

3 'Alternative' Worship: Challenging the Boundaries of the Christian Faith¹

MATHEW GUEST

Introduction

Enmeshed in interpretative frameworks that emphasize post-modern fragmentation, individualism and de-traditionalization, it is sometimes easy to lose sight of the social and conceptual boundaries which define religious identity and shape religious change (Bauman, 1998: 57–58; Heelas *et al.*, 1996). Religious innovation does not imply a randomly experimental approach to 'spiritual capital', but implies change that is tempered by convictions about which cultural phenomena are worthy of spiritual significance. Contemporary cultural change seems to have broadened the possibilities in this respect, but it has not thrown them wide open for all people. New religious initiatives need to be grounded in their specific social manifestations, subject to the social class, cultural identity and religious background of participants, to the experiences to which they are most open, and to which they are most disposed.

Bearing this in mind, this paper deals with the 'alternative' worship movement in the UK as a site of religious change. Located within the organisational structure of the 'mainstream' churches, and yet adopting a radically experimental approach to worship, the movement embodies a tension between tradition and a culturally driven ideology of progression. Moreover, although expressing no desire for schism or organisational independence, 'alternative' service groups provide the context for a radical rethinking of the conceptual boundaries of the Christian faith. In line with the notion that religious innovations are parasitical upon the traditions out of which they grow, it is the intention of this paper to interpret the ritual and ideological innovations of 'alternative' worship as the result of an appropriation and transformation of Protestant evangelicalism. Furthermore, although the two movements seem asymmetrically opposed in some respects, it can be argued that 'alternative' worship is dependent upon evangelicalism

for its historical heritage as well as for the theological and cultural assumptions that underpin the vision of Christianity that it seeks to express. Just as notions of the 'sacred' only exist in the form of relationally or situationally defined categories (Smith, 1982: 55), so—it seems—do representations of faith. First, however, it will be necessary to trace a brief history of 'alternative' worship in order to set this development within its context.

A Brief History of 'Alternative' Worship

'Alternative' worship originated primarily with the pioneering 'Nine O'Clock Service' (NOS),² which began in the charismatic church of St Thomas's, Crooks, in Sheffield, in the mid-1980s. NOS advocated a radical evangelical theology and claimed to be revisiting the essence of Christianity, as lived by the early church through committed discipleship and close-knit community living. Most notably, NOS attempted to challenge the moral and religious complacency that it perceived in Western culture at large as well as in the established church. However, it was the worship at NOS which secured its reputation as inspirational, and which drew so many people to its events.

NOS services were distinguished by a radical use of multi-media technology. Ambient and dance music was used, in vogue with the developing popular music scene of the time, and a conscious effort was made, on the part of the leadership teams, to keep up-to-date with the latest trends in sound technology and image reproduction. For many, this combination of factors formed an event that was closer to a night-club than any conceptions of 'church'; many who had previously felt alienated from traditional church worship found a welcome haven in NOS, where the boundaries between Christianity, the church and pop culture had been effectively and deliberately blurred. Those hundreds of young people who travelled across the country to take part in this pioneering service responded in different ways. Some moved to Sheffield and committed themselves to the NOS community more wholeheartedly, while others were inspired to inaugurate similar projects within their own local areas. It is these scattered local groups that have developed into the 'alternative' worship movement.

Around the time when NOS was enjoying its heyday, several other developments were emerging within Christian circles in the UK, which had an impact on this nascent movement. Dave Tomlinson, a former House Church leader, began to perceive the doubts and misgivings of many Restorationist Christians with respect to the fundamentalism and authoritarian leadership that were central to the House Church style (Walker, 1988: 112, 116). He

responded by establishing 'Harry', a Christian arts festival that encouraged a more experimental approach to worship, using the media of story and debate to provide a 'safe' ecclesiastical space in which young people could express and explore these doubts. In 1995, Tomlinson published *The Post-Evangelical*, in which he argues that a great number of evangelicals have become disillusioned with the conservative, exclusivist approach to truth, authority and the church, which characterizes evangelicalism. He suggests a more experimental, exploratory approach to faith and worship, in accordance with a post-modern understanding of truth as multi-dimensional, and of tradition as subject to perpetual subversion and revision, if it is to retain any relevancy within contemporary culture (Tomlinson, 1995: 131–132). Tomlinson also established *Holy Joe's*, a Christian discussion group run along the same lines as 'Harry'; it is based in a pub in South London, and holds an 'alternative' service on a regular basis.

Although NOS had begun by advocating a strongly charismatic approach to worship, inspired by John Wimber's 'signs and wonders' theology (Percy, 1996), its later services were more inspired by Matthew Fox's 'Creation Spirituality', which emphasizes ecological concerns, a holistic spirituality and a radically immanentist understanding of the sacred (Fox, 1991). Although surviving 'alternative' services shy away from Fox's work, they demonstrate a willingness to experiment with new sources of spiritual significance, including Celtic traditions, and they demonstrate a political awareness of 'green' issues. Services are mostly multi-media based, incorporating video imagery, sound mixing, and the use of incense, in order to facilitate a worship event in which all the senses are involved. Usually held once or twice a month, 'alternative' services are for the most part organized and led by a small planning group who design worship afresh at each occasion, according to the theological theme of the day. Consequently, there is a tendency towards creativity and liturgical revision rather than towards any notion of ritual consistency. Moreover, leadership roles within the act of worship are often shared and any directive teaching is given minimal space, if any at all—a feature that reflects the distrust of person-based, 'parental' authority that Tomlinson observes in many 'post-evangelicals' (Tomlinson, 1995: 54–55).³

It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of 'alternative' services across the UK at the present time. Some practitioners have mentioned a number of over a hundred, but the complexities of self-definition mean that those services which claim the label 'alternative' for themselves may be radically different from one other in worship style and ritual emphases. A useful framework for classifying such worship groups might indicate two divergent trends. Firstly, there are services which adopt multi-media technology primarily in order to attract young people into a church environment in which

they feel more comfortable. Such services are regularly held in churches throughout the country, and at large-scale events, such as those organized by *Soul Survivor*, a movement which has fostered youth ministry through festivals and church outreach initiatives since 1993. However, in terms of proclaimed teaching, leadership style and expressed attitudes towards Biblical authority, these initiatives seldom express any serious divergence from the 'mainstream' evangelical community. Secondly, there are groups which incorporate experimental worship into a broader shared project of rethinking the notions of church, cultural identity and Christian faith. These groups fit closer into Tomlinson's 'post-evangelical' category and many developed out of a first-hand experience of NOS. Such groups are the main concern of this paper, as they establish the contexts in which evangelical identities are explored and negotiated in a ritual context.

