

The Emerging Church in Transatlantic Perspective

MATHEW GUEST

*Department of Theology and Religion
Durham University*

ABSTRACT

Is the Emerging Church Movement (ECM) a single transnational movement? Or is it a series of parallel religious orientations framed by nationally specific contexts? Cross-national comparisons of the many manifestations of the Emerging Church Movement (ECM) remain scarce, especially as the development of the ECM across the globe (e.g., in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand) is most certainly affected by divergent histories and socio-religious landscapes. Focusing on a comparative analysis of the UK and U.S.A., I trace how these different cultural contexts determine variant patterns of ECM identity formation. Overall, a global perspective on the ECM calls for a theorization of the national development of religious movements and takes seriously the cultural and historical experiences that shape both its emergence in particular nations and the differentiated development of distinctive manifestations of ECM identity.

Correspondence should be addressed to Mathew Guest, Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University, Abbey House, Palace Green, Durham DH1 3RS United Kingdom. Email: m.j.guest@durham.ac.uk.

INTRODUCTION

This essay concerns itself with the global dimensions of the Emerging Church Movement (ECM), both as a lens on its international variants, and because the contours of its different expressions in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, for example, tell us a great deal about its cultural boundaries and character. Existing sociological studies of the ECM include singular case studies (Ganiel 2006; Wollschleger 2015), examinations of

regional patterns (Wigner 2014; Wollschleger 2012), and broader-picture analyses largely framed by national – particularly US – boundaries (Bielo 2009; Packard 2012). Excepting the ground-breaking study by Marti and Ganiel (2014), the ECM’s character as a cross-national phenomenon remains substantially under-researched. Correspondingly, our understanding remains fairly localized, calling for closer attention to the precise ways in which the ECM has developed in tandem with global flows of cultural and economic capital, at least among economically advanced western nations.¹

One challenge here has been the fact that the stories members of the ECM tell themselves about their history, e.g. in books, blogs, and informal conversation, tend to emphasize the movement’s novelty as it responds to a single master narrative, usually formulated using the language of ‘postmodernity’. (Indeed, some academic commentators echo the same argument – e.g. Clawson 2012; Cronshaw 2009; Labanow 2006). This has been explicitly argued in popular publications by ECM advocates, beginning with Dave Tomlinson’s influential *The Post-Evangelical* in 1995, whose description of the cultural dissonance between emerging generations of Christians and the churches in which they were formed “put a name to experiences that many shared.” (Gibbs and Bolger 2006: 35) Gibbs and Bolger’s book *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* draws from interviews with ECM figures, many of whom acknowledge Tomlinson’s influence but who have since rejected ‘post-evangelical’ – alongside ‘evangelical’ and ‘Protestant’ – as unhelpful labels which fail to capture the complexity of their perspectives, an outlook that illustrates perfectly Tomlinson’s alignment of ‘postmodernity’ with the ECM. Ironically, themes of cultural fragmentation, anti-institutionalism, and suspicion toward metanarratives have reached the status of ontological orthodoxy. This dominant discourse has

¹ This is not to suggest the ECM is restricted to these nations; while its origins depend on a certain experience of late modernity characteristic of Anglophone western cultures, the ECM has since found expression elsewhere, including in parts of the two thirds world (see Hartman 2015).

become strongly embedded in the ECM to such a degree that more finely differentiated narratives of identity are crowded out.

