From Protestant Ethic to Neoliberal Logic: Evangelicals at the interface of culture and politics

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Abstract

This article brings Max Weber's argument about the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism into conversation with contemporary accounts of society framed by neoliberalism and traces some implications in terms of emergent patterns of authority. It asks how an alignment between evangelicalism and capitalism has fostered a distinctive cross-fertilisation in recent years, including a re-negotiation of what counts as normative, credible, and successful. It argues that a moralised sense of vocation has been overtaken in some influential circles by an urge to mirror the embodied and broadcast perfections of the entertainment industry, and by the importation of business strategies that instrumentalise capital, influence and media exposure. Drawing on examples from recent Anglo-American evangelical history – inspired in turns by a desire for evangelistic success and political influence – the article examines how this pattern is both rooted in a long-standing tradition of technological engagement while also moving into a phase that foregrounds utilitarian logic in order to maximise evangelical exposure and credibility.

Introduction: from Bible to boardroom

In 2006 I returned to St Michael-le-Belfrey, the vibrant, thriving charismatic evangelical church, located in York in the north of England, that I had made the focus of my PhD research several years earlier. St Michael's had for many years built a reputation as a centre of evangelical innovation, pioneering new approaches to mission, outreach, worship and children's ministry that had been celebrated as a model of success within the evangelical movement within the UK and further afield. It was also well known as being the church community that the famous evangelist David Watson had turned around during the 1960s and 70s, growing the church from a struggling handful of elderly Anglicans to a multi-generational congregation of several hundred. Accounts of the work of St Michael's had taken on mythical status, and its pedigree as a church that had repeatedly defied the secularising trend of wider British society, persistently marked by growth and vitality, was a major feature of the shared church culture I encountered when I conducted an ethnographic study there during 1998-2000. By 2006, St Michael's was a markedly different kind of place. Things were slicker, more professional, altogether more polished. During earlier fieldwork, my interviews with the vicar and his staff had been held in compact offices located in the awkward converted interior of an old church building; in 2006, I was chatting to the vicar in a comfortably furnished and highly spacious conference room. St Michael's had retained its classically evangelical priorities of Bible study, community building and bringing others to faith, and in this sense my return visit met with no surprises. The twin evangelical authorities of scripture and Holy Spirit remained firmly in place, mirroring the church's status as a charismatic evangelical congregation. But there was nevertheless a distinct change of tone identifiable in the ways in which the church was presenting itself to the outside world. The

account featured in the Epilogue to my book *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture* (2007) provides a sense of how things had changed:

> If, in 1999, the identity of St Michael's was most frequently articulated with reference to a shared history, rich and largely bound up in evangelical folklore, by 2005, its identity was professionally emblazoned across its material culture, using the slick tools of contemporary marketing. Before, there was a sense that it did not have to proclaim what it stood for beyond the established conventions of church services, meetings and functions, for its identity was well-known and its pedigree securely established. Now, the mission-led ethos of its leadership has engendered a more transparent approach, characterised by the setting of concrete, realisable targets, in accordance with a clear and public statement of identity. (Guest 2007: 222)

Insofar as the changes in the public presentation of St Michael's reflected a honing of missionary strategy – developing a clearer sense of its goals and articulating them as realisable targets (captured in the slogan 'bring in, build up, send out') – then they reflect a well-established pattern in the evolution of evangelical Christianity. The pragmatic determination to master the art of mission initiatives by learning from the past while drawing lessons from others' success can be traced back at least to the 19th century. From the 1940s onwards, Billy Graham's unapologetic embrace of modern forms of communication technology to enable his Gospel message to reach ever larger crowds, as well as his refusal to be limited by the walls of traditional church buildings, pushed this tradition further. Graham was echoing a pattern of harnessing the tools of commerce, media and culture in service of the Gospel that had made massive strides in the USA before being exported successfully across the globe. Church growth theory, the megachurch tradition, and televangelism belong

within the same trend (Ellingson 2013), exemplifying a willing embrace of the methods used by non-Christian parties by evangelicals driven by a determination to be culturally meaningful and successful, and – more importantly – recognisable as such. Not content simply to prevent the devil from having the best tunes, evangelicals also became determined that private business not have a monopoly on what the world saw as success. The more business-like methods of the St Michael's of 2006 may have been ahead of many other UK churches at the time, but they were firmly within a tradition long-established within the transatlantic evangelical movement. Furthermore, the UK movement – as with so many developments in evangelicalism – took its lead from the US, with influential speakers and authors modelling for UK church leaders what might be possible with the right skills, methods and attitude. For example, Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* exerted huge influence across the UK evangelical churches, an influence that is discernible on many a church website where Warrenesque key principles, shared targets and church goals appear in place of the traditional doctrinal statement. I found the St Michael's cell church principles now emblazoned on an impressive public display erected in the church nave. This church – not for the first time – was at the head of the pack in the UK context, but they were blazing a trail that was long established on the other side of the Atlantic.