Worship groups are scattered throughout the country, although they are for the most part located in urban areas. Attendance tends to be on a fairly small scale, with regular services attracting around 20–50 people. Those who attend come from various social and religious backgrounds, although most long-standing participants appear to have some background in evangelicalism and often in charismatic Christianity. It is also fair to say that most are university educated and from the middle classes, a tendency that reflects the factors of technical expertise and a critical, intellectual perspective of religion, both of which are common within 'alternative' worship circles.

Following the collapse of NOS in 1995, a study day was held on 'alternative' worship at Lambeth Palace (see Fig. 1). One of the reasons why the study day was arranged was to give the church hierarchy the opportunity to see that the problems inherent in the Sheffield group arose from its authority structures rather than from its worship. The church establishment has since viewed 'alternative' worship with toleration and acceptance, although very few clergy are centrally involved in worship groups, and services receive minimal attention from the church press. On a local level, most 'alternative' worship groups today exist under the auspices of a host church, which may provide facilities and financial support as well as some pastoral supervision. The majority are attached to Anglican parishes, although some have their homes in non-conformist churches.⁴ Although the 'alternative' worship movement is predominantly a UK phenomenon, parallel developments have emerged in the Antipodes and more recently in the USA (Roberts, 1999: 13). Moreover, while the UK movement maintains inter-group contact through visits and collaborative projects, based at events such as *Greenbelt* and *Time of Our Lives*, the international movement is united in virtual interaction through the alt.worship e-mail discussion list, which acts as the forum for the exchange of worship ideas as well as for the debate of theological issues.

Methodology

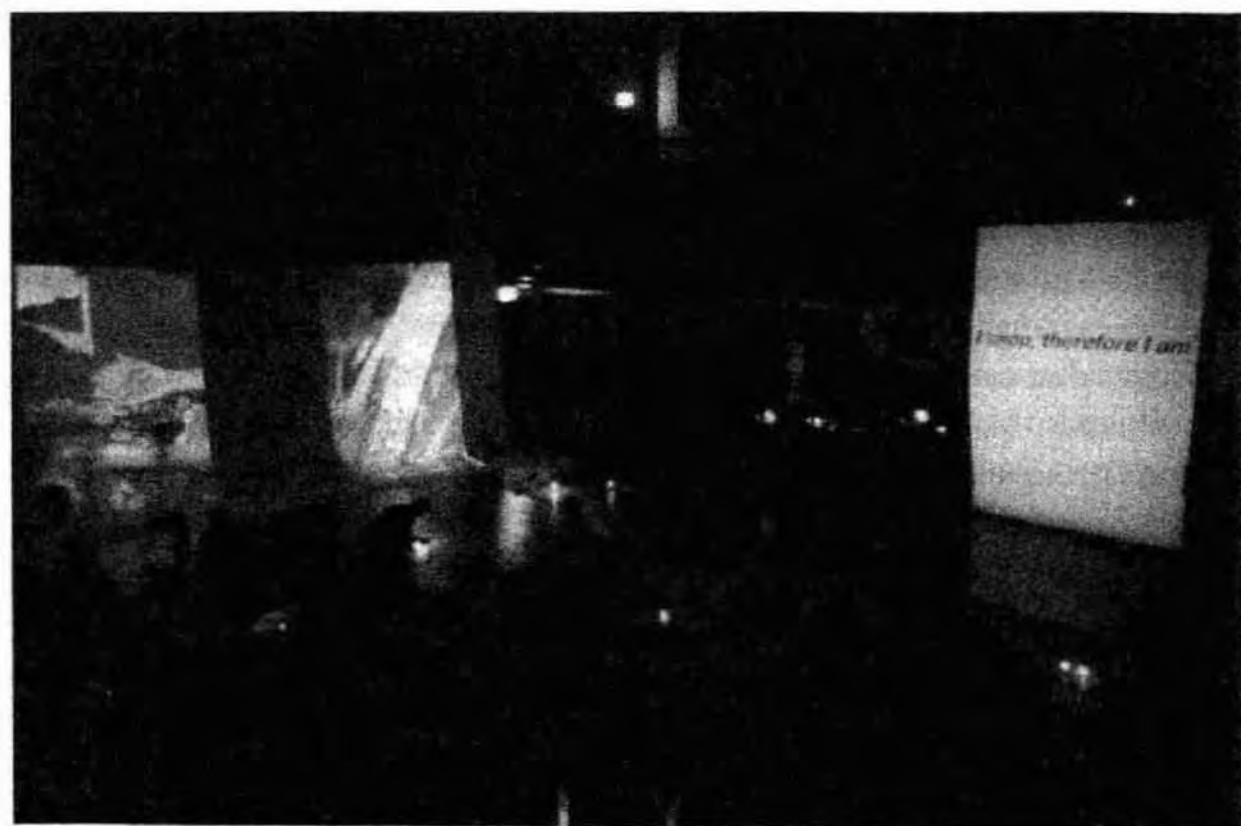
As is clear from the above overview, 'alternative' worship is as much a social movement as it is a development in progressive ritual. Moreover, I wish to argue that it is most thoroughly analysed from a dual perspective that incorporates both dimensions. It is based around and orchestrated by localised small groups, which interact on the basis of shared attitudes both in and around the event of worship, as well as in other social contexts. Within this emerging Christian sub-culture, the actual event of worship is but one context among several, in which a reworking of Christian identity is actively negotiated. I would tentatively delineate primary contexts as the 'event' (incorporating all organized episodes of worship), the small group discussion, and the national and international network (incorporating face-to-face and 'virtual' interaction). A considered examination of any 'alternative' group will perceive lines of influence that frequently pass between these three contexts of social activity.