This pattern is heightened by what Marti and Ganiel call the “expert theorizers” of the ECM (2014: 81), those celebrity preachers, authors and church leaders whose intellectual capacities in critiquing church and culture contribute to the illusion that they – and vicariously their admirers, fans or followers - have effectively disentangled themselves from the institutional and cultural constraints that limit the efforts of the mainstream. The ‘reflexive modernity’ associated with scholars like Anthony Giddens (1991) and Ulrich Beck (1992) has been appropriated as a religious orientation, but just as this account of western culture is critiqued for exaggerating individual empowerment over the persistently framing influence of social factors (such as differences in socio-economic status), so the internal discourse of the ECM veils the degree to which it is shaped as a movement by structural circumstances. Some aspects span the English-speaking western world; for example, the ECM emphasis upon narrative and storytelling as a means of cultivating Christian selfhood evokes the “flexible reinvention and creative renewal” that Elliot and Lemert associate with the “new individualism” (2006: 31). However, as I will argue below, significant regional differences suggest the ECM is steered by divergent histories and socio-religious landscapes. A global perspective calls for a theorization of its contours that takes seriously the particular cultural and historical experiences that framed its emergence and continue to inform its development.

A clear illustration of the benefits of this approach is found in a comparative analysis of the ECM as it is found in the UK and USA, and given limited space here, this will serve as a lens through which the ECM’s global dimensions are explored. The following analysis draws upon the author’s own (ongoing) research into the UK-based ECM and its wider –

including global - networks of influence (Guest 2002; 2007; Guest and Taylor 2006). It also builds on the now extensive secondary literature on the ECM, including a wealth of empirical data that now permits us to begin to theorise the movement as a global phenomenon. The principal aim is to trace how the ECM is doubly indebted to its evangelical background: firstly in its distinctive deployment of a set of bequeathed cultural resources that have empowered its innovation; and secondly insofar as variant patterns of evangelical development in different cultural contexts have framed variant patterns of ECM identity formation. While evident across a wider range of regions, the UK-USA contrast will serve as the main reference point through which to illustrate these patterns.

Communities that self-identify as ‘emerging’ in both nations exhibit similar tendencies:

- the emphasis upon Christianity as a conversation rather than a body of authorized doctrine;
- a corresponding embodiment of what Marti and Ganiel call a “strategic religiosity” (2014: 60), driven by a quest for authenticity that is ongoing and in dialogue with their social environment;
- a focus on creative ritual expression with an associated tendency towards syncretism;
- a passion for fostering inclusive ‘safe spaces’ in which those alienated from, or damaged by, mainstream Christianity can freely express their identities.

The global ECM also embodies several important patterns of internal difference, illustrating how different configurations of denominational structure and religious culture frame the ways in which ECM communities negotiate their identities.

TRANSATLANTIC EVANGELICALISM AS AN HISTORICAL TEMPLATE

The cross-national ECM owes a debt to the long-standing tradition of cultural exchange among evangelical Christians. In this respect the ECM may be seen as a selective expansion – or perhaps an intensification - of an historical pattern built around a transatlantic tradition of evangelical theology and practice. Established trade links have facilitated cross-pollination between like-minded parties on either side of the ocean since at least the 18th Century, when the Atlantic was bridged not just by traveling preachers like Jonathan Edwards and the Wesleys, but also by a lively circulation of letters and magazines containing polemical and exegetical material and a large body of reportage (Hempton 2005; O'Brien 1994). Interconnections that emerged among England, Scotland, the United States, and Canada, became, as Noll, Bebbington and Rawlyk have put it, “foundational to evangelicalism” (1994:6). Likewise, the exportation of evangelical traditions of expression – as with U.S. revivalism in the 19th century – have been capable of changing the direction of the broad evangelical movement and even Protestantism itself (Carwardine 1978).

Recent research in the United States has revealed that ECM participants include more who self-identify as mainline Protestant than evangelical (Marti and Ganiel, 2014: 42), an affinity that matches ECM's open, exploratory approach to theological issues. However, the ECM's originating founders and most famous public advocates and authors have – almost without exception – emerged from strongly evangelical contexts; indeed, that heritage is the chief stimulus to which they are reacting. And while this reaction includes a firm rejection of narrow dogmatism and paternalistic modes of leadership, it retains a dynamic activism and pragmatic inclination towards cultural mobilization inherited from its evangelical forebears (Guest 2007; Hilborn 1997). Moreover, this tradition of practice has been embodied – and

thereby valorized - in the patterns of transatlantic exchange that have characterized Anglo-American evangelicalism over the past 60 years (Guest 2010).