That being said, these changes did appear to reflect an acceleration in the corporatisation of evangelical churches beyond the USA. My encounter with the St Michael's of 2006 formed an impression of changes occurring more broadly in the evangelical UK, including a heightened, more explicit borrowing from the logics of the corporate world (Moberg 2017; Strhan 2015). A couple of years after this visit, for example, I conducted some research on the Global Leadership Summit, an export from Willow Creek Megachurch in the USA, which had pioneered a mass conference in 1995 aimed at training church leaders. Its popularity led the Willow Creek Association to extend the event into a global franchise,

aimed at delivering to local churches across the world 'an annual injection of vision, skill development and inspiration'. The 2-day Chicago event remained in place, attended by thousands of US delegates, but the talks by guest speakers were recorded, transferred to DVD, and sold as part of a package of resources for local organisers, who could then hold their own 'summit' based on the same materials. According to the GLS website, by 2009, "the summit was convened in cities in 55 countries in 26 languages, apparently reaching 120,000 church leaders across the globe, for the first time training more leaders outside the USA than within it." (Guest 2010: 271) During this year in the UK, the GLS was hosted by 14 churches, attracting over 3,000 delegates, many of whom travelled some distance to attend their nearest venue.

The Global Leadership Summit embodies the evangelical mirroring of the methods of private business in numerous ways, not least the commodification of missional resources, expansion into a global brand, and penetration of international markets. This is not, strictly speaking, a new phenomenon. Before Billy Graham, famous preachers like Billy Sunday and Aimee Semple McPherson found inspiration in methods of communication popularised in theatre and the movie business, embodying a long-standing evangelical sense of enterprise open to wider cultural resources (Ambrose 2017). But while the lesson here is that the church can learn a lot from those with expertise and experience in other spheres of life, it is the methods and skills associated with private business that are, in practice, placed at the forefront of many evangelical initiatives, and this emulation of private business has a fairly long history too (Grem 2017; Vaca 2019). It is the corporate world that is turned to for a sense of what success looks like, and which is assumed to have, therefore, the keys to achieving one's goals. This article explores two important sub-strands of this tendency that have, I argue, achieved special prominence under the wider cultural conditions of neoliberalism. First, there is an emphasis on professional production quality, on raising the

bar in terms of communication and presentation so that it mirrors what might be viewed as state of the art in other – but especially private sector and entertainment media – contexts. Second, there is an embrace of an orientation to managing public presence that is instrumentalist and utilitarian, seeking to promote lessons learnt from those whose experience can demonstrate what 'works' in the 'real world'. This is reflected in the GLS in its tradition of inviting guest speakers who are not exclusively Christian pastors but drawn from a variety of walks of life, from the charitable sector, to academe, to private business. What unites them is what is viewed as their visible success at what they do; what distinguishes their celebration by evangelicals is an assumption that such success constitutes a standard worthy of emulation. This instrumentalist tendency stretches much further that finding inspiration beyond the church, though, and mirrors a broader set of developments in the evangelical world closely related to populist strands of contemporary politics. These two strands – the cosmetic and the strategic – form the conceptual focus of this article.

