatic emphasis on both the ‘re-evangelisation of the nations and the transformation of society’.<sup>2</sup>

Listening to sermons articulating this emphasis becomes a key body pedagogic means by which the conservative evangelical subject internalizes this sense of the privileged role of speaking to non-Christians in the practice of faith. The centrality of speaking within evangelistic practice was emphasized in many sermons at St John’s. In a sermon focusing on a chapter from Luke’s Gospel, David stated that ‘Christian mission is only Christian mission if it has to it *verbal* content. Declaring the possibility of reconciliation with God. The disciples are sent to announce, and to offer the possibility of being reconciled with God: that is a *verbal* thing’. He differentiated this from approaches other Christian groups might take, stating ‘it’s a wonderful godly thing to care for your neighbour, to love others. But it is not *Christian* mission unless the gospel is being proclaimed *verbally*. We hear of medical missions, of aid missions, of peace missions, but it’s actually only as the gospel is proclaimed that such activities become genuine *Christian* mission’.

Despite this privileging accorded to speaking about faith, we will see that declaring this kind of evangelistic message is not felt as an easy task in a broader cultural context in Britain in which, in many public arenas, the open expression of religion has become, as Linda Woodhead argues, ‘highly contentious. “God” becomes the great taboo – far more than sex or violence’ (2012: 25). In this context, the struggles felt by conservative evangelicals are interpreted as a battle, part of a cosmic spiritual warfare in which, David stated, the world is divided between Good and Evil, as individuals ‘proclaim the message of reconciliation... announcing the defeat of Satan’. David described the ‘verbal proclamation of the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross’ as ‘warfare, in which we announce verbally the victory of Jesus as we declare the defeat of Satan ... No wonder it’s so hard’. He said to the congregation:

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<sup>2</sup> This quote is from the website of Holy Trinity, Brompton, <http://www.htb.org.uk/about-htb> (accessed 8 June 2012). This is not to say that conservative evangelicals at St John’s do not also talk about the need for a transformation in society, but their understanding of how this will be effected centres primarily here on the need for individuals’ redemption, with this privileged in the teaching of the church, as in the sermons I discuss, over and above the need for activism based on the principle of transforming society as an end in itself.

‘We are authorized by Him to go out into battle, proclaiming the truth of the gospel, announcing the victory of Christ’, and added, ‘You will find opposition, and indeed the more we ... plan to proclaim the gospel, my expectation is the more we will see the opposition rise up .... I think Oscar Cullmann ... got it right ... when he suggested it’s a bit like the Allied Forces following D-Day. Once the D-Day landings had happened, victory was essentially secure. Hitler was defeated. But there was still battle raging all through Europe’. David then asked the congregation: ‘What is *your* personal plan of action where God has placed *you*? Maybe you’re in your office or your school: you’re there as a warrior, as a member of God’s army, and the war God wants us to be involved in ... is the proclamation making the truth of Jesus known’. He concluded by inviting members of the congregation to chat with each other over supper after the service about what their ‘own personal plan of campaign is ... Not all of us will be proclaiming from the pulpit ... What is your particular role in the campaign?’

In another sermon, George, one of the younger curates, articulated this emphasis on speaking words as the means through which God works:

those words, the message of the gospel, those words are powerful words, because it is though the truth entrusted to the apostles that Jesus’s spirit will convict the world ... Those words we have, the apostles’ words here in the New Testament, through those words, the Spirit convicts the world, shows people that they utterly need Him, calls them to put their trust in Him as their Saviour.

George described how for most of the week, members of the church would be surrounded by non-Christians – ‘maybe you’ll get on the bus, driven by someone who’s not a Christian, maybe the bus will take you up to your hall of residence, and you’re going past the porter, who’s not a Christian, up the lift to your floor, populated by people who mostly aren’t Christians....’ He said that these people ‘need the words of Jesus’: ‘These are the words that will convict the security guard, the bus driver, the tube passenger, your next door neighbour, your parents that they have a desperate need of Jesus’, and concluded with a prayer, as the congregation bowed their heads:

We pray, Father, for us as your people, with your words in our hands, that we would speak these words to those who aren’t at the [guest event] dinner

tomorrow<sup>3</sup>... maybe neighbours, security guards, bus drivers, people on our course, people in our office, family, we pray that we would speak these words to them, that the Holy Spirit would be at work, that they would be convicted, that they would come to Jesus.

In these sermons, we see the individual summoned to recognize herself as a subject tasked to proclaim the gospel to others in spaces outside the church, playing her own distinctive part in this 'army' as she speaks of her faith. The objectification of most of the people she interacts with in the course of everyday life as 'other', in need of Jesus's words, is bound up with the subjectification of the evangelical as one whose duty is to speak the words of Jesus to others in the unique situation in which she is located. She is thereby encouraged to experience her movement through mundane spaces of London as affording multiple opportunities to engage in these acts of speaking and to interpret difficulties she may encounter in this task through a biblical narrative of warfare, a view that coloured James's interpretation of the conflict he encountered with his human resources department.

This privileging of *verbal* mission is bound up with a stress on the importance of 'public' speaking about faith, in a narrative emphasizing the progressive de-Christianization of Britain. This emphasis, also evident in the campaigns of organizations such as Christian Concern, can to a certain extent be interpreted according to Casanova's thesis of the de-privatization of religion. As mentioned in the Introduction, Casanova (1994) argues that a response to processes of universalization may be that groups whose lifestyles are disrupted by these processes seek to mobilize and re-enter the public sphere. In the British context, these universalizing processes are evident, for example, in the Equality Acts of 2006 and 2010, the possibility of extending marriage rights to gay couples, and the vote to allow women bishops in the Church of England. As conservative evangelical teachings on gender, sexuality and other faiths in tension with universalizing modern norms come to represent particular cultural flashpoints of tension, public responses to these issues by conservative evangelical leaders locate their movement as increasingly countercultural, with

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<sup>3</sup> St John's holds regular 'guest events': these are dinners and other events with a short evangelistic talk from one of the clergy, followed by a question and answer session for questions to be put to the speakers. Members of the church are encouraged to invite non-Christian friends and colleagues to these.

religious freedom described as increasingly under threat.<sup>4</sup> As these teachings are experienced as in tension with universalizing norms, members of the church come to understand those outside the church objectifying them as increasingly ‘intolerant’ and ‘out-of-date’, as, in David’s words, ‘this country careers away from its Christian heritage’.

This sense of a periodization of time, moving from a Christian past to a secular, liberal modernity increasingly inhospitable to public expressions of evangelical standpoints in tension with norms of equality, was clearly articulated in a question and answer session following a sermon at a Sunday evening service. In this, David said that the ‘social and political tectonic plates of Britain are shifting radically, as we move from once-Christians – at least nominally – through to post-Christian Britain’. He then asked the congregation:

given that the tectonic plates are beginning to shift, well, 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 kind of things, you’re facing increasing hostility?

David mentioned individuals who had been challenged by their human resources departments as examples of individuals who were engaged in the kind of ‘public and unpopular’ speaking he described, and encouraged members of the church to speak publicly about their faith in their workplaces and universities, likening this to the situation of Christians in China:

The worst they can do is kill you. I think that’s unlikely in our culture, but the worst they can do is sack you. Actually, you will find that if they sack you that the law is on your side, because they are threatening your human rights ... Jesus says in Luke’s Gospel that anyone who is ashamed of Him in this generation,

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<sup>4</sup> This sense of religious freedom being under threat is exemplified in a petition on the ‘Not Ashamed’ website, which states: ‘We call on government, employers and other leaders in our country to protect the freedom of Christians to participate in public life without compromising biblical teaching and to promote in our society the values that are revealed through Jesus Christ and that have so shaped our nation, for the good of all’ (Christian Concern, not dated c).

He will be ashamed of them, when He comes in His glory. Now which would you rather: face the rejection of your peers, or face the disapproval of God Almighty?

In these sermons, we see a naming of the evangelical subject as one who not only speaks of her faith to non-Christians, but as one who chooses to speak publicly of her faith in what is perceived as an oppressively secularist context. David labelled the contemporary British context 'totalitarian', stating that what masquerades under the title 'multicultural, liberal diversity' is in fact 'illiberal, intolerant, secularist fundamentalism. This is not multiculturalism or liberal diversity. It is totalitarian'. George said in another sermon that if Christians 'stick with the words of the Bible,' they will be 'hated'. He gave examples of his own practice modelling this, all demonstrating a sense of tension with modern norms of equality, for example, describing how in his Church of England ordination selection conference, other candidates had said they'd be happy for their churches to be used as multi-faith spaces, whereas he had said he would not, and discussing how there'd been a dispute about a local church performing a blessing on a civil partnership, and in their local diocesan meeting, he had taken a stand against that. He said, 'you could feel the hatred in the room from many of those there'. He stated that the apostles 'stuck with the words of Jesus' and were hated as a result, and likens that to the situation Christians experience today. He said 'if you insist on sticking with the Bible, the kinds of words that people might use about you are things like "dogmatic", "black and white", "judgmental", "narrow-minded", and closed the sermon by reiterating: 'the only kind of Christian that is authentic' is one who is 'hated' for speaking the words of Jesus.

Susan Harding has demonstrated the centrality of language to conversionist orientations within fundamentalist Christianity in the United States, with 'witnessing and preaching ... the two main situations in which believers speak the gospel most intently' (2000: 36). Coleman develops this focus on the importance of language within charismatic evangelicalism through exploring how particular, material language practices construct the speaker in specific ways. He describes the speaking practices of members of the Word of Life movement in Sweden, for example, in speaking in tongues or exchanging personal testimonies with each other, as developing a sense of the self as 'reaching out' to affect the world and learning to

deploy biblical language in ways that put it 'into a kind of verbal circulation', these sacred words taken as showing the power of God at work in the individual (2006: 173).

This idea of the evangelical subject as extended outwards is also deeply embedded within the culture of St John's, with the individual described as oriented towards the world as they seek to speak the words of Jesus they have learnt to internalize and thereby convert others. James' story of seeking to 'reach' his non-Christian colleagues through inviting them to carol services and circulating his tract demonstrates this. But other than sermons articulating this emphasis on the centrality of speaking to non-Christians, by what other means does the church seek to create this habitus in which the evangelical subject's body is the medium through which Jesus's words can reach others in the city? And how does this affect the interactions of members of the church as they move through the metropolis?

Members of St John's learn to experience the city as peopled by non-Christians on whom they should show compassion and speak to them of their faith through various means. One method is encouraging identification with the emotional responses of Jesus and His disciples in biblical narratives. Ross, another young curate, described to the congregation one evening how Jesus, in the feeding of the five thousand, 'looked out over the crowd of people, and had compassion on them, because they were lost, like sheep without a shepherd'. He said, 'That's how I feel when I look at London, at the crowds of people here', and asked: 'Do you feel like that when you think about London?' The physical, built structures of the city are also described in ways that connect it with individuals' past experiences of evangelism. As many of those who come to St John's identify their student years as the period when they became Christians, the university occupies a privileged place in evangelical imaginations as a field for evangelism, and the city is described through the spatial image of a collegiate university. Matthew, a former corporate lawyer, now in charge of city ministry at St John's, for example, said he told members of the church working in city ministry, 'the way to reach the city is like reaching a collegiate university. You have your Christians dotted around in colleges, well here, it's just glass and chrome buildings, steel walls ... Our role then is to facilitate and encourage them in their ministry there.'

As well as these methods of re-imagining the city, the leadership at St John's also use logics of expansion, production and growth deriving from the corporate



world to describe the key aims of the church as to reach as many non-Christians as possible, to build them up in their faith, and then to send them out to ‘reach’ other non-Christians. At the church’s Annual Parochial Meeting in 2010, David described his vision for St John’s to the couple of hundred members of the church present using a visual image of a flow chart with numerous arrows branching off the various small groups and congregations of the church to show the ambition to ‘grow’ the church and reach more and more non-Christians.

The church leadership repeatedly emphasizes that it is the task of *all* members – not just the ministry team – to engage in this work, ‘partnering’ with the church in the gospel. In a Sunday morning sermon, David described this ideal of ‘partnership’ in a sermon as coming ‘from the business world’, and used images associated with masculinity to convey this: ‘we should think of partnership or fellowship ... in terms of the Olympic stadium, or Twickenham ... Tolkien got it right with “the fellowship of the ring” – this is nothing cocoa-ish about Frodo, Sam, and-, I can’t remember the name of the other one’. David defended his use of self-consciously masculinist language to describe ideals of verbal mission as a corrective against the ‘feminization of society’, suggesting a sense of space as divided between the public, masculine sphere of speaking and the feminine sphere as private. He said, ‘over the last forty years or so, our society has been feminized. Some of that has been a good thing ... However, with our rejection of a godless model of what it is to be a man, we have lost the idea of what it is to be a godly man.’ He said that secular society promotes either ‘lad culture’, or a ‘metrosexual’ idea of manliness, ‘like Chandler from *Friends*. Men are left asking what do we do with our testosterone? Here is our answer: we are godly men engaged in Christian warfare’. Paradigmatic of this idea of godly masculinity as publicly engaging in verbal mission, ordained ministry – an option only open to men – is held in high esteem in conservative evangelicalism. Members of St John’s were frequently asked in sermons whether this was something to which they were called, further reinforcing the value accorded to ‘public’ speaking practices as a privileged practice of faith. Encouraging the congregation to consider whether they had ‘the right gifts’ for such ministry, David said, ‘Can you imagine anything more wonderful than having that part in the warfare? Anything more important?’

Whilst the leaders of St John’s address the congregation to encourage them to feel compassion for those outside the church, configuring London as peopled by the lost and themselves as fighting together in a spiritual battle as they speak to non-

Christians of their faith, the leaders are also aware that the majority find this hard. They therefore offer a course that aims to train individuals in techniques of speaking about their faith with colleagues and friends. This runs over ten weeks, held at the church once a week, beginning with supper, and followed by a half-hour talk and small group activities and discussions designed to help members of the congregation feel confident in speaking about their faith. The aim is to equip members with a 'framework' with which to explain the gospel, encouraging the use of particular strategies, such as asking questions to encourage their interlocutor to interrogate their own values and beliefs about Jesus, and there are group-work activities and role-plays to practise the kinds of conversation they might have with non-Christians in which they could bring up their faith. These techniques function as a body pedagogic means for forming the evangelical as a speaking subject.

Throughout these sessions, the minister giving the talks, Pete, emphasized that it is the usual Christian experience to find it difficult and awkward to speak about faith with non-Christians. One explanation he gave for why many put off speaking about their faith with non-Christians is because the other person's 'eternal destiny' might depend on the outcome of that discussion. Several members of the group I observed talked about how they often felt embarrassed or awkward trying to talk about their faith when with non-Christian friends, family and colleagues, and prayed for forgiveness for these feelings of shame. This, together with the fact that the leadership of St John's felt it necessary to devise a course specifically teaching people how to speak of their faith seems to demonstrate that despite the desire of the leadership to encourage members of the church to speak about their faith in public contexts outside the church, many members have internalized the sense that faith is somehow a private matter. Nevertheless the dominant idiom individuals used to describe the kind of interaction they *hoped* to have with their friends and colleagues – 'conversation' – demonstrates their desire to speak, and their relational understanding of this.

These then are some of the ways the church leaders aim to encourage a habitus oriented towards evangelistic speaking, bound up with a sense of the city as divided between Christians and non-Christians. But to what extent can we see the desire for the public speaking of faith highlighted by the leadership of St John's played out in the everyday practices of members of St John's? *Is* London named in their actions and speaking as a space peopled by those on whom they must have compassion, and if so,

how does this shape their subjectivities and interactions? *Do* their practices make Christianity ‘public and unpopular’ through articulating traditionalist moral positions in tension with the secular modern spaces they inhabit outside the church?

To sketch differing ways individuals respond to the demand to speak about their faith, I will outline the practices of two individuals: Clara and Simon, one a lawyer, the other an accountant, both working in large multinational firms, both in their late twenties, both white, middle-class graduates of Oxford and Cambridge. Because of the long working hours and high demands of competence required by both their professions, the conflict between the ideal expectations of the church that they spend time evangelizing, studying the Bible, praying and serving others and the expectations of their workplace bring into clear relief different ways evangelicals experience the cultural fragmentation Simmel describes. Both are typical of a certain type of English conservative evangelical who appear ostensibly similar in terms of their socio-economic status and patterns of church involvement, with, like James, intense participation at university that has been maintained since starting work in high-earning professions in London. By looking closely at how these two individuals engage in forms of evangelistic practice in the city, and considering how these compare with the experiences of other members of the church, we can identify different forms of social, cultural and subjective fragmentation and consider how this contributes to the desire for coherence Simmel describes religion as offering.

### **Clara: ‘Reaching the Unreached’**

Smiley and petite, her dark hair cut into a bob, Clara always looks stylish, both when I met up with her a couple of times at her workplace, and at church. In many ways, she seems to embody the ideal understanding of the evangelical subject promoted at St John’s. She organizes a Christian group at her firm, leads a weekly Bible study group at church, writes film and book reviews for a Christian magazine, is on the committee for both a local church plant from St John’s and a Christian lawyers’ association, and is involved in an evangelism project on local council estates. She generally goes to two of the Sunday services each week at St John’s, in addition to a mid-week lunchtime service at the church plant. In contrast with James, she experiences her firm as supportive of her faith. When I met her for lunch at her office canteen, she told me that her work Christian group are allowed to hold fortnightly meetings in one of the

client rooms, put posters up around the office, advertise in the firm newsletter, and every six months hold evangelistic events with outside speakers, often from St John's, for which the firm provides lunch. At the most popular of these – on Dawkins and atheism – about fifty of her colleagues came. In addition to organizing the Christian group at her workplace, she also helps lead an 'Introduction to Christianity' course, aimed at non-Christians, and meets up with a woman who has recently become a Christian in her canteen at work, to read the Bible together in her lunch hour.

Clara seems in many ways to be modelling the type of 'public' Christian practice David encourages, and she told me she is mostly 'pretty open' about her faith with colleagues. She added however that while she would tell the woman she shares an office with that she is off to a Bible study in her lunch hour, she would not tell the partners on her team. She mentioned that members of the team she works with are all aware that she's a Christian, but after six years working there, she has 'not had the opportunity to share the gospel with them'. Clara's busy-ness and hard work in terms of time spent preparing to lead Bible studies and organize events at her workplace might be seen as reflective of the ideals of exactness and calculability engendered through working in corporate law, and demonstrate how her Christianity is informed by urban impulses towards productivity (Amin and Thrift 2002: 109). Although she has not, as she puts it, 'shared the gospel' with her close colleagues, in many other respects, her performance of her faith in this corporate environment seems to be straightforwardly 'public' in the way David advocates, through activities like organizing prayer meetings and evangelistic events.

Clara is also part of a team from St John's who are involved in attempting to evangelize to local council estates near the church. If we compare this form of practice with her workplace evangelism, we begin to see more clearly that her evangelistic practices at work are more reserved than they first appear, suggesting that processes of the privatization and de-privatization of religion can take place unevenly within an individual's subjectivity, formed through the intersection of differing practices associated with particular bounded urban spaces. The project evangelizing to council estates was set up out of a concern about the exclusively middle-class culture of conservative evangelical Christianity in the UK, and is part of a broader national

network called 'Reaching the Unreached',<sup>5</sup> aiming to take the gospel to working-class urban priority areas and areas of deprivation. The website of this network, quoting American conservative evangelical minister and author, Tim Keller, states:

Most evangelical churches are middle-class in their corporate culture. People value privacy, safety, homogeneity, sentimentality, space, order, and control. In contrast, the city is filled with ironic, edgy, diversity-loving people who have a much higher tolerance for ambiguity and disorder. If a church's ministers cannot function in an urban culture, but instead create a kind of non-urban 'missionary compound' within it, they will discover they cannot reach out, convert, or incorporate many people in their neighbourhoods.

(cited in Chester 2010b)<sup>6</sup>

What this translates to in the experience of members of St John's who are involved in this is an emphasis on hoping to convert the local urban poor through speaking to them about faith and reading the Bible with them. The main way Clara and other members of the church are involved in this is spending Sunday afternoons going around local council estates in pairs 'cold calling' – knocking on doors – and asking anyone who answers to do a questionnaire about their values, and then offering to read the Bible with them. This walking around the estates and knocking on doors provides an example of one way London comes to be felt in the experience of members of St John's as 'lost', inhabited by individuals on whom the church shows 'compassion' through trying to convert them. Members of the estates team meet weekly together for Bible study and have lunch together every Sunday after the morning service before heading out knocking on doors, and have developed close friendships with each other.

The UN Report on global cities describes how urban areas are increasingly divided into distinct areas parallel with particular forms of work, each of which can be seen as a 'subcity'. The report identifies five subcities:

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<sup>5</sup> Joanne McKenzie's doctoral research explores the experiences of members of this network in the UK (cf. McKenzie 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Elisha mentions Keller's work as also used as a resource by informants at a Tennessee megachurch engaged in social outreach work (2011: 101-2).

(1) the luxury city of those who make decisions about capital and development; (2) the gentrified city of professionals, managers, technicians, and college professors; (3) the suburban city of families of workers and managers in new manufacturing centers; (4) the tenement city of lower-paid workers and unskilled providers of service; and (5) the abandoned city of the very poor.

(United Nations Report on global cities, cited in Gunnemann 2005: 106)

The city workers of St John's, such as Clara, James and Simon, belong to the first and second type of subcity, whilst those with whom they are trying to engage through their work on the estates belong largely to the fourth and fifth groups. Saskia Sassen (2001) has described how the 'glamour' of global cities such as London is supported by large populations of blue-collar immigrant workers, and this has led to an increasing polarization between high-income workers of the first and second groups, and low-wage, menial workers inhabiting a different subcity.

The awareness that the 'Reaching the Unreached' project shows of the middle-class character of conservative evangelicalism suggests a desire by those involved with the work to disrupt the ways urban space is bounded by these divisions of socio-economic inequality as reflected in the make-up of conservative evangelical congregations. When several of the team involved in this project spoke about their work to the congregation one Sunday evening service, the minister leading the team stated, 'It's sad but true that in the UK, evangelical Christianity is primarily a middle-class phenomenon', and said that 'if we could look with x-ray spectacles beyond the walls of the church, we would very quickly come to these estates, and see the proximity of these unchurched people who are facing God's wrath'. He said the gospel 'must mean breaking down socio-economic barriers between people'.

Yet it is a minority of members of St John's who are practically involved in this work, and the ways some members of the church narrate these evangelistic practices has the effect of objectifying those living on the council estates as 'other', demonstrating how deeply rooted these socio-economic divisions are within urban subjectivities. At one of the weekly Bible study groups I observed, the church invited a former member of the church now involved with 'Reaching the Unreached' in another church in a predominantly white working-class area of Essex to talk about his work. When asked what he would like prayer for, he asked for prayer that 'God would raise up more indigenous pastors ... For me, this ministry is cross cultural, I'm a

middle-class toff'. At another prayer meeting in which one focus was the estates work, the members of the small group I was participant observer in, who were not themselves involved in visits to the estates, discussed 'how scary it must be to go round the local estates', and how 'unpleasant they must be'. Straight after praying that anyone who came to St John's from the council estates 'would be able to fit in', the two men I was sitting next to – both highly-paid professionals, wearing pinstripe suits and pink shirts – started chatting about their recent skiing holidays and fine dining in Verbier, and Lucy, with sharp sarcastic wit, commented to them on the irony of this. The fact that people from the estates who do want to engage in Bible reading are not necessarily encouraged to start attending St John's – the estates team suggest other possible 'Bible-teaching' churches nearby – demonstrates the extent to which the estates team are also conscious of these cultural divides shaping urban meanings and experience.

The evangelistic speaking practices members of St John's use on local council estates stand in contrast with the evangelistic techniques they employ with middle-class non-Christians. These are typified by either the workplace methods of organizing events such as carol services used by Clara and James, or more commonly by inviting long-standing friends to church 'guest events'. Clara lives near the council estates she evangelizes, in a modern apartment block with a security man on the door, but neither she nor other members of the church practise door-to-door evangelism in these middle-class spaces. Whilst this is in many ways because they see door-to-door evangelism as the *only* way to reach the urban poor, so separate are their existences that they would not have the opportunity otherwise to engage with them,<sup>7</sup> at the same time, the contrast in how they speak about their faith across these contexts illuminates the dynamics of different forms of urban fragmentation.

Their attitude of *comparative* reserve in speaking about their faith with non-Christian friends and colleagues, evidenced by feelings of anxiety and embarrassment, suggests that in spaces associated with middle-class privilege, it is harder for evangelicals to go public with their faith. In practice, one of the main ways

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<sup>7</sup> See Michael Sandel's discussion of the erosion of public city spaces in the United States as sites where people from different class backgrounds can engage with each other across socio-economic boundaries. He argues that 'More and more, the affluent evacuate public spaces, retreating to privatized communities defined largely by income level or by the zip code direct-mail marketers use to target likely customers' (1998: 331). This socio-economic polarization of space in London is examined at length by Sassen (2001).

members of St John's 'speak' about their faith is not through verbally articulating the gospel themselves, but inviting a friend or colleague to a 'guest event' at church at which a minister, as a religious specialist, explains the gospel in a setting that is constructed for this purpose. Even this act of invitation can create feelings of anxiety. When the leadership of the church encouraged its members to invite their friends to a forthcoming evangelistic guest event by giving out cards asking what one question they would like to ask of God, they asked people who had given these cards out to talk about how that went to the rest of the church. Several of these – whilst encouraging use of the cards – said that they had felt embarrassed or awkward about giving them out. Before a different event, Stevie, one of the young curates, said to the congregation that it can feel 'very nerve-wracking' inviting people along to guest events, and described a time he had 'broken out in a sweat' in front of his computer as he emailed a friend to invite him.

Such incidences of embarrassment demonstrate a moral fragmentation arising from the conflict between an internalized sense of reserve and propriety demanding that Godtalk is to be avoided both in the workplace and amongst friends, and the countercultural demand addressed to members of the church to practise their faith in a way that is 'public and unpopular'. Jonathan, another graduate in his late twenties I interviewed said that he found it difficult in his open-plan office 'to talk about Christian things, because people can just come in half-way through a conversation, and then it would probably sound quite strange what we were talking about ... It's hard to have a chat about personal, spiritual things ... I find it quite difficult, but I love it whenever I get the chance to'. This indicates his internalization of a secular cultural norm that faith is 'personal' and 'private', running in tension with the ideal of 'public' speaking encouraged by ministers at St John's and in wider evangelical discourse, drawing on the urban St Paul's paradigmatic preaching of the gospel to all in public spaces of ancient Mediterranean cities.

In contrast with the sense of awkwardness associated with speaking to middle-class colleagues and friends, no-one involved in the work on the estates spoke of this work as causing them embarrassment or anxiety, despite the prayers of other members describing this work as 'scary'. A teaching assistant in her early twenties described how in 'coming out as a Christian, it's easy to lose face', which she said makes it harder to be 'out' as a Christian amongst colleagues and others with whom members of the church are in regular contact. In contrast, other than giving up time on a



Sunday, those involved in this work on the estates do not risk this loss of face through going 'public' with their faith in door-to-door calling. The estates work therefore demonstrates the extent to which urban space is divided across lines of social stratification, and that the distance and anonymity this creates for middle-class evangelicals in areas of deprivation means their evangelistic practice in these spaces is not marked by the awkwardness with which evangelism directed towards middle-class acquaintances is imbued. Whilst those involved in the estates work seek to challenge and transcend the boundaries of division caused by wealth and cultural inequalities, in practice, they find these difficult to undo.

Thus the desire to locate Christianity in public city spaces is both appropriated *and* contested in the single location of Clara's body, in her busy organization of evangelistic events and door-to-door evangelism bound up with her *comparative* reserve about speaking to the colleagues with whom she works most closely about her faith in everyday conversation. Given Clara's commitment to the different forms of evangelistic practice she is engaged with, it is not surprising that she says she is considering leaving the world of corporate law to devote herself to full-time paid Christian ministry. This is indicative of the tension she feels between the demands of her faith and those of her work in the city, and demonstrates her desire to overcome the pull of different logics of practice and enable a greater sense of overall coherence in her life. It also shows how the idealization of the speaking evangelical subject privileges full-time paid Christian ministry as the highest aspiration for the individual who has 'the right gifts'; Clara's desire to enter full-time Christian ministry is bound up with the high esteem with which this is held at St John's. She said, however, that she was unsure whether she would be able to pursue this ambition, as options for women in full-time ministry within conservative evangelicalism are significantly more limited than for men.

### **Simon: 'London to me is not what it is to many people'**

Simon has, like Clara, been attending St John's since starting work in the city, yet his attitude towards workplace evangelism is less confident than hers, and in many ways more representative of the experience of the majority of individuals I spoke with. He was wearing shirtsleeves when I met up with him at a café about a minute's walk from his office early one February evening, and after we finished chatting, he returned

to his office to work, as he regularly works until 10 p.m. Simon is a quietly-spoken young man, and he told me he doesn't find it easy to talk to either his colleagues or his family about his faith, saying it would feel 'unnatural' to talk about it, although he added he *should* try to think of his workplace more as a mission field. He said he would find it very difficult to talk to non-Christian friends or colleagues about the evangelical teachings on gender or sexuality that David mentioned as provoking particular hostility in a secular context, and added that he would also be embarrassed to talk about the church's opposition to the ordination of women with any of his Christian friends from outside St John's.

While church leaders aim to encourage members of St John's to feel more confident in speaking publicly about conservative evangelical teachings on gender, sexuality and other faiths, even if that will lead to hostility, most members of the church I interviewed said, like Simon, that they would prefer to avoid conversations on these issues. Another accountant, for example, said that she lived with a gay housemate with whom she was good friends and had never mentioned her beliefs about sexuality to him, preferring, as she put it, to talk about 'more positive aspects' of her faith. This framing of evangelical sexual morality as implicitly 'negative' and not something individuals want to address with non-Christians was bound up with an articulated sense that the moral teachings articulated in the church were only applicable to Christians. Gemma said that it would be wrong for her to be judgmental of her colleagues for behaving in ways that went against 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'. In a Rooted group, discussing unmarried cohabitation, Lucy said she wouldn't want to address this issue with non-Christians: 'I wouldn't feel comfortable, if they're not Christians, saying they ought to change what they're doing'.

Within this narrative, the most important thing to speak about 'publicly' with non-Christians was the 'positive' aspect of the possibility of relationship with God. A trader I interviewed articulated this reluctance to discuss his views on sexuality with non-Christians:

It's 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.

Several socially conservative Christian campaign groups argue that Christians should play a role in the public sphere in promoting their views on areas such as sexuality morality and family life, stating that these moral teachings are for the good of the nation.<sup>8</sup> However the unwillingness of many members of St John's to share their views on these issues with non-Christians in everyday life suggests that running in tension with this 'prophetic' ideal in which these moral norms are understood as universally applicable, their subjectivities are also formed through a principle of toleration, in which expressing their views on issues such as sexual morality impinges on the other's right to be other and live according to their own moral norms, and would, through confronting difference, disrupt the calm that follows from allowing difference through urban indifference. Describing non-Christians' morality as essentially none of their business, and the pragmatic impetus to focus on 'more positive' aspects of their faith in their speaking, thus enables them to craft a coherent narrative that makes sense of this reluctance to speak with non-Christians about issues where their moral viewpoints are in tension with universalizing modern norms.

However, this sense of a strategic decision not to speak is somewhat troubled when colleagues directly asked about their views on these issues. Two women in their early twenties I interviewed, Jo and Rhiannon, described times when they had been asked about their views on homosexuality and had experienced difficulty expressing these. Rhiannon, who worked in the theatre, said a gay colleague had said to her, 'rather aggressively, "oh, do you think that I'm going to hell?"' Describing her response, she said, 'I was really shocked and really upset ... I don't think I said anything at that point, partly because I think I was almost crying. But then, afterwards, I went back and said, "look, I don't think you're going to hell because you're gay, ... actually, if you've been told that, then that's a wrong perception of Christianity'. She said she thought that negative perceptions of evangelical Christianity in the theatre were due to its being seen as judgmental: 'the theatre is very postmodern, and it's a faux-pas to say that you disagree with someone's belief or lifestyle choice'. Jo, a physiotherapist, described a time when one of her colleagues

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the mission statements of Christian Action Research and Education (2010) and Christian Concern (not dated b).

had asked her, in front of several other colleagues, what she thought about 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>9</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’.

The effect of the prominence of the narrative that Christians will be ‘hated’ and face hostility for speaking about such issues, combined with the media prominence of cases like the Bulls, seems to be the opposite of what evangelical leaders intend, with most members of the church feeling increasingly anxious in speaking about issues where the church is felt as rubbing up against broader norms of equality.<sup>10</sup> But it is not only speaking about these specific issues outside the church that makes members of St John’s feel uncomfortable. Many, like Simon, feel awkward talking about their faith at all, and some described themselves as ‘coming out’ as Christians the first time they mentioned to colleagues that they go to church. Feeding into this anxiety is not only media representations but also specific examples of individuals at St John’s who have got into trouble at work for their evangelistic practices. A student I interviewed, for example, Steph, was formally reprimanded by her course director over setting up a Bible study group, and Freddie referred to her experience in a sermon. As such stories circulate around the church, this makes others more anxious about speaking about their faith in workplace settings. Jane, a teacher I interviewed, for example, said, ‘when you hear of cases like Steph’s, you think that’s not what you’re meant to do, to tell the gospel to people’, though she qualified that, saying, ‘I wonder if it’s hard [to speak about faith] not because of the society we live in, it’s just that ... we make it hard for ourselves, ’cos we’re rubbish, and lack the confidence’.