The roots of an entrepreneurial evangelicalism, relatively unconstrained by conventions of church buildings, organisational hierarchies or rhetorical delivery of the Christian message, go back much further in US history than they do in the UK, and it was arguably US influences that accelerated this tendency on the other side of the Atlantic. In using non-traditional locations and new communications technology as part of his mission visits to England in the 1950s, Billy Graham inadvertently laid the foundations in the evangelical imagination for the genesis of the ECM some years later. Graham embodied a dynamic Christianity that was unbound by the constraints of church structures, denominational difference, social hierarchy, or entrenched conventions associated with British norms of propriety. A tradition of creativity in church worship developed, merging in the 1980s with a missiological passion to reach Britain's unchurched youth. The year 1985 saw the establishment of what was arguably the first emerging church community: the Nine O'Clock Service (NOS) based in Sheffield, England. NOS started at St Thomas's, an Anglican charismatic evangelical church, at which a small group of musicians, styling themselves as the 'Nairn St Community', developed a passion for radical Christian living following the model described by influential evangelical leader David Watson in his 1981 book *Discipleship*. Members lived communally and committed money to a common purse, thereby releasing more of their shared resources for Christian mission in the local community. The group's vision experienced a major step change in 1985, after they attended a 'signs and wonders' event led by the American Vineyard preacher John Wimber. Wimber had by then become the standard bearer for the 'third wave' of charismatic renewal, which taught that charismatic gifts were not only as much a reality today as they were in the

apostolic age; the faithful could also harness the power of the Spirit in the service of healing and evangelism (Percy 1996). Soon after Wimber's visit, the rector of St Thomas's, Robert Warren, received a prophecy which he interpreted as a call for the Nairn St Community to establish a new service aimed at reaching younger generations. A project based on empowerment via charismatic gifts and radical community living soon evolved into an ambitious multimedia worship service attracting hundreds of young Christians from across the country every week (Guest 2005). NOS offered a unique combination of music and aesthetics that mirrored the popular dance subculture of the late 1980s, and a radical vision of Christian life centred on sacrificial giving, social justice, and ecological responsibility. In so doing it was both in tune with British youth and treated Christian commitment with radical seriousness, challenging the common perception of the mainstream church as out of touch and moribund.

When NOS collapsed in 1995 following a scandal of power and sexual abuse, many of those inspired by its worship - if not by its authoritarian leadership structures - started their own multimedia services in a movement called 'alternative worship' (or alt.worship). Attracting post-evangelicals who were disillusioned with the patriarchal and dogmatic evangelicalism with which they had grown up, alt.worship emerged as a site of ritual experimentation and Christian inclusion (Roberts 1999). By the late 1990s, alt.worship had adopted the label 'emerging church', by which time communities with a similar ethos, keen to embrace the same name, also had developed in Australia, New Zealand and the United States (Guest 2007: 162-7). From the very beginning, the ECM was shaped by a constellation of influences that spanned the Atlantic and, subsequently, the English-speaking world.

DIVERGENT PATTERNS IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING ECM

The ECM communities in the UK and U.S. appear to be parallel movements responding to similar trajectories of disillusionment and empowerment, punctuated by significant occasions of exchange. However, these trajectories are guided by different structures and histories rooted in local and national circumstances. It is also possible to observe similarities between the ECM in Australasia and the UK, both contrasting with the U.S. context. By extending our discussion like this in this section, we are able to illuminate more clearly the contextual factors that frame ECM variations.

