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<https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2013.783336>

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# Practising the Space Between: Embodying Belief as an Evangelical Anglican Student

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 28(2), 225-239 available online:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2013.783336>

**ABSTRACT** *This article explores the formation of British evangelical university students as believers. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with a conservative evangelical Anglican congregation in London, I describe how students in this church come to embody a highly cognitive, word-based mode of belief through particular material practices. As they learn to identify themselves as believers, practices of reflexivity and accountability enable them to develop a sense of narrative coherence in their lives that allows them to negotiate tensions that arise from their participation in church and from broader social structures. I demonstrate that propositional belief—in contexts where it becomes an identity marker—is bound up with relational practices of belief, so that distinctions between ‘belief in’ and ‘belief that’ are necessarily blurred in the lives of young evangelicals.*

## **Introduction: The Practice of Belief**

The study of religion in the West has been characterised by understandings of religion that have privileged belief as a cognitive, private assent to a set of ‘teachings’. Many now familiar objections have been posed, drawing into question the prominence of propositional belief. The Christian—and in particular Protestant—legacy that has shaped scholarly use of the term was brought into sharp focus by anthropologists Rodney

Needham, Malcolm Ruel, and Talal Asad, who criticised Clifford Geertz's conception of belief as "a modern, privatized Christian one because and to the extent that it emphasizes the priority of belief as a state of mind rather than a constituting activity in the world" (Asad 47). Scholars who take what has become known as 'the lived religion' approach<sup>1</sup> have argued that prominent sociological methods of inquiry, privileging survey data on beliefs, values, and affiliation to religious institutions, perpetuate a particular Western construction of religion that effaces the importance of bodies and objects.<sup>2</sup>

Attempting to move beyond the academic construction of religion emerging from liberal modernist Christianity as rational, emotionally controlled, privileging propositional belief, lived religion scholars have called for approaches that explore the 'messiness' of how religious lifeworlds flow beyond the orderliness of categories of doctrine and spaces of religious institutions. They have therefore focused on forms of religious embodiment which often involve the body in heightened emotional states. Meredith McGuire, for example, argues (115):

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).

However, the implication that there could be forms of religion—i.e. those focused on beliefs and opinions—that do not fully involve the body seems to reinforce the mind/body dualism McGuire seeks to challenge: surely all forms of religious practice, including those privileging belief, involve the material body. There is also an ironic suggestion that the messiness of religious practices outside the boundaries of institutions is somehow more 'real' religion than its social construction in the West. Yet academic

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<sup>1</sup> See Gordon Lynch for a discussion of 'the lived religion' approach. Lynch notes that the turn to 'lived religion' emerged as a discernible movement in the study of religion with the publication of David Hall's *Lived Religion in America*.

<sup>2</sup> Scholarship in the anthropology of Christianity has focused attention on the embodied and material techniques of Christianity (e.g. Meyer; Coleman, *Globalisation*). Within this, an emerging body of work has focused on word-based practices in Protestant cultures (e.g. Coleman, "Materializing"; Keane; Engelke; see also Bialecki 680).

practices are also forms of realising religion that do not necessarily stand outside the experiences of the people whom academics study. As lived religion scholars have reacted against a Protestant construction of religion, little attention has been paid to the material practices of those who embody a self-consciously rational, cognitive, word-based lifeworld. Therefore, focusing on the means by which conservative evangelical students are formed as ‘believers’ provides a window on how the kind of construction of religion that lived religion scholars are reacting against (i.e. highly rationalised, focused on belief, in many senses privatised) has been internalised in some contexts and the social consequences of this.

Drawing on Charles Peirce’s argument that belief is psychological and physiological as well as linguistic, David Morgan describes belief as involving dimensions of emotionality, materiality, and relationality. He conceptualises belief as an ‘orientation’ that develops through habits formed during childhood or other conversionary periods when the mind is opened “to absorbing fundamental new patterns” (7). Moving beyond the belief/ practice binary, Morgan argues that understanding belief entails asking not only what people teach their children, but also “how, when, and where do people teach their children what they teach them?” (6, emphasis in original). In what follows, I ask questions of how, when, and where conservative evangelical students are taught and formed as believers through participation in a conservative evangelical Anglican church in London, which I call ‘St John’s’. I begin by contextualising relations between belief and embodiment within British evangelicalism and Protestantism. I then outline the practices through which students develop a specific habitus<sup>3</sup> through internalising the words of the Bible and consider the orientation to the self and to emotions this entails. I conclude by arguing that practices of accountability enable the students to negotiate uncertainties and tensions as they experience their modes of belief as countercultural and become conscious of forms of subjective fragmentation in their own lives.

