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One Sunday during my fieldwork at St John's, a large conservative evangelical church in London, smiling members of the welcoming team at the doors were handing everyone on arrival copies of a glossy brochure entitled 'Re:Generation Appeal'. This coincided with that Sunday being the church's 'annual giving Sunday', as Pete, one of the ministers, explained at the start of the service. To open the service, Pete read out some verses from 2 Corinthians: 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.' After the notices, Pete invited Philip, the church's treasurer, to speak. Philip, in his early fifties, the global chair of a large financial services corporation, addressed the congregation confidently. He said he wanted to talk about two issues: regular giving, and the Regeneration Appeal. Talking about regular giving, he said that they had expected the next five years for the church to be tough, as giving had fallen in the years following the financial crisis, however although they had budgeted for a deficit of £250,000 that year, they were somewhat encouraged that it looked more like £100,000 by the time they had closed the books. He said that while they'd had to cut back on certain plans, things seemed ok, but that

to keep things running as they were, they would need an increase of 5% in regular giving to the church, for example, if you gave £100 a month, that would mean £5 extra. He stated that the average person in the church was giving £30 a week, and encouraged people to pray about their giving, and then to act on that. He recommended a book called *The Money Mentor*, which he said shows that the core issue here is 'our hearts' and also recommended 'the stewardship website' to help with budgeting. Philip then talked about the Regeneration Appeal, which was aiming to raise £3 million for building works. Pete said that they had already raised £1.3 million, so they needed another £1.7 million, describing this as a 'once in a decade kind of appeal' to 'help take the work of the church further'.

A member of the congregation then read Philippians 4: 10-23, which the congregation followed in the church Bibles placed on every seat. David, the rector, stood up to preach from the carved wooden pulpit. He began by stating that in the Philippians passage, the church in Philippi was 'in partnership with Paul' and that 'partnership' is a favourite word of Paul's in the letter; today he would address what 'true gospel partnership' looks like and 'what financial giving should be like, since it is important to hold these two together.' As was typical of sermons at St John's, David emphasized that being a Christian was countercultural, stating, 'true church membership is energetic and corporate, public and unpopular, and selfless and sacrificial'. He then asked the congregation, 'do *you* see yourself as a partner in gospel ministry? Because that is what you are, if you're a Christian, whether you like it or not.' He went on, 'here is the mindset of the true Christian partner, different from the rest of the world, which is self-seeking … The Christian partner is selfless and sacrificial … The *true* Christian partner will always be downwardly mobile,[i] seeking to become like Jesus in death.' He then addressed financial giving, and said that Paul

speaks of giving as an ‘investment’ that bears fruit that accrues to the Philippians; this might be the fruit of ‘others coming to Christ’ but is also counted by God in heaven at Judgement Day. He emphasized that this should not lead to the idea of ‘good works’ or ‘purchasing your way to paradise’, but was all about ‘grace, and responding to grace with thankfulness’ and quoted St Augustine, saying ‘God crowns not your merits as your merits, but as his own grace’. He continued:

> perhaps we are too *English* in our attitude to talking about money and whether we are good with our investments … the issue is not how much money you give, since God values the £3 gift from the student as much as the £3000 from the recent graduate… God is pleased with your gift … like on Mother’s Day, when children make a mess while preparing breakfast in bed, but the mother is pleased.

Over coffee after the service, I chatted with Alistair, a corporate lawyer I’d got to know from the Bible study group I’d been attending. He was looking suntanned having just returned from skiing. I was interested to ask whether he was involved in decisions about church finances; as a member of the Parochial Church Council, it seems he did have shared responsibility for the church’s financial decisions, which here meant deciding whether the Regeneration Appeal would be a good use of money, which he thought it would be. Philip came over to chat with us and mentioned they were happy with the amount of money raised so far, that most of those capable of committing to large financial donations had done so, so it seemed promising the building works would go ahead.

In looking for the good, a congregation like St John's is perhaps not an obvious location – especially in terms of their engagements with money. It's easy to stereotype this type of church, with many affluent members able to gift the church significant sums without forgoing their skiing holidays. These individuals in many ways seem good Weberian Protestants, as the church encourages an ethic of careful household budgeting and avoiding excessive consumption, so individuals can 'invest' more money in church expansion. David articulated an understanding of an idealized evangelical subject who 'partners in the gospel' by financially supporting the church, thus allowing its expansion and reaping future interest in the 'fruit of others coming to Christ', as well as counting towards their own salvation at Judgement Day. It might appear that their actions are thus subsumed under the calculative logic of capital, with the values of faith seemingly monetized and oriented towards self-interest.