Australia and New Zealand were home to some of the earliest established emerging churches, and *The Prodigal Project: Journey into the Emerging Church*, a book by three Antipodean ECM leaders (Riddell et al 2000), demonstrated a depth of reflection on the nature of the ECM that was unprecedented in previous literature. *The Prodigal Project* is largely inspired by the authors' experiences at Parallel Universe, an experimental worship gathering established in 1994 in Auckland by Mark Pierson, who had been interested in the alt.worship scene emerging in the UK (Riddell et al 2000: 9-10). Indeed, personal connections among Australian, New Zealander, and UK ECM figures already had been established and consolidated via mutual visits and festivals (as became apparent during the author's own ethnographic fieldwork among the *Visions* group in York, 1999-2000). A common sense of purpose among ECM groups – based around cultural authenticity, open-mindedness and a concern for those alienated from mainstream, particularly evangelical, churches – was discernible by the mid-1990s. Much of the ECM in Australasia has emerged in Baptist churches, whose traditional focus on the *local* expression of the church resonated with ECM convictions that contexts of postmodernity demand we attend to the immediate and particular over remote church structures to which many cannot relate. This synergy has also strengthened the internal coherence of locally-oriented mission strategies (Cronshaw and

Taylor 2014), as inherited theologies legitimate what might otherwise be viewed as excessively experimental. By contrast, many UK groups have been attached to Anglican churches, which – while traditionally oriented to the local, geographically defined parish – have tended to permit ECM groups semi-autonomous status, and their apparent appeal to a distinctive subculture has meant they have been treated as parallel to, rather than integrated into, existing outreach to the community. Australasian ECM groups have also tended to emerge as evolved versions of existing churches – rather than marginal worship groups attached to them, as with the UK case - and to have positively embraced their leaders who have, in turn, developed identities as ECM ritual entrepreneurs or worship ‘curators’ (Taylor 2012). The latter is also true for many UK ECM figures, although their ambivalence towards person-based authority – coloured by a shared scepticism about the more animated expressions of charismatic Christianity - has arguably impeded their capacity to maintain leadership roles with the same enduring confidence.

Such differences relate in part to embodied ecclesiology – in these cases Baptist vs Anglican - although they also have a great deal to do with different histories of denominational development and secularization in national contexts (Guest and Taylor 2006). That said, in both contexts, a common pattern of gradual absorption into the mainstream churches has occurred in the last decade or two. Indeed, this has paralleled a process of the ‘mainstreaming’ of ECM ideas. For example, the evangelical notion that being authentically ‘missional’ is about embodying the surrounding culture was axiomatic to NOS and the alt.worship mission to the dance culture of the 1980s, attracting the disapproval of some conservatives who saw capitulation to unsavory influences and the dilution of the verbal proclamation of the Gospel. In the second decade of the 21st century, the same ideas are associated with more mainstream evangelical forces, like academic evangelical (and former

Anglican bishop) N T Wright, and the orientation to public engagement adopted by The Bible Society, founded in the nineteenth century for the purposes of promoting scripture (Engelke 2013). In the 1990s, ECM groups would have positioned themselves at the margins of evangelicalism, affirming a radically progressive orientation to theology, ethics, and ritual performance (if only rarely and hesitantly mobilized for political engagement). Elements of that radicalism are still evident, perhaps most obviously in neo-monastic communities such as Moot in London², and in the Café Church communities whose emphasis on discussion over doctrine permits a homespun heterodoxy at the local level (Cox 2012). But the socially engaged, reflective form of spiritual practice central to the ECM is also found within traditional church structures. Indeed, a more general process of institutional consolidation has arguably blunted the movement's edge, certainly in the UK context. Many key figures have either drifted away from the movement or become ordained into a mainstream denomination. The original generation of alt.worshippers has become preoccupied with careers or having families (e.g. Guest 2007: 157). Their reluctance to engage in public self-promotion, let alone proselytization, means the next generation has no clear sense of who they are or what they stand for. Faced with the much more visible, vibrant, and populous evangelical churches that affirm a clear, accessible, and explicit theological essentialism, few young people are attracted by the subdued, small-scale, meditative tone of ECM worship.