In accordance with this broad picture, the portrait of 'alternative' worship that follows is based on two main sources of data. Firstly, I have explored the nature of the broader 'alternative' worship movement by way of an extensive study of service literature,⁵ internet sites, e-mail discussion, and observation of 'alternative' worship events. I have also interviewed several individuals who have had considerable experience of 'alternative' worship in various church contexts across the country. Secondly, in order to explore more deeply the culture of 'alternative' worship within a single group setting, I have engaged in participant observation among an 'alternative' worship group based in a large town in the north of England. There are several reasons why I chose this particular group as my case study; the most important reason is related to its ecclesiastical situation as a worship group attached to a large and thriving evangelical Anglican church. Guided by my intention of exploring the cultural dialectics that occur between 'alternative' worship and evangelical Christianity, this situation seemed well suited to a comparative analysis that may contrast the two groups by their worship and shared attitudes, and to the exploration of the nature of any interaction that may occur between them. My fieldwork at this stage has extended to over three months duration and has incorporated participant observation of all services held by both the evangelical church and the 'alternative' worship group. I have also attended various group meetings and have engaged in numerous conversations with participants in both 'camps' in varying contexts.

I chose to conduct my fieldwork overtly for two main reasons. Firstly, I feel that it is important, on ethical grounds, for the researcher to be as honest as is practically possible about his/her intentions. Secondly, in order to ensure



1. As part of the 'Alternative' Worship Study Day in Lambeth Crypt in 1995, a service entitled 'Are you receiving me?' was held, organised by groups from Bristol, Leeds, London, Oxford and York. The service involved a prayer ritual during which participants lit candles for those who are suffering or are separated from God. These candles were then offered at an altar constructed from broken TV sets and decorated in topical newspaper cuttings. The ritual as shown here is recreated by the *Visions* group, who performed it at one of their own services in York the week after the Lambeth event. (courtesy of Richard Horton/*Visions*)



2. A 'Labyrinth' service held by the *Live on Planet Earth* group as part of the 'Reimagining Worship' conference for UK 'alternative' worship groups in May, 1998. Suggested meditations are placed at intervals around the labyrinth. The ironic OHP caption on the far right is reflective of the way western consumerism is undermined in some 'alternative' services; critique is often expressed through ambiguity and symbol, rather than through any verbal diatribe. (courtesy of Steve Collins)



3. A *Visions* service visual arrangement, typically juxtaposing radically divergent images: a motorway complex, a waterfall, angels, the Turin Shroud and a pair of hands cupped around the warmth of a naked flame. All of this is flanked by constantly changing TV images, and illuminated by a characteristically simple, open but provocative verse from the Bible. (courtesy of Richard Horton/*Visions*)



4. During the *Visions* service in York, the whole east wall of the church building is transformed by projected visuals and video images. Here, nature-centred images of trees and water droplets are juxtaposed with an orthodox icon of Christ. In reflection of the group's use of Celtic tradition, the orthodox 'Jesus prayer' is also displayed, its simplicity and innocence enhanced by the medium of child-like handwriting. (courtesy of Richard Horton/*Visions*)

some sort of thematic focus, I wanted to conduct formal interviews as part of the fieldwork. Consequently, I have been open with all the people with whom I have spoken about what I am doing and about my personal beliefs. This approach has helped gain the trust of many people, and has had the added advantage of opening up avenues of discussion that have been stimulating and insightful. It has also enabled me to observe the different ways in which the two communities receive outsiders and relate to their external environment (see Hobbs & May, 1993: xii). I considered myself in particular to be an outsider who did not share the apparent beliefs of those people within either group—at least this was my initial preconception. However, my subsequent research has revealed a more complex picture.

I do not consider myself a Christian and have been plain about this fact with respondents within the community. I have portrayed myself rather as an interested agnostic who is nonetheless sympathetic to some aspects of Christianity, but who has difficulties accepting other, more conservative values. My attitude could perhaps be described as that of a liberal humanist. It is important to note that I have not announced my non-Christian status to either community uninvited, but have responded to questions about my personal beliefs if and when asked. This has allowed me to gauge responses to my presence as an unknown newcomer, and also to gauge initial responses to outsiders generally (as least in as much as this was practically possible). Reactions to my presence within the two communities have been markedly different.

After reading about the guarded suspicion with which some researchers of conservative Christianity have been received in the past (e.g. Peshkin, 1984), I was justifiably anxious about how I might be viewed within the evangelical community. However, I was happily proven wrong and experienced both warmth and helpful, open co-operation from both church staff and parishioners. Most people with whom I have spoken have been curious about my research and have expressed an interest in speaking further. Furthermore, once acquainted with my status as a researcher, the vast majority of people then asked if I was a Christian. My often convoluted answers have prompted more interest, some encouragement towards conversion and certainly no condemnation, but the question has been a recurring one and has appeared in straightforward language: are you a Christian?

My reception within the 'alternative' group has been very different. Despite my continuous presence both in services and in small group discussions, I have only been asked once about my personal beliefs. The group is small and it was not long before I was known by all the core members, with whom I have spoken at length, both in 'religious' and social contexts. I have assisted in the setting up of services and contributed to group

discussion. I have been asked about my research, and the group is positive about my presence (to the point of asking me to lead one of their small group discussion sessions⁶) and yet, virtually no questions have been raised about my personal religious identity.

Although these impressions are merely based on my experience within a single local community, they introduce some recurring issues with which the remainder of this paper will be concerned. In particular, they illustrate the evangelical conception of conversion as a straightforward transformation of identity—'Christian' being the operative category, the invocation of which is assumed to safely indicate a certain status, the nature of which is unquestioned. By contrast, the 'alternative' tendency is towards the unquestioning acceptance of individuals, regardless of background or faith. Direct questions about personal faith are perceived as judgmental and intrusive. Moreover, there is a reluctance to discuss identity openly in such clear-cut terms.