Method

What follows is an exercise in theory-building that attempts to build on Max Weber's sociology of religion by bringing his conceptual apparatus into conversation with the cultural circumstances of the 21st century. The evidence emerges from research into the UK evangelical movement undertaken over a period of just over 20 years, including case studies like those cited above that explore relationships with the US movement. This is supplemented with a range of studies drawn from secondary literature. The overall aim is to re-articulate Weberian notions of authority insofar as they emerge from the cultural expression of present-day evangelical Christianity. It considers a range of recent examples from the evangelical world that, while by no means exhaustive nor representative, constitute recurring patterns that

thereby illustrate important trends. These trends undoubtedly achieve much more visible expression in the global north and within Anglo-American contexts framed by relative wealth, 'western' media and the English language. However, this is not to say its conclusions are confined to these kinds of contexts. Indeed, just as the patterns outlined below reflect neoliberal norms, so they often spread in tandem with neoliberal economic influence. Robert Wuthnow's research into the missionary work of US churches supports this critical reading of the "global Christianity paradigm", suggesting that globalization demands an acknowledgement not only of religious vitality in the global south, but also of the "cultural and organizational mechanisms through which Christianity in its scattered global locations has become more intricately connected." (Wuthnow 2009: 58) This is not to underplay significant evangelical movements that emerge at the instigation of actors in the global south; rather, it is to note how the flow of neoliberal influence extends well beyond its originating contexts. It also, of course, invites a critical question of how authority is accorded, and how, therefore, it is legitimately contested. In the broadest terms, what follows is an attempt to theorise patterns of authority that emerge at the interface between evangelicalism and neoliberalism.

The structure of the article reflects the method of analysis. We begin with a consideration of Max Weber's early work on the Protestant ethic which recontextualises its insights within a neoliberal frame of reference. An emergent two-pronged theory of evangelical authority is then set out and exemplified in two sections, before a conclusion attempts to map the wider implications of the analysis.

Revisiting Weber

Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* – first published as a series of essays in 1904-5 – remains an influential, if disputed, analysis within debates about the relationship between economics, culture and religion. Weber's argument forged a historical and conceptual link between certain forms of Protestant Christianity – most famously Calvinism – and social habits associated with early capitalism. Weber argued that Calvinism instilled an 'inner-worldly asceticism', this displacing the 'other-worldly' discipline of the monasteries with a self-discipline oriented to this world. Christian notions of 'calling' are here extended to vocational purpose expressed in the work of the ordinary man, such a 'calling' essential to channelling the "systematic, methodical character" necessary if this worldly asceticism is to be convincingly embodied (Weber 1958: 161). Therefore, God's grace becomes readily discerned in the success of one's worldly labours. However, the fruits of labour could not be squandered, treated frivolously nor as an end in themselves; asceticism dictated that such behaviour was reprehensible. This "limitation of consumption" leads, according to Weber, to an obvious practical consequence: a compulsion to save the financial product of one's labours and reinvest one's capital (Weber 1958: 172). In this sense, Weber argues, Calvinism furnished its followers with a powerful lever for the expansion of the 'spirit of capitalism'. This is the historical and conceptual argument that Weber presented for how Calvinism and its 'Protestant ethic' generated an affinity with emerging forms of entrepreneurial economic activity characteristic of what became the capitalist economic system. While scholars differ on the enduring merits of Weber's argument, *The Protestant Ethic* continues to provoke debate over a century after it was first published (e.g. Barbalet 2008; Connolly 2008; Swedberg 1998).

Weber was clear that modern capitalism no longer depends on the Protestant Ethic as explicitly taught within religious forms; as Alan Aldridge puts it "[i]nner-worldly asceticism

as a value-system can survive the death of God." (2007: 78) Two observations emerge from this. First, the rationality associated with the Protestant Ethic has become established as an economic norm, so that "[a]ll people engaged in the extensive system of market relationships are bound by the norms of functional rationality…" (McGuire 2002: 312, emphasis in original). The rationality Weber associated with a specific set of historical relationships has become universalised across the 'global north' and in tandem with its economic and cultural influence elsewhere. Indeed, as Swedberg argues, the behavioural concomitants of 'inner worldly asceticism' have become integral to capitalism's success and the everyday stability of its participants: "…people have to work in a systematic and restless manner anyway if they are to survive economically" (Swedberg 1998: 121). The 'iron cage' remains in place even as the churches close and Christianity as a social reality diminishes.

And yet – and here is the second observation – if there are remnants of what Weber observed within the 21st century, it is difficult to make a case that inner-worldly asceticism remains a dominant feature. Both Protestantism *and* capitalism have evolved into significantly different forms since Weber was writing, although there remains – I would argue – a significant relationship between the two. This relationship is very different from the one described by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* – a mutual engagement remains a significant shaping influence over Protestant evangelicalism, but the reverse relationship is now far less consequential. Moreover, the capitalism with which Protestantism contends emerges as a very different social force in the 21st century.