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<sup>3</sup> My use of the term habitus follows Marcel Mauss’s definition, which denotes 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” (74–5).

## **Words, Knowledge, and Belief**

British conservative evangelicalism has many roots: Methodist emphasis on personal conversion and evangelism, Moravian pietist focus on the Cross, and the Reformation doctrine of sola scriptura—the conviction that the Bible contains all knowledge necessary for salvation (Bebbington).<sup>4</sup> Marked by diversity throughout its history, the influence of the Jesus Movement in the US in the 1960s and 1970s on charismatic evangelicalism led to an emphasis on visible manifestations of emotion during institutional worship and engagement with popular youth culture (Ward 80). While charismatic evangelicalism has become increasingly widespread globally, conservative evangelicalism remains prominent among British students, influenced by the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF). This fosters a network of Christian Unions “held together by their commitment to a shared doctrinal statement and mission-centred ethos” (Guest 200) and emphasises particular propositional beliefs as a mark of a shared identity, with a Protestant understanding of the Bible as revealing “the fundamental truths of Christianity” (UCCF).

Webb Keane’s pioneering *Christian Moderns* explores how propositional belief came to hold a central place within the history of Protestantism. The reformers, defining themselves in reaction against Roman Catholicism, insisted that ritual had no efficacy in itself in achieving salvation: those who participated in rituals such as communion must already believe (Keane 61). Emphasis was placed on Bible reading as the centre of worship (ibid 63) and individuals’ interior thoughts were brought to the fore through the objectification of language in ‘entextualised’<sup>5</sup> forms such as the sermon, prayer,

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<sup>4</sup> The difficulties of defining evangelicalism are widely acknowledged. I use the term to refer to the broader tradition that has existed in Britain since the 1730s, marked, as David Bebbington summarised, by characteristics of conversionism, Biblicism, activism, and crucicentrism (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 contextualisation of tensions between charismatics and conservatives within post-war British evangelicalism.

<sup>5</sup> Linguistic anthropologists use the term ‘entextualisation’ to describe how “chunks of text come to be extractable from particular contexts and thereby made portable” (Keane 14).

confession, and creeds. An example Keane discusses is how the semiotic form of the creed locates agency in the self through objectifying belief as an internal state. 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." (Keane 71) The repetition of the creed gradually "entails a normative tilt toward taking responsibility for those words, making them one's own" (ibid).

Keane describes these Protestant practices as shaping subjects who located belief and agency in the self, creating the conditions for the emergence of the individualised, autonomous subject of the Enlightenment. The Protestant re-formation of the body led to an emphasis on the mind's significance over the flesh. This did not remove the sensuous body from knowledge construction, but meant that information given through sensations and emotions was understood as 'knowledge' only after processes of categorisation and filtering through the mind (Mellor and Shilling 23–4). The senses of sight and hearing were valued 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 through spirit/mind, rather than through 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'.

In his essay "What We Do When We Believe", Michel de Certeau describes belief as establishing a contract with one who has been recognized as other, through which the future is brought into the present: the "believer" must give up a "present advantage, or some of its claims, to give credit to a receiver" (193). This forms a sense of insufficiency in the self, as the believer "hollows out a void in himself relative to the time of the other" (ibid). In so doing, 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: belief in the other names an

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absence in the self, while also producing “this ‘other’ presumed to insure against what it is losing” (201). Belief and time always remain linked, as the 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 believing is separated from seeing” (193). These relations are established in a social field in which a plurality of others establishes the credibility of the one believed in. Thus a plurality and an history are knotted into the act of believing.