These initial reactions shed light on the boundaries manifest in each group, which separate insiders from outsiders, and on the criteria upon which this division stands. Although the evangelicals welcomed me, their rhetoric suggested that they conceived my identity as categorically different from their own. I may have shared common ground with many members of the congregation—not least a university education and a knowledge of theology—but the categorical dichotomy of Christian/non-Christian was a perpetual reminder of my being different, an outsider. By contrast, no such clear-cut distinctions were evident within the discourse shared among the 'alternative' group. Indeed, the possibility of such categories seemed to be the very subject of discussion at times. Ostensibly, the group ethos is to welcome people from any background, although there are, of course, boundaries of group inclusion. However, these are implicit and related to the 'sub-cultural' mood of worship events. Although I found some sense of affinity with dimmed lighting, video projections and contemporary ambient dance music, it was clear that many individuals from more conservative backgrounds would not have felt so comfortable. Indeed, in explaining why they did not attend the 'alternative' service, most evangelicals referred to its 'weird' style rather than any theological argument. Consequently, some 'alternative' worship can be interpreted as culturally alienating for a great number of people.

The insider/outsider distinction is a useful theoretical lens through which the transformation of evangelicalism within 'alternative' worship groups can be viewed. The predominant shift appears to be from exclusivism to inclusivism, marked by an openness to outsider influences and to outsider involvement. The development of 'alternative' worship out of evangelicalism is, however, more complex than this. In order to explore this process, I shall

focus on three thematic dimensions that appear to mediate, in various manifestations, the problematization of evangelical Christianity among 'alternative' worshippers: authority, reflexivity, and community.

Progressive Dimensions: Authority

The success of Protestant evangelicalism during the 1980s was marked by several key features which characterized its theology and wider mission, and which distinguished it from the liberal Protestantism of the time. Descriptions of evangelicalism vary, although all focus on the importance of scripture as the inspired word of God, the centrality of the cross as the basis of salvation, a stress upon actively living the Gospel message, and the essential experience of conversion as the door to the Christian life (Bebbington, 1989: 1–17). During the 1980s, these maxims were predominantly interpreted and enacted along conservative lines within many evangelical circles in the UK. The Bible was taught as the primary, if not the sole, source of divine authority, before all other possible sources of divine inspiration, which were therefore to be measured against it. Moreover, salvation was conceived in exclusivistic terms—formulations that deviated from the evangelical conception (most notably those that de-emphasized the living Christ or the crucifixion) were often judged as illegitimate. Moreover, those deemed to be 'unsaved' were often considered to be destined for hell, usually understood as an actual place of punishment rather than a state of being. The boundaries that marked insiders from outsiders were explicit and unequivocal—even if members were not expected to make some public statement of commitment, it was clear through shared discourse and received teaching what 'insiders' were expected to believe.

In addition to these features, the conflation of evangelical and charismatic developments in the early 1980s transformed British evangelicalism (Bebbington, 1994: 371). The emerging generation of young evangelical leaders, many of whom had been influenced by the House Church Movement, expressed a new combination of theological conservatism, social and political awareness and charismatic spirituality.⁷ The importance which charismatic gifts assumed in the world of British evangelicals, intensified by the influence of John Wimber and later the Toronto Blessing (Percy, 1998: 141–162), awarded a new status to personal experience as a source of divine inspiration and spiritual guidance. It also fostered a renewed faith in the reality of supernatural power as it may be manifested in the social world as well as in church.⁸

The emergent charismatic evangelicalism, as manifested in expressed theology and worship practice, stressed two main sources of authority for the church: scripture and experience. The Bible, appropriated as the inspired account of God's work on earth through Jesus Christ, was taught as foundational to Christian faith, as an authority independent of personal or institutional mediation. In actual fact, of course, certain Biblical themes were stressed over others, according to the theology that was taught by evangelical preachers, a theology that often incorporated a moral conservatism and an exclusivist stance on other faiths. Moreover, a conservative interpretation of scripture such as this required consistent media through which it might be expressed and defended against liberal polemic. Evangelicalism catered for this by way of its active community of preachers, effectively reaching a wide audience through the increasingly popular tradition of evangelical conferences and festivals, such as 'Spring Harvest' (Tomlinson, 1995: 19–21). Significantly, it was through the medium of personal leadership, transmitted in preaching as well as spiritual guidance and Bible study, that the understanding of the authority of scripture was inculcated and sustained. The success of 1980s evangelicalism was not merely founded on the Bible, but on the directive style of the leaders (often young and enthusiastic) who preached its message as they had appropriated it. Consequently, the stress on Biblical authority veils another source of social power within evangelicalism: that expressed in the personal conviction of successful preachers.

'Experience' was invoked as authoritative in two related, yet distinct senses. In a perennial sense, 'experience' referred to the life world of the developing individual, in which and through which, it was taught, one may sense God and His work as a present-day reality. Such an understanding grounds the common evangelical tendency to attribute the occurrence of banal, everyday events to supernatural causes. The second understanding relates to charismatic gifts, the conception of which is based upon the former understanding of experience. However, charismatic gifts are manifest in the form of particular norms of performance, often within a congregational context. The occurrence of charismatic gifts is therefore subject to social pressures that persist in communal contexts, and expressions of power may effectively be contested or embraced in relation to group dynamics. What is important for our purposes is that divine authority is perceived as accessible and communicable through inter-personal media (Percy, 1998: 73). Moreover, it is experienced as something to be shared and understood, and consequently incorporates the notion of an authority for others as well as for oneself.⁹

Contrary to popular misconceptions, the 'Nine O'Clock Service' (NOS) appears to have maintained a ritual and theological structure that endorsed the above sources of authority in a traditionally evangelical vein, at least prior

to its absorption of creation spirituality and post-modern thought in the early 1990s. Some of the other long-standing 'alternative' groups appear to have developed out of a similar state, originally combining traditional evangelical authority structures with multi-media worship. However, during the past ten years, 'alternative' worship has been the context for the development and rethinking of such notions of authority, as expressed in ritual as well as in group discourse. In particular, there has been a widespread shift away from expressions of authority as directive, imperative sources of teaching. Personally delivered instruction is often viewed with suspicion and at best as one 'reading' among many others. Biblical teaching is treated critically—not with cynicism, but from a perspective that welcomes new interpretations, fresh nuances in the text, and an authentic dialogue between Biblical stories and the post-modern culture that defines our identity. Furthermore, leadership roles within groups are mostly unofficial, shared and de-emphasized. Whereas 'mainstream' evangelicalism has built itself upon a tradition of authority embodied in influential preachers, many 'alternative' worshippers remain thoroughly suspicious of institutional or charismatic authority.