The movement that captures this broader change is what is commonly described as neoliberalism, traceable to the thought of Austrian economist Friedrich von Hayek (1899-1992) and other thinkers during the 1920s and 30s. A cluster of ideas and debates, rather than a coherent school of thought, neoliberalism nevertheless developed momentum as a major alternative to the Keynesian branch of economics that was dominant in the first half of the

20th century (Steger and Roy 2010). It arose as a response to the perceived failure of 19th century classical liberalism, which was viewed as placing too much faith in the state and the moral-philosophical perspectives often used to rationalise state authority. Instead, neoliberal thinkers sought the replacement of political discourse with economic measurement. Liberal politics was critiqued as vulnerable to ambiguity and the unreliable idiosyncrasies of ideology. For Hayek, centralised state planning was anathema as it enabled an elite minority to impose its will on the majority; by contrast, the competition of the market ensured individual freedoms and was therefore more democratic (Hayek 1944). Societies would, according to neoliberals, be better organised according to the principles of the free market, with value conceived in terms of explicit, quantitative, economic indicators (Davies 2017; Harvey 2007). Insofar as this approach transcended the interests and inherited privileges of particular individuals, and instead presumed an equal playing field governed only by the rules of free competition, it was perceived as a more effective guarantor of both efficiency and fairness. As William Davies recognises, Hayek and Weber point in opposing directions in this respect, the latter critiquing modern bureaucracy for its cold anonymity and lack of any public sense of its value for humanity, while the former celebrates markets for their promotion of the same qualities. To be detached from a substantive ethical or political perspective was, for Hayek, a positive feature of economics, because its "technical forms of quantitative evaluation" were a more effective means of securing liberal values (Davies 2017: 9).

In practical terms, neoliberalism is commonly thought to have achieved significant international influence during the oil crisis of the 1970s, achieving increasing dominance on a global level during subsequent decades (Harvey 2007). But this movement is not simply or solely one of economics. Part of the emergence of neo-liberalism as a dominant paradigm has to do with the pre-eminence of economics over other forms of thinking, what one

commentator has described as "the worldwide dissolution of politics and religion into

economics" (Stimilli 2019: 401). In other words, neoliberalism represents a set of

assumptions that has its originating context in economics, but which exerts an influence over

- indeed, is embedded in - a much wider range of cultural spheres (Delanty 2019: 11). This is

one of the many reasons why Weber's *Protestant Ethic* is worth reconsidering: just as he was

charting an apparent correspondence between a particular form of religion – Calvinist

Protestantism – and rational capitalism, so the conditions of neoliberalism invite us to

consider whether cultural resonances have made their way from the economic sphere into the

expression of more recent religious identities.

A variety of economic characteristics are associated with neoliberalism as a

philosophical narrative underpinning free market capitalism. The most important are: the pre-

eminence of global financial markets; an assumption that the liquidity of capital is more

important than stability of employment, and that social contracts are less effective than the

logic of the market (Marti 2020: 194). The pre-eminence of markets is also accompanied by a

conviction that it is *deregulation* of these markets that enables the full realisation of their

potential. These economic forces bring with them a number of correlative developments in

the cultural sphere, each embodying what William Davies calls the "cultural logic of

neoliberalism" (Davies 2017: xvii). Heightened levels of wealth inequality generate various

social problems as consumer aspirations outpace the means to achieve them. The valorisation

of competition is apparent across public as well as private institutions. There is a migration of

quantifiable measurement of value across cultural spheres, fostering what Carrette and King

describe as "the increasing hegemony of a narrowly instrumental and calculative rationality"

that becomes "the basis for all truth-claims and value judgements" (2005: 124). This becomes

manifest within institutional life in terms of what David Beer calls "metric power" (Beer

2016); commodification emerges as a feature not just of commerce, but as a characteristic of

non-economic processes as well. Education, healthcare, welfare and leisure are all subject to organisational norms that resemble commercial exchange, with products packaged in order to maximise consumer choice and convenience. 'Market logic' is deployed as an assumed measure of efficiency. A heightened individualism becomes normative, tending to present the empowered consumer as the driver of social change (associated with a diminished civic sphere and, according to some commentators, a weakened democracy – e.g. Brown 2015). These cultural tendencies arise alongside an illusion of market neutrality, maintaining the myth that what drives the system is objective economic efficiency, rather than the self-interests of a plutocratic elite. Religious movements orient themselves to these neoliberal norms in a variety of ways, including those which embrace market logic as a universal regime of 'success', strategically deployed to further key goals; those which internalize neoliberal norms and integrate them into theological assumptions; and those which fiercely oppose neoliberalism as complicit in social injustice.