When I asked Simon about whether he thought his colleagues knew he was a Christian, he said that he thought that a number of them did know, but added that he

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<sup>9</sup> See Preddy and Hall v Bull and Bull 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Members of the congregation involved in church politics, for example, in synod meetings, in that context seemed more confident expressing the church’s opposition to gay clergy and women bishops. However, it was a minority of lay members of the congregation involved in these forms of interaction, with clergy being more frequently involved in articulating the church’s position on these issues, often arousing tension with liberal clergy within the Anglican Communion, as, for example, in the incident George described in his sermon.

thought their impression of his faith was that it was ‘a hobby... a thing bolted onto my life ..., it’s just on Sundays’. Because Simon finds it hard to engage in the sort of verbal evangelistic practices Clara is involved in, he finds other non-verbal means of ‘witnessing’ and thereby negotiating alternative boundaries of distinctiveness from non-Christians. One area in which he, like other members of St John’s, draws boundaries of distinctiveness from non-Christian colleagues in the city is in the area of drinking culture. Most, including Simon, balance this not by withdrawing from going out for a drink with colleagues, but by limiting themselves to two drinks (although Jenny, an insurance worker mentioned this didn’t necessarily always work: ‘the trouble is that if you haven’t had something to eat, or you’ve got the timing wrong, you end up losing your sense of proportion’). Simon said he doesn’t think colleagues look down on him for this. However when I interviewed Matthew, he said other members of St John’s had been made to feel uncomfortable by their bosses not only for making a couple of beers last an entire deal-closing-celebration drinks, but also for refusing to take clients out to lap-dancing clubs. He said that for all Christians working in the city, ‘you’ve got to have your own red line’, and know where those moral boundaries are drawn.

Performing this distinctiveness from the drinking culture of the city is one way for the majority of evangelicals to position themselves as distinctive, even if they feel awkward engaging in the more public ‘verbal’ performances of faith Clara and James are engaged in. As cities have figured in biblical and other religious narratives as vice-riddled, so in sermons at St John’s, London is frequently compared to the Corinth that St Paul was addressing, a hedonistic, ‘sin city’ in which ‘money and sex are the twin idols’. David described the church’s location in London as ‘within the precincts of the temple of Western idolatry: materialism’. Therefore by giving a significant percentage of their income to the church and by withdrawing from behaviours like getting drunk or sex before marriage, members of St John’s are able to position themselves as ‘aliens’ within this reading of London as lost, and they narrate these practices as the ways in which they offer a ‘witness’ in their workplace contexts, when they find it hard to speak of their faith.

Learning to read the city as peopled by ‘the lost’ for whom they are a witness, both verbally and through performing other boundaries of distinctiveness, entails significant emotional demands, as every interaction becomes loaded with possible ramifications for eternity, every moment including the passing of lost chances and

missed encounters. In his sermon on verbal mission, David described London both as a space of battle and as a 'lost city' that affords strategic potential for expansion, and talked about how on a recent visit to Bloomsbury he had been aware of how it was full of students from around the world. He said that St John's has 'incredible opportunities for the spread of the gospel all around the world: God has placed us here, at the centre of this global city', and he prayed for 'this desperately lost city of London, that they would turn, and put their trust in you'. Following Simmel, this mode of concern and compassion for the 'lost city' is in tension with the instrumental norms of interaction that dominate everyday modes of practice in the metropolis. This therefore creates a specific form of fragmentation between the type of emotional response evangelicals learn to feel for non-Christians through the church, and the more instrumentalized modes of interaction formed in their workplace settings where, as Jonathan described, talking about 'personal, spiritual things' is felt as strange.

This tension of feeling that they ought to speak about their faith and that they cannot, or 'lack the confidence' to do so, is not only because of stories circulating of individuals who get into trouble with their human resources department. It is also, I would argue, related to their habituated modes of speaking practices formed through participation in the church. In *Together*, Sennett describes how when he first moved to London after music school in New York, 'discussions were couched in terms of "possibly", "perhaps", and "I would have thought"... whether in a local pub or patron-grandee's drawing room, the Brits proved themselves skilled masters in the use of the subjunctive mood' (2012: 22). Sennett argues that this is not just a matter of politeness in conversation, but is a tentativeness that issues 'an invitation to others to join in' (ibid.). This mood of conversation was very characteristic of interactions at St John's, especially in the weekly Bible study groups. These followed a repetitive rhythm of practice, each beginning with supper, followed by an academically demanding Bible study run by members of the church trained in leading small groups. The conversations in the two groups I spent most time with were characterized by this subjunctive mood of 'I would have thought' and 'perhaps', as established members of the groups sought to open up space for quieter and newer members to join in. Sennett argues that the subjunctive mood is an antidote to paralysed positions and counters 'the fetish of assertiveness by opening up an indeterminate mutual space... The social engine is oiled when people do not behave too emphatically' (ibid.: 23).

Small groups are one of the main body pedagogic means through which

members of St John's learn to both hear God speak through the text of the Bible and, as Freddie described, to 'preach the gospel to each other' as they speak the words of Jesus in discussing the set passage. Small groups are seen as important to being part of the church community, and the craft of sociality and dialogical conversation is privileged as part of the making of this community. Although the speaking in small groups was not completely indeterminate – there were things that could not be said – the space of these groups, crafted around the interpretation of particular texts, involved a give and take in conversation that refrained from assertiveness and offered social pleasure in the forms of conversation and connection it enabled.

Whilst ministers address the congregation with an assertive message in sermons and encourage them to 'speak Jesus's words' and 'contend publicly for the truth of the gospel', thereby engendering conflict, the ways members of the church actually practise speaking about their faith is mostly with each other, in this more subjunctive mood. This encourages a habitus of sociality that values indirection and avoids confrontation, which also underlies their reluctance to speak about issues where the moral standpoints of their faith are in tension with those of the secular spaces they inhabit outside the church.<sup>11</sup> This norm of interaction militates against more definitive public statements of, as David described, 'the objective truth of the gospel', and the tension between these two differing norms of practice can be theorized in terms of a subjective division.

Despite – or because of – these tensions, the church becomes a space that provides a sense of coherence and unity through both a sense of relationship with God, as we will see in Chapter 5, and the experience of intimate friendships formed there. Both Clara and Simon said that their closest friendships are with Christians, and when I asked what difference their faith makes to their experience of living in London, both spoke of the importance of the experiences of friendship afforded by the church. Simon said he felt that the city has '*shrunk* in many ways', that London is not

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<sup>11</sup> Comments by some informants indicated that the avoidance of speaking about particular beliefs that could lead to confrontation was also co-negotiated with non-Christian friends. Amelia, for example, a part-time postgraduate student and employee of a education charity, discussing whether she'd ever experienced hostility from her friends because of her faith, said she'd felt 'really uncomfortable' when a non-Christian friend once asked her directly whether she thought she was going to hell and had answered 'yes'. She said 'moments like those are really rare though, because my non-Christian friends love me, and so don't raise difficult topics or ask questions like that because they don't want to put me in that kind of awkward position again'.

to him ‘what it is to many people, a large impersonal city’, but is where his church is based and where he therefore has a large number of friends and feels welcome.

Jonathan said that since moving to London, ‘the only way, other than work, I’ve found of meeting people is through the church’. This sense of London being changed through the experience of friendships at church was reiterated by almost everyone I spoke to. Jenny said that St John’s made life in London ‘bearable’, both through the friendships it enabled and the ways in which she saw it as supporting her faith.

The friendships formed through participation in the church are related to its physical location: because it is in a very central part of London mostly given to commercial buildings where few live (other than those on the council estates they are evangelizing), the majority of the congregation live about half an hour’s journey away. Thus very regular – in many cases twice-weekly – meals together at church in small study groups and after Sunday services form an important means of creating a sense of community, and the practice of sharing prayer requests at the Bible study groups means that people are quickly drawn into each others’ lives. The time that members of the church make for this might be seen as bound up with urban impulses towards productivity and logics of accumulation, as the church seeks strategically to ‘build’ these individuals in their faith so that they can ‘reach’ more ‘unreached’. Yet the details of these practices – eating together and engaging in rigorous exegesis of a small portion of text, going to listen attentively for half an hour in the middle of a busy working day to an academically demanding sermon – might also be seen however as a means of finding a space outside this and, as we will explore in Chapter 6, these groups provide an important means in enabling individuals to keep going in their belief in and orientation to a transcendent source of meaning.

Simon seems, unlike Clara, to have more straightforwardly internalized the cultural expectation that faith should not be spoken of publicly at work, and has developed a disposition of critical distance towards some aspects of practice that St John’s encourages, for example, criticizing David’s privileging of ‘verbal mission’, stating that he felt there is a tendency at St John’s ‘to downplay social ramifications of the gospel’. Whilst Clara’s reading of her office as a mission field and expressed desire to devote herself full-time to Christian ministry shows one response to the problem of metropolitan fragmentation Simmel describes, Simon deals with this differently, finding spaces for reflection within his weekly routines in which he is able to orientate his attention towards the transcendent and find a sense of unity and



coherence beyond experiences of cultural dislocation. In addition to his participation in Bible study groups, church services, and private devotional reading, he attends choral evensong in another church, sings in a gospel choir, and at weekends regularly escapes the sensory bombardment of urban life in London with a Christian walking group. All of these, following Simmel, may be seen as a way of providing a more coherent pattern to urban life, whilst simultaneously introducing a further fragmentation specific to conservative evangelicalism between these forms of practice that seek to develop an orientation towards transcendence and more instrumental modes of interaction characterizing urban life.

### **Conclusion: ‘a unity of disunity’**

In an article on the St John’s website, one of the church staff described how at university, she’d been the ‘compartmentalising queen. I had a box for study, a box for CU, for church, a box for my social life, and the most important ... a box for sleep ... And very oh so very rarely did any of them meet’. An image of stacked cardboard boxes accompanied the article, and the writer suggested that rather than compartmentalizing, Christians should see the ultimate ‘aim of our lives being to see God’s name spread, wherever we are or whoever we are with, or whatever area of our carefully boxed out life it intrudes upon, and whatever it cost us. Our aim being to focus on how immense Jesus is (Hebrews 1), and how little we deserve his love and forgiveness’. The writer concluded by suggesting that instead of experiencing life as a pile of boxed and divided areas it is ‘instead one huge box, where the cardboard is Jesus’. This article articulates the tendency in complex, differentiated societies – with metropolitan London exemplifying this – to cope with the fragmentation of the cultural spaces individuals move through by compartmentalizing and separating religion out as separate from other areas of life. In workplaces, instrumental norms of interaction are shaped, as Simon described, by the ‘busy-ness of work, therefore the conversations also revolve around work’. In this context then, it feels ‘unnatural’ to talk about faith, as something felt as belonging to a separate sphere of ‘personal’ life.

This logic of urban sociality patterned on rationalizing interactions implies the separation of life into public and private spheres, with interactions in the public sphere shaped by instrumental norms that do not interfere with or scrutinize others’ private lives. The impersonality and seeming indifference that characterizes these

everyday modes of interaction allows certain freedoms, as discussed in the previous chapter. Whilst, as Tonkiss describes, ‘relations of indifference may be fragile, grudging, uneven, ... they also can be seen as *ethical* in inscribing an attitude, however minimal, of the self in respect of others’ (2005: 9-10). Members of St John’s are conscious of the freedom this affords them in relation to their faith, and despite the language of persecution and hostility that reverberates, they also frequently express gratitude to God that they are free to practice their faith in contrast with Christians in other global contexts for whom they pray. Formed as ‘modern’ subjects who value this freedom that privacy allows, they feel uncomfortable expressing moral viewpoints that appear to transgress ‘public’ impersonal and instrumental norms of interaction by expressing beliefs that imply that others’ ‘private’ moral behaviour is wrong, and this is most intensely felt in relation to issues where the teachings of the church rub up against broader norms of equality.<sup>12</sup> Yet the teachings of their faith *also* ask them to feel compassion for those around them in ‘this desperately lost city in London’, and to witness to those in need of Jesus’s words through speaking to them of their faith and contending ‘publicly’ for the gospel.

Members of St John’s are conscious of these tensions, and their reflection on the extent to which their own speaking practices fall short of their understanding of what God wants of them enables them to work on themselves as ethical subjects, as they seek to discipline not only their practices but also their attitudes towards the different codes of behaviour they experience in different spaces. Foucault describes the process of subjectification as taking place through ‘dividing practices’: ‘the subject is either divided in himself or divided from others’ (1982: 208). At St John’s, the naming of the ideal evangelical subject, who speaks publicly about her faith and expresses beliefs about gender, sexuality and other faiths that go against universalizing norms, functions as a boundary that divides evangelicals from others. It *also* divides the subject within herself, introducing a demand into her that she is conscious she does not meet, and therefore feeling, as Jane described, ‘rubbish’, and there being an inevitability in this. The experience of a tension between an ideal of

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<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the narrative that is often presented of evangelicals viewing diversity policies related to Equalities legislation with hostility, several members of St John’s I interviewed spoke positively of these policies for preventing discrimination against gay colleagues. Research conducted by Anderson *et al.* with evangelicals in New York City also found that LGBT rights were taken seriously by members of a conservative church there, ‘even amongst those who theologically disapproved of homosexuality’ (2011: 627).

practice – here, the public proclamation of faith – and the sense of having fallen short of that is not new within evangelicalism. Practices of reading the Bible, listening to sermons, and small group discussion name ideals of performance, whilst practices of confession, divide the individual, making her conscious of her falling short of these ideals, and desiring to come closer to them in future.

The tension between the desire to speak publicly and the consciousness of failing to do so is narrativized as an internal battle, through idioms of guilt, sin and idolatry, and biblical narratives enable them to make coherent sense of this tension and shape their orientation to their own practice. A speech therapist, for example said, ‘Jesus talks about, “whoever will be ashamed of me and my words, I will be ashamed of him”’, and stated that this showed that feeling ashamed of their faith is the inevitable experience of all Christians. The leadership of the church are also sensitive to these tensions and articulate a sense that whilst God desires wholehearted service, He also offers the promise of coherence and unity beyond the fragmentations and cultural divides of the city, providing release for the soul riven by ‘internal battles’, as we will explore in subsequent chapters.

Whilst Bruce describes the compartmentalization of religion that occurs with structural differentiation as a holding process en route to secularization (2002: 29), examining the different forms of evangelistic practice of members of St John’s somewhat complicates this narrative. Whilst on the one hand, the difficulties they experience in speaking about faith does seem to imply a secularization of urban space in which speaking of their faith is a taboo, on the other hand, members of the church are conscious of this fragmentation, and learn to desire a sense of overall coherence, for Jesus ‘to be the cardboard’. The fragmentation and disunity Simmel describes as characteristic of the metropolis can be seen in the evangelistic practices of members of St John’s. On local council estates in which distance is created through boundaries of socio-economic division, individuals confidently engage in verbal evangelism, and experience little discomfort about doing so. Yet in middle-class spaces, in contrast, their experiences of awkwardness signify a tension between the prophetic and missionary norms encouraged through their church and a secularization of space through instrumental logics that locate the religious within the realm of the private and personal. Seemingly contradictory ethics of interaction bound up with the different spaces evangelicals inhabit are thus spun in uneven patterns within their bodies, shaping their engagement with and formation by the city in complex ways, as

their *desire* to speak is often inhibited and they find alternative means of ‘witnessing’. Through these practices, they draw lines of distinctiveness that separate them from non-Christians and connect them more closely with each other.

London is therefore named and experienced in particular ways as individuals learn to read the city in different ways: as a ‘desperately lost city’ and site for busy evangelism, as a space where Christianity is marginalized, as a space of friendship and community, as a space of socio-economic divides, as a site for workplace productivity, as space resounding with other voices that distract them from attending to the voice of God, and as site of missed encounters and opportunities. The specific sense of fragmentation created by the conflicting demands of faith and wider social life is, as Simmel describes, a never-ending process as the individual ‘cannot constantly maintain the perfect oneness of life itself and that of life and religion itself’ (1997e: 43).

The inculcation of the desire to *speak* the words of the Bible to others is bound up with the formation of the evangelical subject as one who ‘listens’ amidst the clamour of the city and thereby forms a sense of relationship with God. In the following chapter, I will explore the body pedagogic means by which this is formed, and the ways this points towards an ideal of subjectivity, bound up with a norm of rationality, that is orientated towards a unification of the fragmentation and transiency of cultural forms in the metropolis.

# Chapter 4

## Listening in the Metropolis

Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.

(T.S. Eliot 1974: 194)

Services at St John's are always planned by the church leaders to focus on a particular theme from the set Bible passage, with hymns and prayers reflecting that theme. On a cold January morning in 2011, Pete was leading the service. He began by referring to the shootings in Tucson, Arizona, that had taken place the day before, saying it was appropriate to be focusing on the theme that morning of 'looking forward to God's future glorious kingdom'. He said, 'Hear what the apostle John says in Revelation: "I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.'" This theme of the future kingdom of God reverberated in the words of the traditional organ-accompanied opening and closing hymns and the more contemporary songs accompanied by a band, for example, 'There is a higher throne / Than all this world has known, / Where faithful ones from ev'ry tongue / Will one day stand' (Getty and Getty 2003).

Hugo, one of the older ministers at St John's, was preaching that morning. He opened by praying, 'Open our eyes, Lord, we pray, that we might see wonderful things in your Word. Open our vision to the future, that it may become increasingly real to us. Strengthen our faith that we may live in the light of these things that you have revealed to us'. He said, 'the book of Isaiah has often been called a tale of two cities ... Here, in Chapter 1, ... the faithful city has become a whore, ... and afterwards you shall be called ... the city of righteousness, the faithful city'. He explained that the faithful city is 'of course Jerusalem, ... with Zion... [as] the symbol of the presence of the only true and living God amongst His people ... He dwells among His people, and He does that in order to make them holy as He is holy, so that Israel can be a light to all the nations of the ancient world'. He said the question Isaiah is 'grappling with' is: 'how is the faithless city to become the faithful city?... How can He produce a people who are characterized by holiness when we know just be looking inside our own hearts that the raw material of human nature is riddled with sin and rebellion?... How can you and I, as sinful, rebellious people, ever be in relationship with a God of holiness and righteousness and justice?'

He described the situation Isaiah outlined as a 'picture of a city in a spiral of decline, disintegration and corruption', which God will 'purify' as 'He moves in judgment against His people... It will be a sanctifying, restorative work that God does, ... and afterwards, the faithless city will become the faithful city'. He said that Isaiah's aim in describing the 'glorious, faithful city' was to 'motivate Isaiah's hearers to repentance... to a changed life, to a holiness of living in the present ..., [which] will make a radical difference to their everyday life and to ours.' He said that this vision of a future city should motivate 'God's people in our own generation' today: 'we're looking forward to an eternal and glorious city... in which nobody else really in our cultural context actually believes. It's a great challenge to live by that, to live by repentance and faith, in the light of the future certain reality of God's eternal kingdom'. Isaiah's vision of the faithful city then offers, Hugo said, 'detail about God's eternal purposes, which can focus our present, frankly often wobbly, discipleship and motivate us to holiness of character and life'.

Hugo described Isaiah in this passage Isaiah as 'shining God's light on the city of God', and asked the congregation to focus on a phrase in the first verse of chapter 2: "The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw":

Isn't that interesting? What Isaiah sees is a *word*. Because Old Testament revelation is always verbal rather than visual. It may use illustrations and pictures and visions ..., but they're always expressed verbally. The God of the Bible, you see, is a speaking God. Which is why the Word of God is central to everything that we do on Sunday mornings. We're not called here to come to see pictures. We're called to come to listen to God's Word, to respond to His Word, the Word of God Himself in scripture, the Word of total wisdom and total authority. And this is a Word of future prediction from the God who makes His promises and who fulfils them.

Hugo described how in the passage, people will go up to Zion, and said that the 'source of this magnetic attraction' is the 'revelation of the knowledge of God, which will lead us to living a life that reflects the character of God. And that's what we're all concerned about as Christian people: we want to be effective disciples of the Lord Jesus'. Hugo said this vision of God's future glorious city is something that is future, but has 'a present application: ... Let us be the people who receive the revelation that He's given and who responding to His teaching walk in the light as He is the light ... Our responsibility now is to listen to His teaching and to walk in His light'.

Hugo warned that what keeps people from this response is 'idolatry: ... something has become more important than God to us, usually ourselves in some form or another ... We want what *we* want, rather than what God wants', and said 'this is why we don't long for the heavenly city ... [This] makes it seem remote and distant to us because much more pressing and immediately in our everyday circumstances are the idols which take over from God at the heart of our lives'. He said that in the passage, Jerusalem, as 'the faithless city in Isaiah's day, ... had the same desires as the pagan nations around them ... They were indistinguishable in their quest for money and armaments', and he said that the 'root of that' was that 'their land is filled with idols'. He said idolatry allows these idols – 'often ourselves' – 'to dictate to you what is most important in your life', and contrasted 'merely human' idols with God: 'man has no continuity; his breath is totally dependent on God, he has no dependability apart from God'. He said that 'the mistake fallen human beings like us [make] is to try to make ourselves secure independently of God ... All the way through our lives the struggle that every Christian faces is that there are little cities that are our endeavours

to make ourselves secure, so that we don't really have to bother God, much less depend on Him, and hopefully He won't bother us. That's the story of human history'.

He concluded the sermon by praying, as the congregation bowed their heads:

We're going to sing in a moment, 'Saviour, since of Zion's city, I through grace a member am. Let the world deride or pity, I will glory in your name'. Lord, we don't just want those words to be sung to a great tune. We want them to be the expression of our hearts and lives today and through the coming days of this week. We pray that in the midst of the world that doesn't really believe anything of what we've been talking about, you will help us not just to withdraw from it into some sort of pietistic ghetto, but to live in it as agents of change. We pray that wherever we are this time tomorrow, at work, in our communities, in our serving, wherever we are ... that we may be the people who are so aware of the grace that has made us members of this eternal city, that we will glory in your name, and that glory may destroy the idols and focus our eyes on the king.

After the final hymn, as the congregation were still standing, with heads bowed, Pete read some verses from the book of Revelation re-echoing the theme of the service: 'The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price. ... He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!'

In this service, we see how looking forward to the future, faithful city of God is understood at St John's as interrelated with the practice of listening to God and forming a disposition of obedience to His teaching in His Word, and that this disposition is experienced as in tension with the 'idolatry' of a cultural norm of self-determination. This critique of autonomy reverberated in many contexts at St John's, through, for example, sermons that described Jesus as 'a perfect model of dependence on God.'<sup>1</sup> In one of the Rooted discussions, Hannah asked the group what kinds of things they would avoid mentioning as possible 'costs' of Christianity when talking to

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<sup>1</sup> Heelas and Woodhead describe how this focus on Jesus Christ as inspirational model of obedience was characteristic of a 'pervasive stress on deference' within congregational life in their study of religion and spirituality in Kendal (2005: 15).



people who were considering becoming Christians; Emily answered, ‘obedience and rules’. Alistair 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 said that faith means ‘living in a way that is not 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’.

In Hugo’s words, we see an understanding of God as speaking and that relating to Him involves listening to His Word. People are called to respond to His teachings in obedience and develop a sense of dependence on Him and trust in His promises of a future city of God, which is partially realized in the actions of His people on earth as they seek not to withdraw from the world ‘but to live in it as agents of change’. But we also see an acknowledgement that this is a struggle, that they need help to focus their ‘present frankly often wobbly discipleship’. In the following chapter, I will explore how the personality of God – described by Hugo as holy and bringing about a relationship of intimacy with His people – has agency in shaping the subjectivities of members of St John’s, and in Chapter 6, I will consider this difficulty of maintaining an orientation to His promises for the future. Before turning to these themes, this chapter will address the formation of evangelical subjects as listeners, concentrating on the processes through which they develop an orientation towards God and learn to focus on His character, both offering a response to urban fragmentation and introducing a specific sense of moral fragmentation, as outlined in the previous chapter.

I begin by considering the place of ‘listening’ in modernity, drawing on Michel de Certeau’s argument that the loss of the ability to hear God speak is associated with a fracturing of meaning as individuals understand themselves as authors of their own meanings and identities. I then describe the techniques through which members of the church seek to form themselves and each other as listening subjects in collective listening practices, and discuss the significance of ‘rationality’ in this. I then consider how members of the church also learn to listen in ‘private’ and ‘personal’ spaces and consider how these different modes of listening imply norms of subjectivity and agency that contribute to their self-identification as ‘aliens and

strangers' in the city. Yet whilst these practices of listening enable particular forms of connection and an orientation towards coherence, they also lead members of the church to be conscious of the many other 'voices' that distract them from hearing God in the city's soundscapes. I conclude by arguing that their listening serves as an interruption to everyday rhythms of the city, encouraging members of the church to seek to *know* God as a source of coherence and meaning and to discipline their minds and bodies in attentiveness to the demand to listen to Him.

### **Listening, Meaning and Modernity**

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau describes the modern period as characterized by a loss of the ability to hear God's Word. As historian Leigh Schmidt describes, for de Certeau, 'the modern disenchantment of the universe was fundamentally a predicament of hearing, a fracturing of words and reveler, a loss of God's living voice' (Schmidt 2000: 29). De Certeau outlines a shift from a 'listening' to a 'scriptural economy', arguing that prior to the modern period, the Bible speaks: 'The sacred text is a voice, it teaches (the original sense of *documentum*), it is the advent of a "meaning" (*un "vouloir-dire"*) on the part of a God who expects the reader (in reality, the listener) to have a "desire to hear and understand" (*un "vouloir-entendre"*) on which access to truth depends' (1984: 137). The 'modern age', he argues, is 'formed by discovering little by little that this Spoken Word is no longer heard, that it has been altered by textual corruptions and the avatars of history. One can no longer hear it. "Truth" no longer depends on the attention of a receiver who assimilates himself to the great identifying message' (ibid.). Within the listening economy, the identity of the Speaker had been certain, and 'attention was directed toward the deciphering of his statements, the "mysteries" of the world' (ibid.: 138). But the authority of the religious and political institutions that guaranteed the credibility of that voice were progressively weakened in Western societies, so that 'the voice that today we consider altered or extinguished is above all that great cosmological Spoken Word that we notice no longer reaches us: it does not cross the centuries separating us from it' (ibid.: 137)

De Certeau argues that when the Spoken Word was still heard, identities had been established in relation to the social institutions that projected the divine voice. With the disappearance of this voice, there was 'a loss of the identities that people

believed they received from a spoken word. A work of mourning. Henceforth, identity depends on production, on the endless moving on (or detachment and cutting loose) that this loss makes necessary. Being is measured by doing' (ibid.). New substitutes for the unique speaker had to be found, and modern societies worked to redefine themselves without that voice, for example, in revolutions and new nationalist identities (ibid.). The task of 'writing' in this 'scriptural' economy symbolizes this change in relationship with language and meaning. As people no longer believed their identities were received with reference to the Spoken Word, the nature of human subjectivity and society was redefined without that voice: humans sought to understand *themselves* as the authors of meaning. As language in the modern age had to be '*made* and not just *heard* and understood', there emerged a 'vast sea of progressively disseminated language, in a world without closure or anchorage' (ibid.: 138). In this situation, the individual's place in society could no longer be formally assigned as a 'vocation and a placement in the order of the world', but became a 'sort of void, which drives the subject to make himself the master of a space and to set himself up as a producer of writing' (ibid.).<sup>2</sup> This 'new writing' is formed through 'a moving on (*une marche*) that always depends on something else to provide available space for its advance, to the degree that the voice proper to Christian culture becomes its other and that the presence given in the signifier (the very definition of voice) is transformed into a past' (ibid.: 137).

This depiction of a shift from a 'listening' to a 'scriptural' economy with the advent of modernity is, de Certeau admits, an artefact, constructed to draw attention to a shift in modernity from emphasis on the agency of God to that of humans and the fracturing and endless deferral of meaning that accompanies this. Taking 'writing' here as symbolic of the activity of different modes of cultural production, de Certeau's account is consonant with theories positing modern and postmodern culture as characterized by the circulation of products and information taking place at ever greater speed, enabled by ever new technologies, threatening the possibility of coherence. With the ever faster production and circulation of the stuff of consumer capitalism, this multiplicity of products and objects produces, as in Simmel's thesis, 'many more cultural artefacts or signs ("signifiers") than people can cope with.

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<sup>2</sup> The emphasis on the mastery of language this involved became, de Certeau argues, a principle of social control that 'formerly privileged the middle class and now privileges the technocrat' who is able to make language its instrument of production (ibid.: 139).

People are bombarded with signifiers and increasingly become incapable of attaching “signifieds” or meanings to them’ (Lash and Urry 1994: 3).<sup>3</sup> Schmidt discusses how the composer R. Murray Schafer expressed anguish over the ‘polluted “soundscape”’ of modernity, and concluded his *Tuning of the World* by invoking Meister Eckhart: ‘Still the noise in the mind: that is the first task – then everything else will follow in time’ (cited in Schmidt 2000: 29).

This story of the loss of the ability to ‘listen’ in modernity is, as Schmidt writes, mostly, ‘finally, a story of religious absence’ (ibid.). Whilst de Certeau tells this through a picture of a move from a listening to a writing economy, the tale of the passage from a divine speaking to a purely human autonomy is often also evoked in narratives detailing a shift from ‘hearing’ to ‘vision’ as the prominent means of knowing the world.<sup>4</sup> Although historians are wary of accounts that trace a generalized shift from cultures privileging hearing to occularcentrism, it is now, as Charles Hirschkind notes, ‘widely recognized that the politics, ethics, and epistemologies that defined the Enlightenment project were deeply entwined with a set of assumptions regarding the relative value of the senses’ (2006: 13). Whilst vision is predicated on distance between the eye and the object of perception, listening bridges the gap between visible and invisible, interior and exterior worlds, involving the self’s ‘immersion within a sound from without, an engulfment that threatens the independence and integrity grounds the masculine spectatorial consciousness’ (ibid.). The very phenomenology of listening and the receptivity and passivity it implies came to be regarded as a danger to the autonomy of the Enlightenment subject.

In articulating a distinction between orality / aurality and writing, de Certeau does not intend to set up an antinomic opposition between the two, since the listening he describes implies listening to the words of a written text. His distinguishing these two modes of relating to language is more meant to suggest that modernity has been

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<sup>3</sup> Lash and Urry see Simmel’s theory of modernity as capturing the ‘postmodern’ condition they analyse: ‘Like Georg Simmel’s neurasthenic flâneur, the first “modern subject”, people are overloaded by this bombardment of the signs of the city, people become blasé. In this sense, of increased profusion and speed of circulation of cultural artefacts, postmodernism is not so much a critique or radical refusal of modernism, but its radical *exaggeration*. It is more modern than modernism. Postmodernism hyperbolically accentuates the processes of increased turnover time, speed of circulation and the disposability of subjects and objects’ (1994:3).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Buck-Morss’s *The Dialectics of Seeing* (1991) and David Levin’s edited *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (1993), including contributions arguing both for and against this position.

marked by a move away from valuing attentive receptiveness towards an Other whose address gives the self her identity and meaning. He emphasizes that his aim is not to create the kind of metaphysical binary of writing / orality that Jacques Derrida criticized as having as an ‘ultimate reference ... the presence of a value or of a *meaning (sens)* that is supposed to be anterior to difference’ and functions as a foundation that establishes a ‘founding archaeology’ for language (cited in de Certeau 1984: 133). De Certeau, like Derrida, assumes that ‘plurality is originary; that difference is constitutive of its terms; and that language must continually conceal the structuring work of division beneath a sym-bolic order’ (ibid.).<sup>5</sup>

The contemporary appeal of evangelicalism *is*, however, sometimes explained in terms of a longing for an ultimately authoritative revelatory voice that speaks outside of time and establishes a referential unity that ‘stems [the] semiotic drift’ arising with the fragmentation of modernity (Comaroff 2010: 29). We will see, as Hugo’s words indicate, that members of St John’s do come to understand God as a secure originary source of meaning and identity, and that, as Schmidt argues, the narrative of the Enlightenment dispelling of ‘the wonder of divine speech and auditory presence’ through the ‘anatomizing eye’ is too simplistic, as there is still a longing for a ‘holy listening’ (2000: 31, 246). Yet I will show that this practice of listening – a technology of the self that works to form a sense of obedience to God that will infuse *all* everyday interactions – is hard work in the modern metropolis, and, as I will consider in Chapter 6, this divine voice can be lost at times. I will also show that the norms of receptivity to the voice of another symbolized in listening and of ‘modern’ autonomy (symbolized in visuality and the ‘scriptural’ economy) are inextricably bound together in the lived experience of the evangelical listener.

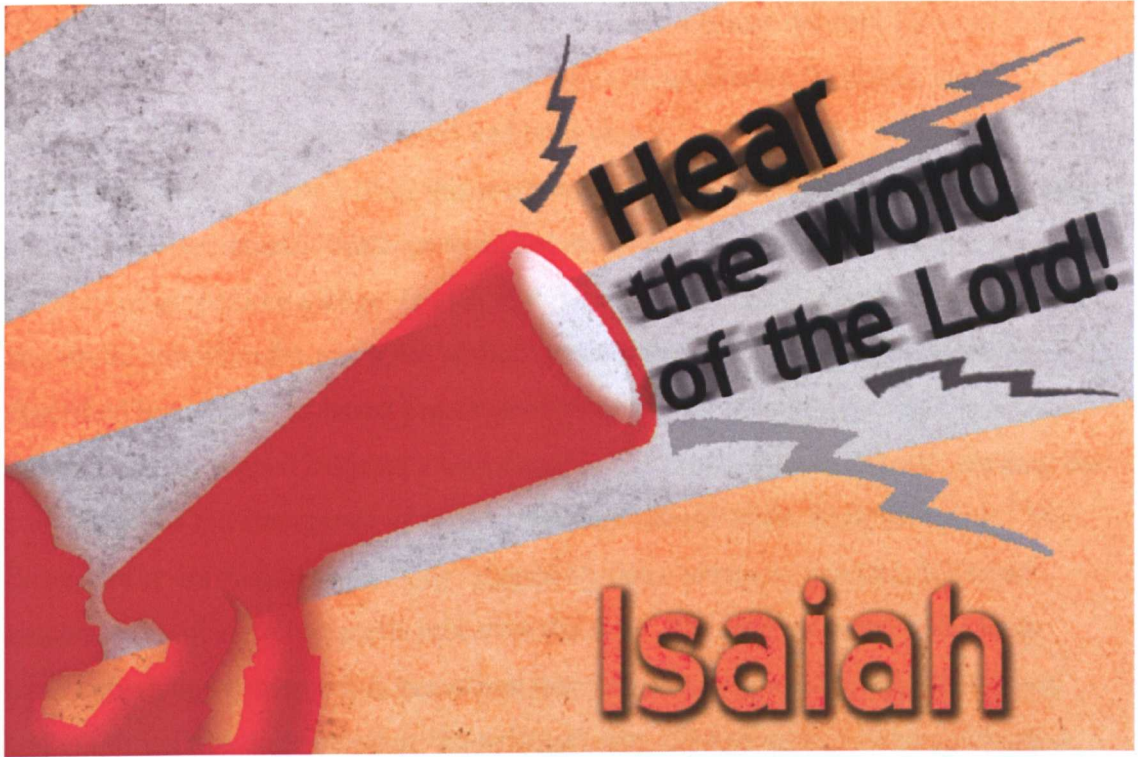
Let us turn to examine the means through which members of St John’s are formed as ‘listeners’. What does this reveal about their modes of relation with God, each other and the multiple others they encounter in the city? To what extent is their listening shaped by the change in orientation to language de Certeau argues has happened with a shift away from receptivity towards humans as producers of their own, forever unstable meanings? And how is this formation affected by the

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<sup>5</sup> It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore this claim, but I would argue that de Certeau is correct to argue that the nature of language tends to conceal the difference on which it is predicated (cf. Strhan 2012: 23-5).

proliferation of cultural forms and sensations that confront the individual in everyday metropolitan life?