Conservative evangelicals still use the entextualised forms of language Keane discusses. These, I will suggest, produce the structure of belief de Certeau outlines. The historic Protestant emphasis on a relationship with God mediated through words reverberates at St John’s today. As Freddie,<sup>6</sup> the curate in charge of student ministry, said in a sermon: “The life of faith is the life of the Word. ‘Abide in me’, says Jesus, ‘abide in my words.’” In another sermon, another curate stated that an individual “becomes clean ... through hearing his [Jesus’s] Word and believing it”. As students learn to believe not only in God, but also in the church leadership and each other, plurality and historicity are knotted into their acts of believing and they become conscious of a coincidence of presence and absence in their lives. How is this practically formed?

### **Internalising the Word**

Luke, a floppy-haired medical student, described how he had been brought up going to his local Anglican church, how he had been a chorister at school and attended evangelical youth camps, but said it was not until his third year at university that he became a Christian: “I actually started going to church on Sunday ... and really ... desiring to hear God’s Word.” He described his faith as more important to him now than before moving to London: “I’ve realised that what I’m living for is God.” Luke’s days and weeks are marked by his “walk with God”, including morning and evening prayer and Bible reading and involvement in small groups at church and in the Christian Union at university. He said he tried to pray throughout the day, whether just walking along or on the tube or attending lectures, so that he aimed to spend his whole day talking to God.

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<sup>6</sup> All names have been changed.

Luke characterised his belief in terms of knowledge rather than materiality or embodied experience. When talking about the Bible his grandparents had given him, he emphasised that its significance was bound up in it being the way God speaks to him, “as an object, it’s not significant ... if I lost it ... I wouldn’t be bothered”. He characterised his sense of relationship as mediated through knowledge:

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.

Luke said that praying helped “discipline my heart” to develop this awareness.

Luke’s self-discipline in praying, Bible reading, church attendance, abstaining from sex with his girlfriend, and avoiding getting drunk may be standard behaviour for some evangelical students (Wilkins), but is not typical of most British university students. While young people’s participation in institutional religion is in decline in Western societies (Collins-Mayo 1), St John’s saw a steady growth in the number of students it attracts on a weekly basis, from around 40 in 1995 to 100–120 in 2010. These students inhabit a lifeworld saturated with the discourse of belief and they work hard to try to become more aware of God in their lives. What are the material means by which this is formed?

My analysis is based on fieldwork conducted at St John’s from February 2010 to August 2011. During this time, I attended two church services every Sunday, spent one term attending weekly Bible study groups for students and student suppers held after Sunday services and attended Bible study group meetings during university holidays.<sup>7</sup> Across these meetings, conversations with students in the group I was part of and with other students as well as observations of practices provided data about students’

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<sup>7</sup> My fieldwork did not just focus on the students: I also attended a Bible study group for older members of the congregation from April 2010–July 2011 and other church events intended for those outside the church and I conducted interviews with a range of other individuals and church staff.

formation as believers. I also conducted open-ended interviews with 13 members of the church about their experiences of student life while at the church.<sup>8</sup>

At St John's, significant resources are devoted to a student programme which is separate from the rest of the congregation's Bible study programme. Freddie (the curate in charge of student ministry) explained the rationale for this, describing university as a time when "people are unusually willing to re-evaluate their beliefs" and have "an unusual amount of space and time to do that". Church leaders talked of "training and equipping" students in their faith and saw establishing a desire to read the Bible as paramount. This takes place through various means. As a large urban church, the leadership emphasises the importance of membership of small groups as the way to become part of church community life. Thus most students attend weekly Bible study groups, 100–120 students attending in an average week, divided into groups of about 10. Over the course of an academic year, students study one book of the Bible in depth. There is an informal atmosphere at meetings: each evening starts with supper, followed by 90 minutes of intensive focus on a short section of text. The discussion centres on comprehending the passage in its historical context and exploring which sections of the text are applicable to the group today.