And yet, as in the words of Peggy Lee, is that all there is? In what follows, I explore different moral threads interwoven in the thoughts and actions of those at St John's in relation to the place of money in their lives. I argue that as well as a calculative ethic shaped by modes of economic value, we also see a desire for a value beyond value (Skeggs 2014), in which the good is imagined in relation to a transcendent grace that exceeds – and at the same time valorizes – capitalist regimes. Approaching conservative evangelicals through the lens of the good moves us, I suggest, beyond the 'othering' of nonliberal religious movements through avoiding dismissing their ideals as 'bad-faith alibis' (Robbins 2013: 457). At the same time, this approach invites attention to the contradictions and eruptions that evade the logic of capital even amongst those who are well rewarded by the current economic order.

The Good, the Bad, and the Study of Conservative Evangelicals

In recent decades, scholarship across sociology and other social sciences has examined how capitalism broadly – and specifically the socio-economic-political capitalist order termed 'neoliberalism' – perpetuates multiple injustices and suffering, focusing on the operations of power, governmentality, and exclusion. As discussed in the introduction to this volume, the anthropology of the good has been seen by some as a reaction against this body of work, underscoring how social life is shaped not only by power and domination but also by questions of the good and ethics.[ii] This work has sought to shift our attention to the ways in which people are 'trying to do what they consider right or good, are being evaluated according to criteria of what is right and good, or are in some debate about what constitutes the human good' (Lambek 2010: 1).

Criticisms have been raised that this focus on morality ignores issues of power and inequality or that 'the good' is situated as opposed to injustice, rather than addressing how constructions of ethical life are interwoven with forms of oppression and the violence of inequality and exclusion (Kapferer and Gold 2018; Ortner 2016: 65). In other words, the study of the good should not be separate from the study of 'the bad' or the 'dim side' of morality (Fassin 2015) and should also explore negative moral emotions, and how constructions of the good can contribute to suffering and inequality (see Lynch, Wilkinson, this volume). These debates occur not only in anthropology. Outlining future research avenues in the sociology of morality, Steven Lukes argues that for moral philosophers, the Nazis represent radical evil, 'the paradigm of what is beyond the moral domain'. Yet sociologists should, he argues, examine how Nazi leaders secured enthusiasm on a large scale and 'the moral attitudes of the various kinds of Nazi perpetrators' (Lukes 2010: 559). This might also

include ‘the limits of their morality’ where the humanity of the other human is denied (ibid.).

While not an epitome of evil, by and large, conservative evangelicals – along other socially conservative Christians – represent by virtue of their political and moral views the ‘repugnant cultural “other”’ to anthropologists and sociologists alike, as Susan Harding argued some 30 years ago (1991). The interrelations of conservative Protestantism and capitalism – refracted through the lens of the US Christian Right’s support for neoliberal governments from the Regan era onwards – have been a key aspect of this political, cultural and moral othering, as neoliberalism and capitalism tend to be understood as amoral, and their means and ends often as clearly immoral (Lambek 2015b: 13). While Weber’s prediction of the disenchantment of the world via the effects of the Protestant stance towards money has not straightforwardly taken place, the Protestant ethic nevertheless continues to provide a sanctification for an impulse to gain, save and give that harmonizes with many aspects of contemporary capitalism – including both its neoliberal and right-wing populist forms.

Much writing about evangelicals and Pentecostals – both academic and popular – portrays these movements as flourishing globally in part due to their close affinities with a spirit of entrepreneurial capitalism. William Connolly has argued, ‘The right leg of the evangelical movement today is joined at the hip to the left leg of the capitalist juggernaut’ (2008: 44), and Jane Guyer (2007) has traced homologies between neoliberal and evangelical temporalities. At the same time, evangelicalism is often portrayed as offering a sense of certainty that is a soothing balm for the uncertainty and fragmentation accompanying the expanding scale and abstraction of transactions across global capitalist economies, the tensions between the nation state

and mobile capital, and growing disparities of wealth and power in the world at large (Comaroff 2010: 32).

In critical dialogue with this literature and drawing attention to its reductionist tendencies, there have been a number of ethnographic accounts of the values and economic practices of charismatic and Pentecostal Christianities (e.g. Bialecki 2008; Coleman 2004, 2011; Daswani 2015; Haynes 2012, 2017), often focusing on prosperity theology. Naomi Haynes argues, for instance, that 'it is a mistake to read the prosperity gospel as simply a spectral parallel of the market, a phantasmagoric shadow of a structural adjusted reality' (2012: 125). Yet there has been comparatively little ethnographic attention given to money's place in conservative evangelicals' lives. Omri Elisha's study (2008, 2011) of socially engaged evangelicals in Tennessee offers insight into how their charitable giving is shaped by incommensurable logics of accountability and compassion. Elisha argues that we need to take seriously 'the ethical dilemmas, existential conflicts, and unintended consequences experienced by socially engaged evangelicals' and move beyond 'the tendency to dismiss them as evidence of hypocrisy or intolerant fanaticism' (2008: 159). By focusing on these issues, we deepen our understanding of how ethical sensibilities are shaped 'in nonliberal religious movements and the extension of those sensibilities beyond ritual confines and into the larger social order' (ibid.).