### Learning to Listen



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For members of St John's, God's voice still speaks in the Bible. The periodization of time implied in the adverb 'still' is pertinent, alluding not only to the shift de Certeau describes away from a listening economy, but also, as we saw in the previous chapter, to the narrative of British society 'careering away' from its Christian past resonating in St John's and wider public discourses. This privileging of listening,<sup>6</sup> underlined in the image above which accompanied the sermon series in which Hugo's sermon featured, is not surprising for a church that locates its institutional identity squarely within the Reformed tradition. The theological rationale for this focus within conservative evangelicalism lies in a Christology positing Jesus as the sole mediator

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<sup>6</sup> The language of 'hearing' and 'listening to God' are used interchangeably by members of St John's to denote the ideal of the subject formed, as de Certeau described, in receptivity to God's address. Yet it is the idea of *listening*, denoting an intentionality on the part of the one who hears, that is more central than hearing to evoke conservative evangelicals' self-formation as listeners.

between sinful humanity and a holy, transcendent God through His death and resurrection, offering those who believe in Him the possibility of relationship with God. The Bible is understood as the means by which the person of Jesus and the purposes of God are revealed and therefore as *the* way of entering into relationship with God. Being in relationship with God is understood as having heard Jesus, believing in Him, and choosing to internalize His words and do what He says. As George said in one sermon, the means by which an individual ‘becomes clean... is through hearing His [Jesus’s] Word and believing it.’

David Morgan describes this understanding of the mediation of the divine in words in Protestantism: ‘Protestants regard the sacred as information, as content-laden delivery of proper knowledge. God is in the information, the knowledge of salvation and divine intention for one’s life’ (2012: 177). Keane, as discussed in Chapter 2, described how the word-based practices of the Protestant Reformers, for example in reciting creeds, shaped subjects who located belief and agency in the self, creating the conditions for the emergence of the autonomous subject of the Enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> The Protestant re-formation of the body, shaped by these norms of practice, led to an emphasis on the mind’s significance over the flesh. This did not remove the body from knowledge construction, but meant that information given through sensations and emotions was understood as ‘knowledge’ only after processes of categorization and filtering through the mind (Mellor and Shilling 1997: 23-4). The senses of sight and hearing were valued by the Reformers for their potential ‘to provide unsullied access to the word of God’, marking ‘a significant stage in the Western tendency to equate the eye with the mind and to “forget” that sight is itself a sense’ (ibid.: 10). Emotions were seen as forces to be controlled, and contact with God was sought

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<sup>7</sup> A linguistic practice Keane discusses, for example, is public performances of adult confirmations of faith in his fieldwork in Indonesia, in which the minister asks the individual performing the public commitment ‘Do you believe, acknowledge, and promise?’, and the individual replies, ‘I believe, acknowledge, and promise’ (2007: 219). These practices are part of the long history of dematerializing ideologies within Protestantism, which were bound up with the early Protestant reformers defining themselves against Roman Catholicism through their insistence that ritual has no efficacy in and of itself in achieving salvation: those who participated in practices such as the communion must already believe (ibid.: 61). The iconoclasm of the reformers, strenuously denying the possibility of material mediations between human and divine, privileged the scriptural word and the human voice, whilst denying that sound or particular linguistic forms had intrinsic power in themselves. Special emphasis was placed on Bible reading as the centre of institutional and family worship (ibid.: 63), and focus on individuals’ interior thoughts rather than ritual practice was brought to the fore in the move from tradition to inner-directed social character (cf. Riesman 2001), shaping subjects conscious of themselves as believing subjects (Keane 2007: 69).

through spirit / mind, rather than the impure body. Belief – in terms of an internal assent to propositions, mediated through *hearing*, accepting and then *knowing* Jesus as saviour – became separated from and privileged over experiences of the sacred gained through ‘carnal knowing’ (ibid.: 23). Hugo’s sermon indexes this Protestant focus on ‘knowledge of God’ mediated through listening to the Word. Whilst I will show in the following chapter that members of St John’s also experience God in personal terms that exceed the purely informational, nevertheless this sense of a relationship with God shaped by words and knowledge is central to conservative evangelical theology and everyday experience. As Freddie stated in a sermon: ‘The life of faith is the life of the Word. “Abide in me, says Jesus, abide in my words”’.

Listening is therefore described at St John’s as *the* most important practice of the Christian life, as the means of cultivating a relationship with God. As David stated at a mid-week service, preaching on the story of Martha and Mary in Luke’s Gospel:

There is only one priority that counts: listening to Jesus. There is only one thing that really matters: listening to Jesus. There is one item that trumps all others on the list of things that you need to do today, tomorrow, this week, next week, next month, the month after, until the day we die. Put *this* in place as *the* priority above all others and everything else will fall into place: listening to Jesus comes ahead of my work. Listening to Jesus comes ahead of my acts of service. Listening to Jesus comes ahead of my family responsibilities. Listening to Jesus comes ahead of my own physical needs, before my pleasures and playthings. Listening to Jesus comes ahead of our church responsibilities. Listening to Jesus comes ahead of our church plans, our church activities. Listening to Jesus comes ahead of our care programme, our mums and toddlers group, our outreach plans, our building projects. There is one thing that matters: listening to Jesus. Martha was distracted; Mary chose the good portion that will not be taken away.

He went on to say that his prayer for the church is that they would be ‘people who give ourselves to listen to Him’, and he described the discipline of listening to the Word and its explanation as how to have ‘a genuine experience of the living God’. David stated that in practical terms, this listening must be both ‘personal and public’, explaining that by ‘personal’ he meant a programme of individual daily Bible reading,



study and listening to audio-recordings of talks, and by ‘public’ he meant hearing the Bible read in the settings of church and Bible study group. Let us examine first ‘public’ listening, beginning with the body pedagogic means of training individuals as ‘listeners’ in Bible study groups.

Whilst modes of practice were broadly similar in the ‘Rooted’ and student groups, the church devotes particular resources to the student programme with the aim, as Freddie described, of ‘equipping and training’ students in techniques that will form them as confident in their ability to hear God speak in the text of the Bible. Therefore attending to the means by which students are ‘trained’ to listen helps clarify the habitus conservative evangelical leaders aim to reproduce. Over the course of an academic year, groups studied one book of the Bible in depth, following a set programme written by church leaders. There was an informal atmosphere at meetings, which followed a carefully structured pattern, beginning as group members arrived and chatted about their weeks over supper, often with contemporary music by bands such as Arcade Fire, playing in the background. On one level, their music tastes were unremarkable for middle-class students. Yet on another level, the choice to play music by bands whose lyrics at times express sentiments that appear diametrically opposed to the teachings of the church,<sup>8</sup> indicates how everyday audio and media consumption becomes a means of fragmented auditory experience in the city: whilst students carry sermons in their iPods and seek to draw the words of these into themselves, as I will show, they also carry other voices that jar with this.

At 8 p.m., the music was turned off, and one of the ministers would address everyone from the stage and pray a short prayer, asking ‘that we would listen as you speak to us through your Word’, constructing a boundary marking the turn of concentrated attention to the text as the most significant part of the meeting. One of the two appointed group leaders – each of whom had received training from more senior members of church staff – would lead the conversation, beginning by asking a member of the group to open in prayer, and then asking another member to read the set Bible passage aloud as everyone else in the group followed in the church Bibles. The style of discussion in many ways resembled academic seminars. Group members were encouraged to focus on the text in front of them as the means of forming a disposition of attentiveness to the *words* of the text as the means of hearing God

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the lyrics of ‘Antichrist Television Blues’ (Arcade Fire, not dated).

speaking, and to spend time preparing for the meeting using set preparation questions. Early in the academic year, students spend a weekend together, at which newcomers are given a talk on the doctrine of revelation to help form their understanding of the purpose of Bible reading. Freddie said they hoped that students would learn that it's possible to read the Bible 'and be hearing from God; it's possible to work out how to apply them [the scriptures] today, that while that needs to be done carefully... and read in context, it's still ... a good thing to do, and not too difficult to do on your own'. Freddie said he told new group leaders that if you watched first year groups from the church's gallery, over the course of the year you could visible see a change in how students engage with the Bible. Earlier in the year, he said, students tended not to look at the text during meetings and gave answers from prior understanding, whereas by the end of the year, 'you've got much more looking down to see the answer, and ... that's something we're trying to encourage and train'. Most students also engage in one-on-one weekly Bible study with an older member of the congregation to help encourage this way of engaging with the text.

The group's discussions focused on comprehending the passage in its context, working out the structure of the argument, the author's intention, and which sections of the text are applicable today. Through these discussions, students learn to develop a particular form of temporal engagement with the text: for each passage they were asked to focus on what the author of the text was trying to achieve in writing those words at that particular period of history and to consider what God is trying to say to them as a church in London today through that passage. Thus by listening to each other in conversation and helping each other, as de Certeau described, to 'decipher' what God is saying the text, students learn to understand these discussions as a means by which they are able to hear God address *them*, corporately and individually.

There was no discernable difference in the style of the Rooted group's practices, although there was no need for leaders to reiterate the importance of focusing on the text, as individuals long trained in these techniques were used to attentive reference to the words of the text and had internalized this understanding of God addressing them through the Word. As Lucy, for example, said to me as we chatted one evening after a service, 'the longer you are a Christian, the more you realize how amazing it is that the Creator God has revealed Himself to us in this book'. She picked up a Bible from the seat next to her and hugged it: 'it's the way God *speaks* to us, the way we get to know Him.'

Although there has been a shift away from focusing on ‘meanings’ in religious rituals, especially within anthropology,<sup>9</sup> this practice of listening to the words of the Bible read together in the group becomes dense with meaning as individuals learn to interpret this as the means by which God speaks to them and asks them to respond to His teaching in their everyday lives. This understanding of these groups as a space of listening is inseparable from their also being a space of speaking, and members of the church describe their speaking in these groups as a form of ‘witnessing’ to each other. Their listening is therefore always bound up with other embodied practices: sitting together, eating together and conversations with each other, and members of the groups enjoy these interactions. Alan, for example, who had previously attended a prominent charismatic evangelical church, said that one of the main reasons he preferred St John’s to his previous church was because the Rooted groups are ‘so much fun’; he said his experience of London had been ‘transformed’ since joining St John’s through his experience of ‘church community’, formed primarily through the Rooted group.

Listening to the Word was also positioned as central in Sunday services. This was indexed spatially through the positioning of musicians on the floor, the Bible reading given from the stage above that, and the sermon preached from the large, elaborately carved central pulpit above that. The sacrality of the Bible was emphasized in every service, for example when David said to the congregation, before the Bible reading: ‘we come now to the heart of our meeting, the reason why we’re here, to hear God speak to us. It is, you might say, the high point, to hear God’s Word as it is read to us and explained’. Reinforcing the solemnity of this, he usually asked the congregation to ‘please take hold of any electronic device and switch it off so that no-one is disturbed while we’re listening to God’s Word’. Mobile phones rarely go off during services, but David’s words helped reinforce the sense that *this* is the moment people have come to church for, and almost everyone I interviewed described the sermon as their favourite part of the service. The leaders aimed to encourage particular techniques through which individuals could become better listeners in services. In one Sunday service, for example, Pete interviewed Natalie, one of the church staff, about what being a good listener involves. She said, ‘we are coming together as a family to hear God speak to us, as a family,’ and gave the

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<sup>9</sup> See Sennett 2012: 89.

congregation tips from her own practice about ‘how to listen well’, such as finding out what the passage will be in advance from the church website and reading it before the Sunday service in preparation, listening for ‘three or four key themes’ to take away and remember later on in the week, and writing notes during the sermon to return to later on in the week during ‘quiet times’.

The centrality of attentiveness to the text of the Bible in this listening is emphasized in the placing of paperback copies of the Bible on each of the seats of the church.<sup>10</sup> During the Bible reading and sermon, the congregation follow the readings and take notes on handouts provided or in their own notebooks. Whilst other evangelical churches – both charismatic and conservative – now often use PowerPoint slides during both sermons and songs, these visual aids are not used for sermons at St John’s. Lucy said this was a conscious decision by the leaders, to encourage people to focus on following the ministers’ spoken words. Thus the physical presence of the preacher is vital to this ‘public’ listening, and ministers at St Johns, all skilled orators, scarcely look down at their notes while preaching, instead making eye contact with the congregation. There is thus a visual aesthetics being crafted as individuals look up to follow the expressive faces of the preachers, look down at the words on the page, and jot down notes on the hand-outs, and although listening is discursively privileged, the church leaders are aware that the visual matters.<sup>11</sup>

The spatial arrangement of the congregation sitting to listen to the sermon also functions as a visual marker. As Morgan writes, these listeners ‘may not share the same thoughts ..., but they do share the same disposition of a corporate embodiment...’ (2012: 176). Whilst sitting together may appear a mundane detail, in this context it is imbued with a particular meaning, conveying ‘solemnity, respect, and submission to authority ... Sitting in unison is no less important for mainstream Protestants than praying or singing together. The assembled congregation is

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<sup>10</sup> Because the physical space of the church is rearranged on an almost daily basis for the different small group activities and larger services that take place in the church, placing Bibles on every seat takes up a not insignificant amount of the time of the St John’s ‘apprentices’, who work full-time for the church for a period of between one and three years, usually whilst contemplating whether to enter into full-time ministry in the church.

<sup>11</sup> They are conscious, for example, of visual markers in creating the ambience of meetings, for example, through styles of dress, with the ministry team wearing suits or blazers and chinos for Sunday morning services, and changing into jeans and jumpers, t-shirts or rugby shirts for evening services. The church staff wear suits for midweek meetings aimed at those working near the church. I never saw any of the ordained ministers wearing a dog collar or any form of clerical dress.

consuming the Word of God together, as a single body, and this affirms its sense of what “church” is’ (ibid.). The church building is brightly lit inside, with white walls and utilitarian flexible seating that can be rearranged for different types of meeting. This is in contrast with some charismatic evangelical Anglican churches of comparable size in London, one of which I visited having dark stone walls, with the lights dimmed and musicians and preacher spotlighted, and the congregation sitting on cushions and beanbags facing the musicians at the centre of the space.<sup>12</sup> These visual forms together emphasize the centrality of the act of listening at St John’s, performing as ‘sounding boards’ to return the words to the hearer more effectively. Thus the ‘iconicity of the text’ is underlined, as Morgan describes: ‘bodies are disciplined to attune the ears to the prevailing soundscape and to predispose feelings to arise as if separate from the body; and spaces host sound and allow light to lift the eyes from objects and to illuminate the spaces and plain walls that reverberate with sound’ (ibid.: 167). Visuality and other forms of embodiment are at work in this listening, but they perform unobtrusively, ‘all the better to turn words into pure content, delivered in an unadulterated, immaterial form’ (ibid.). The body and material objects are not rendered irrelevant, but this aesthetics brings the words that are spoken and heard to the forefront of individuals’ conscious attention, whilst the ‘body is put to rest in order to augment hearing and make it a soul-receptacle like the church interior’ (ibid.: 171).

This focus on attentive listening as the means of relating to God constructs a boundary distinguishing ‘authentic’ Christianity as Word-based from other Christian traditions placing greater emphasis on ritual or displays of emotion.<sup>13</sup> David, for example, said in a question and answer session following a sermon:

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<sup>12</sup> During fieldwork, I also visited a large charismatic evangelical church in central London that several informants said they had attended prior to coming to St John’s to get a sense of the cultural difference between these, as this distinction from charismatic evangelicalism was something that almost all informants expressed consciousness of.

<sup>13</sup> The particular distinction between conservative and charismatic evangelicalism that was articulated here and in many contexts during my fieldwork can be attributed in part to the specific location of St John’s in London. Brierley’s 2005 English Church Census showed that most of the largest non-Roman Catholic churches in the country are located in Greater London, and that all of these are evangelical, and the majority either Pentecostal or charismatic evangelical (2006b: 250). Of these, it is the large charismatic evangelical Anglican churches that draw members from the most similar socio-cultural backgrounds to St John’s.

Reformed Christianity is always challenged by Deformed Christianity.... If somebody backslides from the Christian faith, they've been in a church like this, they very, very rarely completely throw over the whole boat. Normally what happens is you go into a deformed form of Christianity that isn't so focused on a final word and a finished work. And you start saying ... I need something extra to give me assurance, I need a worship leader to lead me into the presence of God, or I need a priest, charismatic catholic. Now that's not to say that there aren't real, genuine, lovely Christians in those movements. But actually, a Christianity that starts to rely on the visual and the tangible, and to add to the final word and the finished work, I need something extra, a fresh word, an extra experience to assure me that I'm in the presence of God, that's deformed Christianity.

Yet despite this anti-ritualist discursive emphasis distinguishing 'authentic' Christianity as Word-based from forms of Christianity that 'rely on the visual and tangible', members of St John's are nevertheless conscious that their formation as those who listen to God speaking depends on their training of the body through specific material techniques to develop particular dispositions that will enable them to learn to hear God speak so that they can, as Freddie described, 'abide' in Jesus and He in them. One such technique is their engagement with music.

As many members of St John's have either previously attended or have friends who attend charismatic evangelical churches, they are conscious of how their acoustic sensibilities are tuned in ways intentionally different from charismatic evangelicalism, implicit in David's critique of reliance on 'worship leaders'. This affects how they understand the place of music in church. Songs are described as functioning pedagogically: rather than music providing an opportunity to receive the Holy Spirit, it is seen as reinforcing the main listening event as the sermon and allowing individuals to internalize the content of that. Rebecca, a twenty-two year old graduate, said singing is 'a medium by which the Word of God can dwell in you richly'. While 'the sermon should be expositing the Word of God,' the next day, 'when I wake up, what I'll be remembering in the shower is the song; so the song should be so full of the words of God that actually it's almost like helping it to dwell richly in me'. She added that when she feels 'down and can't speak truth to myself, and ... forget all those unseen realities', what really helps is a song 'that speaks the words of God; ... it

helps it to get in'. She said singing is not about the individual before God, but is 'horizontal: we sing to each other so that the word of Christ dwells in us richly... so that it's really embedded in my thoughts'.<sup>14</sup> She also described internalizing the words of scripture by talking to friends as 'a further form of meditation, like chewing on God's Word and thinking, how can I just get this into my very short-sighted thick brain? I need people to tell me, I need to be reminded'.

Through this central metaphor of Christ 'dwelling' in them as they draw His words into themselves, belief and body are connected by their discursive practices and they learn to understand their listening bodies as vessels for the divine (cf. Morgan 2012: 171). The metaphors of 'chewing', 'food' and 'hunger' that were frequently used can be connected with this, for example, when the congregation sing songs before the Bible reading with lyrics such as 'Speak, O Lord, as we come to you / to receive the food of your holy Word' (Getty and Townend 2005). De Certeau describes belief as knotting individuals into relations with others, functioning like a sacrifice in the Durkheimian sense of establishing a society: 'by what it takes from individual self-sufficiency, it marks on what is proper to each (on the body or on goods) the existence of the other ... (1985: 194). As sermons are experienced as the most sacred moment in church services, so the metaphors of 'eating' members of St John's use to describe their listening can be compared with the sacrament of the Eucharist: as they 'chew' on these sacred words, their bodies are marked with the existence of the other through receiving the 'food' of the Word and this marks their social collectivity.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Members of St John's' understanding of their singing as 'horizontal ... to each other' marks a further differentiation from charismatic evangelical churches, where choruses typically repeat one or two sentences for extended periods, so that individuals are able to sing with eyes closed. At St John's, few members of the church close their eyes during singing – and the leaders emphasize the importance of members of the congregation looking at each other as they sing to 'encourage each other'. Thus this is a conscious performance marking a contrast with what might be seen as more individualized moments of relationality in charismatic evangelical singing, emphasizing the corporate identity of St John's as a community of the faithful.

<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer from *Journal of Contemporary Religion* for drawing attention to the discursive significance of the metaphor of 'chewing' here. Coleman also describes how his informants used images of hunger and eating to describe their internalization of the Holy Spirit through sacred words (2000: 127-8). In his study of Protestant congregations in a Scottish fishing village, in which the idiom of 'eating words' is also prominent, Joe Webster (2012) develops an extended conceptualization of sermonizing as a form of sacrificial meal, drawing on Robertson-Smith and Mauss.

This disposition of attentive listening to the words of another, through which members of the church learn to experience the Word as indwelling, might appear to threaten the independence of the individual subject and thus exemplify dispositions that de Certeau characterized the Enlightenment emphasis on activity and autonomy as recoiling from. As David said in one sermon, ‘the trouble is, listening to his Word in the Bible like this can seem so un-experiential. I mean, you’re just sitting there, and ... it seems kind of just rather a passive thing’. Yet this understanding of listening is also woven together with modern norms of autonomy and rationality. Let us consider how this takes shape.

### **Listening as the Practice of Rationality**

The centrality of rationality at St John’s was brought home to me in my first meeting with David, when he recommended I read Stark and Finke’s *Acts of Faith* (2000), which, in his words, ‘argues that faith is entirely rational’. The emphasis on rationality at St John’s meant that listening was understood as a process through which the listener is able to evaluate the preacher’s interpretation of the Bible and look for ‘evidence’ to support their views. Freddie told me that the ministers ‘try and show our working [in sermons] enough to enable someone to evaluate whether they agree with what’s said in the pulpit, but also to enable someone to think, “I can apply that working method myself”’.<sup>16</sup> After sermons, there are often question and answer sessions for the clergy that encourage the congregation not only to ask questions of clarification and consider how to ‘apply’ the teachings of sermons to their lives, but also allow for critique of the sermon, and questions were raised often raised that expressed disagreement with ministers’ interpretations. At the end of most sermons, ministers also set questions for the congregation to discuss over coffee or supper after the service, which likewise encouraged the congregation not only to interrogate their own practices in the light of what they had heard, but also to discuss whether they agreed with the main point of the sermon. An understanding of faith as based on

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<sup>16</sup> When individuals I interviewed said that they disagreed with particular sermons, they were usually able to explain, with reference to passages in the Bible, why they thought the minister’s interpretation was wrong.



rational evidence was also frequently emphasized in sermons, for example, Freddie said that ‘on the basis of rational evidence, it is rational to be a Christian’.<sup>17</sup>

As many members of St John’s work in professions in which interactions are highly calculative, it is not surprising that such habituated modes of interaction affect their practices in church, leading to a rationalist culture. In my Rooted group, for example, members’ professions were in law, financial services, teaching, and medicine. When I asked Alistair, one of the group’s leaders and himself lawyer, why there were so many lawyers at St John’s, he said he thought there was a particular homology between law and Protestant Christianity, pointing out that Martin Luther had studied law before becoming a monk, and that Calvin had also been a lawyer. ‘So what do you think the similarities are?’ I asked. ‘Words,’ he replied, ‘words, structure, analysis ... And also evidence.’ He said he liked evidence, the tradition of British empiricism, and for things to be rational.

This privileging of rationality that shapes listening is a prominent cultural marker of not only St John’s, but also other large conservative evangelical churches, bound up with the social class background of this movement in Britain. As David said in one sermon, ‘many of us are Stoics by upbringing, ... stiff upper-lipped’. The formation of this culture is bound up with the male, public school habitus of key twentieth century leaders of British conservative evangelicalism and the historical prioritizing of evangelism amongst students at public schools and elite universities, leading, as Pete Ward argues (1997: 40), to a privileging of reason over emotion. Members of St John’s at times linked the emphasis on rational listening with the male leadership. A retired man I interviewed, for example, said he had left his previous church because a new young minister had taken the church in a direction with ‘too much emphasis on the charismatic, and other social nonsense’. I asked what he meant. He replied that there used to be young children allowed in throughout the whole service, because the mothers complained that if they took them out, they would not be able to hear the sermon, ‘but of course they couldn’t hear it anyway, and neither could anyone else.’ He said that at St John’s, ‘there is a tight male grip’, which means that ‘there is much more discipline in these areas’.

The intellectualized culture that has emerged within these kinds of large conservative evangelical churches means high levels of literacy are required to ‘listen’

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<sup>17</sup> The specific forms of evidence he was referring to here were the arguments in support of the Resurrection that are also used in the Alpha Course. See, for example, Alpha 2010.

in the ways the church seeks to encourage.<sup>18</sup> When I commented on this to Natalie, she said she thought St John's was self-selecting in this sense but that there was still an emphasis on seeking to 'study' the Bible in churches in more deprived areas. She said studying and learning are central to Christianity - 'we wouldn't have the education system we do if it wasn't for the influence of Christianity ... If someone becomes a Christian, they will take that imperative to *study* God's word seriously'.<sup>19</sup> Despite the efforts of members of the congregation to reach beyond urban socio-economic polarization through the 'Reaching the Unreached' network, there is, as Natalie described, an inevitable self-selection of individuals who feel at home within this milieu. One Sunday evening, discussing 'standards of wisdom in the world' in his sermon, Freddie asked members of the congregation who have a degree to put their hands up. It felt like everyone in the church put their hand up. He then asked members of the congregation who have more than one degree, or a further professional postgraduate qualification to put their hands up. I would guess that over a third of the congregation put their hands up. Freddie commented that 'the national average for such further qualifications is 20 per cent, so here at [St John's] we are bizarrely overeducated'. Freddie intended this to challenge the congregation to think about whether they are too concerned about what 'the world' thinks about them. Yet the performative effect of this seemed to objectify the evangelical subject as highly educated, reinforcing the sense that it is a space in which an intellectualist approach to the Bible is privileged. This affects how members of the church characterize the church. In one of the Rooted discussions, Alistair asked the group (in relation to the Bible passage) how they might describe St John's to their friends, Philip, one of the other group leaders, replied: 'We might talk about the excellent, intellectual preaching.'

'The witty illustrations,' Alan added.

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<sup>18</sup> The church runs separate 'international' Bible study groups for those members whose first language is not English. One individual I interviewed criticized the fact this made church membership difficult for those without the cultural capital of educational attainment, and contributed to the socio-economic polarization of urban space.

<sup>19</sup> When I interviewed Gemma, after she had left St John's to move to a new, smaller suburban conservative evangelical church after marrying, she said the focus on Bible study was still central in her new church – although adding that Bible study groups there felt different because they were organized in separate groups for men and women – but commented that she missed the intellectual challenge of sermons and study groups at St John's.

‘The intellectual, clear, rational and witty sermons,’ Alistair summarized.  
‘Anything else?’

‘The smoked salmon sandwiches?’ Lorna added (partly joking; she’d brought smoked salmon sandwiches for our group that evening to celebrate the end of term).

This emphasis that St John’s places on the rationality of their faith is not only related to the social class background of its leaders and members, but is also interrelated with wider perceptions of evangelicalism as irrational and anti-intellectual (cf. Noll 1994). The prominence of binaries promoted by celebrity atheists such as Richard Dawkins that equate atheism with ‘education, critical thinking and evidence-based understanding’ and religion with ‘fundamentalism, superstition, intolerance and suffering’ might also partly underlie the particular emphasis on reason and evidence (Richard Dawkins Foundation For Reason and Science, not dated). Yet the roots of this emphasis on rational listening run deeper than this, and are interrelated with a desire for a certain kind of ‘public’ culture. David expressed a sense of connection between forms of rational listening and civic life in a sermon on 2 Corinthians. He said:

Over the summer, we as a teaching team encouraged one another to read Neil Postman’s book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. It was written in 1985. And Postman’s thesis was that with the arrival of television, methods of communication have changed radically. He suggests that we have entered a world – this is 1985, remember – where instant rather than permanent, impression rather than reason, entertainment rather than serious discourse are the norm. As you read the book ..., he does on occasion appear to be a slightly grumpy old man; I’ve no idea what age he was when he wrote it, and possibly that’s why I found myself agreeing with it so often [*laughter from congregation*]. But surely we have to say that Postman’s thesis was right. That since 1985, we’ve entered a world of soundbite and spin, where politicians appear to be elected at least in part on looks and media appeal, newscasters are employed on the basis of their ability to look good in front of the camera, and where celebrity culture has taken over from an age of carefully reasoned, sustained logic in our public discourse.

David argued that this this media logic has affected evangelicalism, leading to celebrity preachers whose ‘teaching style is anecdotal, short on substance, light on logic, full of self-referencing stories that puff up the preacher, that do little to instruct the listener. And you have to conclude, when you look at it, they’ve deliberately put the beautiful people at the front, everybody seems to have perfect teeth that glisten white, they’re part of the beautiful celebrity world’. He argued that as the Corinthian church had been open to ‘false teaching’ by being impressed by ‘worldly preachers’, so Christians today are also ‘wide open to false teaching’ because of the cult of the celebrity preacher. Having outlined ‘authentic Christian ministry’, drawing on St Paul’s words in the passage from 2 Corinthians, as characterized by ‘failure’, ‘weakness’ and ‘frailty’, he said:

It’s never nice to look around at other ministries, but Paul does ... in order to guard the flock. Some of you will have come across, for example, Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, that has sold millions of copies around the world. Or here in London, Hillsong. There’s no doubt that their message is different to the authentic message of the New Testament. You will not hear cross-shaped living: if any man would come after me, let him take up his cross daily and renounce self, deny self. You will hear: ‘your best life now’. But because all of this is presented in a style that is so deeply attractive and deliberately apes the celebrity culture of our age, hundreds, thousands of people have been taken in by it.

David’s critique of celebrity culture and his idealization of a public culture of rational discourse and listening does not, however, straightforwardly reflect a modern norm of autonomy. It is bound up in a conviction in *both* God’s authoritative speaking in scripture *and* people’s ability to use reason as they listen to ascertain whether or not particular Christian preachers are articulating ‘authentic’ Christian teaching.

Postman’s critique of the impact of television on public culture idealizes nineteenth century civic culture in the United States, in which public audiences had the capacity to concentrate on political speeches lasting a couple of hours. The articulated desire by the leadership at St John’s for ‘reasoned’ public listening and discourse, like Postman, expresses dissatisfaction with the perceived triviality of contemporary public discussion and suggests a desire for forms of ‘rational’ public

debate on ‘non-trivial’ issues in which religious voices resonate. In a sermon on secularism, David described the British public sphere as shaped by ‘secularist fundamentalists’ who ‘ban[ned] 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’. He stated that this ‘make[s] it impossible for people to say, oh actually, we think that is wrong, sinful, bad for society, bad for people and untrue, and that is a very, very dangerous position for a culture to end up in’. Whilst we saw in the previous chapter that members of St John’s feel uncomfortable expressing moral positions they feel would be perceived as intolerant and judgemental of others’ moral behaviour, at the same time, they articulated a *desire* for public spaces in which speaking and listening to each other about faith is not felt as a taboo.

At the same time as expressing this critique of contemporary media logics of interaction as lacking reason and seriousness, David’s words express a consciousness of how individuals’ modes of listening and interaction are themselves affected by broader cultural shifts. When I interviewed Mark, the church’s head of media, he said it was important to be aware of the effects of the media on people’s ability to listen, through, for example, shortening attention spans. He said the church needs ‘to reverse the trend of short attention spans. We need to educate people to listen, because the Christian message is a coherent message ... The Bible – particularly the letters of Paul – is full of arguments, and you’ve got to learn to be able to follow an argument, and to *think*, and that is increasingly countercultural. And that’s where I think we need to use all the modern tools of the web to draw people in and attract their interest, but actually the core business of what we’re doing is getting people to *listen* very carefully, and to read carefully, and to pay attention’. He gave me a short paper he’d written for the church’s senior leadership team, addressing how ‘modern media – facebook, twitter, internet etc. – affect our culture and particularly how they impact / should shape our preaching’. He wrote:

Ease and speed of communication means recipients are potentially bombarded at all times of day and night by incoming information, mostly trivial. In the absence of sufficient self-discipline, recipients are easily and frequently distracted by incoming data ... The tendency towards shorter attention spans, caused by the 24/7 bombardment, undermines people’s capacity to think

critically and coherently and to follow reasoned argument. Since much Christian teaching (not least in the letters of Paul) involves sustained argument, this is an important consideration.

Mark argued that whilst the new media should be used to ‘maximize scale of distribution through social networking sites etc.’, the church should also help develop dispositions of disciplined attentiveness:

If people have difficulty concentrating during a sermon, they need to **develop** the discipline and faculty of listening. Talk outlines (and notetaking) can help, but the sermon should still be able to function without these aids ... If people cannot concentrate on a sermon, how will they be able to concentrate on reading the Bible for themselves? It is important to **develop** these skills rather than find a substitute genre ... It is the duty of the Church to encourage concentration and the appreciation of sustained argument, so that believers can benefit from sermons and personal Bible study. Just as the Reformation caused a huge growth in literacy in the past in the places they touched... so too today’s Church needs to counteract the short attention spans of the Internet age and foster an abiding appreciation of the written and spoken word of God. [*emphasis in original*]

Mark’s words demonstrate that tuning the senses towards attentive, disciplined listening is felt as countercultural within an age of fast-paced exchanges of communication and needs cultivation.

Although this emphasis on reason might appear in line with modern norms of autonomy, as there is confidence in the ability of the listener to be able to discern through reason whether teachings are ‘authentic’, this emphasis is bound up with a desire to ‘hear’ better what God says in the Bible and be able to decipher His Word. Thus the turn to the self often taken as implied in norms of rationality is bound together here with the impulse to ‘deny the self’ in turning to attend to God as other. How then do these norms of ‘public’ listening relate to ‘personal’ listening?