The neoliberal age has brought the close relationship between religion and economics back into focus (Carrette and King 2005; Einstein 2008; Lyon 2000; Martikainen and Gauthier 2013). This is in part because a range of scholars have recognised how neoliberalism marks a closer relationship between economics and culture – what political scientist Wendy Brown calls the "economization" of all realms of human life (Brown 2015). However, the emerging relationship between religion and economics appears much more fluid than the picture painted by Weber in The Protestant Ethic, a fluidity that invites particular attention to reconfigurations of evangelical authority.

Rethinking Weberian Authorities

Recognising this fluidity requires that we diverge somewhat from Weber's well-known tripartite distinction between legal-rational, traditional and charismatic forms of legitimate authority (Weber 1947: 328). At the same time, we emulate Weber's determination in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to trace possible affinities between forms of religion and forms of economic activity. To find elements of Weber's writing in tension with one another, or to discover one of his lines of argument superseded by another, is not surprising. Weber's thinking evolved throughout his lifetime, he changed his approach to certain key ideas, and much of his work was only compiled and published posthumously. It would be unrealistic to approach his writings – voluminous as they are – as a systematic, singular sociological account. Indeed, it is the argument of this article that by following the approach of the early Weber – as modelled in *The Protestant Ethic* – and applying this to 21st century circumstances, we open ourselves up to the development of a more complex theory of authority than that presented in the well-known tripartite typology with which Weber is so often associated.

By attending to how evangelicalism has developed new expressions of authority out of its practical engagement with the cultural sphere, we are able to recognise how the logic of neoliberalism has been integrated into dominant patterns of Protestant practice. Authority here appears to be produced out of interactions with cultural norms that achieve particular pre-eminence within a neo-liberal context. Indeed, mirroring the neoliberal preference for forms of evaluation that refer to markets, calculation and individual choice (Davies 2017: 23), evangelical publics can be seen to embody and valorise forms of authority derived from the logic and life of commercial markets. Examining some of the most influential and pervasive trends in contemporary evangelical public engagement, two mutations of authority appear especially important. On the one hand, there is the *cosmetic authority* that mirrors styles and standards popularised in entertainment media, coloured by commercial invocations

of youthfulness, vigour, beauty and happiness which are often used to heighten heteronormative narratives of identity and propriety. Evangelical innovations in this vein achieve normative power by imitating commercial equivalents and deploying emergent tropes to reinforce selected, already established evangelical values. Building on Weber's original typology, this manifests as a form of routinised charismatic authority, often rooted in the embodied expression of notable evangelical figures but codified into transferable 'cosmetic' norms (and sometimes actual *products*) that can be emulated (or purchased) by ordinary believers.

On the other hand, there is the *strategic authority* that baptises neoliberal economic virtues of enterprise, industriousness and instrumentalism for evangelical application. Here, evangelical innovations secure and demonstrate legitimacy by using strategies commonly associated with the neoliberal economy. At the micro-level, such evangelical entrepreneurialism might be interpreted as a heightened, more explicit version of Weber's 'Protestant ethic'. On a more macro-scale, the same logic can be seen in engagements with political power which manifest in alignments with populist or nationalist causes and in a more cynical attempt to harness legal-rational power with the aim of consolidating evangelical influence in the public sphere. In examples of the latter, theological bases of authority are either mutated to accommodate a neoliberal framework or are set aside on the grounds of neoliberal means justifying a higher end. Both of these forms of authority arguably have their principal originating axis in the United States but exert their influence across a much wider geographical context. They are unpacked and exemplified in the sections that follow.