Following Elisha's humanizing move, my aim in what follows is to explore conservative evangelicals' moral imaginaries through examining how they develop an orientation towards a particular construction of the good in terms of generosity and grace, which shapes their engagements with money. I trace how they experience their ethical stance in relation to wealth as in tension with a wider cultural norm of the 'love of money', shaping their sense of being 'aliens and strangers' within the moral

ecology of the city (Strhan 2015). I draw on nineteen months' ethnographic fieldwork carried out with a large, conservative evangelical Anglican church in London, 'St John's'.[iii] The congregants are predominantly white, affluent, educated and middle-class, with many members working in corporate law, financial services, medicine and teaching. While not nationally representative of British evangelicalism, St John's is regarded by other evangelical churches as influential in terms of theology and practice (Strhan 2019: 12). As such, it offers insight into how conservative evangelical culture fosters particular ethical sensibilities shaping the relationship between faith and money.

The Celestial City and the Language of Commerce

In the central narratives of Western Christianity, the division of the imagination between the transcendent and immanent and between the Cities of God and of Man, as Augustine put it, is deeply rooted. As Richard Sennett describes, 'when early Christianity took root in the city, …[it] reconciled itself to the powers of the urban center by dividing its own visual imagination in two, inner and outer, spirit and power' (2002: 373). The early urban Christians used forms of collective practice to sever their attachments to place and keep their focus on the transcendent Word and Light (ibid.). As I have described elsewhere, members of St John's likewise fashion themselves as 'pilgrims through time' (Strhan 2015: 199), shaping themselves and each other as 'exiles', with a strong sense of their cultural and moral distinctiveness from those around them in London. Through practices such as listening to sermons, prayer, Bible study, singing hymns, and relationships with other Christians, they seek to instil a sense of their orientation as journeying towards a transcendent God and a

future Celestial City. As one church member expressed it to me, 'since Abraham onwards, we've been looking forwards.'

At the same time, through these practices they seek to understand the city they currently inhabit as transient, and its 'secular' values as lures into idolatry. In this context, the church emphasized that it was the privileged duty of the believer to seek to convert those around them. Members of the congregation were encouraged to experience London as peopled by non-Christians on whom they should show compassion by proselytizing. As a minister put it in a promotional video for the church, 'Do we share the compassion that the Lord God has, that Jesus has for those around us? Are we that passionately concerned for people's eternal destiny?' In reality, church members often struggled with this moral demand to speak, as the church also encouraged them to see themselves as inhabiting an oppressive secular state, within which speaking publicly of their faith would engender 'hostility' and 'hatred' (Strhan 2015: 89). Because of this reserve in speaking about their faith, church members did not necessarily proselytize much themselves. They rather saw the church as carrying out the evangelism they themselves often struggled with, through initiatives such as the church's 'guest events', at which a minister would explain the gospel in a setting designed to be inviting for outsiders, or through the church's other forms of targeted evangelism, such as student 'mission weeks'. Giving money to the church to support its efforts to save souls is therefore a means through which they can understand themselves as showing compassion for those they see as otherwise lost, and it becomes an everyday means through which they see themselves as enacting the good. There was little emphasis at the church on giving to alleviate poverty[iv]. Joy, a teacher, told me she had a tense interaction with a liberal Anglican colleague after Joy had suggested inviting some of their 'nominal Christian'

colleagues to evangelistic guest events at St John's. She said that her colleague had told her that you didn't need to be a follower of Jesus to be saved and that pleasing God meant 'doing God's will in terms of feeding the hungry, clothing the poor'. Joy said that she found her colleague's position 'really shocking': at stake here was, as she put it, 'an issue of evangelism, about how people are saved'.

This ideal of giving money to the church as a means of showing compassion for others, building up 'wise investments' as a 'true gospel partner', as David expressed it, is constructed in terms of a calculative ethic. This has resonances with Amira Mittermaier's depiction of her Egyptian informants' almsgiving as a form of 'trading with God', articulating a contractual sense of relationship (2014). Their giving, she argues, is simultaneously guided by an alternative Muslim economic theology, 'which highlights abundance and generosity while resisting calculation' (2014: 287). Thus, concepts of trading with God, she argues, 'both mirror and exceed this-worldly economic imaginaries' (2014: 288). The investment language used to describe giving at St John's likewise intersects with neoliberal and capitalist modes of being-in-the-world (Mittermaier 2014). Yet it is also deeply interwoven with the historical languages of Christianity.