Such developments suggest a move away from a hegemonic understanding of authority towards a more democratic, open understanding, which suggests authority as negotiated and relative, rather than received and absolute. The 'truth' of Christianity is not seen as simply available in the sermons of an 'inspired' preacher or as residing in prescribed readings of the Bible, significantly mediated through the middle-class, Western preconceptions of conservative evangelicalism. Indeed, the 'truth' of Christianity is seen as something that cannot be easily encapsulated in rhetorical formulae. Rather, Christian identity is represented as a processual phenomenon, subject to development and exploration, with the final arbiter of authenticity being the individual. As a consequence of this, faith is frequently conceived in terms of a journey, a pilgrimage with no prescribed route or defined end.

The most vivid ritual expression of this understanding of personal faith may be found in the widespread use of the 'labyrinth' by 'alternative' groups. This tradition originally derives from the maze-like floor pattern in Chartres Cathedral, which was traversed in medieval times by candidates the day before their baptism or confirmation. The labyrinth (as modelled on Chartres) has been a feature of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, since 1991, and NOS may have followed this example in its own initiative soon afterwards. In 'alternative' services, the labyrinth is used as an aid for prayer and meditation—slowly and silently participants move around the labyrinthine floor pattern at their own pace, moving to the centre as they approach God, stopping in the middle to sit and be with God, and eventually moving back 'into the world', supposedly renewed by the experience. Some 'alternative'

labyrinths are entirely blank, with only a Bible at the centre for guidance, while others include 'stations' that suggest prayer rituals and meditations (see Fig. 2). However, all suggest ritual and spiritual direction as person-centred, guided primarily by the experience and perception of the individual participant.

The shift in 'alternative' worship away from directional expressions of authority also relates to a refusal to embrace rhetorical representations of the Christian message as straightforward, univocal and binding. Out of a tradition of Christianity that has concentrated on the Word as the primary medium of divine communication (Coleman, 1996), 'alternative' worship embraces the image as a means to inspiration, reflection and spiritual insight. In accordance with this ethos, the symbolism used in worship events is often deliberately ambiguous and provocative (see Fig. 3). Occasionally, irreverent and controversial images are juxtaposed with images traditionally associated with purity or holiness, in an expressed effort to subvert our understanding and provoke a rethinking of the Christian tradition. *Grace*, an 'alternative' service based in Ealing, have used a particularly controversial image during their communion service: a picture of Jesus surrounded by gay men dressed in leather. As one of the organisers commented: "It's quite a shocking image ... and again irreverent, but plays well, begging the question who would Christ have shared his table with?" (Baker, 1999: 46)

The expression of Christian identity as essentially an exploratory process is accompanied by a tendency for 'alternative' service groups to adopt a broad perspective in which various traditions of significance may be legitimately incorporated into worship and into one's faith. Indeed, the ritual resources of 'alternative' worship are sometimes so eclectic that some uninformed outsiders have been tempted to compare it to the New Age movement. *The World Service*, previously based in London, once ran an event addressing the topic of 'Holy Ground', which included the use of Islamic art next to Christian stained glass as wall decoration. *Visions*, an 'alternative' group in York, often draw from the Celtic tradition in the form of prayers as well as projected images (see Fig. 4). And *The Nine O'Clock Community* (NOC), organised by former members of NOS in Sheffield, have incorporated a wide variety of spiritual traditions into their worship, including a performance of Samhain, an ancient pagan festival associated with the remembrance of ancestors and the coming of new life.

Despite the common tendency to draw from a wide variety of traditions as well as from the themes and media of pop culture, those within 'alternative' worship rebut any accusation that they have become 'New Age'. 'Alternative' worship is seen as the context in which our vision of Christianity is broadened and liberated from conservative traditions that constrain our appreciation of

a living God. Furthermore, the intense use of material symbolism, suggested by some as indicative of a return to sacramentalism (Roberts, 1999: 18), together with the renewed emphasis on the image (see Fig. 3), suggest that 'alternative' worship is not an exercise in revising the mainstream church as a whole, but that it is concerned with reclaiming sources of significance eclipsed by the overly rhetorical theology of Protestant evangelicalism.

A further consequence of the resistance to directive forms of authority and to definitive portrayals of Christianity relates to the perception of evangelism in 'alternative' groups. Many 'alternative' worshippers would deny that their activities are primarily intended to attract more young people into the church (Ward, 1999: 14). Indeed, while this may be a by-product of the 'alternative' approach, for most, the expressed aim is to provide a worship environment in which disillusioned Christians might make sense of their faith. This ethos is based on the argument that the church is out of touch with post-modernity and needs to adopt a less rigid and more open approach to spirituality in accordance with the wider cultural climate. However, the fact that 'alternative' worship resists any 'pat' expressions of Christianity and shrinks from 'pushy', discursive forms of evangelism, has meant that it has no active mission strategy. Services are not widely promoted, nor do organisers typically gauge their success by numerical attendance. Consequently, 'alternative' groups remain small, with probably little prospect for significant demographic growth in the near future.