Indeed, research about patterns of religious activity in Australia and the UK suggests very limited engagement in experimental forms of church (Hancock 2013). In a national study of religious beliefs and practices among university students in England, including over 2,000 survey respondents who self-identified as Christian, an open question was asked about motivations for attending a particular church. Not a single respondent mentioned the words

² See <http://www.moot.uk.net/> (accessed 5/9/16)

‘emerging’, ‘emergent’, ‘post-evangelical’, ‘postmodern’, ‘experimental’ or ‘creative’. In addition, no respondent answered in a way reflective of the ECM concern for authenticity and respecting individual difference, suggesting perhaps this does not rank so highly among the priorities of today’s young Christian adults; there was a similar absence of such themes in qualitative interviews (see Guest et al, 2013). What these data also suggest is that generational approaches to the ECM that ignore differential trajectories at the national level risk misrepresenting the future prospects of the movement.

Insofar as this pattern of shrinkage and absorption is found across the UK and Australasian cases, the United States stands out as a contrasting case within the English-speaking ECM. Here, the ECM’s defiance of traditional evangelical mores is deemed more remarkable and its ritual innovation more radical. ECM advocates who promote a theological progressivism attract far more vitriolic opposition. U.S. ECM communities appear more likely to use modes of communication less removed from the evangelical mainstream; the most striking example here involves preaching, which while modified in terms of more communitarian styles of engagement that offset any suggestions of authoritarianism, remains far more traditional than in the UK movement, the latter almost embodying an abdication of Protestant verbalism in its preference for liturgy, images, and artistic ambiguity over any kind of rhetorical provocation (Guest 2007). One exception on this count is in Northern Ireland, where Pete Rollins and the Ikon community have emphasized verbal provocation without pastoral structures as a means of discouraging dependence on leaders and encouraging critical engagement with the world (Marti and Ganiel 2014:120).

ECM groups in the U.S. and Northern Ireland are both shaped by a counter-sectarian tendency generated in response to salient traditions of Christian expression within their surrounding environment. Emblematic here are the history of Protestant-Catholic tensions in

Ulster and the religio-political conservatism of the U.S. Christian Right. Both merge political and religious ideologies, and both provoke a profound ECM unease with narrow, exclusivist expressions of Christianity. In the U.S., this disdain for exclusivism sits alongside a dislike for programmatic forms of church associated with the megachurch model, which is viewed as sterile, anonymizing, and uncritically aping the dynamics of free market capitalism (Marti and Ganiel 2014:67). Moreover, this critique is capable of expression in adversarial forms, whether in preaching, blogs, or published books. By contrast, the ECM in Australia, New Zealand, and the UK appears far less vituperative and less aggressively reactionary. The fact that dogmatic or sectarian Christianity enjoys a much more limited cultural salience in these countries is an important factor in explaining these differences.

Borrowing the language of social identity theory, for the U.S. ECM the cultural salience of its primary out-group (the most strident, exclusivist evangelicals) is much greater than it is in the UK, Australia, or New Zealand, provoking a more robust, shared expression of identity among U.S. ECM adherents (Smith 1998). The greater general religious vitality of the U.S. and its strong voluntarist tradition – including what Martin calls its capacity for “subcultural institution building” (2005: 94) - also make the establishment and durability of independent EC groups more possible. By contrast, EC groups in the UK have tended to depend on mainstream churches for their venues and structural support; with many of these remaining theologically moderate and more accommodating of a questioning religiosity, they function as relatively weak ‘outgroups’ against which the ECM might rebel. In fact, in the case of the UK, the EC has formally been routinized in its absorption into the ‘fresh expressions’ initiative co-convened by the Church of England and the Methodist Church. ‘Fresh expressions’ is intended to recognize and nurture forms of church beyond traditional Sunday morning worship. Its formal codification is the 2004 *Mission Shaped Church* report,