As is typical of an evangelical church that locates its identity squarely within the Reformed tradition, St John's places significant focus on the Bible as the Word of God. It is therefore not surprising that biblical economic metaphors percolate the conservative evangelical imaginary. In the Philippians passage that David drew on, discussed at the start of this chapter, St Paul describes desiring that 'more be credited to your [the Philippians'] account'. Peter Brown argues that in late Roman Christianity the language of the Christian gift was a 'daring extension of the earthly language of exchange, commerce, and treasure … to the unimaginable world of

heaven' (2012: 85). Brown notes that there were many reasons for this construction of the good, including how the creation of a vast common market in the Achaemenid Persian empire had influenced Jewish notions of religious giving, which had been appropriated by Christianity. What might seem to us, he writes,

> a crude commercialization of the religious imagination was favoured because, at the time, it infused relations with God with a sense of the infinite that echoed the breathtaking expansion of the horizons of the possible that accompanied the rise of a monetarized economy. The volatility, the seemingly limitless opportunities for profit, and the sheer shimmer of such an economy were adopted as apposite ideograms for the incalculable mercy of God. (Brown 2012: 85-86)

In other words, while the language of investment might today seem the opposite of ideas of abundant mercy, in the early Christian imagination, the monetarized economy was the most apt representation of the *in*calculable and transcendent.

At St John's, the language of giving as an investment for the future sounds like a purely self-interested exchange, predicated on the promise of divine reward. Yet we also see a critique of the idea, as David put it, that you could 'purchase your way to paradise', and an emphasis on the importance of God's grace, which we might see as a form of the good. We also see a conscious effort to seek to understand the act of giving to the church as a relational act that is about each individual in their singularity. Brown describes how for the early Christians 'every gift, however small, brought about nothing less than the joining of heaven and earth' (2012: 86), and in the

same way, David emphasized that God takes just as much pleasure in the £3 given by the student as the £3,000 given by the recent graduate.

Evangelicalism is often understood as relationally corrosive, fostering an individualistic sensibility. At St John's, we do see emphasis on individuals' singular moral duty to give to the church. Yet the meaning of this practice is also constructed as a communal venture, tinged with expectations of rewards and purpose extending beyond the present. The value of individual gifts is thus amplified in relation to the transcendent and oriented towards the future City of God. At the same time, these acts of giving shape their sense of collective identity as pitted against an unbelieving world, which is constructed as 'self-seeking'. Giving to the church is imagined as breaking down boundaries between heaven and earth as individuals see themselves as agents of the good, partnering with God in the spread of the gospel through their monetary contributions. In this sense, we see how (economic) value is transformed into virtue (Lambek 2015a). As Lambek describes, 'even in a middle-class church service, when the collection plate is passed or when congregants donate to charity, this kind of transformation takes place', which is of 'profound moral significance for participants' (2015a: 235). This is an example of how religion can turn 'the profits and earnings of the everyday world, into such virtues as largesse, generosity, charity, or honor' (ibid.).

'Maximizing Resources' and the Snare of Mammon

As well as biblical languages of investment, the ideal of the good Christian was constructed drawing on expansionist logics drawn from the corporate world within which many members of St John's worked. At the church's annual parochial meeting[v], the couple of hundred church members present sat at tables laid with

meeting agendas, the church's financial reports, glossy annual reports on the church, and minutes of the previous year's meetings. David gave a report on the ministry of St John's that year. His main theme was that the church should not think about 'church planting', which he said was 'unbiblical language', but 'church building' and 'church growing', which he said were biblical. He talked through a slide about how he saw the work of St John's in terms of 'reaching' and 'building', using a flow chart with numerous arrows extending off to various congregations and small groups to show the ambition to 'grow' the church and reach more non-Christians, locally, nationally and globally. This aspiration was also central in a video on the church website. The narrator talked about the numbers of 'younger city workers' and students they were engaged in ministry with, and the numbers who had gone on from the church into preaching, with the head of a theological college saying, 'they've gone out into the city of London, into the UK, and they've gone out into the wider world', illustrated by a shot panning out from the church to an image of the globe. The narrator mentioned the church's 'digital ministry', that 'people near and far listened to 360,000 sermons online in 2013'. The video closed with David saying 'all of this has been achieved by God's grace alone … There is however so much more work to be done and so much more that could be done, and therefore it's only right that every one of us asks ourselves, "what part can *we* play in this next phase of God's work here at St John's?" God's given us resources that he wants us to maximize for his honour.'