### **Listening Personally**

The church leaders suggest a variety of techniques for ‘personal’ listening, enabling individuals’ bodies to become vessels for the words they hear. These include writing out verses from the Bible reading and displaying them prominently around the home, talking to and praying with others from the congregation about the sermon, reading through and ‘praying through’ Bible reading from the service later in the week, and writing out the notes taken during the sermon into a diary. Members of the church are encouraged to download MP3s of the sermon and email them to friends, and play and discuss them with others in workplace or university Christian unions. During my fieldwork, the church launched an iPhone application and many subscribe to its podcast channel. Predating these technologies, there is a history at St John’s of recording sermons for circulation and repeated listening via CDs and cassettes, and the church’s media department has sermons dating back to the mid 1960s stored in their offices, with 6500 of these available online.<sup>20</sup> Individuals I interviewed who had been members of the church for several years sometimes had favourite sermons they listened to repeatedly. Jenny, an insurance worker, told me there was a talk on the Psalms that she listened to whilst ironing that ‘just hits the spot and encourages you to keep going’. She said that now she has an iPhone ‘I put the earphones on and listen to a talk in the middle of the night’. She commented that she found this better than reading the Bible in the middle of the night because she does not have to put the light on and disturb her husband, showing how, in contrast with ‘public’ listening at church, outside the church this listening is a private activity, although, experienced as a form of connection with God, it cannot be seen as precisely ‘solitary’.

Reading the Bible in ‘quiet times’ is understood as the primary means of ‘personal listening’.<sup>21</sup> Giving a talk to students about ‘developing your relationship with God’, Liz said, ‘we need to give ourselves time in the day to let whatever we’ve

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<sup>20</sup> Mark stated that while one of the aims of putting the talks online was evangelistic, aiming to ‘extend the reach’ of St John’s globally (he mentioned that talks had been downloaded from the website from 136 different countries), he also emphasized the pedagogical aim of facilitating attentive listening through the talks: ‘The aim is also... to improve the quality of listening. When a person listens to a talk in church, within a few days you can only remember a fairly small portion of it. But if you listen to it again or a third time, your attention is very much greater, that is the beauty of recording, the fact that you can stop and go back if you didn’t get a point. So it’s extending the reach and also the depth of listening.’

<sup>21</sup> Almost all members of the church I interviewed said that they were engaged in the discipline of regular individual daily Bible reading, often using guidance notes or books that can be bought at the bookstall in church, with these devotional ‘quiet times’ averaging between 10 and 45 minutes, although some members also said that they did sometimes find this daily discipline a struggle.

been reading [from the Bible] sink into your heart'. She said that during her walk to work, she meditates on a passage, thinking through what it shows about God and what it might mean for her friends. She offered the students practical tips for their engagement with the Bible, suggesting they could 'put verses on the fridge, or on your desk' and memorize verses: 'a wonderful resource for times when you need to turn to them. I still know verses I learnt as a child'. Following her talk, students were asked to talk with each other about how to be more disciplined in their personal daily Bible study and shared their tips about what helps them focus in 'quiet times' when concentration wanders, and how they might better cultivate habits of attentiveness in their listening.

Several individuals indicated a qualitative difference between a sense of intimacy with God in 'private' individual 'listening' and the culture of group study and Sunday services. One student who had recently started coming to St John's expressed a strong sense of distinction between the two forms of practice, and was critical of the approach characterizing small group meetings: 'to understand everything in the context, you have to know so much history, and I think ... it's too much emphasis on that'. She said she felt like God was being 'made normal, kind of standardized and made quite scientific and ... put in a box'. However over time, the habituation of the style of listening in study groups could affect that sense of disjunction. Hannah, who had been at St John's for over twenty years, expressed a sense that through her time there, she had gradually lost a sense of emotional intimacy in her relationship with God through the privileging of the rational. She said, 'I think sometimes we are *too* rational, and not emotional enough ... I wouldn't ever want to take away from the rational side of [St John's], but sometimes I think we perhaps don't allow ourselves to love God enough'. In the Rooted group, individuals sometimes opened study sessions by praying that the study 'would not just be intellectual, but Lord, that you would change our hearts and lives by your Word'. This suggests that despite the focus on listening as rational, members of the church still *desire* an experience of God that is both intellectual / rational *and* emotional / intimate, and can feel a disjunction between the intimacy of their sense of relationship with God mediated through private reading and devotion, and the cognitive / rational dimension privileged in study groups and Sunday services.

The busy-ness and instrumentalized measurement of time in the city Simmel describes can affect these individual listening practices. When I interviewed Matthew,



he described work in the city as ‘rather like the Fritz Lang movie *Metropolis*: coming in, clocking in, doing their shift, clocking out, and there’s very little left for life’. The long working hours of most members of St Johns’ means finding time to listen in their daily routines is felt as a constant struggle. Describing her quiet times, Jenny said that on an average morning these would be fifteen minutes, and added:

It depends on how panicky I am about work, whether I can actually get my act together to realize that this is more important ... Usually I pray after, and I try to pray about what I’ve read and learn, and add in petitions, but I must admit that I never spend as much time as I’d like, and I’m often conscious of the fact that I’m thinking, gosh, well, if I keep going til then, then I’ll get to work by then.

Thus although members of the church develop a *desire* to listen through their participation at St John’s and sense that this should be their priority, their actual practice of this can be felt as an ongoing struggle. Thus David prayed for the congregation:

Thank you our loving Lord that you know everything about us. You know how busy we’ve made ourselves, you know the long lists of things we think we have to do, and we pray that it would become a joy to us to listen to the Lord Jesus day by day. Please put this discipline at the centre of our beings and as we listen, please enable us, we pray, by your Holy Spirit, to act on what you say.

In these words, it is possible to see an understanding of the evangelical subject as, in a sense, divided within himself, aware he is distracted and divided in his attention, and therefore labouring to come closer to the ideal of the attentive, undistracted listener. Thus whilst listening to God is felt as a means of directing attention to a transcendent voice beyond the busy times and spaces of the city, this introduces a disposition and demands in tension with these and thereby further contributes to the experience of fragmentation, as Simmel describes.

Both ‘public’ and ‘personal’ listening practices function as means by which individuals seek to form themselves as ‘abiding in the words of Jesus’ and to internalize His words. Coleman analyses the importance of internalizing the words of

scripture in Pentecostalism, in which the born-again believer does not interpret the words of the Bible or sermons, but rather receives them, through the Holy Spirit: ‘The logic of this is that the mind and body of the believer are to be colonised by the transcendent world of the Spirit, with sacred language as the mediating vehicle between the two’ (2000: 127). At St John’s, there is this same emphasis on internalizing the words of the Bible as enabling access to an ultimate source of truth, but in contrast with Pentecostal culture, there is little emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Indeed one of the members of the student group joked to me that critics of St John’s from other churches label its understanding of the Trinity as ‘God: Father, Son and Holy Scripture’. As individuals seek then to shape their thoughts, knowledge and attitudes towards self and others through these embodied techniques of engaging with and internalizing these words that shape their everyday interactions with others, they seek to understand themselves as *subjects* obedient to and receiving their identity from, as de Certeau described, the Spoken Word.

A complex picture of evangelical subjectivity emerges from these practices of internalizing sacred language, rational listening, and desire for intimate relationship with God. Despite evangelicals’ emphasis on rationality, this exceeds the boundaries of the autonomous subject of Enlightenment modernity: when the evangelical hears her own thoughts, she also hear God ‘inside’ herself in the words of the Bible she has internalized, and the meaning of this is only comprehensible through her being part of a community of believers, whose identity is configured as facing towards – and in tension with – the world. This intersubjective formation of the listener is captured in a passage from John’s Gospel the Rooted group studied one evening. Jesus, addressing his disciples, says: ‘Abide in me, and I in you ... If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you’ (John 15: 4-7, ESV). Being in relationship with Jesus is seen as having His words abiding *within* the individual’s interiority, but this presented in terms of a choice: ‘*if* you abide in me and my words abide in you’ (ibid.). The voice the evangelical subject learns to hear through the material practices of listening to sermons in church, through listening to podcasts of these, or when reading the Bible in which it is one’s own inner thought that is ‘heard’, is experienced as God speaking. But as these sacred words are heard, taken up and made the individual’s *own*, the boundaries between self and other in the mediation of an evangelical identity are blurred, as God, objectified as Other, is experienced within the self.

Members of St John's thus form themselves as listeners through techniques of making the words of the Bible theirs. Although this is presented in terms of an individual choice, this is bound up with the ideal of obedient, disciplined subjection to the Word whom members of the church hold, as Hugo described, as 'the Word of total wisdom and total authority', anchoring meaning and identity. Thus although there is a sense of human agency implied in the valuing of rationality, this is held together with a critique of autonomy. David said that 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'.

Members of St John's are therefore 'un-modern' in the sense of being marked by their relation to the spoken Word they strive to hear and heed: their identities dependant on the conviction that they are addressed through the Word and simultaneously possessed of the autonomy to choose to respond. Although there is an agency of the evangelical subject implied in their work on themselves and each other as they are formed as listeners, this privileging of attentive listening can also be seen as related to a desire to direct attention away from the self, taking the subject out of herself. Jonathan's articulated dissatisfaction with his experience of charismatic evangelicalism prior to coming to St John's expresses a desire to direct attention away from the self towards a divine Other:

I think they [charismatic worship songs] tend to make the focus the individual much more than God and who He is, what He's done for us, who we are in the light of Him ... I'll give you an example, I used to turn up at church and almost every week I would be asked right off the back to sing a song that basically expressed what *I* felt about God and what *I* want to do for God, how *I* want to serve and love God ... Actually, half the time I might arrive at church pretty distracted, not really thinking about God ... Then I arrived at [St John's], where ... we'd start with singing songs about God and about *Him* and about *His* love rather than *our* love, and His grace rather than our goodness, and the focus is Him rather than us ... And that reminds me of why I want my life to be about Him, and if I've forgotten momentarily, which happens all the time, then it's a brilliant reminder of the truth that I *know* but frequently forget or get distracted from.

As listening implies a sense of passivity and receptivity to another, as de Certeau described, so we can see conservative evangelicals' focus on listening as demonstrating a longing for attention to be directed to something that transcends and is felt as more important than the self, whilst their sense of God addressing them as they listen, asking for *their* response simultaneously individuates them.

The body pedagogic means of incorporation into the church then is both a form of communion with others in the church and a means by which individuals disciple(in)e each other whilst also sowing the 'seeds of individualism' as the individual body becomes the vessel of redemption through their choosing to respond to and receive Jesus's words (Mellor and Shilling 2010: 32). Whilst this creates a sense of separation from those outside the church and connection with others in the church, it also indexes the inter- and intrasubjectivity of the evangelical in relation to God, who is felt as both Other and experienced within the self. Graham Ward clearly articulates these central paradoxes of the Christian faith through the metaphor of participation, which implies a 'relational ontology' that he sees summarized in Christ's words to his disciples, 'he dwells in me, and I in him' (John 6:56, KJV):

In the conception of a Christian praxis, there is no room for a ... modern notion of self-sufficiency. This already implicates us in a different construal of freedom than that operating in the notion of the liberal secular subject. In fact, what characterizes this Christian agent is a surrender, a sacrifice... This does not mean that Christians have no sense of their singularity, their uniqueness ... In speaking ... of a relational ontology in a Christian act in which the subject is always participating in that which transcends himself or herself – indeed, not only transcends but grounds any sense of there being a he or a she – I do not wish to implode notions of selfhood but to refigure them.

(Ward 2009: 185)

Ward's theological exposition of Christian agency evokes central paradoxes implicated in the nature of subjectivity and agency that members of St John's listening practices also index. The nature of subjection implied in this notion of Christian agency can be interpreted as a means of expressing irreducible

interconnections between self and other,<sup>22</sup> human agency and subjection, and experiences of power and powerlessness, drawing into question modern ideals of self-sufficiency and individualism.

### **Conclusion: ‘The Still Point’**

Conservative evangelical listening to God creates a sense of distance, marking Him as Other, and also constructs a boundary of separation from those ‘others’ who do not hear God. Yet, as they consume His words they experience this distance as transcended, and seek to discipline themselves to become better listeners and more attentive to the Spoken Word. Their seeking to internalize the words of God expresses their desire for their subjectivities to be shaped by a transcendent source of meaning, for *all* of their life, as Jonathan stated, to be about Him, rather than experiencing themselves as the authors of their own meanings, even if in practice, they are conscious that this is a struggle.

Outlining the force contemporary modes of embodiment have had on Muslim listening practices in Cairo, Hirschkind asks:

What religious meaning might survive the passage through the channels of commoditization, the technological mediations, the cluttered and deafening soundscapes, the urban geographies of visual and kinaesthetic displacement, to then offer itself to a waiting ear? What could an ear ‘gather up and preserve [*legein*],’ besides decay, static, and noise, the debris of a tradition transformed into popular distraction by the force of modernity’s disintegrating embrace?

(2006: 18)

Members of St John’s urban soundscapes are likewise fragmented as their modes of interaction are shaped by sounds, voices and other modes of practice that affect their longing for a holy listening. Jonathan compared life in London and its soundscape with his rural upbringing, and said this inhibited awareness of God in the everyday:

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<sup>22</sup> These interconnections are profoundly implicated in the very relationship between individual subjectivity and words, as ‘our’ words, which have always come from outside, are never only ‘ours’: ‘when I listen to myself, to my words, to the sound of my voice, I can hear others: I hear others “inside” myself’ (Levin, cited in Schmidt 2000: 35). See also Keane 2006: 313; Strhan 2012: 25-6.

Though London has its beauty, it is in no way close to what we find in nature, and that [nature] reminds me of the gravity of the world we live in, and God's place in it, or over it ... And the busy-ness, London is a very busy place to live, ... there are so many options of things you can do, it's a city that defines itself through busy-ness and work and experience, yeah, a sort of high octane life, I guess ... There isn't a lot of quiet, ... just peace and quiet is quite rare in London, in any urban environment, I guess, but in London especially.

However, although their 'personal' listening may be pressured through the relentless busy-ness of the city, evangelicals' practices of listening together in church and in small groups are a means of constructing times within the week outside the hyper-speed of their modern globalized urban locations and finding a 'still small point of the turning world /... where past and future are gathered' (Eliot 1974: 191).

We saw in the previous chapter that members of the church can struggle to speak 'publicly' of their faith outside the church. Although leaders at St John's describe their 'public' listening practices in the church as countercultural, these are not experienced as a struggle, because, located within the space of the church, these are not felt as transgressing urban norms of 'tolerance'. The idealization of rational 'public' listening and discourse David articulates might on one level seem to correspond with norms of rationality in broader understandings of a modern 'public sphere' in the Habermasian sense (Habermas 1989).<sup>23</sup> Yet, on another level, it might, to a certain extent, be conceptualized in terms of a 'counterpublic'. Hirschkind argues that Muslim cassette listening practices construct a counterpublic that – in contrast with the public sphere as a space for the formation of political opinion through deliberative reason – 'exhibits a conceptual architecture that cuts across the modern distinctions between state and society and between public and private that are central to the public sphere as a normative institution of modern democratic politics' (2006: 107). Hirschkind argues that the figure of the ethical listener in Egyptian shaped 'forms of practical reasoning tied to the tradition of the virtues, ... oriented not simply

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<sup>23</sup> Space here precludes discussion of the historical interrelation of evangelical Christianity and the norms of a public sphere and democratic life, themes which have been extensively debated in relation to the formative era of American politics and religion (see, for example, Hatch 1989; Butler 1990; Porterfield 2012).

toward a notion of moral community (an *umma*) but toward what we would recognize as a public as well: the practice of the virtues and the deliberation of issues of public concern were fused together in a unique manner' (ibid.). The temporal frame of the Islamic *umma* mediated through listening to sermons develops a disposition not only towards moral self-formation but of a critique of contemporary politics and calls for moral renewal (ibid.: 118).

At St John's, listening practices mediate, as we saw in Hugo's sermon, a temporal frame orientated towards a past history of God's relationship with His people and His future promises to make the faithless city holy and righteous. This likewise therefore encourages members of St John's to examine both their own everyday practices *and* broader political and moral norms in the light of these narratives, shaping, for example, their critique of a broader culture of individualism. However, as we saw in the previous chapter, members of the church's willingness to express such critiques publicly outside the church is inhibited by urban norms of privacy and reserve. Thus whilst this 'public' listening does shape members of the church's orientations both towards their own moral formation and wider public and political life, this 'counterpublic' does not undercut notions of public and private in the way Hirschkind outlines in Egypt. Furthermore, whilst Hirschkind's informants were 'critical of rationalist, academic approaches... [that] succeeded in neither grabbing the attention of an audience nor stirring the pious passions' (2001: 630), at St John's, 'reason' is itself deemed a virtue, as the means of relating to God is understood as primarily a form of knowledge. Luke, a postgraduate student, said '*feeling* God as present – I don't know what that feels like... So I *know*, I have knowledge, and... I *believe* that God is always there watching over us, and that... His love extends to all of us, in terms of actually caring about what we're doing all the time'. Yet this knowledge is not only reinforced through rational listening: Luke said praying helped 'discipline my heart' to develop this knowledge. Thus although rationality is discursively privileged above emotion at St John's in a way that is distinctive from Hirschkind's informants' listening, their desire is likewise to discipline the self and all their everyday practices in obedience to a Spoken Word orienting them towards the transcendent beyond the fragmentation of the city.

De Certeau's narrative of a shift away from a 'listening' economy towards the authority of the individual in modernity thus captures how members of St John's locate both broader culture as shaped by ideals of autonomy and their descriptions of

the dangers of their own idolizing the self. As members of the church often struggle to find time to listen in their busy urban lives, this contributes to their consciousness of an internal fragmentation, which, as I will show in the following chapter, serves to deepen their sense of both difference from and dependence on God. Yet amidst the frenetic, fragmented soundscapes of the city, their collective attentive listening to a long, intellectually challenging sermon and their listening to each other in discussions in Bible study groups assessing the precise structure, tone and contemporary application of a small portion of the Bible, demonstrates the tuning of their aesthetic sensibilities in modes that are ‘thick with the residues of past practices’ (Highmore 2007: 104), rubbing against the grain of the velocity of contemporary modes of communication. Arguing that de Certeau challenges us to see how everyday life is characterized not only by practices of novelty and interruption, but also by an unhurried culture of slowly developing phenomena, Ben Highmore writes:

The everyday world echoes with a clatter of footsteps: footsteps that are out of step with the rhythms of urban modernity. Everydayness is the movement that drags, that takes detours ... This doesn't mean that ‘capitalist modernity’ (or ‘discourse’, or ‘discipline’, etc.) hasn't colonized the everyday in substantial and terminal ways, just that something else is there too, something that resists total assimilation.

(ibid.: 112)

Within evangelicals' self-identification as - in David's words - ‘the people who give ourselves to listen to Him [Jesus]’, it is possible to discern a clatter of ‘footsteps that are out of step with the rhythms of urban modernity’. Whilst in many ways their cultural locations *are* firmly in step with the logics of urban modernity, there is also ‘something that resists total assimilation’ as their ambition to be ‘aliens and strangers’ is both performed in and shaped by their formation as listening subjects.

The focus on disciplined attention to the Word at St John's demonstrates a continuing function of ‘listening’ as an identity marker, objectifying conservative evangelicalism as different from other Christian traditions that place more emphasis on visible manifestation of emotions or the bodily performance of rituals. Yet despite evangelicals' lack of discursive emphasis on the materiality of linguistic forms of mediation, we have seen that they are nevertheless highly conscious of the embodied



techniques by which they experience themselves as in relationship with God. Practices of attentive listening – to sermons, to each other, and to the words of internal thought when reading the Bible – are the aesthetic form through which the transcendent is experientially mediated in their bodies. This might be expressed in terms of John Donne’s description of the church as an echo of the voice of God: ‘The scriptures are God’s voice, the church is His echo – a re-doubling, a repeating of some particular syllables and accents of the same voice’ (cited in Winkett 2010: 142). For conservative evangelicals, faith is embodied as their speaking and listening bodies become the means by which they learn to understand themselves as experiencing the voice of God echoing in a culture where this sound is felt as anomalous. Yet because of their simultaneous locations in the busy-ness of the city, this hearing is always interrupted, and introduces a further sense of fragmentation that is specific to their evangelical desire to be better disciples. Let us turn, in the follow chapter, to explore how the personality of God they seek to become oriented towards in this listening provides a means of finding coherence in response to this.

## Chapter 5

# What does God want? Coherence, Love and the Personality of God

‘Which commandment is the most important of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The most important is, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The second is this: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’”

(Mark 12:28-31, ESV)

As members of St John’s listen with each other, they are learning to listen to God. David explained the priority placed on listening at St John’s in one sermon as follows:

*Why* is it that listening to Jesus is the one priority that really counts?... The answer of course comes though the whole of the Gospel and has to do with who He is and what He has come to do ... [I]n Chapter 1 [of Luke’s Gospel], Jesus is introduced as a ‘horn of salvation’ for us that we should be saved and delivered from our enemies. In Chapter 2, the baby Jesus was lifted up in the temple and described as ‘a light of revelation to the nations, the salvation of God prepared in the presence of all people’. In Chapter 9, the apostle Peter ... looks on Jesus and says, ‘you are the Christ, God’s King’...

So we should listen to Jesus because of who He is, and we should listen to Him because of what He has done. He has come down from God to earth, to declare to us the character, the concerns, the priorities of God, and to bring salvation to us ... Without Jesus, no-one knows God. With Jesus, it is as if a great doorway has been opened into heaven, and we can see God, know God, relate to God, experience God, in this life.

Here David articulated the theological rationale for why members of St John's should listen to Jesus's words, for it is through these they can know God's character. But how does that character affect them? How does it shape who they are as subjects?

In the previous chapter, we saw that as members of St John's formed themselves as listeners, they learnt to experience God as mediated *in* the words they hear. Although their modes of embodiment are important, these are, as Morgan argues, pushed below conscious attention so that it is the *content* of the words they learn to focus on, conveying their experience of God. As the words of the Bible, and specifically the words of Jesus, are experienced as the means by which they know 'the character, the concerns, the priorities of God', then, to borrow a phrase from W.J.T. Mitchell, what does God *want* of them? To understand the nature of conservative evangelical sociation, attending to their relationality with God requires exploring how God has His own life and loves within their lives,<sup>1</sup> which for them are irreducible to and transcend – yet also exert a pressure on – their immanent social circumstances. Whilst we have seen the role that modes of speaking and listening play in evangelical subject formation, the personality of God inscribed in the Bible through cultural sediments predating modernity, evangelicalism, the Reformation and Christianity, is also an actor here, as what He is felt as desiring shapes evangelicals' practices and desires.

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<sup>1</sup> My approach to non-human agency here is influenced by Mitchell's work on how pictures have agency and 'lives and loves' of their own, and specifically his attention to the double consciousness and paradoxical nature of pictures, which he addresses through the theme of desire: 'To ask, what do pictures want? is not just to attribute to them life and power and desire, but also to raise the question of what it is they *lack*, what they do not possess, what cannot be attributed to them' (2005: 10). However my interest is not specifically in the field of visual culture he explores, but rather draws on his focus on the question of desire to examine the intersubjective elements of evangelicals' experiences of the personality of God and the effects of that.

In asking, what does God want? I am not intending to offer a theological answer. When I introduced myself to members of St John's and explained I was investigating the difference their faith made to their experience of living in London, several people said that to really answer that, I ought to read the Bible. I did not do that.<sup>2</sup> Yet this advice, whilst perhaps influenced to a certain extent by evangelistic impulses, nevertheless demonstrates their consciousness that what is distinctive about their sociality is shaped by their relationship with the Bible, bound up with their sense, as David describes, that through the Bible they experience God. Through their engagement with the Bible in different settings, they relate to a God whose character has specific contours and who wants certain things of them. The personality of this God then, following Simmel, has a *social* agency shaping who these subjects are as they seek to respond to the demands they experience Him making, which affects the binding and unbinding of their immanent social relations with others in the metropolis. Before turning to explore how the personality of God is an actor in the lives of conservative evangelicals, let us first consider Simmel's view.

Simmel's attention to the personality of God provides a model for investigating the agency of a divine figure without entering into metaphysical speculation. His essay 'The Personality of God' proceeds from the assumption that it is possible to separate 'the content of religion' from 'faith in its reality' to examine how that 'content' exercises social effects, even though 'these two poles are absolutely inseparable in the experienced reality of religious life' (1997h: 46). He begins his analysis of God's personality through considering the nature of human personality. He describes the formation of human personalities as taking place as 'the psychic elements within us that are somehow beyond our conscious mind are in a state of continuous interaction, and in this way forge themselves into the unity we call personality' (ibid.: 50). But this 'is not merely a stable center but a mutual penetration, a functional adaptation and transfer, an interrelationship of parts' (ibid.). He says there could only be '*perfect* personalities ... if this interaction were itself a perfectly unified whole', but this is not the case: 'Our psyche is as much enmeshed in a world external to itself as is our physical body; influences are at work within it that cannot be accounted for by our psyche alone' (ibid.: 51). He argues that the structure of time also prevents unity, as temporal progression requires "memory" of the past in

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<sup>2</sup> My participation in Bible study groups and services did however entail my reading and listening to several books of the Bible.

order to bring its content into an ever fragmentary interaction – this fact alone prevents any unity of all its content’ (ibid.).

It is only in God that the ‘perfect personality’ of ultimate unity and coherence is found. God is ‘the ultimate realization of personality’, for He ‘knows no “memory” in the human, temporal sense, which always assumes its opposite, the act of forgetting. For Him there is no past ... The wholeness and unity of His being is not subject to the fragmentariness and incompleteness of temporal incoherence’ (ibid.). This personality of absolute, atemporal coherence is transcendent (ibid.: 52). Yet this absolute unity does not provide imaginative resources for the human mind to grasp, and immanent images, such as the Christian Trinity, are needed (ibid. 59). Simmel suggests that Christianity first articulated the idea of a God who was both transcendent and ‘at the same time a personal god, displaying the cohesive, unifying strength of this form in the unconditional breadth of His being and deeds’ (ibid.: 176).

Simmel argues that people draw on ideas to create a sense of order in life and that God’s perfection provides resources for people to order the fragments of their lives into a pattern of meaning and purpose. To the person of faith, God embodies ideals of ‘power, justice and perfection in the form of a being’ (ibid.61). These ideals stand above the relativity of our fragmented existence, thus ‘He is the pure meaning from which our relative, imperfect, and impure lives gain their meaning and their form’ (ibid). Whilst modernity – and, paradigmatically, the metropolis – leads to cultural and subjective fragmentation, this ‘disharmony of emotions’ serves ‘to convey fully the unity of the object of our faith and our behavior toward it’ (ibid.: 38).

In contrast with the standard view of fragmentation as leading to secularization discussed in Chapter 1, in Simmel’s view, this coherent God offers resources to form a sense of coherence and unity out of the fragmentary conditions of modern life. This is only possible through God’s transcendence. In ‘Religion and the Contradictions of Life’, he argues that the multiple concerns of individuals’ lives converge as the object of the religious endeavour ‘in a sphere beyond the empirical world, because it would be impossible to reconcile our manifold and diverse spiritual concerns in an empirical context’ (1997e: 37). He characterizes the nature of believers’ relations with this transcendent God as desire. Desire depends on distance between the subject and the object of her desire, and the value of what we desire depends on its capacity to resist our possession. He argues that within the relation between person and God, the tension and disharmony of human emotions creates the

resistance that is needed for ‘the power of religion to express itself and make itself felt’, and he describes this desire for God as love (ibid.: 38). He notes Plato’s positing of love as a condition between having and not having, though not the antithesis of these, but a third condition. Love ‘means to have and not to have at one and the same time, an infinitely secure possession that nevertheless, each day and with untiring efforts, must be acquired anew, not merely preserved’ (ibid.: 38-9). Even as love increases, its goal is always unattainable, and for this reason ‘it is apt to speak of God as “Love” itself’, as the relation with God is experience in this tension of having and not having that is love:

In our feeling for God, the tension between having and not having reaches its ultimate climax; for whether this emotion remains finite in our love for finite beings or whether it merely hints vaguely and uncertainly at the infinite, both are directed toward Him, and therefore are truly infinite. The religious soul is bound to its God equally strongly by the bonds of having and those of not having; or rather one might say that its God comes into being at the point where these conflicting bonds, extended beyond the finite world, converge.

(ibid.: 39-40)

God, as transcendent, is experienced as both present and absent, and thus the promise of coherence and unity that the personality of God offers is ‘at every moment ... unity and unity yet to be’ (ibid.: 43). Yet as religion provides resources for integrating the fragmentary conditions of modernity into the individual’s body through developing an orientation towards a transcendent unity, it also introduces a further form of fragmentation and sense of internal tension, even while offering the promise of coherence. This is because religion is itself a cultural form at odds with other cultural forms: ‘it resolves the contradictions it finds outside itself as well as those which arise constantly between itself and the totality of the rest of life’ (ibid.). And yet that sense of fragmentation, providing resistance between the fragmented self and the coherence of God, increases the individual’s desire for God. Thus religious faith is ‘a never ending task, as a process of development in which each stage attained points infinitely beyond itself’ (ibid.: 44).

Simmel’s view of God’s personality as the perfection of human ideals sees this having agency in offering a promise of coherence and relief from internal

contradictions, whilst simultaneously intensifying consciousness of subjective division in contrast to this pure unity and further contributing to fragmentation through introducing specific dispositions and desires in tension with broader cultural norms. As Simmel's understanding of the metropolis illuminates the nature of cultural fragmentation, to what extent does his understanding of God's personality also hold in the experiences of members of St John's? Simmel's focus on mysticism in his writings on religion appears at some distance from conservative evangelical focus on knowledge, evidence and rationality considered in the previous chapter, yet I will suggest that his emphasis on God as coherent and transcendent, experienced by individuals in a relation of desire, does resonate with the character of God as experienced by conservative evangelicals in London today.

In attempting to trace how the personality of God is experienced by conservative evangelicals, I will address only two characteristics: unity and desire, encapsulated in Jesus's command: 'The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength' (Mark 12: 29-30, ESV). My focus on these characteristics is because, as I will show, these have particular agency in forming conservative evangelical subjectivities. In attempting to sketch a realist account of members of St John's experience of relationship with God, I will move beyond Simmel's account of human desire for God to also consider God's desire for His people, how what He wants of them shapes their self-identifications. My resources will be those forming the instauration of God in the lives of members of St John's: the Bible, sermons reflecting on Bible passages, the words of hymns and prayers, and particular creedal statements.<sup>3</sup> I begin by focusing on the characteristic of unity central to monotheism, and then consider God's desire. I then explore how these characteristics are mediated in the experience of members of St John's, so that they experience God as asking certain things of them. I argue that members of the church experience themselves as constantly falling short of these ideals, and show that language of adultery, idolatry and guilt enable them to construct a sense of narrative unity that makes sense of their

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<sup>3</sup> There are other media that also shape how the personality of God is experienced by members of St John's that I have not drawn on, for example, Bible commentaries, Bible notes, theology books, and other historical sources. The resources I focus on here were those I observed members of the church engage with in church services and study groups, whereas their use of other resources to form their understanding varied from individual to individual, depending, for example, on which Bible study notes they were using.

worldly attachments, with their sense of guilt and focus on the person of Jesus binding them more closely in their sense of relationship with and dependence on God.

### **‘The Lord is our God, the Lord is One’**

Monotheism recognizes the existence of only one God, and this is central to how His character is understood at St John’s: the creator and ground of all that is, God is unity and integrity in person. The first of the Thirty Nine Articles, which members of St John’s describe as an expression of Anglican orthodoxy, articulates this view:

There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

(cited in Church Society 2003)

This monotheism is *ethical* monotheism. God is not only One, with the reality of all other gods denied, but is supremely concerned with morality and Himself possesses infinite moral virtue. In the biblical narratives members of St John’s engage with, God’s goodness and power are so infinitely greater than human characteristics that His people mostly cannot see them, and when they do, for example, in a vision, their difference from God becomes terrifyingly clear. Thus Isaiah’s response to his vision of the Lord seated on the throne was, ‘Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD<sup>4</sup> of hosts!’ (Isaiah 6:5, ESV). Preaching a sermon on this passage, Hugo emphasized that this is a *moral* difference, stating that the word ‘holy’ the seraphim repeat in Isaiah’s vision ‘is used to describe God in His total differentness from us. His otherness from his creation. It’s used over 800 times about God in the Old Testament and it speaks of ... His moral excellence and His perfection and His righteousness’. Hugo said that this holiness – the ‘Godness’ and ‘goodness of God’ – speaks of ‘the essence of His nature, which is revealed in the outshining of His

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<sup>4</sup> The ESV translation renders the personal name of God (YHWH) with the capitalized ‘LORD’, as is common in contemporary English translations.



glory, filling the whole creation, the whole earth is full of it ... God is *the* holiest that you could ever imagine. He is set apart from us; ... even the best of human beings cannot approach anywhere near to the righteous, awesome, exalted, omnipotent God'. As Isaiah recognizes himself as sinful, a 'man of unclean lips', so the correct response to this vision of God's holiness – 'the expression of His perfect nature' – is, Hugo said, not to be 'fearful before a powerful creator' but rather to 'to be sinners and recognize ourselves as such before a holy God'.

Whilst God's infinite moral goodness, power and transcendent otherness in biblical narratives are reflected on by members of St John's, at the same time, this God is personal: contra the Thirty Nine Articles, He has passions and loves of His own and desires a relationship with His people. Thus the narrative of creation in Genesis, which was the focus of several sermons during my fieldwork, describes God as making man in His own image: He does not want to be alone. And, as Mitchell points out, this man, created in the divine image, also has his own desires and 'asks for a mate to love him in turn' (2005: 57). Thus we see that God, although transcendent, is also profoundly relational and He makes beings likewise relational.

Therefore although biblical narratives such as the book of Isaiah characterize God's nature in terms of transcendent unity and otherness, conservative evangelicals, drawing on the relational language *also* used in these narratives, have no hesitation in using personal terms to convey His characteristics. One of St Paul's privileged soteriological tropes for understanding how God relates to humans, frequently referred to at St John's, is 'reconciliation'. This, as Alister McGrath writes, implies 'that the transformation through faith of the relationship between God and sinful human beings is like the reconciliation of two persons – perhaps an alienated husband and wife' (1994: 207-8). In conservative evangelical understanding, what God *desires* is a relationship with His people and as the Only God, He wants people to recognize this and respond to Him alone in worship, obedience and love. Yet despite this language of intimacy and love, this is held together with a sense of His otherness, as Hugo preached, 'This God is not our buddy. He's not our best mate. I'm horrified when I hear even Christians talking about "the man upstairs"'. When we assume somehow that God is on a level with us. No, what the church needs today is this ... overwhelming vision of holiness, of the greatness of God, that God shares His amazing mercy and grace with us but He doesn't indulge us: He isn't a Father Christmas in the sky figure'. This recognition of God's character, as well as creating a

consciousness of sinfulness, is also expressed by His people in praise and adoration, for example in King David's expression of praise, that David referred to in a sermon:

Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, for ever and ever.  
Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honour come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.