The style of these studies resembles academic seminars in many ways. Students are encouraged to focus on the text in front of them and to spend time preparing for the meeting using 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 students would learn that it is 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 had told new group leaders that, if they watched first-year groups from the church's gallery, over the course of the year, they would see a visible

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<sup>8</sup> This is part of a wider project exploring conservative evangelical subjectivisation. I focus on this tradition partly because conservative evangelicals have expressed concerns about the marginalisation of Christians in Britain and partly because more scholarly attention has been paid to charismatic evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, with conservative evangelicalism a comparatively neglected area.

change in how students engaged 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 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.

Through these practices, students learn that God speaks through the Bible, which is also emphasised in church services. The centrality of the Bible is indexed spatially through the positioning of musicians on the floor, the reading given from the stage above it, and the preaching from the large, elaborately carved pulpit above that. The significance of the Bible is emphasised in every service, for example, when David, the rector, says to the congregation, before the Bible reading, that this is now “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 asks 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”.

Every seat in the church has a Bible on it. During the sermon, people turn back to the text of the Bible and take notes on handouts which are provided so that congregants can follow the structure of the sermon. The calm, rational, attentive listening as the means of hearing God marks students’ identities in ways which are intentionally different from charismatic evangelicals’ use of visual media and the centrality of music in their services. This constructs a boundary distinguishing ‘authentic’ Christianity as word-based from traditions placing greater emphasis on ritual or displays of emotion.<sup>9</sup> David, for example, said in a question-and-answer session following a sermon:

Reformed Christianity is always challenged by deformed Christianity... If somebody backslides from the Christian faith, they’ve been in a church like this,

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<sup>9</sup> This can be contrasted with the ‘emerging evangelicals’ James Bielo studied, who self-consciously use multi-sensory media in the attempt to experience God (96). While there are similarities between Luke’s description of praying throughout the day and monastic offices of prayer, conservative evangelicals would not draw this comparison. In contrast, Bielo describes how emerging evangelicals cultivate disciplines which draw on monasticism.

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... 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 members of St John's are nevertheless conscious that their own formation as believers depends on the training of the body through specific material practices to develop particular dispositions. Mark, the church's head of media, commented that it was important both to recognize how media affect people's ability to listen and to respond to this:

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.

Therefore, in church services, small group meetings, student suppers, and one-to-one Bible studies, the aim is to develop the dispositions that will enable people to learn to hear God speak and to internalise the words of the Bible so that they can, as Freddie described, 'abide' in Jesus and he in them.

The orientation towards experiencing God through words can be seen in the way music is described at St John's, differentiated from the charismatic emphasis on receiving the Holy Spirit while singing. Songs are described as functioning pedagogically and enabling individuals to experience the words of the Bible as 'indwelling'. Rebecca, a 22

year-old graduate who attended St John's throughout university, said singing was "a medium by which the Word of God can dwell in you richly". While "the sermon should be expositing [sic] 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 felt "down and can't speak truth to myself, and ... forget all those unseen realities", what really helped was a song "that speaks the words of God ... it ... helps it to get in". She said singing was not just about the individual before God; it also had a communal function and was "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". Rebecca also described how she internalised 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 the central metaphor of Christ 'dwelling' in them as they seek to draw his words into themselves, belief and body are connected by their discursive practices and they learn to understand their believing bodies as vessels for the divine. The metaphors of 'chewing' and 'food' can be connected with this. Before the Bible reading, the congregation sing songs with lyrics which often describe the Word as food, for example: "Speak O Lord, as we come to you/to receive the food of your holy Word." De Certeau describes belief as knotting individuals into relations with others and functioning in many ways like 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... It carves the mark of the other within an autonomy; it loses a present for a future; it 'sacrifices'. (194)

As sermons represent the most sacred moment in church services, the ways members of St John's learn to describe the Word through metaphors of eating can be compared with the sacrament of the Eucharist: as they 'chew' on the words, their bodies are marked with the existence of the other through receiving the 'food' of the Bible. As they experience

God as indwelling together, this marks their social collectivity and interdependence (cf. Coleman, *Globalisation* 127–31).<sup>10</sup>

Most students also engaged in regular individual Bible reading, mostly in devotional ‘quiet times’. Louisa, a postgraduate student, said, “I start my morning with the Lord and that’s the only way I can start it if I want the day to be anything worth experiencing.” When I asked how she prayed, she said, “I start with surrender, you know, just prayer, saying ‘here it is, here I am, it’s all yours’, just giving it up really.” She said she would have “tea with God” and read a chapter from the Bible. She said she was “crazy about the psalms” and explained, in terms evoking de Certeau’s description of the temporal delay implicated in the structure of belief, that they 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.” She added, “you’ve got to have x-rated prayers with God if you really want to know him.”