In conclusion, the authority structures of evangelicalism have undergone a significant transformation through 'alternative' worship. Most notably, absolutist notions of truth and essentialist expressions of faith, often mediated through directive evangelical preachers, have been undermined by a symbolic stress on ambiguity, a ritualized shift towards individual-centred spirituality, and a resistance to any simple, 'packaged' expression of the Christian message. The emergent movement is characterized by ritual experimentation and a broadly inclusive attitude towards sources of spiritual significance.

Progressive Dimensions: Reflexivity

I have argued that 'alternative' worship, as a development in the Christian community in the UK, is revisionist. That is, it represents an attempt to revise and rethink, in ritual and discursive forms, the traditions that its participants have inherited. In particular, it is shaped by an effort to challenge some key features of evangelical Christianity. However, the ethos that drives the revisionist trend is frequently carried further to such an extent that a 'theology

of questioning' becomes a desired end in itself rather than a means to some final resolution or agreed truth (Tomlinson, 1995: 132). In many ways, the discursive exchanges and ritual innovations encompassed by 'alternative' worship reflect the post-modern urge to subvert received assumptions, question established authorities, and experiment with new possibilities of meaning (Beckford, 1992). Many of those most centrally involved in the movement are versed in post-modern literature and thought (Roberts, 1999: 17–19; Howard, 1996: 26–27). Indeed, many organizers would explain 'alternative' worship as an attempt to bridge the gap between the church and post-modern culture. This is certainly an important factor in accounting for its particular emphases, although explicit references to 'post-modernity' and to authors associated with this field also suggest a particular social location for 'alternative' worship among the educated middle classes (Beckford, 1992: 20).

Reflexivity can also be claimed as an intended feature of the many new rituals performed in 'alternative' services. The one-way delivery of the sermon is frequently rejected in favour of participatory exercises that suggest and provoke rather than inform. Prayers and meditations are frequently based on sensory experience and improvisation, and participants are often encouraged to engage actively with material symbols as an aid to reflection on a suggested issue (see Fig. 1). One ritual in which I participated was developed from the theme of Peter as the rock of the church. Rather than listen to a sermon on leadership, we considered the idea of the church as many rocks, symbolized by a series of small stones placed on the centre table. We all picked one and examined it, reflecting on the suffering of others as well as ourselves, before placing the rocks in a small fountain at the front of the hall. This was to symbolize how God transforms us from rough, damaged individuals into a beautiful community. Such an inventive rite sheds new light on Catherine Bell's claim that the loss of authentic sources of community in the contemporary world has led to a rise in ritual 'entrepreneurship' (Bell, 1997: 224).

In addition to the active encouragement of reflection, the general form of services undermines clear-cut or definitive presentations of Christianity, thus demanding some reflexive engagement from the participant. The multi-media technology of services facilitates the simultaneous bombardment of a continuously changing series of sounds, words and images—effectively subverting the possibility of a univocal, substantive message. Moreover, little effort is made to offer interpretations of the symbolism used; images may reflect a service theme, but the juxtaposition of sharply varying images frustrates the possibility of any unified meaning. Moreover, worship environment and ritual form are typically arranged anew for each service, so that the notion of a consistent substantive message that one might

appropriate over the course of weeks is arguably undermined (Rappaport, 1993).

There is a strong ethic of experimentation in 'alternative' worship, born out of a desire to communicate more and more effectively to participants, and born out of a resistance to the simple rehearsal of tradition. 'Alternative' services embody a paranoia about 'effective' ritual—about constructing a successful event, whereby success is not measured in terms of the numerical popularity of services, but by the conviction on the part of those who participate that it 'worked' for them. However, as this quality is difficult to gauge and impossible to describe adequately, service-planning groups are working with no specifically defined goal in mind. Combined with some insecurity brought on by low numbers and the potential for disagreement among key members who are, after all, united in a project that has no established guiding principle, the picture is one of perpetual innovation and ritual change—reflexivity without closure.

Discussion on the alt.worship e-mail list further demonstrates a shared willingness to radically question the fundamentals of the Christian faith through discursive media. Similar to Tomlinson's projects at *Holy Joe's* and 'Harry', this list provides a safe place in which 'progressive' Christians may voice doubts about key issues and suggest innovative solutions (Roberts, 1999: 11–12). Indeed, although some contributions are controversial, it is rare for messages to appear that challenge or strongly object to another point of view—the overall tone is one of acceptance and exploration, a feature that reflects the unspoken 'post-evangelical' ethic of allowing space for innovation and resisting judgement or condemnation at any cost. Recent contributions have challenged certain Biblical teachings on ethical issues, argued against the notion of a gendered God, and proposed an inclusive attitude towards other religions. Perspectives seem to range from the liberal evangelical to the post-Christian, and post-modernity is often referred to as an index of culture or as a cultural movement from which we may learn to question certain received categories.

Progressive Dimensions: Community

The fact that 'alternative' worship takes place in groups scattered across the country, and the possibility, discussed above, that the spiritual identity of those who attend may be seen as individualistic, privatized or post-traditional, may lead one to the conclusion that this is a rather fragmented movement, perhaps destined for dissolution. This may be the case. However, there are conditions in place that have so far ensured the continuance of 'alternative'

worship as a development with some degree of unity and shared purpose. Many participants share some common history, having moved among the social networks surrounding *Greenbelt* festival, NOS and 'alternative' worship conferences;¹⁰ continued inter-service collaboration takes place from time to time.¹¹ The Internet is used extensively, as a means to community cohesion and service promotion, and this reflects the fact that many participants possess considerable technical expertise. All in all, the emergent picture is of an 'imagined community' of 'alternative' Christians connected by a perception of shared attitudes and worship tastes (Anderson, 1993; Stringer, 1999: 67).

However, the theme of 'community' within the movement runs deeper than this. Locally based 'alternative' groups are close-knit, and a significant amount of time and commitment is invested in fostering continued group cohesion and mutually supportive relationships. This takes place within the context of small group meetings, commonly linked to worship groups, as well as social events. Moreover, participants invoke a sense of community and group identity in explaining their continued involvement. This can be partly explained as an inevitable consequence of the marginalized status of many groups, who need to establish and sustain close inter-personal links in order to persist as a social collective (Becker, 1963: 81). In this sense, an emphasis on community does not so much mediate a negative reaction to evangelicalism as compensate for the social consequences of partial detachment from it.