(1 Chronicles 29:10-13, ESV)

As we saw in the previous chapter, members of St John's are encouraged to focus in detail on specific passages as a means of hearing God speak and learning of His character, but they also seek to locate these in the context of the whole Bible, understood as His revelation.<sup>5</sup> Through this narrative framework and its explication in church, they develop a sense of temporal progression in God's dealings with His people in terms of first a covenant relationship established first with Israel and then a second covenant through the person of Jesus. In this understanding, what God wants of His people was first objectified in the legal codes given to the Israelites. In the first commandment of the legal code, God is concerned with His people's worship of Him only, and He forbids the making of rival idols or images (Exodus 20: 1-6). As God spends more time on this than other commandments of the Decalogue, this prohibition on idolatry appears to be the one He deems most important, especially as the others can be suspended at times.<sup>6</sup> As Mitchell notes, this reveals God as demanding the fidelity of His people, and He is jealous when they worship another: the golden calf the Israelites build in the Exodus narrative 'is a substitute for God, like a rival lover who moves in when the husband is away. The Israelites are "whoring after strange gods," and idolatry is a form of adultery' (Mitchell 2005: 133). This monotheistic prohibition on idolatry is still today a significant feature of how members of St John's understand and experience God's character and His expectations of them: God as One

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<sup>5</sup> The third year of the Rooted Bible study programme involves reading the entire Bible.

<sup>6</sup> For example, killing is allowed as a punishment for idolatry, for example, when God tells Moses and the Levites to kill those Israelites who had worshipped the golden calf.

and Lord of all is described as asking, first of all, that His followers worship Him and Him alone and recognize His holiness. Yet, as biblical narratives convey a sense of God *wanting* His people to respond to Him in obedience and love, desire implies the absence of the thing desired, and members of St John's emphasize that the Bible is a story of people *not* relating to God in the way He wants, turning away from Him towards other gods, such as the golden calf.

Whilst the legal codes setting out what God wants are concerned that His people love and worship Him alone, and make clear that God tolerates no rivals, these biblical narratives also set out moral obligations, requiring that His people act with equity and justice. Thus as conservative evangelicals experience God's personality as the expression of perfect goodness, wisdom and justice, they also understand Him as requiring that His people also exemplify His virtues. Whilst Jesus defined the demand of this morality in terms of loving one's neighbour, this expression of morality has been understood as in broad terms involving the curbing of human desires for wealth, power and pleasure (Miles 1996: 111). But God's *desire* for His followers' morality, like His desire for their faithful devotion, clearly indicates that this is often lacking: His people continually fail to meet the requirements He sets out. This was repeatedly emphasized as members of St John's referred not only to their individual sinfulness but to a collective 'sinfulness' and 'rebellion' of God's people throughout history and today. This is how Jerusalem, for example, was described in the Bible reading that preceded the sermon by Hugo discussed at the start of the previous chapter:

How the faithful city  
has become a whore,  
she who was full of justice!  
Righteousness lodged in her,  
but now murderers...  
Everyone loves a bribe  
and runs after gifts.  
They do not bring justice to the fatherless,  
and the widow's cause does not come to them.

Therefore the Lord declares,

the Lord of hosts,  
the Mighty One of Israel:...  
'I will turn my hand against you  
and will smelt away your dross as with lye...  
Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness,  
the faithful city.'

(Isaiah 1:21, 23-4, ESV)

Thus God as pure unity and coherence, is described as wanting His people to be devoted to Him only, and this expressed through their doing what He says.

Equally significant to evangelical understanding of God's character is the expression of His love in terms of forgiving His people when they fall short of His standards of holy living: He wants to be with them despite their constant turning away from Him. This desire for reconciliation is most powerfully expressed in the narrative of the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus that is central to conservative evangelical theology. Jesus's suffering body is understood as offering a possibility for the separation between God and humanity to be breached, a story showing God also suffering, as the atemporal, transcendent God enters into space and time, in a sequence of descent and ascent. As God incarnate, Jesus is described as providing new ways for His followers to relate to God, and what He asks, in terms of morality, exceeds the requirements of the legal code: 'You must therefore be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 6: 48, ESV).

In this very brief sketch of God's personality as it is experienced in conservative evangelical lifeworlds as unified and expressing desire, this character might appear to express paradoxical traits: He is both transcendent otherness *and* demonstrates intense, jealous concern for His people. And yet this paradox is not felt by conservative evangelicals as a contradiction, since the Bible, the authoritative Spoken Word, emphasizes that this God is One. As One, He also wants His people to be of one heart, mind and strength in their love and devotion to Him. How then is this distinctive personality practically mediated in the experience of members of St John's? And what effects does this have in forming their subjectivities and shaping their social relations in the city?

## Desiring Coherence

As we saw in the previous chapter, the main way members of St John's relate to God is through learning to hear Him speak in the Bible, through sermons, Bible study groups, and the inculcation of habits of devotional Bible reading. These are the primary means through which God is experienced as having a life and personality of His own within their lives. Occasionally the church organizes talks specifically focused on explicating His character. In the third year track of Bible study groups, for example, there was a series of talks and studies on 'the Doctrine of God' at the groups' weekend away. These examined a selection of Bible passages, and also encouraged discussion of Reformation doctrinal statements about God such as the Thirty Nine Articles, Belgic Confessions and Westminster Declaration of Faith. The discussion emerging from these talks emphasized God's immutability, atemporality, moral perfection, and His requiring moral purity from His followers. The minister leading the discussion cited passages from the Bible in which he said God is described as 'pure Being', 'Light – searing moral purity', 'Truth – it is the essence of God that He tells the truth', and 'in His essence unchanging - the same yesterday, today and forever'. He asked members of the group to look up these passages, and in the feedback session after this, he emphasized that God is 'absolutely certain, you can build your life on Him', and contrasted 'divine simplicity' with human 'multiplicity' – 'God cannot be cut up into bits, you are made up of parts'.

The personality of God is thereby mediated in this context not only through attention to the Bible but also through Reformation statements of doctrine. Yet in the everyday, routine life of the church and its members' practices, God's personality emerges less through explicit focus on doctrinal statements than through their modes of interaction with the books of the Bible they are reading or listening to sermons about. During my period of fieldwork, the particular narratives members of the church were engaging with focused for example, on ideas of God's actions in relation to Israel in the books of Isaiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles, on the person of Jesus in Mark and John's Gospels, or on St Paul's discussion of God's redemption of His people in the letters to the Corinthians and Colossians. All these demonstrated an understanding of God's personality in relational terms that was held together with ideas of atemporal transcendence and immutability, formed through listening to sermons, prayer, Bible

reading and study groups. In a sermon on 1 Chronicles, for example, as part of a sermon series focusing on the Unity of the Kingdom of God in contrast with a 'Divided World', David emphasized that God's greatness requires 'wholehearted devotion and affection' from His followers. The Bible reading for that service included the expression of praise by King David cited above (1 Chronicles 29:10-13), and David spent time discussing this passage in his sermon:

Why should we give our undivided and wholehearted loyalty and service to God? Because He's worth it, because He'll never let us down... His is The Greatness. The Majesty. It was Muhammad Ali who some of you will remember used to say, 'I am the greatest'... and you know, Muhammad Ali, as you look at him now, you think, 'what a tragedy'. But of God we can say ... 'Yours is The Greatness, the majesty'. But not just the greatness and the majesty, but also the power and the victory... At the centre of the five attributes, glory speaks of His moral, eternal, philosophical weightiness. Truth, purity, integrity, justice, love, compassion, severity, holiness. Why give God wholehearted service? Because He's worth it. And then the end of verse 11 is wonderful, isn't it, because it speaks of exclusive, personal power. Universal: 'yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all'. Exclusive: '*yours* is the kingdom, O Lord'. Personal: 'yours is the kingdom, *O Lord*'.

We see in these words how the personality of God expressed by King David in this passage from 1 Chronicles, in which He is the perfection of human values, shapes David's expression of his understanding of God's personality in his sermon, and that he understands this as entailing specific requirements for His followers.

This forms a sense of human separation and distance from God, which is articulated in the following verses, as King David contrasts God with the transience of human life: 'But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things have come from you, and of your own have we given you. For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on earth are like a shadow and there is no abiding' (1 Chronicles 29: 14-15, ESV). Addressing these verses to the congregation, David's words emphasize this sense of differentiation from God:

‘There’s no abiding’. You know, you think you’re young, the world is your lobster or whatever, the world is your oyster, it’s all lying ahead of you, you’re in your thirties, maybe you’re in your teens, or maybe in your forties, you think, ‘yeah, I’ve got loads of time’. You’re just a shadow. The Bible speaks of us as a breath on a cold winter’s night. You breathe it out, it’s there for a second, and it’s gone. So says David, very conscious at the end of his life, maybe he’s 65, 75, ‘look, I’m just a fleeting shadow, and you’ve allowed *me* to give myself wholeheartedly to this project of yours, the building of [the temple], what a privilege. How could you ever have allowed someone like me?’ And the sense of privilege. The innate worth, the undeserved privilege, and then the eternal purpose.

Through this passage in 1 Chronicles, and David’s preaching, the distance between the sense of human life and values as fleeting and transient and God as eternal and the perfection of human values is objectified. But God’s connection with humans is also expressed here, as David identifies King David’s being addressed by God and asked to build a temple with His addressing members of the church today, subjectifying them as likewise receiving the ‘undeserved privilege’ of working on God’s project.

As God’s characteristics of coherence and unity reverberate in the Bible, so also does the idea that these are required of His followers, for example in the commandment to love God ‘*with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*’ (Mark 12: 29-30, ESV, my emphasis). David emphasized this demand in relation to this passage from 1 Chronicles. He commented that in the passage, King David and the Israelites ‘rejoiced because with a whole heart, they offered freely to the Lord’, and said that this is a ‘wonderful’ verse and worth memorizing. He went on:

And that word, ‘wholehearted’ means exactly what it says. It speaks of every part of me. The whole of me. The psalmist... speaks of ‘Lord, give me an undivided heart’, it’s a wonderful verse, Psalm 119. ‘Give me a whole heart’ he could have put. And the idea is you know, there’s not this little bit of my passion focused over here on my career, and you know, this that and the other, and then a little piece of me over here focused on God, or one piece of me

focused over here on my favourite sport, and another piece focused on my x-box, and then another piece focused on-, you know, that would be a *divided* heart, wouldn't it? And it always results in a miserable life.

So it's not as if God was the focus of their energy at the Christian Union, or at camp in the summer, or midweek Rooted, and the rest of the time actually their heart was somewhere else. Rather, 'the people rejoiced because they'd given willingly, for with a whole heart they had offered freely to the Lord. David, the king, also rejoiced greatly.' It's a great summary verse, isn't it?

Whilst in the passage from 1 Chronicles, the Israelites' wholeheartedness related to their building of the temple, David said to the congregation that they needed to interpret their lives outside the church in this context, aiming to view their work in terms of wholehearted, willing service to the God who is 'worth it':

My ultimate concern, even at work, if I'm there for sixty hours next week, or some of you even longer, yeah, there will be jobs to be done and to do it properly to the glory of God, honouring His name for the advance of His kingdom, but my ultimate, absolute concern will be for the building of His people. And at the weekend, this meeting will be of paramount importance, as we gather, and midweek, whenever we gather, will be of extreme importance, because actually I'm giving myself wholeheartedly, willingly.

Thus the personality of God as ultimate unity and requiring coherence from His people entails here not the building of the temple, but rather the demand that members of St John's should strive 'wholeheartedly' to serve Him in their own lives. This is interpreted as meaning that during the working week, their working 'properly to the glory of God' is seen as a means to 'advance His kingdom', and that at the weekend, they make church a priority.

As Simmel contrasted God's personality as unified with individuals' fragmentation and disunity, so David's sermon likewise articulates this contrast. His preaching on the theme of wholehearted service of God can in itself be taken to imply that this is something members of the church should desire and work towards – as something God asks of them, and that they should *want* this as they reflect on His



character – but that this is something they have not achieved in practice. Reflection on this demand through the form of the sermon makes individuals conscious of ways their actions and desires do *not* reflect this ethic. After this sermon, there was a question and answer session, in which David answered questions members of the congregation had written on slips of paper, collected in following the sermon. Nick, the young curate leading the question and answer session, read the first question out: ‘How can we ensure we are wholeheartedly devoted to God? Even though I know I should be, other things always seem to grab my attention’. This question shows that achieving wholeheartedness is felt as a struggle. David replied to this question that ‘wholeheartedness comes from having my heart captured by the Lord. I was reading Psalm 119 this morning as part of my daily reading and it says, “Give me a whole heart”... So two things: the human side – meditate on God and His character – and there’s the God side, ask Him to give it to you’. Here we see that reflecting on God’s character in this Bible passage can be interpreted as a technique of the self. As God’s personality is held up as perfect, and the privilege of wholehearted service is articulated as an ideal of practice, members of the church interrogate their own attitudes towards this ideal, wanting to find ways of disciplining their desires and practices to exemplify this wholeheartedness that should pervade all their actions.

This same desire for unity and coherence within the self formed through reflection on God’s character was also demonstrated in a sermon Pete preached on truthfulness. In this, Pete described the ideal of coherence as having a particular relation to words, in an ethic of truthfulness that should govern speaking. His sermon was part of a sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount, and was focused on Matthew 5:33-49, which begins:

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath on your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.

(Matthew 5: 33-36, ESV)

Pete began by describing the Sermon on the Mount as a ‘brilliant light that draws me like a moth to a spotlight; but the light is so bright that it burns and sears’, and he discussed these opening verses as setting out God’s demand for truthfulness. He read verses 33-36 again to the congregation, and then said, ‘let’s observe the way of the world, the way of fingers crossed, of forked tongue’:

We know in our society something of the cost of a culture of deceit, so wracked with lies is the public life of our nation that we take very little at face value any more ... We hear a politician’s statement, and the first thing the pundits report is not what was said, but what wasn’t, because the truth only ever lies between the lines ... But God wanted His people to be different. Very simply: to be men and women of their words. To mean what we say and say what we mean.

Here we see how the sermon form mediates God’s desire for His people to act morally in terms of speaking the truth. Focusing directly on the context of the Bible passage, Pete explained that in Jesus’s time, oaths were only binding if they were sworn by the gold of the temple in Jerusalem. He then continued:

Jesus first demonstrates the illogicality of it and then points to a better way. From verse 34, He is saying, ‘God is the God of the whole world, so you can’t go around swearing by things and imagine somehow this oath doesn’t matter because you haven’t mentioned God’s name... We’re talking about the living God, the God of heaven and earth, the one who knows all and sees all and hears all. How dare you play games with his name?’

Instead, verse 37, this is the straight talking way of God’s kingdom: let what you say be simply ‘yes’ or ‘no’. To put it even more simply: Christian, be a man or woman or your word. Anything more than that comes from the evil one, and *the point is that words are a very valuable currency. Our God is a God who chose to reveal Himself in words. He’s a God who cannot lie. He keeps all of His promises and His word will never pass away.* Our Father in heaven is a God of truth, and so Jesus’ question for the crowds, when it comes to our attitude to truthfulness: are you perfectly truthful, like your perfect father in heaven? Or are you more like the father of lies himself? [*emphasis mine*]

Here we see that God's demand for coherence and truthfulness is related to an understanding not only of His moral perfection and truthfulness but also of His omniscience, as one who 'knows all and sees all and hears all'.

Throughout the sermon, Pete addressed the congregation in ways that encouraged them to identify with those addressed by Jesus in the narrative, and challenged them to compare their morality with that of the 'perfect Father'. Thus the personality of God as perfect moral integrity has agency here in effecting a sense of separation between Him and humans. At the same time, the sermon expressed a desire for Him and a means of connection, as individuals learn to embody and internalize the standards He sets as an ethic to guide their everyday interactions. The performance of the sermon signifies this interrelational figuration of the congregation as they listen to Pete, who is understood as having the authority to interpret Jesus's words: as the congregation learn to listen to God together as a church, they are *together* subjectified as those addressed to be truthful in response to a divine command, perceived as differentiating them from those around.

Pete continued the sermon by contrasting this demand for truthfulness with contemporary moral life. He cited research 'from a professor at the University of Virginia who says that 20 per cent of all ten minute social conversations include a lie', and then addressed ways in which members of the congregation might be untruthful in everyday life, though adding that they shouldn't 'get into the minutiae of ethical casuistry and ask, "so what am I meant to say when my wife asks ... does my bum look big in this?"'. He said it was a moral *attitude* that was required, and again related this back to the personality of God:

Remember that Jesus is gunning for an attitude of the heart, a commitment to be a person of truth, saying 'be like your father in heaven'... A couple of years back, a friend told me he'd adopted a zero-tolerance policy to lying in his life. He just wanted to mean what he said and say what he meant. I thought, 'there's a good position for a Christian to be in'. We claim to have the truth; we follow the one who said, 'I am the truth,' and so our first point then: no lying on our lips.

Pete went on to discuss other moral challenges from the remainder of the reading, such as turning the other cheek, the importance of sacrificial generosity, loving enemies, and said these have evangelistic significance as a form of witness to non-Christians:

There is no higher destiny than to be conformed to the likeness of God. And no greater ambition for which we can labour ... As we Christians become more and more like our father in heaven, as we allow the good deeds of our truth-speaking and self-sacrificing and our love to shine before the people of London, there is every hope that the people on our streets, in our offices, in our classes, that they will see our good deeds and be so attracted by them that they will want to learn of the King of Love himself.

He closed with a prayer as the congregation bowed their heads: 'We pray that, Our Father, you would help us not just to brush His word aside, but to allow it to sink deeply into our heart ... Confident of your grace again this morning, we pray that you would indeed change us and help us to hunger and thirst for this deeper righteousness. And then please, by your spirit, would you help us to live in this way, for Jesus' sake.'

The service closed with an organ-accompanied hymn, then the customary short silent pause before the pianist started playing softly, and the congregation began chatting to those sitting around them. I was sitting with Lucy, Sarah and Cathy, all single women in their forties, and they started talking about the sermon. Sarah said she found 'the area of white lies really challenging'. She said she had been on the tube the day before, and offered to give her seat up to an elderly lady, and the elderly lady had said, 'you must be really tired yourself.' Sarah said she had replied that she was not, when in actual fact she had been, and said she wasn't sure if that had been the right thing to do. Lucy said she thought this was 'a difficult area', and they talked about the difficulty of avoiding half-truths and white lies, discussing one of the examples Pete had given of saying you are unable to attend something you are invited to when really you are free. Cathy said she was sometimes relieved when she was able to offer a genuine excuse for not being able to make it to a particular event she was invited to. Sarah said she needs one evening at home each week, and doesn't have a problem with saying that if invited to something on the one evening she's free.

Here we see that bringing God's personality as 'truth' and His demand for truthfulness to conscious attention in the sermon encourages members of St John's to be concerned with ideals of truth and integrity, and to reflect on instances of their own behaviour deviating from these norms. This also carries a social dividing function, naming members of the church as those called to be truthful as differentiated from the world outside. The particular importance of this ethic of truthfulness, bound up with language, can be linked with a norm of sincerity. Keane argues that it was through particular linguistic practices that Protestantism produced sincerity as a modern virtue.<sup>7</sup> The performance of sincerity indexes a particular kind of subject: individual, but also relational, bound up with a particular orientation of obligation towards others:

in being sincere, I am not only producing words that reveal my interior state but am producing them *for you*; I am making myself (as an inner self) available for you in the form of external, publicly available expressions ... Sincerity involves the effort to display to you a connection between those words and my inner self, and to ensure that for you those words do not fall back into the status of quotation.

(Keane 2007: 211)

Many of the practices Keane discusses, such as saying creeds and confessions together and reading the Bible, were in evidence at St John's, and demonstrated how the norm of sincerity is performed in specific interactions. In most services, for example, the congregation say together the Church of England prayer of confession. The curate leading the evening service often introduced the confession by saying that this prayer is 'not appropriate for everyone here this evening', but is for people who are Christians 'who believe that Jesus died for them and that through him they have forgiveness of their sins'. He then typically gave a minute's pause for the congregation 'to look over the words of the prayer and see if you can mean them, and if you can, then please join with us'. This moment for individual reflection on

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<sup>7</sup> In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling traces the history of the concept of sincerity as related to Protestantism and the turn to the individual associated with this. He describes how with Calvinism, 'plain speaking' was privileged, but as individuals in Reformation Europe spoke publicly on great matters in this context, their 'only authority was the truth of one's experience and the intensity of one's conviction of enlightenment – these, and the accent of sincerity, clearly identifiable as such' (1972: 22-3).

whether or not the individual agreed with the words of the prayer reinforced a sense of the importance of the sincerity of the individual speaking these words, that the words they spoke corporately together should reflect their *own* interior condition.

Whilst Keane explores how linguistic performances in Protestantism created a normative tilt towards sincerity, I would want to argue that the personality of God also plays an important part in the intersubjective formation of such ethics of sincerity and truthfulness. As outlined in the previous chapter, the listening practices of members of St John's encourage them to focus on the *content* of sermons and Bible passages, which leads them to focus on the personality of God. In this context, the personality of God as unified and coherent exercises agency both in how members of the church learn to relate to Him and in terms of their ethical self-formation. Thus they seek to discipline their thoughts and bodies as unified according to the transcendent ideals they understand God addressing to them, which forms a moral distinction separating them from 'the world'. And yet, as members of the church, like the characters in the Bible, consistently fail to meet these standards, they learn to desire a God whom they trust is coherent and this enables them to develop a coherent narrative that makes sense of both their fragmented behaviour and that of others. This idiom of desire evokes a rather different tonality of interrelationality than the narrative of the rational listening I considered in the previous chapter. Let us turn to consider how this understanding of God's relational character contributes to evangelicals' desire for coherence and the tensions they live with in everyday experience.

### **Love, Adultery and Idolatry**

It seems obvious, to the point of trite, to say that the God who emerges in conservative evangelical experience is one who loves them. Whilst God is pure coherence and unity, He is also a God who loves and requires fidelity from His beloved church, for them to serve Him alone. Within the biblical narrative members of St John's focus on, this God offers the possibility of reconciliation to those who have turned their backs on Him, ignored and disobeyed Him, worshipping other gods. How was this aspect of God's personality as loving and desiring His people mediated at St John's? In his analysis of Guatemalan Pentecostalism, Kevin Lewis O'Neill describes his participants' desire for God as 'a slippery object of study', more

accessible through participant observation than formal interviews, because it often ‘lingers below the surface of narrativity, altering in innocuous ways how people live their lives and govern their bodies’ (2010b: 134). At St John’s, God’s desire for His church, and their desire for Him was not always articulated in interviews, yet the image of God as lover and of Christians as formed in intimate relationship with the divine was never far below the surface.

An example from a student supper illustrates this. After Sunday evening services, students hang around at church for supper of jacket potatoes, bacon sandwiches, fruit, chocolate and cans of fizzy drinks, over which they chat and are given a short talk on a particular theme. In May 2010, there were a couple of talks on the theme of relationship with God, and for one of these, I was sitting with Gemma and Luke from my small group, Freddie (the student curate), Archie and Becky. Timothy, a member of the church staff in his late forties, who co-ordinates the church’s ‘apprentices’ scheme, had been invited to give the talk. He addressed the students in a quiet voice, and said ‘a relationship with God is the greatest blessing we have’, and is ‘vital to what God is doing’. He gave a summary of a conservative evangelical understanding of God’s interrelations with humans, beginning with the Fall and His relationship with Israel and their disobedience, and then God’s ‘rescue mission’ and the ‘new covenant relation’ offered to those who have faith in Jesus. He said that ‘God promises that one day He will rescue His people; He promises a perfect relationship with God when He will live with them’. He read out a verse from John’s Gospel:

Jesus answered him, ‘If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.’

(John 14: 23, ESV)

He said that ‘Jesus brings us into this Trinitarian relationship’, and emphasized it is God who initiates this relationship: ‘*He* made it happen because we are weak and helpless’. He spoke of the relationship with God as ‘a relationship of great intimacy and depth, of father and child, husband and wife, bridegroom and bride ..., an amazing relation of intimacy’.

Timothy then asked, rhetorically, what ‘relationship’ actually means. He said most people would tend to answer this, ‘reading the Bible and praying’. These, he said, ‘are crucial, but are *how* the relationship happens, not what it *is* ... Communication is central, but what do we expect from communication?’ He said, ‘our relationship with God gives us our identity ... God wants our involvement; we should be concerned with His concerns’. He added ‘we should love God because He loves us and wants us to love Him ... But what does it mean to love God? Obedience? Loving each other? ... Neither of these is enough’. He said that loving God must mean ‘desiring Him, feeling passionate about Him, trusting God’.

At the end of his talk, Timothy set two questions for each table to discuss: ‘What does it mean to trust God? And what does it mean to love God?’ On our table, Gemma and Becky both said they found it hard to trust God when thinking about their future careers. Becky said that trust ‘isn’t just about the future, it’s about the present, how we spend our time *now*’. She said that as she was in the middle of her finals, she felt she should always be revising, and shortened her quiet times, and her flatmate asked her whether she really needed quiet times at all. She said she’d responded, ‘having quiet times is an act of trusting; spending time with God is really important’. Discussing what loving God means, Gemma said that when she tried to explain who God is to non-Christian friends, she tended to explain ‘in quite abstract terms, whereas the right response should be to want them to know Him, because He’s just, like, amazing’.

Comments during the group’s feedback session demonstrated how members of the church didn’t always think of their relationship with God with this sense of passion Timothy described. One student said, ‘sometimes it’s hard to love God because it’s hard to know how to go about it’. Timothy replied, ‘loving God means getting to know Him’, and commented that attitude is important: ‘it shouldn’t be a matter of reading the Bible because we’re supposed to, but of reading the Bible to find out more, because He’s so wonderful. Likewise, prayer shouldn’t feel like a duty’. Becky said ‘it’s easy to feel passionate about God when I’ve just got back from New Word Alive,<sup>8</sup> but I don’t necessarily feel like that all the time’. Timothy responded with the analogy of marriage: ‘sometimes we may not always be thinking about the fact that we are married, and we aren’t necessarily always excited about

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<sup>8</sup> New Word Alive is an annual conference organized by British evangelical organizations such as UCCF and Keswick ministries.



being married, but the fact would remain that we *are* married, and it is likewise in our relationship with God ... Emotion has its right place: neither too big nor too small'.

This idea that Timothy expressed of God as bridegroom or lover and the church as given its identity through their response to His love was frequently expressed in song lyrics. At St John's, songs were a mix of contemporary evangelical songs with more traditional hymns. In both, the words often specifically linked the idea of God's love with images of Jesus's crucifixion, so that the individual singing was performing a response that affirmed commitment to this idea of God as faithful lover. The final two verses of one of the most frequently sung hymns during my fieldwork, 'A Debtor to Mercy Alone', by Augustus Montague Toplady (1740-1778) demonstrate this:

The work which his goodness began,  
the arm of his strength will complete;  
his promise is 'Yes' and 'Amen',  
and never was forfeited yet:  
things future, nor things that are now,  
now all things below or above,  
can make him his purpose forgo,  
or sever my soul from his love.

Eternity will not erase  
my name from the palm of his hands;  
in marks of indelible grace  
impressed on his heart it remains:  
yes, I to the end shall endure,  
as sure as the promise is given;  
more happy and yet more secure,  
the glorified spirits in Heaven.

In these words, we see the idea of God as an agentive lover, and the Christian as responding to *His* love. This image of God's strength was often used when talking about God, but less often in relation to the person of Jesus, whose physical

vulnerability was more often a focus. But songs also evoked the idea of Jesus as lover, for example, in the following lyrics:

Jesus, friend of sinners  
loved me 'ere I knew him  
Drew me with his cords of love,  
tightly bound me to him.  
Round my heart still closely twined,  
the ties that none can sever.  
For I am his and he is mine,  
forever and forever.

(Sovereign Grace Worship 2003)

Whilst Pentecostal and charismatic evangelical song lyrics often use language that conveys the idea of evangelical desire for God and their agency in this love relationship (O'Neill 2010b: 144), the songs at St John's focused more on the agency of God as lover, as in the words of these hymns.

God's character as desiring His people also affects how members of the church feel they should relate to the Bible, with different overtones from the focus on rational practice discussed in the previous chapter. The man leading the prayers one Sunday morning, for example, spoke of how they as a church should 'love God's Word like a bride loves letters from her groom'. This way of relating to God through the Bible also came up in interviews. Louisa, a postgraduate student, described her daily Bible reading and prayer using the language of intimacy. She said that after having broken up with a non-Christian boyfriend, 'I feel so much more intimate with God, really, as father, even as lover ... I'd say, you've got to have x-rated prayers with God if you really want to know Him'. She said she found the psalms helpful when 'I might feel quite close to Him; they're quite intimate, they're intimate prayers, so occasionally I'll just take one, they're praise, almost like love letters to God ... and I just take one for my own and write it in my diary and feed it into my own prayers'. Naomi, in her late forties, described her relationship with God as like a marriage. She said that as single, she had not especially appreciated other women in her previous

church trying to set her up with men, and had told them, 'I've already *got* a man. Jesus'.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to these images of God and Jesus as lover / bridegroom who binds the evangelical subject to Him, Old Testament descriptions of God as a lover who requires fidelity of His beloved also exercise agency on how members of St John's interpret their relations with Him and how they think about their own values. A sermon series on the book of Hosea played on the theme of sexual infidelity, with the image accompanying the series showing a woman's eyes cast guiltily down, evoking a sense of illicit encounter. In Hosea, Israel's adultery is her worship of other idols. Thus when God speaks through Hosea, He says to 'the children of Judah and the children of Israel':

Now I will uncover her lewdness  
in the sight of her lovers,  
and no one shall rescue her out of  
my hand...

And I will punish her for the feast days  
of the Baals  
when she burned offerings to them  
and adorned herself with her ring and jewellery,  
and went after her lovers,  
and forgot me, declares the LORD.

(Hosea 2: 10, 13, ESV)

The punishment of this adulterous idolatry, however, is followed by a new union between God and Israel:

'Therefore, behold, I will allure her,  
and bring her into the wilderness,  
and speak tenderly to her ...

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<sup>9</sup> Diane Austin-Broos's study of Jamaican Pentecostals found that women used metaphors of sexual intimacy to describe their relationship with God, whereas the terms used by men were more formalized (1997: 151-2). At St John's, in contrast, both men and women used idioms of sexual intimacy to convey their sense of relationship with God, most frequently the bride / bridegroom trope.

‘And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me “My Husband”... For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by my name no more ... And I will betroth you to me for ever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.’

(Hosea 2: 14, 16-17, 19-20, ESV)

Such prohibitions of idolatry in the Old Testament refer to concrete acts of destroying material idols, so that Israel returns to faithful worship of the One God, and listening to sermons on these passages at St John’s encourages individuals to identify with the adulterous / idolatrous nation of Israel. Yet, as they do not literally build other objects of worship, and there is no physical act of destroying images, as they listen to these sermons and reflect on these passages, they learn to monitor their thoughts and actions, and interpret desires they experience as in tension with the moral demands of God as the means of their adultery. Thus, through conservative evangelicals’ listening practices, God’s character as a jealous lover operates as a subjectivizing force on evangelicals: the naming of the ideal subject who loves her bridegroom God with wholehearted devotion divides the evangelical subject, leading her to *desire* this wholehearted love relationship, whilst becoming increasingly aware of her own ‘infidelity’, the ways her desires and practices wander from this.

This interlinked trope of idolatry / adultery was used in myriad contexts to narrativize the inevitable fragmentation members of the church experience as their focus on God as coherent leads them to feel conscious of their practices and desires associated with *other* forms of life they simultaneously inhabit within the metropolis. For example, I was invited to the house of four women in their early twenties from the church – Emma, Lana, Lisa and Jo – for supper one evening. As we talked, over glasses of red wine and the spaghetti bolognese Lisa had cooked for us, both Jo and Lisa said, in response to my asking about their quiet times, that they didn’t have quiet times every day. Jo said, ‘I was speaking with Rhiannon<sup>10</sup> the other day ... about the images that the Bible uses for the things we put above the Lord, and how He speaks of us as adulterers, like He talks of Israel in her adultery... And I was like, gosh, who have I slept with – in inverted commas – this week, like before the Lord? And it’s

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<sup>10</sup> Rhiannon is another woman in her twenties from the church.

been, you know, sleep, and er, YouTube videos, it's too embarrassing to say'. She eventually admitted – to much laughter from the others – that her 'adultery' has been watching falconry videos on YouTube, rather than reading the Bible. She said, 'They were really boring videos. These are the kind of things I put above the Lord, and I think that's shameful and horrid'. Thus, as God warns of the lure of graven images in the Decalogue, and we saw in the last chapter that the church leaders are conscious of how media forms inhibit attentive listening, so Jo's 'confession' of her 'adultery' shows that her internalization of her self-identity as God's beloved leads her to feel guilty about the seductions of contemporary visual media. Whilst not always carrying these overtones of adultery, this language of idolatry to describe a sense of falling short of the ideal of 'wholehearted' service narrativized individuals' consciousness of their fragmentation and compartmentalization. This enables them to construct a coherent narrative that makes sense of the force of differing moral norms on their behaviour, interpreted in this language of (inevitable) idolatry. In this narrative, they have agency, but God is ultimately in control.