When other students described their devotional reading, most of them also expressed a sense of intimacy with God in these private spaces, differentiated from group reading practices. One student expressed a sense of distinction between the two and was critical of the intellectual approach characterising 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 that she felt God was “made normal, kind of standardised and made quite scientific and ... put in a box”. In small group meetings I observed with older members of the congregation, individuals sometimes began 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 their desire for coherence in these modes of relating to God, which is bound up with an emphasis, articulated in sermons and Bible passages, that God desires their ‘wholeheartedness’. David, for example, preached a sermon on the importance of ‘wholehearted’ devotion to God and said, “that word ‘wholehearted’

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<sup>10</sup> Simon Coleman describes how Swedish Pentecostals used images of hunger and eating to describe their internalisation of the Holy Spirit through sacred words (*Globalisation* 127–8). In his study of Protestant congregations in a Scottish fishing village, where the idiom of ‘eating words’ is also prominent, Joe Webster developed an extended conceptualisation of sermonising as a form of sacrifice.

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’... ‘Give me a whole heart’, he could have put.”

The demand for wholeheartedness makes students conscious of their struggles in practising belief and they learn to narrate the divisions within their subjectivities as ‘sin’, ‘idolatry’, and ‘adultery’. A recent graduate who had been at St John’s throughout university said that, at times, she found the discipline of daily Bible reading hard and had talked with a member of the church staff about this. She said they had discussed

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 been, you know, sleep, and er, youtube videos, it’s too embarrassing to say.

She admitted that her ‘adultery’ had been watching falconry videos on youtube rather than reading the Bible: “They were really boring videos. These are the kind of things I put above the Lord—and I think that’s shameful and horrid.”

Here we see that relating to biblical narratives—formed through practices of reading, listening to sermons, and discussing sermons with others—becomes a technique of forming the self in alignment with the beliefs and values of the church. As wholehearted love and service of God are named as ideals, students interrogate the ways their practices fall short of this and seek to discipline their minds and desires to come closer to these ideals. Such practices of reflexivity entail a particular “technology of the self”, as inner and outer states are objectified and monitored (Foucault 18; Coleman, “Materializing” 178). This in turn encourages a reflexive orientation towards the self and towards emotions that enables students to deal with uncertainties in their beliefs.

### **Belief, Uncertainty, and Emotion**

In most Sunday services at St John’s, the congregation recite the Church of England confession. The minister often introduces this by saying that this is “not appropriate for

everyone here this evening”, but is for Christians “who believe that Jesus died for them and that through him they have forgiveness of their sins”. He pauses 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”. The pause emphasises the significance of individual assent to the teaching that Jesus offers forgiveness as a marker of belonging and encourages students to reflect on whether they are inwardly convinced of this.

That outward vocalisation of propositional statements should match inward conviction assumes contemporary salience in a culture of political spin, in which telling the truth and integrity is held up as an identity marker for believing subjects. In one sermon, a minister said:

We know in our own 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... God wanted his people to be different: very simply, to be men and women of their words.

He related this to God’s character:

We’re talking about the living God ... the one who knows all and sees all and hears all... Our God is a God who chose to reveal himself in a word. He’s a God who cannot lie. He keeps all of his promises and his word will never pass away.

Being truthful therefore matters to students at St John’s and many listed ‘truth-telling’ as one way in which their lifestyle was distinctive from non-Christians.

This emphasis means that being honest about feeling far from God is acceptable and that the process of appropriating propositional beliefs is acknowledged as being demanding. The young man leading the prayers one Sunday, for example, said: “Lord, we can find it hard to believe that we are forgiven, as we walk around in blemished, sinful bodies. Help us believe the promises of your Word.” Emotions thus have a particular relation to belief. In her research on American evangelicals, Amy Wilkins found that there was a strong emphasis on ‘right’ emotions as proving both ‘authentic’

Christianity and moral worth (111); anxiety and sadness were therefore unacceptable emotions for her informants. In contrast, students at St John's are encouraged not to trust emotions as markers of their relationship with God.