This sense of duty to maximize resources to contribute to the church's ministry was exemplified in the book that Philip recommended to the congregation, *The Money Mentor*, by Ash Carter. Each chapter closes with questions for the reader to interrogate their own practices, such as 'How do I actually spend 168 hours per week / my salary? … How much time do you honestly spend watching TV? … It

would be easy to spend hours every day on those things, precious hours that belong to Jesus' (Carter 2010: 59). This logic of efficiently managing money and time to give as much as possible to the church is emphasized throughout the book, with chapters on tax-efficient giving, including 'making the most of your death'. Carter advises readers to update spreadsheets of all expenditure, weekly, in order to hold themselves accountable. Rather than acknowledging the wider social contexts shaping individuals' economic circumstances, he stresses an ethic of individual responsibility: 'whatever your financial situation, you got there because you wanted to get there' (ibid: 23). He situates his readers within a wider cultural worship of money, which, he says, is bound up with consumerist desire:

> At every point in history, human beings have looked to their harvests, their families, their trinkets and their toys to fill the deep longing in their hearts that can be filled only by a relationship with God. ... We are sinful, and the advertisers play on our lust for created things, feeding our desire and then feeding *from* it… That is why we are so complicit in the mess we are in. … We are sinful. Our hearts are in rebellion against God. Not only mine and yours, but everyone else's too. So we have a whole economy that is built on the universal idolatries of the age. (p. 25).

This narrativization of contemporary society as idolatrous in its worship of money was a frequent theme at St John's and was a means through which church leaders sought to establish a relationship between 'the good' and 'the true'. As listening to sermons was presented in the church as the way in which God speaks to individuals, the construction of the good Christian as selfless in their giving – in

contrast with the world as self-seeking in its desire for money – can be seen as a form of truth-making (Lambek 2015b: 20), determining what *should* matter for the 'true' Christian. In one sermon, David described 90% of the contemporary Western world 'living as if there is nothing beyond this world and all that matters is cash'. He talked about this in relation to the passage in 1 Timothy which states 'the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils':

> Paul does not say that *money* is the root of all kinds of evil, does he? It's the *desire* to be rich… Paul is not against being rich. The Bible is not against money. God made money. God isn't a communist, you might say… What Paul is speaking against here is the man or woman who desires wealth, who hankers after wealth, for whom making money and advancing in financial terms is an all-absorbing affair.

David talked about the imagery in the 1 Timothy passage, which describes the desire to be rich as 'a snare':

> the snare is a noose laid out subtly for an animal into which the animal is designed to put its … neck. Then once in it [the noose] in such a way that it cannot loosen it, and it involves the animal slowly strangling to death. That is what the desire to be rich exposes you to. The senseless and harmful desires are those desires that rise up within us all the time.

David described these dangers in practical terms that members of the congregation could relate to:

> Allow me to introduce us to Sam. Sam is a fictional person… recently graduated and moved to London. Sam is a member of a church… Secretly Sam loves money. Sam has been exposed to a lot of, well, pagan friends, who live around him in the office; who live all out as economic materialists... Their motto is 'Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.' Most of them plan exotic holidays. Many of them have a season ticket at their local football club, gym membership. They ski, of course, at least once a year, and some of them just pop off for a couple of other weekends where they go to the finest resorts, Verbier and such like. Sam secretly has started to long for all these things too… [H]e has seen the adverts, he watches the telly, he hears people talk in the office, and he longs to be rich… Just an extra £2,000 a year, or maybe £5,000, so he can live the life, walk the walk, and talk the talk.
>
> How does God see Sam? … God sees Sam like a person who takes a sword, lays it out at the bottom of the stairs sticking upwards and in the morning walks down the stairs deliberately tripping himself on the second stair from the bottom to see if he might be able to fall on it.

David said, 'the antidote … is not to become a kind of tapioca-eating-tree-hugging-world-denying hippy… Money is good. Being poor is not to be preferred… Rather we should be what you might call spiritual materialists.' He put some figures on this:

> if you are on £55,000 a year and you are a single person, surely you are able to give 20% of that away? … Maybe you are earning £20,000 a year… surely you can give away 10% of that? … Some of us will have savings…. This is a good thing to do… But I wonder when the last time was you … [w]ent to your savings and said, … 'I am going to give away 10% of my savings.'

He then warned against pride:

> How often I've heard somebody who works long hours in the city and gets paid extraordinary amounts of money say, 'I deserve it.' Really? Don't be so arrogant. Do you deserve that money more than the woman in Bangladesh sitting with a pile of bricks on her left hammering them on an anvil, breaking them into gravel so that she can make a pile of gravel to be sold for a pittance to the builders so they can build roads in Bangladesh? Do you really think you work harder than her? Of course you don't deserve it. Don't be so proud.

David said those who are rich must be 'generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves in heaven', but emphasized 'not that we *earn* our place in heaven, but God has given us things which we are to use for the benefit of others, freely, generously, for the work of Christ and thus to develop our portfolio - you will like that language if you are rich – and to build your portfolio where it actually lasts, in heaven.'