This language of idolatry reinterpreted from the context of idol worship in Old Testament narratives to encompass humans' ethical orientations towards sources of meaning was exemplified in a lunchtime talk on Faith, Ethics and the Workplace that Clara invited me to, as part of a special 'diversity' week of events at her firm. The event had been organized by one of the firm's partners, who had invited Tom, one of the cleanly-shaven thirty-something ministers from St John's, a rabbi, and an imam to speak. With all seats full and people standing at the back of the room, Clara was pleased so many people had come. All the speakers chose to address the topic of 'faith in the workplace' through discussing the issue of compartmentalization. The leader of mosque nearby spoke of how important it is 'not to leave your values at the glass revolving doors when entering the building'. Tom, speaking next, said there are 'two main dangers at work ... The first is idolizing work, ... seeing our work as that which gives us security, that which gives us stability, when that should come from God'. The second he described as 'despising work – seeing it as the means to our own ends, rather than God's ends'. He said he thought there was a temptation for 'the firm to become God', so that individuals saw their primary responsibilities as to the firm, rather than to 'serving the wider community'. He emphasized that business must not be seen as separate from faith outside the workplace: 'What we do in work should be connected with the rest of life, with what we do in our relationships. This is why it

does matter what leaders do with their expenses, if they are unfaithful in their marriages ... Integrity should extend to all areas of life.' He added that 'Only Jesus can set us free from meaninglessness; ... only Jesus can offer forgiveness'. Rabbi Levin, speaking after Tom, addressed the commonalities between their perspectives, and emphasized that 'faith is what gives life meaning, enabling us to see that life is precious ... Faith gives core perspective and meaning to our lives'. Here we can see that this idea of God as offering a sense of coherence, and the difficulty of the everyday experience of negotiating different moral spheres, are not the unique concern of evangelicals. However in this public context, it was only Tom who narrativized this in terms of idolatry.

Ministers and members of St John's use this language of idolatry to describe anything that distracts the individual's focus from devotion to God and offers a rival source of meaning. As Pete said in a talk at one of the Bible study groups, an idol is 'anything [other than God] you put your security in'. Contemporary 'idols' described in sermons were the self / self-reliance, materialism, money, families and aspirations for one's family, humanity, romantic relationships, greed, strength, political leaders including Barack 'Messiah' Obama, one's spouse, and 'all ethnic religions of the world'. In a question and answer session after a sermon on monotheism, one of the questions addressed to Freddie was whether fashion and gadgets can become idols. He answered, 'almost anything can become an idol', and said that in determining whether or not it has become an idol, 'you need to think about how much time and money you spend on it, and whether it's where you get your comfort from ... If you were having a bad week, would you be comforted by knowing that you were dressed ok? If it is becoming your idol, then flee from it; ... not that we want to say that Christians have to be dowdy'.

This theme of idols competing with God to be the source of individuals' security was also emphasized at one of the evening sessions training members of the church in how to speak about their faith. Pete asked people to suggest what non-Christians follow instead of God in their lives, and individuals called out 'money', 'themselves', 'pleasure', 'the well-being of future generations', 'happiness' and 'football'. Pete said these could all be seen as idols, and added that these things 'are not in themselves bad, but they are bad when they are placed as more important than Jesus'.

Through these discussions, we can see the importance placed on the idea that God be seen and felt as the overriding source of coherence and security, with ‘idols’ representing alternative rival sources of meaning that life in London offers. Whilst idols in the Old Testament narratives were external objects, and God asked for the literal destruction of these, here the clearing of idols and images takes place through the monitoring of the self for rival sources of meaning and pleasure. The pervasiveness of this rhetoric of idolatry thus indicates an awareness on the part of members of St John’s that it is easy in the fragmented spaces of the city – in which the voice of God does not necessarily resound in most of the everyday spaces they move between, and in which they struggle to speak of their faith – for alternative sources of value to rival God, and for these to construct the evangelical ‘me’.

Amongst the different idols distracting the evangelical from wholehearted devotion, one of the most frequently mentioned was materialism / money. In one sermon David described the location of the church as located ‘right in the middle of the Temple of Western idolatry, the city, where the idol of the West is materialism’, and Matthew, the minister in charge of city ministry who used to work in corporate law, described members of the church as slaves to a system in which money is the prime value.

it’s slavery; ... you’re not in control of your circumstances. The boss says jump and you jump ... Because so much of it is professional services, so there is this slavery / idolatry battle ... Part of the battle for the Christian is to keep reminding them that they are valued not because of what people think about them or because of the number of noughts on the end of a salary, or the size of their Queen Anne mansion ... They are valued because they are God’s children.

Thus the challenge against the ‘idolatry’ / ‘slavery’ formed through capitalist corporate culture Matthew articulates is to help individuals see their source of security as not formed through their relation to capital, but by their identity given to them by God.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Theologian Graham Ward likewise argues that the transcendence and desires with which the spaces of cities are shot through today are determined by the all-encompassing power of money: ‘The new transcendencies that are being written into the fabrics of our global cities are all made possible by the power of money to transcend all boundaries, laws, limits, and norms – moral, political, economic, social, and geographic. The various flows within the city

Yet, although the leaders of St Johns described materialism / money as a pervasive form of idolatry, tension between norms associated with materialism and faith rarely came up as an explicit issue that members of the church talked about their own struggles with in interviews or discussions in small groups. The rhetoric of money / materialism as a form of idolatry was used more to indicate how members of the church interpreted others' moral values as idolatrous in the world around them. The church encourages its members to give generously – tithing being the minimum expectation – and the majority do.<sup>12</sup> Occasionally members talked about financial decisions they made on the basis of their faith, but this was described less in terms of a struggle, and more posited as a marker of how their values were different from non-Christian friends and colleagues. At one of the Rooted groups, for example, Hannah spoke about how when her husband, Philip, had become a director at the financial services organization he worked at, several of their friends had suggested that they move out to a mansion in Surrey. She said that their decision to remain in an area of urban deprivation in inner-city south London – admittedly living in a large Georgian house, albeit not a mansion – was motivated by their commitment to their church. In comparison with many corporate directors of comparable organizations in an era of the seven figure bonus, their lifestyles are unshowy: their preferred holiday destination is a rented cottage in Devon, they do not drive an expensive car, and Hannah – a Cambridge graduate – works as a volunteer for an educational charity. In a discussion about what their non-Christian friends valued at another Rooted group meeting, Philip said, 'I often wonder, why would people want to spend all that money on a Ferrari or whatever? I was saying that to someone at work, and then said, "oh yes, and you've got an Aston Martin haven't you". The conversation didn't really go anywhere'. Edward, a banker in his early thirties, replied to this, 'I think people should be able to see the difference in our lives, that we're living differently, that it isn't those things that are making us happy'.

Mostly members of St John's do not talk in their small groups about any *struggle* with desiring money above God,<sup>13</sup> but they expressed a consciousness that

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are all basically flows of money, money as the constitutive rule of modernity's transcendental logic, its "reality principle" (2009: 215).

<sup>12</sup> This is indicated through the church's annual income from regular donations from the congregation.

<sup>13</sup> There was however a reflexive awareness on the part of some members of St John's that by using money, they are inevitably associated with practices that go against the moral values of



how they spend their money, giving a percentage to the church, was ‘different’ from their non-Christian friends and colleagues, showing how this narrative of idolatry functions as a dividing practice. The struggles members of the church consciously experience in relation to the ‘idol’ of money are felt to be more to do with the long working hours required by their employment in professions such as law, with the subsequent busy-ness of their lives making it hard to find time to listen. Yet their discussions about money demonstrate that they perceive a fragmentation between the values of the church and broader cultural valuing of wealth, and they describe those outside the church as worshipping at the altar of materialism. This then forms part of the narrative explaining why individuals reject God: the alternate idol they are worshipping is money.

This language of idolatry / adultery shows how members of St John’s interpret God’s personality as requiring the devotion of the beloved and not tolerating rivals. As they pray, listen to sermons together and discuss biblical narratives, they are formed as subjects reflexively conscious of internal divisions and dis-orientations, aware of other potential lures in the city distracting from wholehearted devotion. Thus the Christian life is perceived as an on-going struggle between these different forces experienced as at work in the self, as Simmel described. In one sermon, for example, David described the tension between the desire ‘to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin’ and the desire ‘to be mistreated with the people of God’ as ‘a battle that goes on right in the heart of every Christian believer’. In another sermon, he said that to prevent ‘half-hearted, divided Christianity, where you’re just torn in three directions, five directions...’ requires ‘taking the knife out, metaphorically, and sticking it into something. Some treasured desire that is producing a divided heart ... Some desire for something that the Lord hasn’t given me, but that I’m hankering after, and is actually dividing my heart’. This prevalence of the language of struggle – and the narrativization of this as sin – was constantly reiterated in discussions in small groups, and Clara told me it is something *every* Christian lives with. She said that as the individual becomes more self-aware through practices of praying, confessing and reading the Bible, they become ‘more aware of what their own particular temptations

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the church. Discussing the passage from 2 Corinthians in which St Paul tells members of the church ‘do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers’ (2 Corinthians 6:14, ESV), going against the standard evangelical interpretation of this verse in terms of not marrying a non-Christian, Jan, a retired scientist, said, ‘it’s hard for any of us not be tainted by our associations with money’.

are'. She described the areas of her own life she felt as 'struggles' as tendencies towards over-competitiveness and her longing for a boyfriend. Older members of the church often talked about how the longer they had been Christians, the more aware they felt of their 'sinfulness', and this learned self-understanding is foregrounded when ministers publicly describe themselves, as David for example did, as 'today just as sinful as I ever have been' in sermons.

Robbins describes how the Pentecostals he studied in Papua New Guinea learnt to understand themselves as sinful through practices of confession, and this learning of a sinful identity is also evident at St John's. Robbins' argues that his informants experience a sense of fragmentation between the focus on community life associated with their old Urapmin ways of life and the individualistic emphasis of their Pentecostalism, and they learn to recognize behaviour and values from their old way of life as sin. For members of St John's, the temporal order of this tension is reversed: they narrate Christianity as becoming culturally outdated in Britain as the moral norms they experience outside the church – in David's words – 'career away' from the values they associate with their faith. Yet their narratives of idolatry / adultery demonstrate that they are reflexively aware that their own modes of behaviour are shaped by both. Whilst Robbins demonstrates how it is through particular practices that individuals develop their identification as sinful, this is also an intersubjective process that at St John's includes an experience of the personality of God, who, as perfect, demands that His people also embody perfection. As they *inevitably* fail at this, they scrutinize their behaviour to seek to discipline themselves to come closer to the bar God sets of wholehearted devotion and love. Thus the unity and desire of God have agency on members of St John's, leading them to name those attitudes and aspects of their own and others' behaviour that are discordant with this. They are both separate from and connected with others whom they objectify as separated from God through their turning away from Him, and they describe this separation in terms of guilt.

Having considered the significance of narratives of idolatry / adultery, let us consider how, bound up with this consciousness of internal fragmentation, this sense of guilt serves to bind members of the church more closely in their relationship with God and each other.

## **Guilt and Transcendence**

Foucault describes how Christian practices of confession constructed a particular form of the subject, responsible for their actions, divided within themselves as they sought to purify themselves through linguistic practice from polluting thoughts (1978: 58-63; 1988: 40-6). At St John's, linguistic practices such as confession – the Church of England confession is said in every Sunday service – and singing songs produce the evangelical subject as a guilty sinner, with a sense, as Hugo described, of their difference from a holy God. This narrative of the subject as divided and guilty for their idolatry / adultery is bound up with the promise of an ultimate coherence posited in the future identity of the sinner who recognizes their sinfulness and repents and believes in Jesus's redemption as saved by the ultimately coherent and consistent God. British conservative evangelicals posit this understanding of Jesus' death as sacrificial atonement for their sins as central to their self-understanding, and this constitutes something of a dividing marker of identity within contemporary British evangelicalism, with more charismatic churches often rejecting this emphasis (Wood 2011).

It is difficult to overstate the centrality at St John's of the focus on Jesus's death as an atonement. Unlike Calvinist theology, there is a strong doctrine of assurance, and members of the church – if they doubt that they are saved – are taught to 'return to the cross' and feel assured of God's forgiveness, as we will explore in the following chapter. 'Meditation on the cross' and explicit focus on Jesus's sufferings are encouraged, and these serve to reinforce a sense of guilt and dependence on Jesus. A sermon Freddie preached on the 'suffering servant' passages from Isaiah illustrates how members of the church learn to understand their guilt as related to the violence of Jesus' death. Freddie talked about the visceral brutality of YouTube footage of a lynching in Lebanon, emphasizing that the death of the suffering servant was similarly brutal, and similarly real: 'This is a real death we're reading about tonight'. Freddie described what happened to the man in Lebanon, and said that in the suffering servant passage, the servant is beaten up beyond all recognition. He used phrases that evoked visceral images of violence – 'this bleeding lump of meat' – to drive home the physical brutality of Jesus's death.

Freddie said that Isaiah is seeing a video flashing before his eyes of Jesus's death, and described the suffering servant passage as the video to a song: 'There are two people in this song: Him and us ... We are in the video, but not in the way we

expected ... We walk into the picture with our sins and our guilt, and we walk away empty-handed, with peace.’ Freddie emphasized the idea of Jesus ‘carrying’ ‘the burden’ of sin: ‘this death carried our guilt, our shame, our responsibility... Imagine everything we ever did wrong, piled on top of us as a heap. The simple answer is that the servant carried this for us.’ He asked the congregation to draw two columns on their hand-outs, with words under the following headings:

Us	Him
Guilt	He didn't complain and went forward like a sheep to be sheared
Sin	By oppression and judgment he was killed
Strain	An innocent man picking up our guilt

The young woman sitting next to me scrawled in biro the word ‘GUILT’, underlined and capitalized by this passage in her Bible as well as drawing these two columns. Freddie went on, ‘The problem with humanity is that there are no goodies. This servant finds a way to turn baddies into goodies.’ He turned this into a personal question addressed to the congregation: ‘What do *you* make of Him? What do you make of God and His plan? Was it just a hot day with a brutal death, or was it the most wonderful day....?’ He told the congregation to again make two columns on their hand-outs, and under a column with the individual’s own name, to list ‘all your sins and transgressions, and in the other column, write “sinless”, “blameless”, and see if you can believe that He would swap places with you’. The sermon was followed by two songs, which George, leading the service, said that the congregation should sing ‘as a prayer and encouragement to each other’. The words of these described a sense of union with Jesus achieved through His death:

Before the throne of God above  
 I have a strong, a perfect plea  
 a great high priest whose name is Love,  
 who ever lives and pleads for me.  
 My name is written on his hands,

my name is hidden in his heart ....

One with my Lord, I cannot die:  
my soul is purchased by his blood,  
my life is safe with Christ on high,  
with Christ, my Saviour and my God.<sup>14</sup>

Whilst the evangelical tradition – and Protestantism more broadly – is often understood as individualistic, and it is possible to see these lyrics as individuating the subject whose high priest pleads for her, it is also possible to see in the orientation towards God expressed in relation to focus on Jesus’s death as also simultaneously exceeding this, revealing a sense of self-transcendence in desire.

As members of the church learn to relate to God as a lover, in response to His character as desiring their faithful love, so it is possible to see the ways that they relate to God in terms of *their* desire as a form of eroticism. Social theorists have conceptualized the term ‘eroticism’ in a variety of ways. By using the term to intimate desire, I do not intend to limit this specifically to sexuality,<sup>15</sup> but rather to express both Weber’s sense of eroticism as an ‘embodied creative power’ and ‘boundless giving of oneself ... [in] opposition to all functionality, rationality, and generality’ (1948: 347) and Georges Bataille’s treatment of eroticism as “‘an exuberance of life’”; ... in which the boundaries associated with the “discontinuity” of individual existence are dissolved’, which can take the form of physical eroticism, emotional eroticism and religious eroticism (Shilling and Mellor 2010: 440-1).<sup>16</sup> Bataille argues, as Shilling

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<sup>14</sup> The words of this hymn are by Charitie Lees De Chenez (1841-1923).

<sup>15</sup> Although in using the term, I refer to the language connoting sexual intimacy, for example, the images of bride and groom, I am intending my use of the term to carry with it broader meanings of desire that have within Christian theology traditionally been associated with the desire of the self for God, used for example by Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa. As Ward notes, ‘Divine eros, the love of God, and human eros, the love of human beings for God possess far greater dynamics, operating across far greater domains, than just sexuality. But since the nineteenth century, the development of medicine, and the increasing erotification of our culture post-Freud, eros and sexuality have come to mean the same thing’ (2000: 76). In his theological anthropology, Ward seeks to ‘undo.. the knot that tied eros to sexuality, and hopefully rescue.. the idea that Christians are also governed by desire, that desire is fundamental to our nature as human beings as God created us’ and ‘show how Christian desire operates in a way that does not accord with the operation of desire in secular culture, the culture of seduction’ (ibid.).

<sup>16</sup> Shilling and Mellor’s ‘Sociology and the Problem of Eroticism’ provides a provocative analysis of eroticism in the work of Weber, Bataille and French feminist theory, arguing for

and Mellor describe, that with religious eroticism, there is an eroticism of spirit in forms of religious sacrifice where individuality 'is violated by an act that fuses the sacrifices and other participants together with their victim. The victim dies and the spectators share in what that death reveals ... There is always a violation of individuality in eroticism, in reaching beyond the present in search of transcendent meaning' (ibid.: 441).

In the words of these songs, we might interpret evangelicals' language of union with Jesus through his death as articulating this religious eroticism, in which there is a longing for a transcendent meaning beyond the present and the self, which offers an escape from discontinuity and fragmentation. Whilst it is possible to discern an individualist emphasis in the 'I' words of the song and members of the church being asked to write down *their* sins, this individuation is also expressed simultaneously with a desire for a communion of *all* members of the church together with Jesus in other language used. For example, at a service in December 2010, the congregation recited together the following words:

George: This is love:

Congregation: Not that we loved God

but that he loved us

and sent his son

to be the propitiation for our sins.

George then prayed a short prayer thanking God 'that *we* will be part of the most intimate, most permanent relationship that the world has ever known'. After the sermon, the congregation sang a hymn to the traditional tune of 'Love Divine' with words articulating the idea that as His body they would be 'joined in intimate communion / Two made one – like man and wife'. This idea of the church, rather than the individual, experiencing this union was also emphasized in Hugo's preaching on the book of Isaiah. Describing how 'the faithless city will be transformed into the holy city', he stated that the canopy image in Isaiah 4 to denote a future relationship

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the significance of attention to eroticism in exploring sociological questions of order and meaning. Within this, they note how Weber's approach to eroticism draws from the German sociological tradition of starting from the individual, in contrast with Bataille's Durkheimian focus on the collectivity (2010: 440).

between God and the purified, faithful city intimates the idea of a ‘a marriage chamber’. He said that the relationship between bride and groom evoked through this is ‘an Old Testament hint of that image of intimacy and love and faithfulness ... the whole people of God are under the bridal canopy.’

This construction of the communal identity of the church as guilty and sinful, united in and yearning for a transcendent relation with God achieved through Jesus’ death, might appear to lead to a difficult emotional load for the individual to bear, with the violence of Jesus’ sacrifice interpreted as not only related to a shared guilt but also specifically to *their* individual guilt. However, individuals learn to focus on the cross in such ways that these feelings of guilt function to develop their sense of intimacy with God. In a question and answer session, for example, David said that ‘real love for Jesus is nurtured by reflecting on who He is and what He’s done for us’, and encouraged ‘meditating on His character and the kind of things that make us love Him’. ‘What Jesus has done’ is routinely used at St John’s as a euphemism for His death, for example when Luke, a postgraduate student, said to me he sometimes cried at home when meditating on Jesus ‘and what He has done’. In group Bible studies, individuals are encouraged to learn to identify with characters in biblical narratives who reject Jesus, acknowledge their guilt in this, and are forgiven by Him.

Through these practices, over time members of the church develop an ‘emotional regime’ (Riis and Woodhead 2010: 185) in which guilt serves as a form of binding to God, moving through emotions of sadness, wonder, and gratitude, as individuals identify Jesus’s suffering and death as motivated by His love for them. Whilst they feel a sense of connectedness with God through this, as a forgiven and loved child and as His beloved, in their specific reflection on Jesus’s death, they experience Him as other. In one of the student group’s discussions, for example, looking at the passion narrative in Luke’s Gospel, Luke, Patrick, Chris and Gemma all commented that they find it difficult, in Patrick’s words, to ‘get my head round the fact that Jesus was willing to go through all of this for me’. Luke said, ‘I know I’m a Christian and going to heaven, but I’m still scared of death, but Jesus was willing to go through this. And He’s God, which makes the story even more amazing ... and it’s my sins that put Him there’. Older members of the church, habituated in techniques of focusing on Jesus’s death in prayer or meditating on Bible passages, spoke of how over time, their increased consciousness of their own ‘sinfulness’ made them ‘more aware of God’s grace’. As mentoring relationships between older and younger

Christians are encouraged, older members of the church stressed to younger members, for example when Liz spoke to the students over student supper, that they ‘should not dwell on their guilt’, but after identifying and confessing their sins, they should feel confident that these have been ‘dealt with at the Cross’. These intergenerational relationships thereby provide a means of modelling what the ‘right’ way of handling guilt is.

Through focusing on the violent imagery of the cross, and developing an understanding of Jesus dying as a ‘sacrificial lamb’, members of the church interpret this as the sign of God’s faithfulness and love for them, through which their own inconsistencies, subjective divisions and fragmentation are ultimately reconciled. As Hugo described this understanding of relationality with God effected through Jesus’s death, as both present and moving towards a future consummation in his sermon on Isaiah 4:

The city in Revelation is the bride of Christ ... Here is the eternal kingdom to which we’re moving ... No more threats, nothing to undercut the security He gives His people. Nothing that threatens to destroy, no more idols that divert our attention and delude us into thinking that something that we have made is going to satisfy us. No; everything that man longs for and has tried to construct in independence from God down through human history, it’s all to be found in the branch<sup>17</sup> and in His glorious, fruitful city, where He keeps and preserves His people in total security and utter joy, for there the Lord will create. His presence.

Thus we see that despite the rhetoric of the evangelical subject as a rational, attentive listener, their focus on the personality of God also objectifies them as loved objects of God’s desire held simultaneously together with this, mediated not only through words but also through the visual images, such as the bridal canopy, members of the church imagine while they are listening. Whilst ‘public’ listening in small group settings and church services are dominated by more rationalized modes of engaging with these words, it is in communal singing, prayer, and individual devotional practice that this

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<sup>17</sup> Earlier in the sermon Hugo had described ‘the branch’ in this passage as a Messianic reference to Jesus.



sense of intimacy with God comes more to the fore. Some are aware of this as an emotional disjunction, but this is not always so.

### **Conclusion: The Lives and Loves of God in the Lives and Loves of People**

Members of St John's desire for truthfulness and integrity in their own actions accords with Keane's focus on how Protestant practices effected a normative tilt towards sincerity, with a matching of words and the interior state of the subject. This chapter has explored how it is not only conservative evangelical practices habituated through church membership that are significant in forming ethical norms such as truthfulness: these are also related to their experiences of the personality of God mediated through their practices. As the character of this God is felt as both transcendent unity, wholly Other, and a lover who demands fidelity from His beloved, these differing characteristics exercise agency on how members of St John's both relate to God and their own subjectivities, as they strive 'to be perfect' as their 'father in heaven is perfect'. Jack Miles argues that historians of religion have overlooked the psychological impact that monotheism has. His biography of God, tracing His character through the Tanakh, draws attention to the different personalities that co-exist within the unity of God and contrasts this with polytheism. He suggests that, 'Other things being equal, protracted exposure to a God in whom several personalities coexist and alongside whom no other god is ever portrayed even for the folkloric fun of it must foster a way of thinking of the self as similarly composite and similarly alone' (1996: 407).

Whilst members of St John's relate to different elements of God's personality at different times, these are experienced as part of His unified character. Their focus on the personality of God as coherent leads them to desire sincerity and truthfulness in their own lives, and they understand this as a struggle, as their attention to this characteristic of God and His demand for wholeheartedness leads them to be aware of their compartmentalization and their distraction from God. Their focus on monotheistic narratives that warn against idolatry provide them with the narrative resources to make sense of this fragmentation as their own 'infidelity' in this relationship, leading them to be increasingly self-conscious of some of the specific ways their lives are fragmented and to see the lives of others as shaped through worship of idols that their lives are also shaped by, such as money. Sennett argues that

the master image of God in early Christianity was pure Word and Light, and it was the ritual practices of Christianity that introduced a sense of the subject turned outwards towards others (2002b: 371). However, the ways members of St John's understand the personality of God includes *both* a sense of His unity and transcendence *and* a sense that He is turned outwards in desire towards what is felt as other than Him, a God who loves and suffers for His people.

To return to Simmel's thesis, the personality of God is experienced by members of St John's as coherent, and this responds to individuals' desire for coherence in their own lives. But the distinctive emphasis on God's desire for His people and the moral demands He makes, bound up with narratives of adultery and idolatry to objectify His people's turning away from Him, intensify individuals' consciousness of their fragmentation and their struggles 'to be perfect' to a greater degree than in Simmel's account. This is bound up with the urban cultural fragmentation members of the church experience, as they negotiate different moral meanings and feel the demands of their faith as increasingly countercultural. In this context, their focus on Jesus's death and His suffering body enables individuals to deal with their sense of guilt at falling short of the ideal of wholehearted service, and this binds them in their sense of relationship with God. Their attention to Jesus' death both individuates them and increases their sense of attachment to God and also expresses a desire for self-transcendence, as they experience a sense of connection and communion with *all* those – past and present - whom they believe will likewise be united with Christ in a future consummation of their relationship. Their focus on God in this grand narrative of salvation, and their desire for obedience to Him forms them – counterculturally – as desiring subjection, although conscious of their agency in being able to turn either towards or away from what God wants.

Whilst evangelicals are stereotypically seen, as members of St John's themselves describe, as moralizing, intolerant and judgmental, we can see that their focus on the moral demands of God leads them to differentiate between themselves as seeking to keep His demands, albeit inevitably falling short, and others who serve other idols. Yet their focus on themselves as sinners and sense that they *too* are idolatrous complicates this narrative of distance, as they recognize themselves as likewise shaped by the same moral currents as those they seek to be different from. In this context, the lines that mark them out as different, as God calls them out of this world, are fragile, and this encourages evangelical leaders to clearly stake out

symbolic moral boundaries of distinctiveness that enable individuals to understand themselves as exiles and strangers, journeying towards the future city of God.

Tanya Luhrmann (2004) argues that her Chicago charismatic evangelicals' experience of intimate relationship with God is bound up with the thinning of social life and association in the USA (cf. Putnam 2000). My informants' self-differentiation from charismatics and focus on the rational means that they are critical of Christians who, in Timothy's words, 'make the relationship too matey ... they make God like a teddy bear'. Nevertheless, they do speak of a sense of intimacy with God, and understand God as wanting their love for Him. In contrast with Luhrmann's evangelicals, my informants have very busy social lives in which they socialize not only with church friends, but also with non-Christian friends, participate in team sports, choirs and other leisure activities, the busy-ness of which can make them feel guilty that they squeeze time for God out of their lives. I would therefore argue that their desire for God is more bound up with the sense of coherence they experience His personality as offering, which transcends and gives meaning to the fragments of their lives as they move through different spaces that address them in different ways. The sense of coherence that Simmel argues is intrinsic to the personality of God is bound up with His transcendence, as perfect coherence is impossible in mundane, present life. Thus forming an orientation towards and desire for the personality of God means developing an orientation towards transcendence, which necessarily implies absence and leads to experiences of doubt. In the final chapter, I will explore how contrary to interpretations of evangelicalism that posit its global success in terms of the certainty it offers, members of St John's live with and find strategies for dealing with doubt and uncertainty, that deepen their sense of interdependence on each other. I will consider how this is bound up with developing an orientation towards the future, a process felt as a struggle that necessitates members of the church forming themselves as accountable to and dependent on each other to enable them to keep going in their belief. Let us turn to examine this.

## Chapter 6

# Of Time, the Body and the City: Belief, Absence and Incompleteness

On my bed by night  
I sought him whom my soul loves;  
    I sought him, but found him not.  
I will rise now and go about the city,  
    in the streets and in the squares;  
I will seek him whom my soul loves.  
    I sought him, but found him not.  
The watchmen found me  
    as they went about in the city.  
'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?'  
Scarcely had I passed them  
    when I found him whom my soul loves.  
I held him, and would not let him go  
    until I had brought him into my mother's house,  
and into the chamber of her who conceived me.

(Song of Solomon 3:1-4, ESV)

Religious faith is often described as a psychological crutch, numbing suffering, deadening existential anxieties and making pain and loss easier to bear. Is it a crutch? Members of St John's seemed at times to express a sense that their faith was a comfort that helped them through life, and at other times resisted this kind of explanation. Preaching on the passage in the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus tells his disciples that 'the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life' (Matthew 7: 14, ESV), David said that 'some naïve atheists suggest that people

become Christians as some sort of psychological crutch. But it's the Christian who's swimming upstream, against the current'. He described the Christian life as 'countercultural, in every generation and every stage of life: as you follow the teaching of Jesus ... you find yourself swimming against the current'. He said that Jesus's words in these verses 'explain so much about the Christian life ... It explains why the Christian life is not easy', and he described his own sense of struggle:

The longer I go on as a Christian, I think the harder I find it ... It was our friend John Chapman who when asked what his experience of the Christian life was replied, 'I never realized just how wonderful it would be and I never realized how hard it would be.' And almost in the same breath, he said encouragingly, 'Don't worry. The first fifty years are the hardest.' So I picture a marathon runner approaching the Olympic stadium. I'm rather hoping that when I get into the closing years, as it were, in the stadium, doing the last three laps, the picture of the finishing line will cause me to take fresh heart, and to run with my head up. And I remember the early years of the marathon in one's twenties and thirties, where the battles were there, but one was full of enthusiasm and energy. I wonder if in the fifties and sixties, a man or woman is running the hard yards through the pain barrier of the wall.

Members of the church likewise frequently expressed this sense of struggle, of the difficulties of the life of faith, their sense that trying to live in a way that puts love of God and obedience to His demands at the centre of their motivation and everyday actions was hard work. Yet in the Rooted group, discussing the 'costs' of being a Christian and how they might talk about these to non-Christian friends, Alan said, 'I'm sorry, all of this is good standard evangelical doctrine, but what about the other side of this? What about the Jesus who says, "Come to me all you who are heavy laden and I will give you rest ... Take my yoke, for my burden is light"? What about if we have a friend who's really been through a difficult time? Do we really say to them that this is all about the struggle?' Alan's words demonstrate that the 'struggle' and 'costs' of faith are here held together with a sense of the comfort offers. In another discussion, Lorna said to the group, 'Non-Christians often think our faith is just a crutch.'

'Is that necessarily a bad thing?' Alastair asked.

‘It *is* a crutch,’ Hannah said.

‘And perhaps thinking like that is necessary to understanding what it is to be Christians,’ Emily said, ‘because being a Christian is about dependence, so you have to learn that God *does* become a crutch.’

‘I had a master at school who was a Christian,’ Alastair said, ‘and he was a war hero, and everyone looked up to him. And I remember someone saying to him that his faith was just a crutch. And he replied, “of course it is. And if I need a crutch, you certainly do.”’

In these interactions we see that members of St John’s experience of faith both does and does not make their lives easier: the relationship with God that they experience as central to their religious lives has, as Orsi describes, ‘all the complexities – all the hopes, evasions, love, fear, denial, projections, misunderstandings, and so on – of relationships between humans’ (2005: 2). Members of the church not only repeatedly emphasized that their faith was both a comfort and a struggle but that they were human and got things ‘wrong’ in their faith, that they felt they let God down, and at times, questioned where He was in their lives. We saw in the previous chapter that as members of the church relate to God’s character, they want to do what He asks, yet are conscious they continually fail to meet His demands, and this leads them to be conscious of their guilt and binds them closer in their sense of relationship with, comfort in and dependence on Jesus. In this chapter, I explore how it is not only their seeking to be obedient to God’s demands that makes the Christian life ‘hard’ for members of St John’s, as David described. They can also experience doubts in their faith and uncertainty that God does love them, and these are felt as a state of unease and discomfort.

There is a tendency in writing about evangelicals to posit them as religious fundamentalists, their faith – in response to the uncertainties caused by the increasing scale and abstraction of modern life – offering a sense of certainty, their view of revelation one which ‘re-establishes truth, realigns words and things’ and anchors shifting meanings (Comaroff 2010: 29). Whilst members of St John’s do speak of God as offering certain truth and meaning, as we have seen in preceding chapters, understanding the fine textures of their lives also means reading between the lines and noticing the tears and fissures in this, which mean that whilst they *long* for a God of whom they are more sure than themselves, in practice many struggle at times with doubt and uncertainty, and all are conscious that maintaining their faith requires

discipline, hard work and struggle. Standard academic focus on evangelicals has not drawn attention to this complex dialectical interaction of having and not-having, belief and unbelief, that many members of St John's experience as an everyday tension in their religious lives.

This chapter addresses how, as the structure of evangelicals' faith is based on an orientation towards God as transcendent and bound up with His absence, the specificities of their word-based practices can contribute to forms of doubt, and describes how they develop and improvise strategies, both individual and communal, which respond to this and help them keep persevering in their belief. I begin by outlining the significance of absence within Christianity, and draw on de Certeau's writing on the structure of belief to illuminate the relation between self and other, present and future, implicated in this. I then describe how an orientation to the future is introduced at St John's, which entails a consciousness of Jesus's present absence and an understanding of faith as learning to trust in His promises for the future. I show how members of St John's can find it hard work to maintain that future orientation, and outline the techniques individuals use to respond to doubt and uncertainty. I argue that communal practices play a vital role in maintaining individuals as believers in the face of uncertainties and doubts that arise from the negotiation of conflicting norms associated with the different spaces they move across in the city. These develop a strong sense of connection with other members of the church and collective identification as a 'church family' and help reinforce their orientation to transcendence and a sense of individual insufficiency and social interdependence, orientations that contribute to their sense of being in but not of the world.

### **Absence, Belief, Words**

Simmel argues that God's ultimate coherence is only possible through His being transcendent and physically absent in the immanent world. Christian reflection on the material absence of God is deeply rooted in the earliest fabric of the faith, in particular the life and death of Jesus and expectation of His future return. Throughout Christian history, Christians have looked back in remembrance of Jesus' life and death and forwards to His future return and the coming of His kingdom in ritualized

form. By the time St Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, the earliest form of what became the Eucharist already expressed this remembrance and expectation:

the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

(1 Corinthians 11:23-6, ESV)

In this ritual of remembrance, we see Christianity as marked from its earliest history by awareness of Jesus's absence. As de Certeau expresses this, 'Christianity was founded upon the *loss of a body* – the loss of the body of Jesus Christ, compounded with the loss of the "body" of Israel, of a "nation" and its genealogy. A founding disappearance indeed' (1992: 81). Whilst biblical narratives, as we saw in the previous chapter, draw the reader's attention to God's transcendence, the writing of the New Testament and the ritual performance of the Eucharist is predicated both on the experience of Jesus' absence and the promise of His presence, beginning with Mary Magdalene's statement before the empty tomb, 'They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him' (John 20: 13, ESV). In John's Gospel, Jesus's "being there" is the paradox of "having been" here previously, of remaining inaccessible elsewhere and of "coming back" later. His body is structured by dissemination, like a text. Since that time, the believers have continued to wonder: "Where art thou?" (de Certeau 1992: 82). The structure of the Christian relationship with the divine is therefore, as Simmel argued, a form of desire depending on this condition of having and not-having, as Jesus is both absent yet at the same time invites His disciples to abide in His love, telling them that if they keep His commandments, they will abide in His love (John 15:10).