Within British conservative evangelicalism, lack of emphasis on emotion was bound up with the male public school habitus of its key twentieth-century leaders (Ward 40). This still partly underlies attitudes towards emotion at St John's. Luke, who went to a public school, said he might cry in private, while meditating on the cross, but would never do this in church. Yet this does not mean that belief is separate from emotionality—students discuss the importance of being honest with God about emotions. When I asked Freddie about the privileging of belief in terms of knowledge rather than emotions, he said:

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.

Describing emotions as unstable and inconsistent, in contrast to the stability and consistency of God, emotions should, he explained:

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.

While emotions are thus seen as important to being fully human, he said that if one comes to rely on emotions to determine beliefs, "then if you're feeling depressed or ... stressed, you will make wrong deductions about your Christian life".

Thus when students doubt that God loves them, they turn to the words of the Bible or songs. These techniques remind them of the propositional beliefs they understand themselves to possess already, calming tensions created by doubt by reassuring them that they really are forgiven and loved by God. Students also talk about their uncertainties with others. A student leader described how she worked with students

who experienced doubt and said that she thought it was important to acknowledge doubts and

to have integrity, to be honest, like the psalms are wonderful... David crying out going, 'Why Lord have you forsaken me? ... Feelings that are strong are good ... they're honest, if you have integrity but work things through.

She said that, when talking with a friend who expressed doubts that God loved her, she spoke to her "as an objective person, 'God does love you, he sent Jesus to die for you, whether you know that reality or not, the same God that never changes absolutely does love you'".

Church leaders also encourage techniques for dealing with doubt. In a question-and-answer session after a sermon, a member of the congregation 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 emphasised the importance of working on the self individually and with friends in overcoming doubt, characterising this as an ongoing 'battle':

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 realise 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.

The emphasis on speaking honestly about times of doubt helps students configure the practice of belief as an ongoing struggle that is understood, through identification with characters in the Bible experiencing doubt, as part of a coherent narrative of the Christian life.

### **Discussion: Practising the Space Between**

Focusing on the formation of the students as believers helps us see that, contrary to popular portrayals of conservative evangelicals as dogmatically certain of countercultural beliefs, in practice, holding on to belief requires the habituation of acts of daily discipline, mutual support, and reflexive acknowledgement of times of uncertainty and struggle. Peirce contrasts doubt—“an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves”—and belief, which is “a calm and satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid... On the contrary, we cling tenaciously, not merely to believing, but to believing just what we do believe” (qtd in Morgan 3). Practices of belief at St John’s are a form of tenaciously clinging to other people, to the church, and to God, habituated through embodied techniques of listening, reading, and speaking. Because conservative evangelical belief is experienced as a relationship with an invisible, transcendent God, rejected by the majority of their peers—necessitating a lifestyle involving cost to the student in abstaining from many conventional behaviours associated with student life, such as sexual exploration—it is perhaps inevitable that many students struggle with this at times. In this context, cultivating norms of honesty and integrity and narrating struggles as inevitable for Christians enables students to hold together fragmentary elements of their lives in a coherent narrative that provides a sense of stable meaning and identity.

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 of account itself plays an important part in constituting narratives. (218)

Richard Sennett argues that flexibility and mobility in the labour market led to capitalist conditions of time marked by short-termism, flux, and disjointedness, which threaten people’s ability “to form their characters into sustained narratives” (31). As students at St

John's have mostly moved to London to attend university and are at a point in their lives which is marked by uncertainty about their futures, intensified through record levels of recent graduate unemployment, their practices of belief provide a means of crafting a sense of coherence and stability in their lives, as through these they make themselves accountable to each other and God.

The emphasis on mutual accountability at St John's is related to its urban location. Church leaders are conscious that it would be easy, in a large metropolitan church, for students to drift in and out anonymously. They therefore emphasise the central importance of attending Sunday services and small groups and encourage students to send texts or e-mails to friends if they have not seen them at church for a while. One student 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.