issued by a working group of the Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Council, whose chair, Graham Cray (by this time a bishop), was highly influential on NOS and in early alt.worship; unsurprisingly, then, the initiative's rationale is heavily coloured by the nascent UK Emerging Church. However, the radical potential of an 'incarnational mission' sits uncomfortably alongside the more prosaic range of 'fresh expressions' acknowledged in the report. Set alongside 'messy church' and new monasticism in a list of ways in which declining churches are reinventing themselves, it is easy to see how the ECM now has trouble conveying a sense of being on the edge that was so integral to its original *raison d'être*.

If associations with the established church have curbed the UK ECM's radical edge, in Australia routinisation has been influenced by a greater embrace of formal training for mission, as evidenced in the impact of the Forge Mission Training Network, described by Cronshaw as "Australia's most influential emerging church training and networking organization" (2009: 10). Similar tendencies can be observed in the USA, and the establishment of the organisation 'Emergent Village', the Emerging Church conference and the development of a book series devoted to ECM publications by a major US publishing house reflect a movement into institutionalisation that sits awkwardly alongside an insider preference for occupying the margins of US religious life. Jason Wollschleger's analysis of Church of the Apostles in Seattle suggests one response might be a return to localised religious identities. As a counter response to being branded as 'Emerging' within the trans-national conversation, ECM leaders are seeking to renew their sense of authentic engagement by re-identifying themselves as local via stronger relationships with their own denominations (Wollschleger 2015: 117).

The U.S. pattern may not be unique; its counter-sectarian tendencies may also be discerned in the Northern Irish context (Ganiel 2006). It may also not be sustainable, as

Wollschleger's recent study suggests. However, these qualifications only reinforce my argument further: the ECM localizes most coherently and most enduringly within contexts in which a dogmatic evangelical Protestantism is also a culturally salient presence. Packard (2012) argues that the ECM in the U.S. continues to thrive – at least in relative terms – because it has developed strategies of resistance to institutionalization. In the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, such strategies have not endured; indeed, in many ways the pioneers of the ECM in these contexts have embraced institutionalization, whether as essential to survival or as a maturation of denominational linkages already there at their community's inception.

UNEVEN CONVERSATIONS

Marti and Ganiel have remarked that the ECM presents itself less as a movement and more as a “conversation” (2014: 79). This conversational quality is echoed in the ECM's tendency to elevate an unresolved religious pluralism as both desirable and culturally authentic. When scrutinizing how a conversational dynamic spans transatlantic boundaries, it is apparent that these conversations are not ‘flat’; rather, U.S. and UK representatives of the movement adopt or are ascribed different roles within an ongoing dialogue. For example, particular Christian festivals have emerged as major hubs through which ECM ideas and resources are promoted. In the UK, Greenbelt has been running as an annual Christian arts festival since 1974. Its tradition of exploring new ideas and forms of worship has been offering an obvious national focus point for ECM groups since the 1980s. Some years later, visiting American attendees, moved by the lack of an equivalent festival in the U.S., were inspired to establish the Wild Goose Festival, a Christian ‘justice, spirituality, and art’ festival that first took place in 2011 in Silk Hope, North Carolina.³ Wild Goose has become a major event on the ECM calendar. Although it is not as popular as Greenbelt, it similarly