Here we see a construction of the good in terms of generosity contrasted with the contemporary world's idolatrous worship of money. Yet we also see the idea that the love of money is a danger for Christians. Through listening to these teachings and

through practices of Bible reading, prayer and participating in church Bible study groups, church members learn to monitor their thoughts and desires according to the ideals of being content with their possessions and generosity towards the church. They are encouraged to narrativize experiences of the contradictions of capitalist desire as an internal struggle between Spirit and Flesh, which also constructs a sense of distinction from the idolatrous city around them. Foucault describes subjectification as taking place through dividing practices: 'the subject is either divided in himself or divided from others' (1982: 208). The naming of the good Christian here, who gives generously, can be seen as a boundary that divides evangelicals from others. But it *also* divides the subject within herself, outlining an *ideal* moral stance that she will fall short of, and therefore encouraging her to work on herself to come closer to this ideal in future (Strhan 2015: 107). In contrast with interventions by Christian leaders such as Pope Francis, there was at St John's no critique of capitalism in terms of the injustices it perpetuates. Rather, the ideal presented is for the evangelical subject to become aware that the possibility of enacting the good is implicated in her every economic transaction. In one sermon, Pete said, 'Every penny of our resources belongs to God himself. We are merely stewards of them. Therefore, it is right to ask of every pound… Will I save it? Will I spend it? Or will I give it? Because the way that I dispose of each pound is a spiritual decision.'

This construction of the good in terms of the virtues of generosity and contentment – and the struggle to maintain these – can be seen in the words of Gemma, a teaching assistant. She told me she felt pressure to 'look nice' at St John's, and 'because everyone looks nice, you end up wanting to buy more things yourself,

and you don't see anything wrong with it, because everyone else does that, but it does breed a kind of discontent.' She said that David addressed money in sermons

> because he perceives it as a problem that people in the church are facing… I think that maybe we should be more uncomfortable about the tension between society's expectations and our faith. It is so ingrained into our minds to want that suburban house. It's something that Jeremy [her husband] and I struggle with. Sometimes we wonder if we're being ridiculous giving so much away when we really don't have very much… We couldn't afford to go on our church weekend away. It was £140 a night per person if we wanted en suite.

I asked how she dealt with that sense of struggle. 'Through prayer,' she replied, 'and the wisdom of other Christians. Sometimes seeing the generosity of other Christians is really inspiring.' She said that it was hard not to be judgemental:

> You really need to discipline yourself not to judge others. Like, sometimes I hear people at work saying that they need to do more overtime to have money to go out, and I find myself thinking, 'you're living at home with your parents, when Jeremy and I were both of us living off my salary for three months, what do you *do* with your money?' But that's wrong of me... If they're not Christians, there's no reason for them to be living otherwise.

In one evening's Bible study group discussion, Hannah, leading the discussion, said that the way we think about money was an area 'that requires real grace from God to change'. She talked about how she thought the notion that what we

have earned is *ours* is very deeply ingrained. Emily, another group member, said that the problem was that often we can think 'go on, you deserve it, you're worth it'. A particular issue that Hannah raised was the need to save for our pensions and that worrying about the future can affect giving. Emily replied, 'but we *do* need to get a balance between being generous and being sensible.' Alan, another group member, added, 'and we're always being asked for money, on the TV, by post, there are always so many appeals'.

Challenging the church leaders' binary moral construction of the 'self-serving world' and the other-serving Christian, Janet, another group member, said that non-Christians can offer 'a real example' through their generosity, and she mentioned a colleague who had given very generously to a heart charity. 'Yes, and you wonder,' Emily replied, 'are they saying the same thing about you giving to the church?', showing her awareness that those outside the church would see giving to an already affluent church as a lesser good than other causes. Hannah emphasized the importance of context: 'here [in the Bible passage] it is about supporting and giving to *Christians* in need, not giving to secular charities. It's about that circle of God's grace, that grace abounding to us, that results in our giving, then that results in the thanksgiving and relationship with others.'

In another discussion, the group's sense that their own attitudes towards money should be different from non-Christians was clear. Talking about the 'costs' of being a Christian, Hannah commented that when Philip, her husband, became a partner at his firm, their friends had suggested that they move out of central London to Surrey and buy a bigger house, but they had made a decision to stay in London. 'In your pokey old cottage?' her friend had Lucy said sharply, in reference to Hannah and Philip's large Georgian townhouse. In comparison with many corporate partners of

comparable financial services organizations, they lifestyles are relatively unshowy: a (rented) cottage in Devon being their preferred holiday destination, no second home and no expensive car, and Hannah – a Cambridge graduate – works as a volunteer for an educational charity.