This pathos of being, as St Paul describes, 'away from the Lord' (2 Corinthians 5:6, ESV), and the centrality of Christ's absence to the Christian experience of faith has been a central preoccupation in Christian theology.<sup>1</sup> Within the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Augustine 1961; Milbank 1997; Ward 2000. See also Engelke 2007: 13-6.



anthropology of Christianity, Matthew Engelke first addressed this ‘problem of presence’ in his evocative study of the Masowe weChishanu Church in Zimbabwe, exploring the uncertainties attendant in the process of embracing material signs of God’s presence (2007). Within the study of evangelicalism, the question of how God becomes present as an intimate friend in the life of evangelicals has been taken up by Tanya Luhmann (e.g. Luhmann *et al.* 2010). The central tropes of belief, faith and desire, by which members of St John’s describe their forms of relationship with God, all imply a sense of absence and incompleteness in the present, which will be fulfilled by God, as Other, in a future consummation of that relationship, a point that de Certeau clearly articulates in his analysis of the nature of belief.<sup>2</sup>

In ‘What We Do When We Believe’, de Certeau argues that belief entails ‘the recognition of an alterity’ (1985: 192). We saw in the previous chapter that God’s character is recognized as Other through emphasis on His moral purity, transcendence and immutability, which members of St John’s contrast with their own sense of sinfulness, fragmentation and transiency, even whilst their criteria to create that sense of difference demonstrate a connection with God and His standards, so that this mediation of an alterity is inevitably complicated. De Certeau describes belief as establishing a contract with one who has been recognized as other, and this requires bringing the future into the present. The ‘believer’ must give up a ‘present advantage, or some of its claims, to give credit to a receiver’ (*ibid.*: 193). Doing this means creating a sense of insufficiency in the self, as the believer ‘hollows out a void in himself relative to the time of the other’, and in doing so he creates a deficit whereby his future interests and the future actions of the other are introduced into the present (*ibid.*).

De Certeau argues that belief depends on the coincidence of absence and presence, as belief in the other names an absence in the self, whilst also producing ‘this “other” presumed to insure against what it is losing’. Belief and time always remain linked, as this practice of difference, in which there is a *deferred* restitution by the other, ‘endows “delay” with all its social pertinency. It is by this “deferred” that

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<sup>2</sup> There has been a shift away from examining ‘belief’ within anthropology of religion (see, for example, Lindquist and Coleman 2008; Elisha 2008). However because of the centrality of belief in the discourse and self-understanding of members of St John’s, focusing on the specific modalities of how this belief is formed and maintained, and the forms of presence and absence bound up in this, helps illuminate the everyday experiences, comforts and struggles of this lifeworld.

believing is separated from seeing.’ (ibid.). These relations are established in a social field in which a plurality guarantees the guarantor, and thus a plurality and a history are knotted into the act of believing, as these guarantors ‘enable’ believing. As noted in Chapter 4, De Certeau describes the social function of belief as operating in many ways like sacrifice in the Durkheimian sense, taking from individual self-sufficiency and marking on the self the existence of the other:

the code of social exchange inscribed on individual nature, while mutilating it, transforms it into a blazon of sociality ... In the order of (re)cognition, believing would be the equivalent of what sacrifice is in the order of religious practices. It carves the mark of the other within an autonomy; it loses a present for a future; it ‘sacrifices’, in other words, ‘makes sense’ (*sacer-facere*), by substituting a debit for a credit.

(1985: 194)

I argued in Chapter 4 that the communal practices of listening at St John’s can be interpreted as an example of this: as members of the church learn to listen together and consume the words of the Bible, this takes from individual self-sufficiency by marking on them their sense of dependence on God and each other. As they come to carry these words in their bodies, this forms them as believing subjects, but their sense of God’s transcendence and Jesus’s physical absence also constructs the incompleteness of the subject, who is constituted in a desire for what always exceeds her.

De Certeau argues that speech enjoys a privilege relation with belief as words state the absence of what they represent (ibid.: 194). As conservative evangelical faith focuses on the object of belief as the Word, this mediates a particular consciousness of God’s transcendence and material absence. Throughout the history of Christianity, Christians have sought to engage in practices whereby a historicity and their future with God are knotted into the present, effecting differentiating relations with God and marking Him and others who act as guarantors of their belief within their autonomy. How then is this temporal orientation, through which the material absence of God as transcendent is rendered present to consciousness in the act of believing, created through specific word-based practices at St John’s?

## **‘As we look to... things unseen’**

A discussion at one of the Rooted groups indicates the conservative evangelical understanding that becoming a believer is achieved through introducing the future of their relationship with Jesus into the present and the central significance of words in this. The discussion that evening was led by Janet, a Scottish lawyer in her forties, and focused on a passage from 2 Corinthians. Janet asked members of the group to read the passage aloud, a couple of verses each:

Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, ‘I believed, and so I spoke,’ we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

(2 Corinthians 4:13-18, ESV)

Janet started the discussion by asking the group how they saw the structure of the passage under discussion that evening (2 Corinthians 4:7-18) and about what they thought Paul meant when he, in an earlier section of the chapter, described Christians as ‘jars of clay’. She then got out from her notebook some slips of paper she’d prepared and split the group into threes, with instructions to arrange the slips of paper in a logical order that would make sense of verses 13-15. I was put in a three with Alan and Sheila, and I spread the slips of paper out, so that the words on them were visible. Alan, with no contribution from Sheila or me, moved the pieces of paper so that the words on them were arranged in the following order: Have Spirit / Have faith / As written / Believe / Speak / Know will be raised / Brought into his presence / Grace extends / Thanksgiving / Glory.

After a few minutes, Janet asked Alan to explain the order he had chosen to the rest of the group. Janet checked whether everyone agreed; all did. Hannah commented that she found this order interesting, stating that, 'in some explanations of the workings of faith, you would have this order of ideas, but often the idea of speaking would be missed out ... Here it's emphasized that if you *believe* in God, you will also speak'. Lucy said she thought that was really important. Alan said it reminded him of the passage in Romans where Paul speaks of confessing with the mouth. He said he'd learnt that from the Authorized Version, and recited from memory:

The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach; that if thou confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

He spoke these words quickly and quietly. Janet agreed it was important to think that 'belief' necessarily entails speaking of the words they had 'received'.

In this interaction, we see the stated understanding of 'belief' at St John's. Believing entails believing in what is written, speaking / confessing, knowing, with the result that 'the Lord Jesus will bring you into his presence'. This establishes, as de Certeau describes, a 'contract' between the believer and God, predicated on the alterity of God and guaranteed by the witness of the Bible and other members of the church (past and present), with the promise of a future in His presence knotted into the present. As the group discussed the verses following this, they showed how their focus on the Bible in these study groups brought the future to their present consciousness. Janet got out a small cast iron model of a set of scales she said was on her windowsill at work, and set it on the table with a sheet of paper with scales drawn on it. She asked Lucy to write down the group's ideas, and then asked the group to compare 'the present situation' with 'the future' described in these verses. Alistair said, 'we have light and momentary affliction' in the present, but the future 'will be the weight of glory beyond all comparison'. Lucy emphasized, 'it's an *eternal* weight of glory'. Hannah said that in the present, 'we are wasting away, but our inner self is being renewed'. Alistair added that 'at present, we look to things seen, and the

contrast for the other column is “things unseen”. Lorna, her voice strained, as if about to cry, said that when her husband was dying, ‘it was so clear, he could *really* see the glory of what was unseen; he could see the passing of this life’.

Simmel describes the person of faith drawing a contrast between the ephemerality of this life and the eternity of God. Here we see how the Rooted group’s habituated practices of focusing on the text of the Bible encourage them to draw this contrast and objectify the present as transient, marked by suffering, and of ultimately less significance than their future life with God. We also see the central place of *words* in this experience of belief in the future: they have received *words* of faith articulating a promise of what God will do in the future (and has done in the past, in raising Jesus from the dead), through which they believe (and speak), and it is through the credit they grant to God’s words and their internalization of these to speak to others that they are incorporated into the body of the saved.

This interlinking of belief and an orientation towards time was created in various ways in the church: through focus on Bible passages, through prayers, sermons, and the words of song lyrics stating, for example, ‘I long to be where the praise is never-ending / Yearn to dwell where the glory never fades’. One of the most popular songs during my fieldwork, with a simple catchy melody, entitled ‘By Faith’, showed the knotting together of historicity and orientation towards the future in the present:

By faith our fathers roamed the earth  
With the power of His promise in their hearts  
Of a holy city built by God’s own hand  
A place where peace and justice reign

[CHORUS]

We will stand as children of our promise  
We will fix our eyes on Him our soul’s reward  
Til the race is finished and the work is done  
We’ll walk by faith and not by sight

By faith the prophets saw a day  
When the longed-for Messiah would appear

With the power to break the chains of sin and death  
And rise triumphant from the grave...

(Getty *et al.* 2009)

The usual instrumentation of the church band in evening services included singer, piano, guitar, bass, drums and violin, but in the verse ‘when the longed-for Messiah would appear...’, all the musicians except the drummer dropped out, and the congregation sang to an intense rolling drum beat of the moment of the Messiah’s coming being both foretold and remembered, signalling the overriding sacrality of this.

Members of St John’s described this focus on God’s promises for the future as central to their faith, for example, when I was talking with an economist early in my fieldwork about themes I might focus on in relation to evangelical faith, she said that time was a crucial theme: ‘since Abraham onwards, we’ve been looking forwards’. While Genesis tells of Abraham setting out for an unknown land, trusting in God’s promise of that land and his children and future descendants, the practices of looking forwards at St John’s mostly do not look to these future promises being fulfilled in their own lives, but rather after their death. The church taught a dispensationalist understanding of salvation history,<sup>3</sup> but there was little sense of an imminent eschaton, and members of the church often said they found it difficult to keep their focus on Jesus’s second coming, and expressed a consciousness that their temporal orientations were shaped by broader cultural norms.

Individuals were encouraged to work on themselves to develop this future focus. At a ‘Summertime’<sup>4</sup> discussion group, for example, one of the evenings focused on the idea of Jesus’s return. I was sitting with members of the student group I had been with the term before, and the passage was Revelation 2:20: ‘He who

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<sup>3</sup> This was evident, for example, when one of the ministers preaching at the Rooted weekend away about the book of Joel offered a clear summary of the teaching of the church on salvation-time. He asked his audience to imagine a time line, ‘and on that time line is the event of the Lord Jesus ... The Jesus event is God sorting out the world ... God’s coming is part of that same event, but they are stretched apart, by, at the moment, about two thousand years, like elastic’.

<sup>4</sup> As the Bible study groups’ programme runs only during the academic year, over the summer holidays, all groups met together at church for ‘Summertime’ studies, sitting with those of their small group who were around. Instead of having prepared a study in advance, the sessions were each led by a different minister, who set questions for the groups to discuss around their tables and gave a short talk on the passage.

testifies to these things, says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!’ (ESV). The minister speaking that evening, in his thirties, tall, with dark hair, wearing an open-necked white shirt and jeans, said, ‘the message that Jesus is coming back is not popular in contemporary culture’, and commented that if people were to shadow him for a couple of weeks, ‘they wouldn’t get a strong sense Jesus was coming back’. He posed the question: ‘what is it about living in London in 2010 that distracts us from Jesus’s return?’, and set three questions for the group to discuss around the tables:

1. How frequently do you think / talk about Jesus’s return?
2. Why is it often the case that this truth gets neglected?
3. What are the dangers to us as Christians if this truth gets neglected?

Here we can see how the practices of study groups encourage a self-reflexive attitude, monitoring their thoughts and words in the light of the ideal that they *should* be thinking about Jesus’s return. On our table, Chris, one of the student leaders, asked Jeff, a quiet American student wearing a buttoned-up polo shirt and chinos to read the questions, as he was himself eating a chocolate bar at that moment. Jeff read the first question out. Steve, the young man sitting next to him, said he *thought* about Jesus’s return more than he talked about it. Gemma said she doesn’t think about it that much, and Chris said he doesn’t either, ‘because things are comfortable in this world, ... it’s easy to think you can be completely satisfied by things in this world’.

Jeff, who had assumed the role of leading the discussion, said Chris’s comments linked with the second question. He said that in the United States, people tend to think of people who talk lots about the end of the world as ‘crazy, like people who read *Left Behind* books, and you wouldn’t want to be associated with them’. Patrick said when he heard someone ‘shouting something about the end of the world’ on the street or tube, ‘you might *know* what they’re saying is true, but you’re still embarrassed by them’. When there was a pause in the conversation, I asked the group why they thought that at certain times, in particular cultures, there is more or less emphasis placed on Jesus’s return. Jim, a tall engineering student with a soft Yorkshire accent, replied that when he’d been in Ghana, the Christians he was with placed more emphasis on Jesus’s return and he linked this with their experiencing material hardships. The rest of the group agreed with him that it was harder to focus

on Jesus's return when the material comforts of the contemporary world appear to offer, as Chris said, 'many ways to satisfaction'.

After ten minutes' discussion, the minister told everyone to wrap up discussions, and said, 'we don't know exactly what Jesus meant when he was coming "soon", but as Christians, we should *learn* to love that promise'. Presenting ideals of how that love could be learnt, he said that two of the church's mission partners in Belgium 'begin every day meditating on Christ's return. This is oxygen to the Christian soul'. He said Christians should focus on the *person* who is going to come, rather than thinking of Jesus's return as an event: 'the Lord I *now* depend on is the one who will come, so we need to build on our relationship with Him, grow in that relationship'. He said they needed to 'keep pointing each other to the words of Jesus ... As we meet together, we are preparing each other for Jesus's return ... No wonder we shouldn't add any words to this or take them away [referring to the passage in Revelation]: His words are perfect'. The group discussed how 'to learn to love that promise', and Jeff commented, 'as our lives now are finite, it doesn't matter whether that promise won't be fulfilled for several thousand years'. At the evening's close, as the group prayed, they said thanks to God for His promise of Jesus's return and prayed they would be more focused on this.

Through this discussion, we can see that it is through attending closely to the text of the Bible that this future element of belief is introduced into the present. A future orientation is present in most books of the Bible, from the promises made to Abraham and Moses, the prophets' expectation of God's judgment on Israel, to the imminent future eschatology of the New Testament authors who believed that upon them the end of the world was coming.<sup>5</sup> But while apocalyptic expectations were not uncommon in the first century, members of St John's experience these teachings as profoundly at odds with the temporal orientations of the world around them. Whilst there is a tendency to posit a return of apocalyptic thinking, both religious and secular, in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008,<sup>6</sup> this discussion shows that members of St John's are aware that they *should* be thinking and speaking about Jesus's return, but that the comforts and satisfactions of this world make that difficult.

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<sup>5</sup> Many of the New Testament epistles pay special attention to the importance of focusing on the future, and this has often been interpreted by New Testament scholars as being to counteract an 'over-realized eschatology' of the earliest Christian communities who thought they were living in the end-times, although there is debate on this (see Thiselton 1978).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Žižek 2010.



This same tension between *wanting* to be oriented to the future and the difficulty of maintaining this was also evident in several other discussions. In one of the student group meetings, for example, focusing on an apocalyptic passage in Luke's Gospel, Gemma asked the group, 'If we know that Jesus is coming back, and could come back any day, why don't we wake up in the morning and go, "wa-hey, Jesus is coming back today"?' Luke said he thought 'it's because we're too attached to the world. It's very easy to feel at home in the world'. Louise, a more senior student leader, commented, 'we are, in fact, aliens and strangers in the world'. Luke replied, 'it's like we're on vacation in the world, but we will be going home ... I was talking about this the other day with Freddie, and was thinking about what I would do if I knew Jesus was coming tomorrow ... I guess it would be like, those friends who I was waiting to get to know better before I mentioned Jesus, well, I'd make sure I got on with it'. He added, 'Wesley, when he was asked that, said he wouldn't change anything. Man, that man was godly'. Luke's comment that they're 'on vacation' in the world suggests his sense of enjoyment in the world, in contrast with Louise's more standard articulation of being 'aliens and strangers'.

The aim to discipline the self as mindful of a future salvation was less bound up with an expectation of Jesus's imminent return – although, as the student group discussion demonstrates, this was talked about from time to time – than with a learnt consciousness towards their own mortality, since they anticipated Jesus's return as occurring after their deaths. Thus, as de Certeau described believing as involving the calculation of a future interest, the promise that God holds out to them of eternal life is felt to be worth what they describe as the 'costs' of faith as they become habituated to contemplating their own mortality through listening to sermons on this theme. Freddie, for example, in a sermon on 2 Timothy, said that 'Paul wants us to be focused on the life to come, so you can take the shame. Be like a soldier who will endure anything as he looks forward to his commanding officer coming home'. He asked the congregation to turn to a passage in 2 Timothy, and read out St Paul's words:

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth is laid up for me the crown of righteousness,

which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing.

(2 Timothy 4:6-8, ESV)

Freddie said Paul ‘had made his choice’ to endure and ‘take the shame’, and therefore approached his death ‘with joy’. He asked the congregation, ‘as individuals, have *we* made that choice?’, demonstrating how bringing the future into the present here entails asking the congregation to reflect on both God’s judgment and their own mortality. Frank Kermode notes that St Augustine saw that ‘anxieties about the end are, in the end, anxieties about one’s own end; he was long before me in suggesting that apocalypse, once imaginable as imminent, had the capacity to become immanent instead’ (2000: 186), as it does at John’s.

Whilst members of the church strive to be focused on the future, maintaining this focus is described as a struggle: Pete said at the start of a sermon, ‘what causes us to doubt the certainty of heaven?’, and Hugo said in another sermon, ‘What keeps us from wanting the heavenly city?’. As their learnt orientation towards the future arises through their focus on the words of the Bible, it is, we will see, partly their focus on words that can lead to doubts and uncertainties about whether or not God is really present in their lives.

### **‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief’**

Members of St John’s express a conviction, as the Rooted group discussed in a study on 2 Corinthians, that whilst they are ‘at home in the body... [they are] away from the Lord’. It is, as discussed in the previous chapters, through words that God’s character is mediated to them and they experience a relationship with Him as they speak and listen. This presence and absence of God as the structure of faith was clearly articulated as the Rooted group discussed the phrase St Paul uses in 2 Corinthians, ‘we walk by faith, not by sight’. Hannah, leading the discussion that evening, asked what the phrase actually means. Edward said, in a serious tone of voice, ‘I think it means that we live by what we *know* is true, from what God has said in the Bible ... But it’s not the same as having a tangible face-to-face encounter with God ... It’s like if a parent were away from their child, and communicating by email. Our relationship depends on our listening to what He is saying and responding in obedience’. He

reiterated: 'it's not the same as having the physical presence of the father there ..., the relationship can break down'.

We saw in Chapter 4 that the emphasis on listening practices differentiates conservative evangelical experiences from visible forms of emotionality in charismatic evangelicalism and denominations emphasizing the performance of liturgy. To repeat David's words: 'A Christianity that starts to rely on the visual, ... I need ... an extra experience to assure me that I'm in the presence of God, that's deformed Christianity'. This mistrust of emotions is linked to both the historical emphasis on the Word in Reformed Christianity. It is also, as already noted, linked to the male public-school habitus of British conservative evangelicalism's key twentieth century leaders (Ward 1997: 30).<sup>7</sup> When I interviewed Freddie, he expressed consciousness of this, acknowledging that the church was shaped by its post-war leaders being 'public-school educated, with a low value on expressing your emotions publicly, and it's probably fair to say that the leadership at [St John's] is still significantly drawn from that group'. He talked about the effect of 'the growth of the charismatic movement; ... the older generation at [St John's] remember that as a split, and remember defining themselves not as charismatics ... And that's a really interesting question: to what extent we are in reaction to charismatics rather than actually true to the theological principles where we want to be'.

Freddie explained the theological rationale for privileging knowledge over emotionality as linked to the inherent instability of emotions, in contrast with the unchanging constancy and coherence of God's truth: 'If you're walking on the wall, if you look at truth or reason and you walk along the wall and emotion follows after, if you turn around and look at emotion and try and walk along the wall, then you'd probably fall off'. He explained that emotions are important to being fully human, but that they should 'follow what you *believe* to be true. So if you believe that Jesus loves you, ... it would be strange not to have the emotional response that's appropriate to you as a person'. He said that if someone relies on emotions to determine beliefs, 'then if you're feeling depressed or ... stressed, you will make wrong deductions about your Christian life'. This mistrust of emotions is bound up not only with a

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<sup>7</sup> Some commented to me that they find the lack of emotional display during services limiting, for example, John, who used to go to a charismatic church before university, and described services at St John's as 'quite dry... I find it's all stand up, sit down, hands in pockets'. A few months after my period of fieldwork had ended, John emailed me to ask how I was getting on, and commented that he had stopped going to St John's.

differentiation between a sense of human instability and the unchanging coherence of God, but also with the temporal orientation of conservative evangelicalism, which members of St John's differentiate from charismatics. At one of the Rooted weekends away, the minister leading said, 'although there are many good things about the charismatic movement, it's based on heresies', which he explained in terms of the movement being 'too focused on enjoying the gifts of heaven now, and therefore not focused on the future'.

As we saw in this previous chapter, this emphasis on knowledge as the marker of faith does not mean that evangelical life is *unemotional*. The God in whom they believe is both a transcendent unity *and* a jealous lover demanding their fidelity. These characteristics, as we saw, have an agency in naming evangelical subjects as guilty sinners, as their reflection on God's character produces a consciousness of their subjective fragmentation and desire for wholehearted devotion. However, their learnt focus on the future, this idea of belief as *knowledge*, and emphasis on the biblical text as the only reliable mediator of the transcendent God together have particular effects on evangelical subjectivities, making the maintenance of their sense of relationship with God precarious.

A sermon David preached on John 14:8-21 offers a clear illustration of how this focus on words can produce in individuals a sense of uncertainty about whether they have *really* experienced God. The passage begins with the disciple Philip saying to Jesus, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us'. Jesus replied, 'Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:8-9, ESV). David said the issue he was going to explore in the sermon was 'the wait between the departure of Jesus and His return some time in the future, and what it looks like for you and me to have a genuine experience of God today'. He said Philip's words can be interpreted as a request: 'please, give us a full-bodied, face-to-face physical encounter with God the Father, and that will be enough to answer all our questions as we wait for your return, Jesus'. He went on to state that this consciousness of Jesus's physical absence is common to all Christians:

We are ... looking at an issue ... that puts into words a longing which every one of us will be familiar with. There will, I hope, be many here this evening who are investigating the Christian faith ..., you're very welcome here ... But I can easily hear you saying, 'well, if only I could just *see* God, if only He'd make

Himself known, face-to-face, then I could believe'. And then there will be plenty of us who perhaps have been following the Lord Jesus for longer, who long to see God face-to-face. We know enough of God to know that on the last day when Jesus returns it will be a glorious thing. And so we say to ourselves, 'Lord, won't you just know yourself to us, may we not see you, that will be enough?'

The sermon was characteristically predicated on the conviction that Jesus / God continues to speak through the Bible. The contemporary audience are imagined as posing a question – why can't God reveal Himself? – to which Jesus provides a direct answer through the medium of the text, so that the engagement with the text is constructed and experienced as a conversation with God. The answer Jesus provides, David states, linking this to the passage from John, is: 'look at me, says Jesus, and you see God. Listen to me, says Jesus, you hear God. Touch me and you've touched God. Walk with me and you've walked with God.'

David said that although in listening to the words of Jesus the individual experiences God, all Christians would at times, however, experience God's remoteness:

There will come a time, if not now, then at some future point when you find in your Christian life that everything seems just a bit dry and dusty. God seems oh so remote. How is it that I have a living experience of God? Once I had a vibrant, active, energetic, vivid experience of God, those years ago. But from time to time you will find yourself just a little bit out of sorts in your experience of God. The psalmist calls it like being a wine skin in the smoke. Now, personally, I've never been a wine skin in smoke ..., but one can imagine the feeling as the wine skin dries out and becomes brittle and dry and dusty. And elsewhere, the psalmist calls it like being in the desert. How is it then that I experience and regain that living walk, vibrant experience of God?

He emphasized again that God works 'through the *words* of Jesus', and said that Jesus' miracles were evidence of the power of God's word, as, with turning water into wine, the raising of Lazarus, feeding the five thousand, 'Jesus *spoke* and it happened'. David said someone might object to this: 'it all seems so academic, all we're doing is

just sitting, listening to the Bible; you want me to come on a Wednesday night to study God's Word and sit round a table with a group of other people and read a dry, old, dusty book?' He said Jesus would respond: 'that is how God works'. He asked the congregation to visualize a red traffic sign that instead of saying 'men at work' reads 'God at work', and to 'imagine that sign, every time you walk in the doors of [St John's] to hear God's Word: God at work. Every time you set yourself the discipline of daily reading of God's Word: God at work. When you set out on a Tuesday, a Wednesday evening to come and read the Bible, I'm coming to God at work'.

Describing a period in his own life when he felt 'a period of great isolation, and I have to say real discouragement ... I felt a very, very long way from God, and a very, very long way from any experience of God,' he said he used to play Christian music to try and recreate the atmosphere of his university Christian Union. He described this as the wrong approach because it did not 'take the *words* of Jesus seriously', and highlighted other technologies of religious subject formation that he considered inadequate:

My question was just the same as Philip's question, 'Lord, show me the Father, allow me to grow in Christian experience'. But the answer of coming to know Jesus does not come from a mystical experience on a mountaintop, ... nor does it come from some sort of sacramental encounter in a religious ceremony ... Nor does it come from manufacturing moving moments with a worship group that lifts me to the heights and brings me down, or a preacher who makes me laugh and cry and moves my emotions. It comes through the powerful words of Jesus...

I wish I had something slightly more exciting, something with more sort of rrrmmph to it ... You sort of think, well, surely there's some sort of technique, some sort of conference I can go to in the outer Hebrides, surely there's somebody we can go and see and have special advice, or hands laid on us ... and we'll have an experience of God. 'No,' says Jesus, 'look at me, listen to me, speak to me'. It's Sunday school, isn't it? It's what you were taught – if you were brought up in a Christian home – on your mother and father's knee. If you want an experience, a genuine experience, of the living God, wonderfully, it's

as simple as that ... You don't have to travel off on pilgrimage to Lourdes or something ... You've got it right here, everything you need. Look. Listen. Speak.

He touched on the idea of love as also what Jesus commanded, saying that those who love Jesus obey His commandments, and that this makes the church a family united in relationship with Jesus and the Father. He said, 'Jesus Himself will come and dwell in us, with us, by His Holy Spirit', and asked members of the church, 'tomorrow morning, when you're putting on your make-up or shaving in front of the mirror... can I ask you to look at yourself in the mirror and say to yourself, if you're somebody who loves the Lord Jesus, "God [pause] dwells [pause] in [pause] me [pause]. In me.'" He closed by reiterating a sense of distance from charismatic evangelicals' understanding of the Holy Spirit:

The point is not that ... I do the ... dry, dull and academic study of God's Word and then, yes, ah *now* the Holy Spirit is going to come and work powerfully ... Sometimes you go to a church like that where you hear the sermon and then the vicar gets down out of the pulpit [*David walks down the steps of the pulpit*] and he says, 'well, now we're going to ask the Holy Spirit to come and move powerfully in our midst', and the music strikes up, and everybody starts to feel all wobbly and stuff... [*David walks back up into the pulpit*]. That's the first time I've ever done that, and I won't do it again. [*The congregation laugh*]. We used to be tied by the pulpit to one of these. [*He gestures to an electric cable.*]<sup>8</sup> But sometimes you hear people do that in church; it is almost blasphemous. It is almost blasphemous because it suggests that God the Holy Spirit is somehow separate from God the Son and His Word and work. No: it is *as* we are listening to God speak through His Word that God the Holy Spirit is at work in us. It's a wonderful thing, teaching, training, building, correcting, drawing near to us, enabling us to love the Lord Jesus.

This sermon is striking because his acknowledgement that all Christians feel God's absence acutely from time to time, and his discussion of his experience of that,

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<sup>8</sup> Ministers at St John's use wireless headset microphones when preaching.

contradicts impressions of conservative evangelicals as always confident in their faith. Here we see that the temporal *delay* implied in belief is imbued with pertinency, as de Certeau describes, as individuals not only ask ‘where art thou?’ but can lose their sense of certainty in what the words of faith index.

Whilst consciousness of Jesus’s absence is an ineradicable element of Christianity, as liturgical and ritual traditions and the text of the Bible are predicated on His death and the expectation of His return, this sermon suggests that in contexts in which there are no obvious *visible* experiential signs, such as speaking in tongues, crying, laughing, ‘going a bit wobbly’, or rituals such as the Eucharist, that *mark* the Christian as incorporated into the body of Christ, individuals can doubt that God really *is* at work in them. Thus David here acts as a guarantor of belief, himself looking to the text of the Bible as a guarantor, and aims to reinforce amongst the congregation their faith that they really are experiencing God when they come to church, read and study the Bible and pray. He encourages them to persevere in the disciplined repetition of these practices, whilst delegitimizing those of other Christian traditions that are perceived as taking away from the centrality of scripture. This is not a Protestant ‘fantasy of immediacy’ (Engelke 2010b: 812), since we see a clear acknowledgement of the importance of the text and the practices of listening, looking, praying and meeting together as the embodied forms by which individuals become oriented to a mediated transcendent. But we also see acknowledgement of the precariousness of these practices, which is bound up with their form as words.

Merleau-Ponty describes language as a material form that has a tendency to disappear:

The wonderful thing about language is that it promotes its own oblivion: my eyes follow the lines on the paper, and from the moment I am caught up in their meaning, I lose sight of them. The paper, the letters on it, my eyes and body are there only as the minimum setting of some invisible operation. Expression fades out before what is expressed, and this is why its mediating role may pass unnoticed, and why Descartes nowhere mentions it.

(2002: 466)

Any human experience of language is always embodied, as listening, for example, depends on the vibration of sounding bodies and the training of the ear to attend to



particular sounds. Reading and writing are thus inevitably material, with the eye scanning, interpreting and reproducing words, a process which, as Harvey notes, abstracts properties, persons and things from the flux of experience and fixes them spatially, with writing as ‘a set of tiny marks marching in a neat line, like armies of insects, across pages and pages of white paper ... a definite spatialization’ (Harvey 1989: 206). Yet modes of attentiveness to words rather than the embodied means of experiencing them can push ‘the body below the threshold of consciousness’ (Morgan 2012: 171), and indeed led Descartes to doubt the reality of the body itself, as Merleau-Ponty describes.

It might be expected that this is what happens in conservative evangelical focus on the Word, with a focus on the transcendent God mediated in words leading to the body itself becoming almost absent (cf. Leder 1990). Yet David’s acknowledgement of doubting religious experience shows how the nature of embodiment itself complicates this: his emphasis that listening to the words of the Bible *is* experiencing God demonstrates a consciousness *both* that it is only through specific material practices of looking, listening, etc. that individuals can have a relationship with God *and* that embodied humans crave an interaction with the sacred that is felt as somehow *more* than this. The precariousness of the experience of belief, in this context, I want to suggest, is bound up with the interconnection of three threads of conservative evangelical experience outlined in the preceding chapters. First, as T.S. Eliot describes words as ‘slipping, sliding’, and as language tends, as Merleau-Ponty writes, to efface itself, in a modernity in which sensuous experiences of the body are valued, it is easy for what is mediated by words to seem less *real* than forms of religion that mark the body as more visibly having experienced God, for example, through heightened states of emotion, as David’s sermon indicates. Second, as God is transcendent and Jesus is physically absent, it is easy, in the everyday busy-ness of the city, to forget Him. As Emma, a student said, ‘yeah, it’s hard, cos thinking about God and eternity, it’s just hard when we’re so wrapped up in the day-to-day and the here and now, and sometimes it’s just hard to remind ourselves of Him, because He’s not immediately present’. Third, as the subjectivities of members of the church are simultaneously formed in secular spaces encouraging modes of desire and practice that pull against those encouraged at St John’s, this can lead to emotional uncertainty, especially when the ‘future interest’ calculated in the act of believing appears to the individual less attractive than what they must sacrifice for that. This was exemplified

by individuals I interviewed who said they had experienced more extended periods of questioning their faith and doubt when dating non-Christians, which is not encouraged at St John's, and student leaders I interviewed said that relationships with non-Christians were one of the main reasons for students leaving the church.

Charles Sanders Peirce describes doubt as 'an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves', in contrast with belief as 'a calm, satisfactory state...' (cited in Morgan 2010: 3). Peirce writes that because of the emotional disturbance caused by doubt, 'we cling tenaciously not merely to believing, but to believing just what we do believe' (ibid.). Matthew, in charge of city ministry, articulated his understanding of the ongoing necessity of disciplined practices in terms resonant with this:

the default position for all of us as Christians is drift. We don't have to do anything to drift; if we don't do anything, we do drift, but we've got to make an effort to keep going, to continue ... The old line people used to say to me, 'read your Bible and pray every day', ... when you chat to somebody about why they've drifted into all sorts of mess, almost invariably you can trace it back to, 'well, I was in a busy patch and my Bible reading and prayer went out the window'.