Thus students knot each other into relationships of accountability and learn to feel that there are others expecting and wanting to see them at church. Their reflexive practices—in group settings and private prayer—are also means of calling self and others to account. As they discuss 'applications' of Bible passages to their own lives, students learn to align their practices of belief—from disciplines of reading and praying to avoiding getting drunk and abstaining from sex—to shared ways of living, marking the other on the self. As they ask each other what these passages mean for their lives, they form responses that are patterned in a coherent narrative in which the contradictions, inconsistencies, tensions, and moral struggles they experience are expressed in idioms of sinfulness, guilt, and battle.

Paul Ricoeur argues that an ethic of self-constancy is formed as individuals experience others depending on them:

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. (165)

As the students make themselves ‘responsible’ to each other in these senses, they weave each other into relationships of mutual obligation and narrate their practices in the small groups as a form of ‘serving’ each other and God. Drawing on Ricoeur, Sennett argues that to develop a sense of self-coherence, people need to feel “that there is a witness to all we do and say”, a witness who “is not a passive observer, but someone who relies upon us. In order to be reliable, we must feel needed.” (146) While students at St John’s come to rely upon each other, they also develop a sense of God as a constant witness to whom they are accountable. Their focus on narratives of the Bible leads them to understand God’s character as consistent and as asking for their consistency, integrity, and wholeheartedness. Seeking then to be honest and ‘responsible’ in their relationship with him, they acknowledge and account for struggles and doubts as part of a narrative that locates such experiences of disjunction in an overarching frame of coherence. As they confess these tensions to God and each other, their practices of accountability then bind them more closely into these relationships and form their sense of self.

De Certeau argues that belief places us within a nexus of obligations, with the believer “abandon[ing] a present advantage, or some of its claims, to give credit to a receiver” (193). For students at St John’s, their belief in God locates them within a nexus of obligations to account to each other. Yet they are also bound in obligations to others outside the church and, in responding to these differing pulls of obligation, practices of intersubjective accountability help reinforce a predisposition towards believing. Belief in this context is thus a practice of the space of the between: between competing claims of the church and broader cultural expectations, between transcendent and immanent, between present and future.

John Donne described the Bible as “God’s voice” and the church as “His echo—a re-doubling, a repeating of some particular syllables and accents of the same voice” (qtd in Winkett 142). The speaking and listening bodies of the students become the means by which they experience God’s voice echoing—within themselves and others. Their emphasis on integrity and their narratives of ‘sin’, ‘adultery’, and ‘battle’ enable them to

hold together aspects of practices that would otherwise jar as discordant. Their experiences are marked by uncertainties particular to their state being a transitional stage and their practices of belief—which enable them to weave their narratives of self and each other into patterns of coherence and stability—respond to this. While techniques of focusing on the Word develop a highly cognitive mode of belief, this is also a relational and material practice and these forms of relationality become experiences of transcendence. As Rebecca said, “when I look at lots of the people in my life, I don’t see Jesus, but I see little bits of him, and ... the make up of them all is very beautiful.” Jacques Derrida argues that all knowledge is founded on a prior condition of fidelity in the credibility of others. Despite the emphasis on belief in terms of knowledge within conservative evangelical discourse, the distinction between ‘belief in’ and ‘belief that’ is likewise artificial: the means by which evangelicals come to embody propositional beliefs are inseparable from their faith in others—institutional authorities, friends, and God experienced as an intimate other.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am very grateful to all the members of ‘St John’s’ who participated in my study. The research was funded by a doctoral studentship at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. The ‘Belief as a Cultural Performance’ network, funded by the AHRC/ESRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council/ Economic and Social Research Council) Religion and Society programme, provided a great opportunity to discuss emerging findings. Gordon Lynch, Chris Shilling, Abby Day, and the two anonymous reviewers of the Journal of Contemporary Religion offered very helpful feedback on an early draft. A version was presented at the annual conference of the BSA (British Sociological Association) Sociology of Religion Study Group and in a workshop on ‘Christianities’ organised by the Anthropology Department of the London School of Economics.

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