³ <http://wildgoosefestival.org/faqs/> (accessed 5/9/16)

attracts influential leading authors and speakers associated with the ECM. However, in its four-year lifespan, despite its originating inspiration, Wild Goose has only featured a handful of UK speakers. By contrast, Greenbelt continues to book high-profile ECM figures from the U.S. every year; in 2014 these included Brian McLaren and Nadia Bolz-Weber. Recent festivals also have featured Rob Bell, John Caputo, and Shane Claiborne. McLaren also took part in a ‘Greenbelt on the Road’ tour of the UK in 2014; asked why he keeps coming back, McClaren replied: “There is no place on the planet where an open discussion about the feel and shape of tomorrow’s Christianity is taking place like it happens here.”⁴ ECM leaders such as McLaren look to Greenbelt as a forum for debate and engagement whose benign, experimental liberalism finds little equivalent in the U.S. Meanwhile Greenbelt revels in the articulate irreverence of their U.S. guest speakers. Several years’ ethnographic fieldwork at Greenbelt conducted by Tim Hutchings suggests the U.S. presence there has acquired a particular performative function. Greenbelt speakers appear to mirror to the liberally minded UK audience things they see as wrong with the U.S. political and religious Right but feel unable to voice publicly with confidence themselves.⁵ As such, US ECM speakers convey a vicarious, outspoken confidence that is absent within the UK ECM communities, which performs an important discursive function as the movement looks to its international constituency for a coherent identity. Here we see glimpses of how the ECM as a global “imagined community” (Anderson 2006) is constructed, although the complexity of its emerging contours demands further research.

⁴ Brian McLaren – personal communication.

⁵ Tim Hutchings – personal communication.

CONCLUSIONS

In a world framed by global networks of communication, religious identities appear more fluid and less predictable than they once were, especially in the economically advanced West. Responding to this, the sociology of religion requires categories of analysis that move beyond the nation state and the co-present gathering or congregation (Levitt 2013). Moreover, and in tension with its advocates and critics, a sociological analysis of the ECM must resist the temptation to collapse this movement into a loosely connected population of scattered individuals, remaining attentive to the *social* factors that frame its identity at a local, national and transnational level. In reflecting on the nature of the ECM as a collective entity, it is worth asking whether it exists as a single transnational movement or a series of parallel or interlinked orientations framed by nationally or denominationally specific contexts. Might it be helpful to differentiate between the ECM as a discursive construct emerging among elite spiritual entrepreneurs on the one hand, and the ECM as a messier constellation of localized, to some degree interconnected, gatherings on the other? (If the former, global patterns of influence remain important, as evidenced in the influence of Latin American theology of mission on the evolving ideas of ECM luminary Brian McLaren – see Clawson 2012: 801-2). Such questions may be illuminated by referring again to the analogy with mainstream evangelicalism and asking whether the close relationships between evangelicalism in the U.S. and the UK actually indicate a coherent Anglo-American evangelical movement. Such a contention is lent credence by the ideological affinities between globalization (particularly global capitalism) and conversionist Protestantism, both of which are oriented to a global mission (Coleman 2000). But just as its de-territorializing forces highlight how globalization enables flows of evangelical influence to transcend national boundaries of language, culture,

and distance, so too do clusters of cultural affinity emerge as especially robust vehicles for the transmission of evangelical identities (Wuthnow 2009). David Martin points to “voluntary religious associations, initially in the North Atlantic world and spreading in partial alignment with the English language and Anglo-American influence” (2005:29). Peter Berger goes further, describing evangelical Protestantism in terms of “unmistakably Anglo-Saxon traits,” emphasizing “individualistic self-expression, egalitarianism (especially between men and women)” and a capacity for forming voluntary associations (2002:8). The ECM clearly benefits from a similar set of cultural resources, largely inherited from its evangelical heritage but developed according to a more specific pattern. It also marks a heightened valorisation of the cultural capital distinctive of the creative middle classes, exemplified in high levels of IT competence, artistic prowess and a theological literacy resourced by formal higher education and/or independent reading. All feed into projects of ritual and ecclesiological innovation, reinforcing the confidence of the spiritual entrepreneur whose concern is to challenge or reinvent the traditions of the past.