As the church leadership acknowledged doubt as a part of the life of faith and as an uneasy state,<sup>9</sup> they encouraged particular techniques to cling to belief, to 'keep going'. At the Easter Sunday morning service in 2011, for example, Stevie, preaching on John's Gospel said, 'there are times for all of us that we doubt ... It could be that coming to church, you had a fleeting question: what if it's not true? It might be that those doubts are more deep-seated than that. John would say that the evidence is true. When those doubts spring up in my mind, I turn back to the resurrection'. This statement that 'all of us' experience doubt enables the evangelical who experiences doubt to understand that this is not unusual: they are still included in the 'us' of his

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<sup>9</sup> When individuals I interviewed spoke of doubt, they spoke of it as an undesirable and uneasy state. Lucy, for example, said she had made a conscious choice to be a Christian at university, 'but I think that was slightly an emotional woo-hoo, but then afterwards, I found myself thinking, well, is this just a nice idea?' and described a more extended subsequent period of doubt: 'I remember standing there, at the station, and there was this huge black hole of, is it really true?'

statement. At one of the Rooted weekends away, a member of one of the groups asked in a question and answer session about the experience of despair. Pete replied that Luther had made the grounds of belief 'Not how *I* feel... but the cross'. He said a good routine Christian prayer is, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief'.

As words can be experienced as slipping, cracking, the leaders and members of the church encourage particular techniques to enable them to keep going in their belief, and model how to respond to doubts about God's promises for the future and His presence with them. Several people talked about how when they experienced doubt, they found it helpful to focus on the resurrection, and the church leaders encouraged this technique, with the Bible taken as acting as a 'guarantor' of Jesus. Thus Stevie stated, 'John has written his whole Gospel so we would believe', and he said that there was 'rock solid evidence' for the resurrection: 'let this iron evidence strengthen your belief'. In a question and answer session after another sermon, one of the questions Freddie read out for David asked, 'is doubt of such things as foundations, God's future, His promises, on an almost daily basis, is that part of the normal Christian experience?' David's reply emphasized the importance of work on the self by the self and friends as important in overcoming doubt, and characterized this as an ongoing struggle. He said:

Some people find their whole Christian life plagued by doubt. And that is part of the battle of the Christian life ... And it is a battle. You think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, on His knees, praying to the Lord. I was thinking about this just this morning actually in my own prayers, you know, I must realize when temptation comes, that's what it is: a battle. And then put on the armour of faith and preach the gospel to yourself again. Tell your friends that you really struggle in this area and ask them to pray with you to remind you of the great gospel truths. And don't stop meeting together ..., but encourage each other all the more as you see the day draw near.

Several individuals spoke of how they dealt with doubts using this idiom of 'preaching the gospel to yourself'. Steph, for example, said it was important to acknowledge doubts, 'to have integrity but work things through ... So, talk to yourself, preach to yourself, and reason from the scriptures to yourself. And I think that meeting up with another person can just be helpful with that'. Others talked of how

they referred to passages in the Bible where others experienced doubt, so that they could identify with these authors. Louisa, for example, said the Psalms had become ‘very personal’ to her ‘through difficult and struggling times ... because they’re just honest as prayers before God, you know: Where are you? Where is your faithfulness? When will you come? Please don’t delay’. Others talked about how when forms of suffering in their lives led them to doubt God’s faithfulness, they, like Jesus in Gethsemane, addressed their doubts – and sometimes their anger – to God. Hannah, for example, whose father was ill for most of the period I was conducting fieldwork, and who visited him every week as he became more and more sick, said she found herself getting angry at God about this.

Sermons consistently emphasized God’s constancy and faithfulness to His people in terms that encouraged belief in spite of consciousness of His material absence or indications of His inaction, with the Bible taken as guarantor of this. Freddie, for example, opened a sermon on Isaiah 49 with the question, ‘Has God forgotten us?’ and considered this in relation to verse 16, in which God says: ‘I have engraved you on the palm of my hands’. Freddie said, ‘God in the tattoo parlour is the image here ... God is less likely to forget us than a mother is to forget her infant ... God feels for us *more* than a nursing mother’. Sermons focusing on God’s faithfulness and His credibility were one of the most common themes during fieldwork, and these were invariably followed by prayers and songs expressing these themes, for example, the hymn immediately following this sermon was ‘Great is thy faithfulness’, which George introduced by saying, ‘this is a song that reminds us that God cannot and will not abandon us’. Individuals singing these songs and saying these prayers, in the company of each other, as a plurality of guarantors reinforcing each others’ beliefs, entailed a normative tilt to trust in these future promises and a sense of God’s presence, as words of the following song articulated a conviction that ‘Our God is with us now’.

As the act of believing entails for members of St John’s a trust that God will both act in the future to bring them into His presence *and* a conviction that they *have* been redeemed and forgiven and that He is with them, individuals also articulated doubts that God really loved them or that they really had been forgiven. Weber highlighted uncertainty over salvation as a matter of pre-eminent concern for Puritans (2001: 65ff), and despite the doctrine of assurance that is explicitly promoted at the church, members of the church – especially younger members – often expressed

doubts about whether they really had been saved. Steph talked about a friend who 'would say things like, "I just don't know if God loves me", that kind of thing', and so sermons like Freddie's counteract this by describing the certainty of God's love. The individual techniques ministers encouraged to counteract doubts about salvation involved 'returning to the cross'. As discussed in the previous chapter, focus on Jesus's death produces an emotional response in members of the church, and therefore, despite leaders' saying that emotions should not be taken as markers of their salvation, this orientation to Jesus's death produces an emotional response which helps individuals persevere in the light of their uncertainties.

Individuals are conscious of using these techniques of the self to form their knowledge, emotions and desires as coherent, and Gemma described it as 'bringing her emotions in line with reason'.<sup>10</sup> Thus as we saw in the previous chapter that consciousness of the failure to meet God's standards for wholehearted love and devotion to Him serve to embed the believing subject into relationship with Him through producing them as guilty and leading to a sense of dependence on Jesus, so also the uneasy experience of doubt encourages techniques that will reassure them of God's faithfulness to and love for them. Because God is physically absent and, as Matthew described, the natural state for Christians is 'drift', members of the church are conscious that maintaining the credibility of a transcendent Other can be hard work and that clinging to belief and persisting in a temporal orientation to the future He promises requires effort and discipline. Whilst their individual strategies of dealing with doubt help to re-orient them towards the practice of belief, it is the ongoing practice of their habituated communal interactions with each other that ultimately keeps them knotted in the relations that maintain their believing in God's presence and future.

### **Individuality, Incompleteness and Insufficiency**

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<sup>10</sup> Older members of the congregation sometimes spoke of doubts about their salvation. Lucy, for example, who had been coming to St John's for twenty five years, said, 'you do occasionally think, you know, this is so wonderful, can it be true? I mean, it's like a fairytale, isn't it? It is; it's happily ever after'. David said in a sermon that sometimes he worried if he got angry with his children that he was 'not numbered among God's people', but said that the fact that he worried about this showed that he was 'in the land of blessing rather than curse'. However most of the older members of the congregation said that as they got older, they had learnt to trust they were forgiven. Liz, for example, said, 'once you're middle-aged, you realize you're just a sinner, and you get used to the fact that you'll keep getting things wrong'.

De Certeau argues that belief requires guarantees by others: 'It is because others (or many) believe it that an individual can take his debtor to be faithful and trust him. A plurality guarantees the guarantor' (1985: 201). At St John's, it is collective practices in the church that establish the credibility not only of God but of other believers and the Bible that help individuals 'keep going'. As de Certeau argues that belief entails hollowing out a void in the self, and taking from individual self-sufficiency as existence of the other is marked on the self (ibid: 195), so the practices of members of St John's that maintain them as believers are a means of forming individuals conscious of their insufficiencies and orienting them outwards. As individuals desire to turn beyond the self, *through* the self, to God and Jesus, and learn to orient themselves towards past and future, they seek to cultivate themselves (individually and collectively) as not at home in, different from, the world, through their shared practices.

I have already considered the significance accorded to different forms of listening practices in the church and Bible study groups as the means of relating to God: these are understood as vital in enabling people to 'keep going' as believers. Gemma said that when she doubted God loves her, she found it especially helpful to listen to a sermon that 'speaks the truth to me'. Leaders are conscious that it would be easy, in a large urban church, for individuals to go for several weeks without going to church and get out of the habit of attending, and therefore emphasize the meaning of Sunday services as where they experience, as David described, 'God at work'. They encourage the congregation to text or email friends if they haven't seen them at church for a while, and to invite newcomers to supper after services and to look out for them and chat to them, so they quickly feel welcome. Members of the church do this: after I stopped going to services at the end of fieldwork, although I had made the endpoint of my study clear to those I had got to know, I nevertheless received emails from people asking when I was next going to be at church. Individuals thus knot each other into relationships of accountability, so they feel there are people who expect and want to see them at church.

This accountability was also a feature of small groups, as members of the groups narrate their participation in these groups as a form of 'serving' each other, with an expectation of reciprocity from others. When Emily was rarely present at the Rooted group during my second year of fieldwork because of netball practice, a

couple of others in the group described her absence with a sense that she was letting them down. One student I interviewed said, 'I don't know any other church with such strong accountability, through the small groups, with your leaders. If I miss a [Bible study] session, I'll get a text from my leader asking if I'm ok ... Yeah, there's lots of accountability'. Mostly however it is the friendships they develop with each other that mean they *want* to keep attending the groups, and enjoy them. One woman told me she looked forward to her study group 'with delight ... I've never missed it, in fact, all last year, I turned up for all of them, and this year, I thought I wasn't going to make it one week, because I had [a problem with her eye], but they put a patch on my eye ... and somebody walked me to the station. I haven't missed one yet'.

Thus as members make themselves accountable to each other and to God, they form themselves as obliged to give their time to each other. The details of their practices together as they listen to sermons, read the Bible, and listen to, talk and eat with each other orients them towards listening to God, seeking to hear Him speak and learn of His character and developing a sense of trust in His promises. As they seek to focus on the character of God as Other, holy, coherent and desiring their wholehearted devotion, they learn to understand themselves as 'aliens and strangers' looking forward to what God promises for the future. As they seek to draw closer to Him, they likewise want to be 'other', different from those around, but are conscious that this is an ongoing struggle. As Pete said in a sermon, for Christians, 'there will always be areas of your life that set you apart ... If your identity is rooted in the approval of people rather than God, there will always be a temptation to conform to the standards of the world'. He encouraged the congregation to think of alternative sources of value as insignificant compared with the meaning promised by God, citing Tolstoy as saying, 'Is there any meaning in life that would not be annihilated by the certainty of my death?' He said: 'life is futile unless God has ransomed us from futility. From that moment on, every moment is flooded with meaning and value, as we fulfill God's purposes, in every second ... Everything else in the world will perish. Jesus alone is the one who can save, the unblemished, spotless, Passover lamb. God has given us a faith and a hope that cannot disappoint'. He then encouraged members of the church to consider their identities in the light of this: 'At my core: who do I think I am? Where do I find my identity and my security?' He said that Christians should be 'living for Him ... wanting to be like Him,' and referred to the 'danger facing the Western church of going "spiritually native"... Be different, so we can make a

difference in this world’.

As members of the church seek to develop this collective orientation towards the world as ultimately futile and God as the sole source of their identity and security, we have seen throughout this thesis that this is experienced as a struggle. The pressures of everyday city life make it easy to forget about God, and the moral milieu they inhabit outside the church encourages norms of interaction in tension with what they understand God as asking of them. Questions like those Paul addresses lead them to be aware of their internal divisions, conscious of alternative sources of value that mean they *do* care about the approval of others, as for example, they do not want to speak about the church’s teachings on issues such as sexuality. Their listening practices in the space of the church are means of evangelical subject formation through which boundaries that separate them from those outside the church are drawn, even whilst these function to divide the evangelical subject within herself and lead her to be conscious of her internal fragmentation, as the demands to be holy are set out in ways that she is aware she falls short of.

The small groups are to a certain extent constructed as a space where these boundaries of who is inside and outside can be established, monitored and controlled, with members’ behaviour deemed important for what it signifies about the morality of the church to others. In a sermon on Joshua, David said, ‘we live in a very atomized and individualized society, and therefore we can find it hard to think about our connectedness to each other’. He said the message of Joshua is that members of the church’s lives are interconnected: what they do with their private lives ‘has an effect on others in the church’. Although this did not happen with the groups I observed, the small groups can be a site where church leaders police symbolic boundaries in areas that locate the church as morally distinctive from wider culture, for example, over issues of sexual morality. In a sermon focusing on the church’s teaching on sex, Freddie said the church had excluded unmarried cohabiting members of the church, by in effect asking them to leave their Bible study groups, and one of the minister’s hesitations about allowing me to be participant-observer in one of the Bible study programme tracks was, he explained, because perceived as a non-Christian and yet participating in the study, my behavior might be ‘confusing’ to the group.

However, this policing and boundary-controlling function was not evident in the groups I observed. Although members of the groups formed friendships with each other through the groups, they did not necessarily lay all their private lives open to



scrutiny in the contexts of the groups, and their disciplining of selves and each other in these groups was formed less through the shared exposure of their 'private' lives than through their repetitive focus on reading and listening and talking about the Bible together as they sought to shape their thinking in line with the words of the text. Liz commented that one of the problems of being a Christian in the city compared with a small town is that it is easy to only present a certain side of oneself to others in the church. Jan, one of the quieter members of the Rooted group, commented to me that she thought I would not necessarily observe what really mattered to people through the small groups, indicating her sense that members of the group would not necessarily discuss the most intimate concerns of their lives in these spaces. As individuals did however form close friendships with other members of the church with whom they would feel more comfortable talking about these issues in other social settings,<sup>11</sup> this demonstrates how the felt boundaries of 'private' and 'public' space shaped what they felt comfortable speaking about across different spaces. The fact that members of the small groups did not lay bare their private lives to each other in this 'public' setting suggests their modes of interaction in this context are shaped partly through their valuing the metropolitan norm of non-interference and partly through the fact their discussions in the settings in the group were mostly dominated, following the church's set Bible study programme, by textual exegesis and discussion of the ethical implications of the portions of text they were focusing on.

Thus whilst the logic of the desire for wholeheartedness tilts towards establishing forms of connection in which individuals can establish forms of accountability in which their moral lives are exposed to each other, as David's words suggests, their collective practices are in practice shaped by an urban ethic of 'civility',<sup>12</sup> and they respect each others' rights to privacy in the church and in small groups. Whilst they routinely acknowledged aspects of the struggles of living out their faith together, for example, admitting they found it hard to evangelize to friends or family, and collectively identified a sense of their 'sinfulness' that reinforced their shared identity as a church, the small groups were not the spaces where these issues

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<sup>11</sup> I am inferring this not only through the comments of Liz, Jan and a couple of other informants who expressed this sense, but also through contrasts in some of the issues members of the church I got to know well spoke about in spaces outside the church, for example, when we met up for coffee, and their not speaking about these issues in discussions in small groups, and through how members of the church talked, in interviews, about their turning to close friends from the church when experiencing particular difficulties or worries.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Sennett 2002a: 264.

were addressed at length. Thus their modes of accountability encouraged them to keep meeting together, embedding them in the practice of belief through keeping them in forms of relationship that drew them back to the church to keep listening to God. As individuals thereby became habituated in forms of practice that afforded them pleasure in the give and take of their interactions together, they learn to act, together with their leaders and the characters in the narratives that are the object of their study, as guarantors of the credibility of the Bible, and in doing so help reinforce in each other their desires and ambitions to be disciples.

## Conclusion

Narratives of selfhood and identity are, as Alasdair MacIntyre describes, relationally formed as individuals give and ask for accounts of themselves and their actions: 'I am part of their story, as they are part of mine. The narrative of any one life is part of an interlocking set of narratives. Moreover this asking for and giving an account itself plays an important part in constituting narratives' (2007: 218). As individuals experience themselves as accountable to others and develop a sense that these others depend on them, this helps form an ethic of self-constancy. Paul Ricoeur writes:

Because someone is counting on me, I am *accountable for* my actions before another. The term 'responsibility' unites both meanings: 'counting on' and 'being responsible for.' It unites them, adding to them the idea of a *response* to the question 'Where are you?' asked by another who needs me.

(1992: 165)

As members of St John's make themselves accountable to others in the church, asking 'where are you?' of each other, they make themselves 'responsible' to each other, weaving themselves into relationships of mutual obligation. They narrate their collective practices as means of 'serving' each other and God, and form a shared identity as the body of Christ, seeking to listen to Him and working together to enable themselves to keep going as believers.

In this intersubjective fashioning of their collective identity as the body of Christ, they not only ask 'where are you?' of each other, but also experience God asking this of them, and they also ask this of Him. Sennett argues that flexibility and

mobility in the labour market led to capitalist conditions of time marked by short-termism, flux and disjointedness, threatening people's ability 'to form their characters into sustained narratives' as they lack long-term witnesses of their lives (1998: 31). As most members of St John's have moved to London for work and typically change jobs several times in their working lives, their urban experiences are likewise marked by this flux. In this context, they work to make themselves accountable not only to each other, but also to God, who is a long-term witness, demanding their self-constancy. As we saw in the previous chapter, they understand God as a coherent unity who wants *their* self-constancy and coherence, and this leads them to be conscious of their internal fragmentation, narrated as sinfulness, and embeds them in their sense of dependence on a God who offers an ultimate sense of coherence in the person of Jesus. Yet as transcendent, God is never materially present, since the Christian faith has from its earliest beginnings been predicated on the loss of a body. Thus contrary to narratives of evangelical certainty, many members of the church ask, as Louisa and the psalmist did, 'where are you?' and want to be reassured of God's coherence and constancy. They are conscious of these doubts, which they experience as an uneasy state, and work on themselves and each other to keep going in their belief, summoning each other, the text of the Bible and the characters in it to act as witnesses to help guarantee their confidence in God's faithfulness, constancy and love. As they acknowledge doubts and share techniques for dealing with these, their identifications with characters in the Bible who also encounter doubt enable them to locate such experiences of disjunction as part of an overarching narrative of coherence. This encourages them to work hard to trust not in their own feelings, but to develop a sense of trust in the knowledge of God, His love and His character that they come to understand the Bible as revealing.

As they seek to shape their focus as looking forward to a future, heavenly city and God's presence with them, they are conscious of the extent to which they are rooted in the immanent, earthly city, which makes their focus on a transcendent, materially absent divine and their discipleship 'wobbly', as Hugo described. As he asked, 'what keeps us from wanting the heavenly city? What makes it seem remote and distant to us?', he expressed a consciousness that more 'immediate and pressing' everyday concerns can easily 'take over from God at the heart of our lives' and become 'idols'. This consciousness, as we saw in the previous chapter, forms evangelicals' self-identification as sinful before a coherent and transcendent God,

experienced as Other. Yet whilst 'idolatry' is understood in terms of a 'rebellious' construction of alternative sources of value and meaning, so that the technique of dealing with this is cultivating a desire for obedience to the Word, the experience of doubt is not described as due to individuals' willful rejection of God but rather as inherent to the transcendence of God and the structure of a faith mediated in words. Thus individuals collectively reassure themselves that in listening to the words of Jesus in the Bible, they *are* listening to God. Conscious that their natural state is 'drift', in their meeting together they work to discipline their desires and actions to be oriented towards a future, aware that maintaining this focus is a struggle as God's speaking and His promises of a future simultaneously index His present absence. As they seek to discipline their thoughts and desires so that they *do* want the heavenly city, their knotting each other into forms of accountability plays an important role in their forming each other as witnesses to each other and to God, and despite a discursive emphasis that it is the *words* that matter, members of St John's are conscious that these embodied forms of co-presence, through which they learn to focus on words, are what encourage them to keep clinging to their beliefs. It is only together, conscious not only of their dependence on God but on each other, that they can become disciples.

# Conclusion

We see then that the two cities were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly city by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self. In fact, the earthly city glories in itself, the Heavenly City glories in the Lord ... In the former, the lust for domination lords it over its princes as over the nations it subjugates; in the other both those put in authority and those subject to them serve one another in love, the rulers by their counsel, the subjects by their obedience. The one city loves its own strength shown in its powerful leaders; the other says to its God, 'I will love you, my Lord, my strength.'

(Augustine 1984: 593)

The history of the Western city, Sennett argues, tells the story of a long struggle between 'the effort to create power as well as pleasure through master images of wholeness' and the 'civilized possibility' of human beings acknowledging their incompleteness, as the work of civilization 'confronts us, in all our frailty, with contradictory experiences which cannot be pushed away, and which make us feel therefore incomplete' (2002b: 372). He suggests that it is in the state of being aware of incompleteness and difference that 'human beings begin to focus on, to attend to, and to explore, and to become engaged in the realm where the pleasure of wholeness is impossible' (ibid.). In his narrative, the master image of the body of the Judeo-Christian tradition was that of a spiritual wanderer who 'returned home to the urban center where his suffering body became a reason for submission and weakness' (ibid.: 373). Yet he argues that this legacy, like that of Athenians and pagan Romans, carried deep internal contradictions:

when early Christianity took root in the city, it reconciled its relation to this visual and geographic tyranny so antithetical to the spiritual condition of the

wandering people of the Judeo-Christian Word and Light. Christianity reconciled itself to the powers of the urban center by dividing its own visual imagination in two, inner and outer, spirit and power...

(ibid.)

The early urban Christians he describes worked hard to sever their attachments to place through particular rituals and forms of collective practice that would keep their focus on the Word and Light. These rituals that drew them together aroused in them a sense of discomfort in the body, turning people outwards towards each other as they sought to turn towards God and away from the city.

Seeking to be 'pilgrims through time' journeying towards the Celestial city today, members of St John's likewise work on themselves and each other to form themselves as exiles, to be different from those around them in the city. Their conversion to God entails their turning away from the pleasures, comforts and securities they experience in the city, learning to view the world as transient, the secular values of the city as potential lures into idolatry, and their own bodies as frail and dying. Yet this process of conversion is a turning away that is never completed within a lifetime, and individuals are very conscious that their attachments to place make it difficult to focus on what transcends time and space (cf. *ibid.*: 129).

This division of the imagination between the earthly city and the spiritual City of God still reverberates in the lives of conservative evangelicals in London today. Yet the interrelation of the master image of coherence and the experience of contradiction and dissonance in the city is differently located in the modern metropolis than it was in early urban Christian experience. The personality of God on whom conservative evangelicals focus is both Word and Light, impassive, ultimate unity and power, yet simultaneously a God who desires them, who suffers, and jealously wants their wholehearted devotion. The transcendence of this divine enables them to understand this God as One, consistent and fully coherent, these seeming contradictions posited as beyond the reach of finite human minds. At the same time, these paradoxical characteristics provide imaginative resources for them to orient themselves to this transcendent source of coherence, whom they trust has called and loves them, and they seek to draw Him into their own bodies as they internalize the words of the Bible and learn to focus on images and narratives of Jesus's death and resurrection.

Through these practices they are marked as part of the body of Christ and this creates a sense of their dependence on God and each other. As desire, like belief, is always predicated on recognition of an absence, the narrative of Christ's resurrection and ascent formed Christianity as a faith constituted in an awareness of a displacement, insufficiency and incompleteness within the immanent social order, as the absent physical body of Jesus became transposed into the church as His body (cf. Ward 2000). This narrative of incompleteness shapes how members of St John's come to understand self and the world as insufficient in themselves today, desiring a transcendent God who is materially absent and desires them. As they seek to be dependent on and obedient to Him rather than self, this obedience marks them as part of the body of Christ, an ethic they experience as at odds with modern ideals of self-determination (cf. Heelas and Woodhead 2005: 3-4).

Sennett describes the master image of the body shaping contemporary Western cities as that of a body drawn into an increasingly solitary rest, through the modern comforts that meant that people no longer sought to be with each other in public spaces (2002b: 317-49). One of the main ways members of St John's interpret their lives as different from what they describe as an individualized and atomized modern society is through the modes of sociality and connections with each other they form through the church. As Hannah said, her life in London would be 'much more lonely' if it were not for St John's. Yet they are also conscious of the material comforts of their lives in the city and the extent to which this interrupts their focus on the future and desire to sever their attachments to place, and this can lead them to experience doubts and uncertainty in their faith. The uneasiness of doubt encourages them to keep drawing to each other in forms of collective practice, as they seek to cling to what they do believe through their connections with and established accountabilities to each other and to God. Through these collective practices and individual disciplines, they acknowledge uncertainty and struggle and their own sense of guilt and sinfulness, which then serves to bind them more closely in their desire for a God who relieves these tensions.

The forms of practice internalized through their participation in urban church life mean that they have a strong sense of 'belonging' to a bounded community. This emerges partly through strategies of differentiation from charismatic media forms leading to an emphasis on the importance of their collective listening to a physically present minister and their consciousness of the necessity of crafting forms of mutual

accountability in a large urban church. Like the Swedish charismatics Coleman describes, members of St John's also seek to internalize sacred words and circulate them to others. Whilst these Pentecostals' minds are 'colonised by the transcendent world of the Spirit' (Coleman 2000: 127), members of St John's seek to have their minds shaped through the words of scripture addressed to them by a transcendent God who speaks. Yet focusing on the Word rather than 'experience' as marking their relationship with God, members of the church can also experience doubts and uncertainties that they really have been saved, or that they really have experienced God, and this means that forms of relationship with each other draw and mostly keep them together.

This focus on words does lead them, as Keane (2007) describes, to be concerned with sincerity, truthfulness and belief, with a sense of the agency of the rational self who is individuated in their choice to respond in obedience to the will of God. Yet theirs is not a simplistic individualized notion of modern autonomy. The narratives they articulate that emphasize the agency of forms of mass media, 'enslaving' expectations of corporate capitalist workplaces, the pull of broader cultural practices and values, and each other is a way of articulating the complexity of the relation between body, self and society. Yet also exercising agency within this is the personality of God whose coherence leads them to desire wholeheartedness and coherence, aware that they are, like Robbins' Urapmin, marked by their moral fragmentation as they move between incommensurable practices in the metropolis, their subjectivities formed through both norms of tolerance and privacy *and* the desire to speak of their faith in public ways that resist the 'ethic' of indifference.

The desire for the forms of civic participation that Sennett describes are sedimented within these collective cultural practices of St John's. As the roots of evangelicalism as a movement that emerged during Enlightenment modernity, and spread in public gatherings, so the forms of public listening and speaking it encouraged are recognized as formative in the creation of American civic life, and these bear their traces in the expressed desire for public listening and speaking practices at St John's today. Yet, as the teachings of the church rub up in increasing tension with modern norms of equality and members of the church become increasingly conscious of their being labelled as intolerant and judgmental, they struggle to speak, as they are simultaneously shaped as modern, urban subjects, valuing the privacy and norm of tolerance that the metropolis affords.



Through their focus on God's personality as coherent, members of St John's become conscious of their sense of shame and embarrassment that inhibits speaking as a form of subjective division, which they narrate in idioms of sin and idolatry. This consciousness of fragmentation, as Simmel describes, increases their sense of separation from and desire for God as the pure coherent reconciliation of the tensions and contradictions of life in the present. Their learnt attention to the transcendence of God means that maintaining their attention to Him is a constant struggle, and this introduces, as Simmel describes, a further form of fragmentation, specific to their faith, into immanent metropolitan life. Their bodies then become the location of immanent / transcendent tensions, as they seek to form themselves through particular techniques as subjects oriented to doing what they experience God as asking of them. Their developing orientation towards their own mortality and fragility framed in relation to God as offering coherence and a sense of transcendent order provides the mundane details of their lives with a heightened sense of meaning, even if, as they acknowledge, in the busy-ness of their everyday lives, they often forget that.

Simmel describes the human being as 'the connecting creature who must always separate, and who cannot connect without separating... And the human being is likewise the bordering creature who has no borders' (1997a: 174). We have seen that conservative evangelicals in London engage in interactions through which they seek to separate themselves from others, as 'exiles', forming themselves as oriented towards different values than those they locate as dominant in wider society. The public statements of conservative evangelical leaders articulating a sense of tension between universalizing modern process and traditionalist moral positions reinforce this narrative of distinctiveness, their sense of being 'aliens and strangers' and increasingly countercultural. Yet we have also seen that this distance from others can be hard work to maintain, as members of the church simultaneously live within, are shaped by and find comfort in these same secular spaces. Their subjectivities are the site where they are at times conscious of how these connections and separations can rub up against each other.

My aim in the narrative I have developed in this thesis has been to move away from simplistic understandings of conservative evangelicals that arise through either sensationalizing exposé or apologetic homages that circulate in the media and influence wider public understandings. I have tried to show how members of St John's experience and find, within the immanent city, ways of negotiating human

vulnerabilities, sensitivities, needs and anxieties that shape social life more broadly and have explored the specific effects of their faith in this process. This contributes to the growing body of ethnographic literature by sociologists and anthropologists on evangelicalism through examining some of the specificities of the culture of British conservative evangelicalism, focusing especially how this intersects with everyday, urban life. My account challenges stereotypical understandings of evangelical certainty, missionary zeal and intolerance, showing how members of St John's interactions are shaped by an urban ethic that often makes them reticent about articulating their faith publicly and they do not want to express views that might be interpreted as an attempt to impose their moral teachings on others. Yet, their urban religious subjectivities are also shaped through the *desire* that their faith would shape all their everyday interactions, and that they would be 'witnesses' for Jesus across all the moral milieu they inhabit.

Analysing speaking and listening as forms of practice and their enactment over time helps open up the complexity of evangelicals' forms of connection with and separation from others in everyday social life. I have explored how they experience a sense of relationship with God through specific word-based practices, and how these are bound up with an orientation to forming a sense of moral coherence in their lives, opening up future research on word-based forms of religious practice and the extent to which these are also bound up with developing a desire for coherence in different contexts (cf. Keane 2012). This focus on these forms of urban religious practice illuminates how cities are crossed with boundaries, bridges and doors, in the sense Simmel describes. It also shows that these can be hard work to maintain. This focus on their speaking practices demonstrates the interrelation and construction of the 'public' and 'private' in lived religious experience (cf. Engelke 2012a), complicating narratives of the privatization or de-privatization of faith as straightforward linear processes. I have considered the relations between the desire for 'public' expressions of faith emphasized by evangelical leaders and campaign groups and the everyday practices of members of St John's. Such focus on the interrelations between 'public' constructions of religion by leaders and the media and the everyday lives and practices of members of religious groups are important areas to explore further in developing understanding of the increasingly complex ways in which religion is located, negotiated, and sometimes contested across different and interlinked social and cultural spaces.

In seeking to understand evangelicals' lived experience, my analysis of individuals' experience of the personality of God draws on recent scholarship arguing for the importance of taking relations with sacred figures seriously in the study of religion (for example, Orsi 2005; Lynch 2010; Chapman *et al.* 2012). Building on work examining how the transcendent is mediated through material practices and the attendant uncertainties and ambivalences this can cause (Engelke 2007; Meyer 2008, 2010; Morgan 2012), my study suggests that developing these approaches into intersubjective portraits to examine how divine personalities are experienced and make demands on individuals through these practices and the agency of these personalities in shaping religious subjectivities has potential for opening up new avenues in understanding the complex textures of lived religious experience.

This analysis of religious intersubjectivity also contributes to literature in the anthropology of ethics, an emerging area of the discipline that might help stimulate the study of religion to deeper engagement with central questions of meaning, value and how people treat each other that are deeply rooted in the history of the discipline of sociology. Whilst several anthropologists who have focused on morality and ethics have drawn on Aristotle's discussion of *phronēsis* and Foucault's approach to techniques of the self (e.g. Robbins 2000; Lambek 2000, 2010; Laidlaw 2002), and I have also drawn on Foucault, my approach to everyday religious ethics has also explored how relationships with sacred figures are also important aspects of ethical formation. It would be possible to analyse the formation of members of St John's as ethical subjects purely through focusing on their learnt disciplines of introspection, confession, prayer and Bible reading, in the Foucauldian and Aristotelian sense of the development of specific virtues and orientations to the self. Yet, following Latour, developing a *realist*, empirical account that engages with the lived textures of their experience requires engaging with all their social relationships and the specificities of how these have agency in shaping who they are. The desire of members of St John's to do what God wants stems from their sense of Him as 'searing moral purity', whose teaching 'draws me like a moth to the light', and their consciousness of God as One who *wants* their love, devotion and trust. The naming of the ideals of moral purity, unity and coherence in the personality of God has social effects in introducing into the evangelical subject an excessive demand to respond to Him through seeking to 'be perfect', a demand she can never fully meet. Narrating this in terms of guilt serves to

bind the evangelical subject not only in her sense of relationship with God but also in her sense of relationship with other 'sinners'.

Aristotelian and Foucauldian understandings of the making of moral life imply a sense of people developing ethical orientations and virtues, individually and with others. God and other sacred figures are therefore important 'others' to consider as also actors in this process, and these are, as I have shown, amenable to social scientific description and analysis. Conservative evangelicals' desire to form themselves to be better listeners and speakers is bound up with their affective experiences of being addressed by God and asked to respond to Him in modes of interaction that pull against other ways they are simultaneously addressed by multiple others in the city who ask other things of them. These multiple and contradictory modes of address shape the conditions of the formation of their urban subjectivities. Focusing on how members of the church perceive God as addressing and binding the whole church in an intimate love relationship reveals the limitations they place on individual agency, even as they are individuated through their sense of a responsibility to respond to a divine address. Focusing on the forms of relationality implied in this helps deepen understanding of the affective interconnections of self and social collectivity in this context, and how individuals hold differing ideas of agency and subjection together whilst not experiencing these as in tension. Future work on the everyday experience of evangelicals' and other religious groups' negotiation of their moral lives and meanings might move beyond focusing on practice and the techniques of the self to draw further attention to how modes of intersubjectivity are a significant part of this, how the lives and loves of sacred figures act within their social worlds, making people do and desire certain things, binding and unbinding particular kinds of relationship in space and time.

As Orsi describes the study of religion as constructing moralizing figures of otherness that have fortified the difference between the liberal academic subject and particular religious 'others', this study of conservative evangelicals' practices across different spaces in the city has troubled this. The subjectivities of these distinctly urban dwellers are formed through the complex intersection of a sense of relationship with God and each other, their being addressed by traditionalist moral teachings, including those on issues such as gender, sexuality and other religions in tension with secular modernity, and a simultaneous inhabiting of liberal, pluralist spaces outside the church that lead them to experience these teachings as a cultural taboo, that they

are, in most of the everyday spaces they inhabit, unwilling to transgress. Their consciousness of these tensions, narrativized as sin and idolatry, increases their sense of desire for God. This God is experienced as other, differentiated through objectifying contrasts between His coherence and their fragmentation. Yet He is also experienced as within, shaping and troubling the boundaries of the self, even while remaining, as transcendent, always infinitely Other and physically absent. For conservative evangelicals, believing in Him requires learning to look through the present city to a vision of an eternal city beyond time. To do this, they must connect with each other, and this provides a means of being both at home and an exile within the city.

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