Talking about what their non-Christian friends valued, Philip mentioned that he had said in conversation to a colleague, 'I often wonder why would people want to spend all that money on a Ferrari or whatever?', but then remembered that this particular colleague had an Aston Martin. Edward, a banker in his early thirties who was part of the Bible study group had replied, '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.' Edward's words reflected many church members' sense of duty to embody the good life, although not as an end in itself but rather as a means of 'witnessing' their faith to non-Christians. While being aware that they have material wealth, the source of church members' contentment should *visibly* lie elsewhere, in their relationship with God. As church members discussed their sense that how they spent their money was 'different' from their non-Christian friends and colleagues, they thereby reinforced their sense of moral distinction from non-Christians. Such discussions feed into their perception of a fragmentation between their values and a broader cultural valuing of wealth. Yet in acknowledging the exemplary generosity of non-Christians and wondering about their friends' perceptions of their own giving, they also demonstrate the fragility of these moral boundaries of distinctiveness.

Conclusion

Approaching conservative evangelicals' through the lens of the good means taking seriously the ethical sensibilities of a group who seem morally suspect to many, and

examining how their values are shaped, maintained and challenged in everyday life. Different moral threads are interwoven in their economic imaginaries: we see a broadly 'neoliberal' ethic of individual self-determination to maximize monetary resources in order to give to the church, contributing to a corporate venture that extends globally, and draws past and future into the present. There is also a somewhat 'utopian' understanding of money (Dodds 2012; Simmel 2004), in which the £3 gift is equal in value to the £3000 gift. At the same time, money is a mortal threat: wider society is constructed as in the lure of Mammon, and Christians as also constantly threatened.

Peter Brown describes how in late Roman society the act of giving became a source of competition, with fierce inter-family rivalry goading urban benefactors to compete in giving to their cities. Christian giving, he argues, was a way of escaping this competitiveness. The rich 'valued in the churches a certain lowering of the sense of hierarchy and a slowing down of the pace of competition' (2012: 87). Brown notes that in church they did not have to give large amounts at one time, as long as they gave frequently: 'the sense that the glory of heaven stood behind their every gift enabled the Christian rich to contribute regularly and with that much less strain' (ibid.). Among affluent circles in contemporary London, there is little such competitiveness about charitable giving, but there *is* competitiveness about status. The values cultivated at St John's might be seen likewise as a means of standing apart from this. One trader told me that everyone in his profession was well paid, and 'there's a culture of materialism…. So it's a question of whether you buy into that as well. So I think it does affect the car I have, I think it affects where I live - all of those things would seem less impressive than they might' to his peers. He said that coming

to St John's motivated his work, describing it as 'like a recharge, which is really good, in terms of *perspective* on what I'm doing.'

When I interviewed the minister in charge of city ministry, he likewise talked about the importance of enabling people to see their value as beyond economic value:

> David used to tease me, and say, 'it's just idolatry isn't it?' And I'd say, 'no, here's the irony, I think it's slavery,' because … the junior guys in the city – I mean guys generically – the junior Christians in the city, you're not in control of your circumstances. The boss says jump and you jump. So you're a slave. I look at the managing director of [a large financial services company], the chief executives I know, and I think, it's different for you, you're in control, you control your diary, you can pick and choose. The MDs at [a large financial services company] tell me that the phone rings and it's a client, it could be a chief exec of a FTSE 100 company on the phone, they get an email, and they say, 'why aren't you on the phone? I need to speak to you.' That's the kind of thing you expect a junior grub to get in the food chain, but this is a guy – there's no higher person in the bank – but he's being treated like a junior grub. Because so much of it is professional services. So there is this kind of slavery idolatry battle….
>
> Part of the battle for the Christian is to keep reminding them that they are valued not because of the number of noughts on the end of a salary, or the size of their Queen Anne mansion, or the top speed of their Aston Martin… They are valued because if they're God's children, God has created them in his image, Jesus has died on the cross for them, and God's Spirit dwells within

them. It means that we're remarkable… I just have to keep reminding myself. And so to have the right criteria for their source of value makes a difference.

Church leaders thus sought to develop in church members the 'right criteria' for their source of value in terms of this sense of relationship with God which will shape their engagements with money, with God experienced as the ultimate 'arbiter, guarantor, and … redeemer of value' (Lambek 2015a: 228). As well as a means of opting out of the competitiveness of status, giving money to the church and placing limits on spending are also a means for church members to have an increased sense of control over their lives, which many of them do not necessarily feel in relation to working in professional services.