However, I would argue that an emphasis on community among 'alternative' worshippers might be traced to an ecclesiological style that has its basis in their evangelical heritage. In speaking of evangelical developments during the 1970s and 1980s, David Bebbington stresses the shift towards communitarian involvement as a lauded virtue of the British movement. This can be explained to some extent by the pervasive influence of the charismatic notion of 'unity in the Spirit' and by the strong evangelical stress on actively living out the Gospel message. Many churches established traditions of group activity outside Sunday worship as a further context for ministry, mission and group fellowship. House groups, Bible study classes, away days, church holidays, youth clubs and church-organized social occasions all served to strengthen group cohesion (Bebbington, 1989: 243–244).

By the late 1980s, evangelical church life had come to be equated not just with regular church attendance, but with wider involvement in other group activities that had a Christian purpose or an ecclesiastical source of organization. Such was the experience of many who subsequently became involved in 'alternative' worship. With the close-knit small group as an established context of faith-based interaction, 'alternative' worshippers had

the confidence to initiate groups of their own, without the fear of being perceived as schismatic or sectarian. Free from excessive ecclesiastical interference and free from any shared conservative theology or organizing principle, 'alternative' worship could develop on the level of 'culture' (Martin, 1990: 274), in accordance with group creativity and the evolving attitudes of key participants.

However, it is tempting to over-emphasize the extent to which 'alternative' worship groups serve as a focus for community belonging. Key participants, involved in the organization of services, may form close-knit groups, but a sizeable proportion of attendees only participate on an occasional basis. Moreover, initial research suggests that many of those who participate, including organizers, regularly attend other places of worship. These factors suggest that 'alternative' services are not being treated as the sole ritual and pastoral basis of Christian identities, but more as a cultural resource—a source of meaning without strong demands of commitment and without explicit criteria of belonging.¹² However, the fact that many 'alternative' service groups have survived the duration of the 1990s suggests that there is strong active commitment at their core.

Conclusion

I have argued for a transformation of evangelical Christianity within the 'alternative' worship movement, particularly as mediated through the themes of authority (undermined and questioned as a consequence of negative experiences), reflexivity (endorsed as a post-modern medium of desired change), and community (restored out of a common marginality). Each of these themes has been the basis of revision through discursive interaction as well as in and through ritual, effecting a shift from exclusivism, authoritarianism and essentialism to an inclusive, experimental approach to faith that resists any form of conceptual enclosure. It is, however, important to resist the suggestion that 'alternative' worship exists as a simple oppositional reaction to evangelicalism, borne out of 'post-modern' attitudes to religion and truth. Indeed, in many ways, its character owes as much to evangelicalism as it does to a negative perception of its theologies and styles of authority.

In an interesting essay on ritual, Pierre Bourdieu makes the important point that for a ritual to function successfully—for it to communicate the message and effect the transformations that it intends—those participating must recognize the authority on which it is based (Bourdieu, 1997: 113). Although it might appear that 'alternative' worship invokes no claims to ritual

authority as such, it still relies on particular established norms for its activities to be recognized as meaningful and legitimate episodes of Christian worship. To some extent, legitimacy has been secured by precedent, the experiments at NOS effectively pioneering 'alternative' worship and opening up the possibility for re-traditionalization within mobilized groups around the country. At a deeper level, it is a tradition of 'experience'—partially rooted in evangelical Christianity—which has effectively nurtured 'alternative' worship into an accepted 'tradition' and which serves as the basis for the legitimacy granted to it by those who participate.

The understanding of subjective 'experience'—emphasized as a source of spiritual authority by charismatics and as the context of divine guidance for other conservative Christians (Percy, 1998: 155)—has persisted in 'alternative' circles, but has also undergone significant transformation. Firstly, 'experience' is not seen as a source of authority that is binding for others. This can be explained by the widespread suspicion in 'alternative' groups of charismatic power as a potential means of manipulation. Secondly, as the medium in which truth and God might be located, 'experience' is not interpreted through unquestioned categories of tradition, but is the means by which such 'categories' might be first ascertained and explored. Whereas evangelical interpretations of experience are generally invoked as supporting the fundamentals of belief—God's presence at particular times may be questioned, but his substantive nature is not—'alternative' worshippers tend to draw from experience as an inductive resource, effectively developing and exploring theological possibilities in the light of subjective experience. Church tradition is treated as but one framework among many which may be employed in order to make sense of, and find meaning in, the cultural experience of individuals. As one organizer of 'alternative' worship informed me: "[Our service] is primarily about a spiritual search, for worship that has integrity, a spirituality that sits cohesively into our world, and a form of Church community *that works in our culture* (my emphasis)."

Such radical 'inculturation' has effectively expanded the conceptual boundaries within which Christianity can be conceived. Ideological inclusivity demands a rethinking of the insider/outsider distinction, and understandings of 'faith' as an expression of identity seem to require considered revision and exploration in the light of recent cultural change. What is perhaps clear from the above discussion is that manifestations of 'faith', as negotiated and expressed in discourse, are not simply reflective of the tradition on which they are based, but emerge out of a dialogue between pervasive relations of power within specific religious and cultural contexts.