The Turn to the Cosmetic

In his excellent historical analysis of the US evangelical publishing industry, *Evangelicals Incorporated,* Daniel Vaca demonstrates how evangelicalism's indebtedness to the norms of private business can be traced deep into the 19th century. Vaca explores the markets for Christian revivals nurtured by evangelist Dwight L. Moody during the 1870s, the development of a Reformed brand of Christian literary product by the Eerdmans company in the 1920s, through to the market segmentation of more recent decades, which has fed the binary oppositions of the 'culture wars' by matching warring publics with alternative consumer choices. This strong relationship between evangelicalism and commerce is long-established. Moreover, Vaca's astute analysis is also helpful in developing at a conceptual level how we might understand this relationship. It is not simply a matter of cultural affinities between evangelical and capitalist aspirations; the relationship between the two is more intimate and more consequential than this. Indeed, Vaca paints a picture of evangelical endeavour in which business-like, entrepreneurial behaviour emerges as a public marker of evangelical distinction. As he comments in his Introduction,

> While commercial activity has served as the spirit that has animated the incorporation of evangelicalism's social body, practices of profit-making, branding, selling, financing, and marketing have served as fields of religious faith. (Vaca 2019: 4)

The use of the notion of 'field' here prompts a note citing the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, and while Vaca does not develop the metaphor, his use evokes Bourdieu's sensitivity to how power and status are determined by relationships between subjects within a given field of action (Bourdieu 1991; 1993). The repertoire of the business world is not simply applied by evangelicals towards a given end; it comes to embody evangelical authority and represent the public reality of faith within evangelical subcultures. It is this subtle theorisation that serves

as a useful corrective to so-called 'resource mobilisation' perspectives, which often over-instrumentalise the ways in which religious actors draw upon a wider range of resources. The most striking example would be rational choice theory, whose adoption of cost-benefit analysis as a psychological universal both over-simplifies individual motivations and produces a rather one-dimensional account of social reality (Finke and Stark 1992; Gauthier et al 2013: 7). This is a consequence of the absorption of neoliberal assumptions into social science more generally, as if maximisation of personal benefit can be universalised as an explanatory lens through which we may understand all human behaviour. Vaca's analysis reflects a much more subtle account, which attends to the specific circumstances and internal dynamics particular to different religious movements. Vaca alerts us to how a concerted engagement with business methods changes the ways in which identity is embodied and, in turn, is subject to acts of recognition and misrecognition by others. As evangelicalism has evolved in close proximity to commercial trends, it has increasingly absorbed the methods, aspirations and fashions of commerce into its own self-presentation.

Part of this process has valorised visual and performed elements of embodied expression, so that the 'field' of religious faith overlaps with the 'fields' of advertising, entertainment and youth culture. We also find an internalisation of the norms of professionalism and 'quality' encountered in cultural production, affirmed as a means of claiming credibility for evangelical initiatives. For example, James Bielo, in his anthropological study of The Ark Encounter, the creationist theme park in Kentucky, USA paid special attention to the values motivating those responsible for designing and curating the exhibits. By seeking to emulate wider norms of professionalism found in mainstream, non-Christian media, these entrepreneurs of Christian cultural production sought to minimise accusations that their work was naff, kitsch or amateurish (Bielo 2019: 56). In this sense, they anticipate the common assumption that evangelical theme parks will be a pale, flawed

imitation of the 'real thing', and borrow from the standards of the 'secular' entertainment industry in order to offset this critique. Bielo attributes this to an internalisation of the norms of capitalist consumerism – delivering an experience that is 'value for money' and worth a return visit – but also cites an anxiety on the part of its fundamentalist patrons about social marginalization. To appear credible in mainstream commercial terms is, in one sense, to reclaim a place in the centre ground of consumer culture.

Within contexts like the Ark Encounter, this distinctive invocation of 'professional' quality is most clearly manifest in the material culture expressed through merchandising, museum exhibits or glossy, promotional publications. In other, more internally facing evangelical contexts, authority – as an embodied template – is more organically *cosmeticized*, performed in identities ascribed with qualities of vitality, youthfulness, health, vigour and self-empowerment. Evangelical expressions within this category tend, unsurprisingly, to be highly gendered. The campaigns of the New Christian Right have, since the 1970s, affirmed a strong opposition to all cultural phenomena that diverge from or potentially disrupt the moral order of the 'traditional' nuclear family (especially abortion, homosexuality, and women's empowerment). In cosmeticized form such ideas achieve expression via more visual, embodied media. A striking example can be found in the initiatives of Hillsong, the globally influential, Sydney-based megachurch, which has achieved massive impact on the broader evangelical world via its worship music and glossy template for an aspirational Christian youth (Connell 2005). Having extended its model into a global network of churches, Hillsong currently claims to attract around 100,000 individuals to its 80+ churches across the globe. Beyond its own churches, Hillsong has – like several of the biggest, most successful megachurches – achieved the status of 'influencer', effectively setting the agenda and standard for many other churches who seek to emulate Hillsong's appeal and success.