Brown describes the 'glory of heaven' standing behind every Christian gift in the early church. For members of St John's, everyday economic practices become likewise imbued with a transcendent significance and enable them to feel a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves, drawing together the past and the future in the present moment. In her study of international humanitarianism, Lisa Malkki argues that involvement in humanitarian work enables people to feel 'part of something other and bigger than themselves, to *imagine* themselves … as members of a greater "community of generosity"' and at the same time benefit from the social connections they experience through such work (2015: 12). Members of St John's learn to imagine their giving as contributing to the work of a greater heavenly community while at the same time fostering the church as an earthly community that provides them with a sense of social connectedness. Malkki notes that in humanitarian work, the recipient of giving is often presented as the 'passive and pathetic' subject who suffers, in contrast with the active subject who 'identifies suffering and knows

how to act' (ibid: 7). At St John's, while in practice the church is the direct recipient of congregants' money, church members are encouraged to see the *true* beneficiaries of their giving as the non-Christians around them, who are otherwise headed for eternal damnation and who may yet be saved through the church's proselytizing. It is possible to see this transformation of wealth into sanctity, as Lambek argues, as one reason for the appeal of religion as it 'expands alongside the penetration and expansion of the capitalist economy. Indeed, it may provide the only way not just to siphon off capital, but to transcend capitalist regimes of value' (2015a: 236).

These incommensurable logics at St John's in terms of the calculative, rationalistic ethics entwined in mundane book-keeping, spreadsheets and accountability, and of transcendent grace gesture towards counteracting moral dynamics deeply rooted within contemporary neoliberal subjectivities. Andrea Muehlebach argues that while much work on neoliberalism places itself in the Weberian and Foucauldian tradition of studying forms of self-formation accruing virtues of work, thrift and productivity, we should also understand neoliberalism as 'a force that can contain its negation – the vision of a decommodified, disinterested life and of a moral community of human relationality and solidarity that stands opposed to alienation' (2012: 25). Yet these differing moral impulses also gesture towards deeper fissures within the human subject in modernity, between dimensions of order, control and rationalization and the vertiginous dimension of ideas of grace, ethics and transcendent possibility that exceed totalizing logics of exchange (Levinas 1969; Strhan 2019: 194). Henig and Makovicky (forthcoming) call for an 'anthropology of gratuitous action', building on Pitt-Rivers' (2017) argument that human sociality is not grounded only in transactional exchange relationships but also on forms of grace and gratuity. Future studies might attend to the significance and articulation of

specific ideas of grace and gratuity, and the ways in which these are interwoven within and beyond economic imaginaries.

For conservative evangelicals at St John's, the ideal of giving is anchored through an imaginary focused on ideas of God's transcendent grace and the future promise of the City of God. I have elsewhere argued (2015, 2019), following Stanley Cavell, that transcendental elements and utopian moments may in the end be 'indispensable in the motivation for a moral existence' (Cavell 2004: 18; see also Cooke 2006, Robbins 2016). One of Kant's summary images in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* portrays, as Cavell describes:

> the human being regarding his existence from two standpoints, from one of which he counts himself as belonging to the world of sense …, and from the other of which he counts himself as belonging to the intelligible world (the province of freedom and of the moral law, presided over by reason, transcending the human powers of knowing). (Cavell 2004: 1)

This image of human nature as divided or double permeates a wide range of philosophical and moral perspectives and, as Cavell describes, offers 'a perspective of judgement upon the world as it is, measured against the world as it may be', and in so doing expresses 'disappointment with the world as it is, as the scene of human activity and prospects', while 'lodg[ing] the demand or desire for a reform or transfiguration of the world' (ibid: 2). Cavell argues that this interplay of transcendental moments, disappointment, and desire are intrinsic to the register of 'moral perfectionism', echoing 'an idea that Socrates … invokes as listening to one's genius (meaning not our virtuosity but something like our receptiveness), which may require self-

disobedience' (2004: 18). Attending to the wider social contexts shaping the formation of these transcendental imaginings and their interrelation with specific conditions of disappointment and desire might deepen our understanding of the location of the good in the world, and how this can both anchor and transcend contemporary regimes of value.

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[i] This idea of Christians being 'downwardly mobile' was a self-conscious distancing from prosperity gospel theology, which in other sermons was described as 'blasphemous' in its emphasis on material blessings in the here and now (Strhan 2015: 185).

[ii] Robbins (2013) does not situate the anthropology of the good in relation to neoliberalism, but rather with the loss of the 'Other' in the anthropological imagination through focusing on suffering.

[iii] Further information about the process of conducting fieldwork with St John's is detailed in *Aliens and Strangers? The Struggle for Coherence in Everyday Evangelicalism* (2015) and *The Figure of the Child in Contemporary Evangelicalism* (2019).

[iv] This is in contrast with other evangelical churches in the UK which often place greater emphasis on giving to the poor (see Evangelical Alliance 2012).

[v] Every parish in the Church of England is required, under Church Representation Rules, to hold an Annual Parochial Meeting to conduct parish business.