Notes

- 1 I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Economic and Social Research Council for funding the research upon which this paper is based. I also wish to offer my thanks to the editors as well as to Simon Coleman and Paul Roberts for insightful comments on these issues, as presented in an earlier draft.
- 2 Unfortunately, the only extensive published work on NOS is the journalistic account provided by Roland Howard in *The Rise and Fall of the Nine O'Clock Service* (1996). Howard's book is marred by his unconcealed agenda that seeks to 'expose' the power trappings of the contemporary charismatic church. Consequently, his portrayal of NOS is generally negative and its reliability questionable. Although I had to consult Howard's book as the only available published source on NOS, I have also spoken to several individuals who were either members of NOS or who attended its worship events at some point. I have subsequently pieced together a rough picture of the worship at NOS that I believe to be reliable. I have deliberately withheld from commenting on the alleged power and sexual abuse that took place within the NOS community, as I do not feel that this is relevant to the present paper.
- 3 The distrust of person-centred authority, expressed as a suspicion of manipulation and abuse, was exacerbated and intensified for many 'alternative' worshippers following the exposure of abuses of power that were rife at NOS.
- 4 I know of no 'alternative' services that are held in connection with any Roman Catholic church, a fact that reflects the origins of 'alternative' worship and its continuing dialogue with Protestant Evangelicalism, the tradition that shapes its activities and forms the background culture of many participants.
- 5 Although extensive service literature has been made available to me by organizers, primarily in the form of group magazines, service orders, notes kept from discussion sessions, and promotional material, there is very little written on 'alternative' worship that may be referred to as secondary literature. In fact, the only academic account of 'alternative' worship is contained in Paul Roberts's short booklet, *Alternative Worship in the Church of England* (1999). Roberts's work is a useful and sensitive portrayal by someone active within the movement. His interpretative framework is very much in accordance with the argument that 'alternative' worship is a ritualized response to post-modernity.
- 6 In accordance with the open, inclusive ethos of the group, I was asked to contribute a presentation primarily on the basis of my knowledge as an academic researcher.
- 7 Dave Tomlinson traces this development to the appointment of Clive Calver as leader of the Evangelical Alliance in 1983. Calver was an unashamed charismatic, had connections with the House Church Movement and was instrumental in involving young leaders of a similar persuasion (Tomlinson, 1995: 17–19).
- 8 This had negative as well as positive dimensions, the emerging charismatic mind-set incorporating notions of satanic evil as well as divine blessing. This may be exemplified in the popular 'Marches for Jesus' during the 1980s as well as in the notion of 'spiritual warfare'.

- 9 This is only a rough sketch of what was a far more complex movement. However, the elements stressed are pertinent to this paper, as they are common to the perception of evangelicalism entertained within 'alternative' worship circles.
- 10 *Greenbelt* is a Christian arts festival which has been held annually since 1974. Originally held at Charlshfield in East Anglia, the festival has shifted between several venues over the years, before finally moving to Chelmsford Race Course in 1999. The main ethos of the festival has been the expression and celebration of the Christian Gospel through the media of contemporary pop culture and the arts; it is this emphasis that drew many who subsequently became involved in 'alternative' worship. 'Alternative' worship has had a central place at the festival since NOS performed its famous 'Passion in Global Chaos' set in 1992. Each year, 'alternative' worship groups continue to lead services, debates and other creative events at the festival.
- 11 In particular, groups in London—notably *Grace*, *Epicentre*, *Holy Joe's*, *The Host Community*, and *Vaux*—have worked together across denominational lines within the context of various events.
- 12 Further research will need to explore this issue, particularly in relation to the possibility that 'alternative' worship may be 'used' by many people as supplementary to sources of Christian worship and belonging. If this is the case, an actual 'theology' of alternative worship may only extend to those most intimately involved in its organization.

References

- Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1993.
- Baker, J. "Rhythm of the Masses." In Ward, P., ed. *Mass Culture: Eucharist and Mission in a Post-Modern World*. Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 1999: 33–53.
- Bauman, Z. "Postmodern Religion?" In Heelas, P. (with the assistance of D. Martin & P. Morris), ed. *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998: 55–78.
- Bebbington, D. W. *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1989.
- Bebbington, D. W. "Evangelicalism in its Settings: The British and American Movements since 1940." In Noll, M. A., Bebbington, D. W. & Rawlyk, G. A., eds. *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, The British Isles, and Beyond, 1700–1990*. Oxford, New York: Oxford U. P., 1994: 365–388.
- Becker, H. S. *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: The Free Press, 1963.
- Beckford, J. "Religion, Modernity and Post-Modernity." In Wilson, B. R., ed. *Religion: Contemporary Issues*. London: Bellew, 1992: 11–23.
- Bell, C. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York, Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1997.
- Bourdieu, P. "Authorised Language: The Social Conditions for the Effectiveness of Ritual Discourse." In Bourdieu, P. *Language and Symbolic Power* (edited and introduced by John B. Thompson). Oxford: Polity Press, 1997: 107–116.

- Coleman, S. "Words as Things: Language, Aesthetics and the Objectification of Protestant Evangelicalism." *Journal of Material Culture* 1 (1), 1996: 107–128.
- Fox, M. *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.
- Heelas, P., Lash, S. & Morris, P., eds. *Detraditionalization: Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Hobbs, D. & May, T., eds. *Interpreting the Field: Accounts of Ethnography*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
- Howard, R. *The Rise and Fall of the Nine O'Clock Service*. London: Mowbray, 1996.
- Martin, D. *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
- Percy, M. *Words, Wonders and Power: Understanding Contemporary Christian Fundamentalism and Revivalism*. London: SPCK, 1996.
- Percy, M. *Power and the Church: Ecclesiology in an Age of Transition*. London: Cassell, 1998.
- Peshkin, A. "Odd Man Out: The Participant Observer in an Absolutist Setting." *Sociology of Education* 57 (October), 1984: 254–264.
- Rappaport, R. "Veracity, Verity, and Verum in Liturgy." *Studia Liturgica* 23, 1993: 35–50.
- Roberts, P. *Alternative Worship in the Church of England*. Cambridge: Grove Books, 1999.
- Smith, J. Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Stringer, M. D. *On the Perception of Worship: The Ethnography of Worship in Four Christian Congregations in Manchester*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 1999.
- Tomlinson, D. *The Post-Evangelical*. London: SPCK, 1995.
- Walker, A. *Restoring the Kingdom: The Radical Christianity of the House Church Movement*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988 (2nd ed., 1st ed. published in 1985).
- Ward, P., ed. *Mass Culture: Eucharist and Mission in a Post-Modern World*. Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 1999.