But the developments mapped above also suggest differential patterns steered by the varying religious landscapes of different Anglophone nations. The ECM embodies the Anglo-American evangelical capacity for cross-national dissemination, but has evolved differently in dialogue with the nation-specific contexts of the UK, USA, Northern Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand. Our analysis suggests the USA and Northern Ireland illustrate one kind of pattern, the UK and Anglophone Australasia another, and the social-structural mechanisms that explain this difference appear to have most to do with different organisational configurations within the evangelical movement and divergent histories in the public profile of Christianity.

The first factor relates to types of social organisation, and recalls David Martin's observation that the distinctive circumstances of the early USA led to the universalizing of the dissenting denomination as a religious form (1978: 29). As discussed earlier, ECM churches in the US have tended to emerge as independent entities while the UK's groups tend to be dependent on existing mainstream local churches, usually Anglican, Methodist or Independent Evangelical, effectively functioning as sub-groups or services within, but often marginal to, an existing community. This difference in form has obvious implications for available resources, with the US groups also benefitting from a stronger religious voluntary tradition, generally higher levels of sympathy to religious causes and less expensive land and property available for religious purposes. In simple terms, it is easier for an ECM group to thrive in the US because it is easier for a church to be established and thrive in the US more generally. In Australia and New Zealand, the ECM has developed more within self-contained churches rather than marginal groups, and so benefits from greater levels of autonomy than in the UK, but they remain within heavily secularised contexts and so lack the stocks of social and cultural capital that resource the US movement.

The second factor relates to the status of religion within the immediate public sphere and how this resources and directs how ECM initiatives are imagined by those who embody them. For the US groups and networks, their anti-institutional impetus is framed by an acute awareness of, on the one hand, the strident, morally conservative evangelicalism that pervades talk radio, Christian TV and the political discourse of many pro-Republican lobbying groups, and on the other, the pre-packaged, seeker-cum-consumer oriented megachurches whose numerical success means their methods are increasingly aped by the wider Christian population. Both feature in the religious biographies of many ECM advocates, representing triggers of disillusionment based on exclusivism and bland

homogeneity respectively. As such, they persist as primary reference groups against which ECM communities define their efforts to embody a more vibrant, culturally authentic Christian identity. Neither of these movements has a similar level of public visibility in the UK, Australia or New Zealand. According to the most recent research there are only around ten megachurches in the UK and most of these are located in London (Cartledge and Davies 2014); a good number are also black majority churches with strong links to West Africa, and so are unlikely to serve as a significant ‘outgroup’ for the predominantly white middle class members of the ECM. Patterns of secularisation in the UK are in many respects echoed in Australia – e.g. in terms of declining levels of church attendance, religious self-identification and religious rites of passage – and large, thriving evangelical churches like the influential Hillsong in Sydney or CityLife in Melbourne are the exception that proves the rule (Hilliard 2010). Moreover, while there exist pockets of evangelicalism in both nations analogous to the US movement in terms of moral conservatism, they are for the most part small, marginal and have limited public visibility. While the ECM in the UK, Australia and New Zealand has its origins in disillusionment from mainstream evangelicalism, this disillusionment appears to have largely been subdued by the passing of time and not kept ignited by the continuing public presence of its originating triggers. The experiences of an exclusivist, narrow and staid evangelicalism that drove post-evangelicals out of the churches remain alive and present for those based within the US context. The more heavily secularised contexts of the UK and Antipodes have consigned such experiences to personal memory as the vehicles of evangelical dogmatism have receded from public view or accommodated to a more moderate outlook.

The contrast is most sharply evident in the case of Northern Ireland, in which a legacy of sectarian conflict has inspired a determined ECM endeavour to set Christianity on a non-

sectarian foundation. This is expressed among ECM participants in a cohesive sense of community among like-minded Christians and a preference for agitation and provocation in the interests of social justice. As Ganiel puts it, the ‘main tasks’ of *Ikon* members are ‘supporting one another and calling other Christians to account.’ (2006: 45) The form taken by the ECM relates strongly to the dominant political expression of religion within its immediate context.

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