Hillsong has also maintained for some years a series of highly popular conferences –

mimicked by other similarly inclined churches across the world – structured around the

separate needs of men, on the one hand, and women on the other. Marion Maddox's account

of these events – drawing on fieldwork between 2005 and 2010 – reveals their indebtedness

to norms of attractiveness and gender-specific qualities prominent in commercial western

culture:

> Attendees at women's conferences are exhorted to diet, exercise, use makeup, get
>
> "pampered," and even resort to plastic surgery to conform to a narrow, fashion-
>
> magazine definition of "beauty." Men's conference attendees, meanwhile, are
>
> encouraged to "lead," "take authority," and discover their similarities to God.
>
> (Maddox 2013: 12)

The 'Colour Conferences' aimed at Hillsong's women match a rhetorical emphasis on

commercial notions of feminine beauty with commercial opportunities for personal

enhancement. As Maddox comments, "Colour conferences feature "pamper" stalls, decorated

to resemble the cosmetic counters of an upmarket department store, offering makeup,

manicures, and hairstyling." (2013: 20) Augmenting the emphasis upon physical perfection is

a trend of using 'Princess' language and tropes in referring to female participants, a pattern

derided as infantilising and encouraging passivity by Hillsong's critics. It also mirrors the

ageism inherent in the entertainment industry (Ward 2020: 51), whose celebration of a

particular form of the youthful female body is echoed in Hillsong's own projections of

femininity. A similar pattern is found by Jenkins and Marti in their study of the Oasis

Christian Centre in Los Angeles and the 'God Chicks' ministry, named after the book of the

same name by influential pastor Holly Wagner. Jenkins and Marti find 'older' (40+) women

embracing a ministry that requires them to be wise examples for their younger peers. But their redefinition of 'being old' retains aspirations defined by commercial images of physical attractiveness. These women believe they must "stay focused on looking fashionable in a healthy body as this is what allows them to prosper in the world in personal relationships and evangelical, missionary outreach." (Jenkins and Marti 2012: 246)

An advocacy of a complementarian view of gender roles is, of course, nothing new within evangelical Christianity. What is more noteworthy is the way traditional notions of gender difference are refracted through images of masculinity and femininity most associated with mainstream entertainment media. Maddox cites Bobbie Houston, wife of Hillsong's senior pastor Brian and figurehead of its women's conference, who calls for a celebration of "Heaven-breathed womanhood in all its beauty, softness, vulnerability and tenderness…" (quoted in Maddox 2013: 16). A romanticised language associated with conjugal intimacy is also used to describe women's relationship with God or Jesus (Maddox 2013: 18), with some expressions evoking a quasi-erotic encounter between women and God echoed elsewhere in charismatic circles (e.g. Percy 2005).

By contrast, Hillsong's men's conferences encourage men to have a relationship to God that is one of identification, of seeking to embody His example. The virtues associated with this example, tellingly, are highly evocative of traditional notions of masculine heroism, emphasising adventure, risk, strength, courage, valour and battle-readiness. In this respect the constructions of masculinity found in Hillsong echo the teaching of controversial pastor Mark Driscoll, who led Mars Hill Church in Seattle until accusations of abuse led to Driscoll's departure and the church's demise. Jennifer McKinney charts the rise and fall of Driscoll's ministry at Mars Hill as both a continuation of evangelical traditions of 'muscular Christianity', but also an embrace of a more crass 'hypermasculinity', regressive in its persistent call for the submission of women to men, and demeaning to those men who

embody qualities deemed to fall short of the 'man's man' image being promoted (McKinney, forthcoming). While Driscoll's church collapsed, and his public profile and influence undoubtedly waned as a result, he tapped into a wider resurgence of 'traditional' gender language mirrored in the populist movement that placed Donald Trump in the White House.

If a cosmeticization of evangelicalism is manifest in the escalation of heteronormativity within theologically conservative circles, it is expressed in more subtle form in the elevation of embodied emotional states taken to be indicators of Christian faith, virtue or wholesomeness. Amy Wilkins' comparative study of *Wannabes, Goths and Christians* (2008a) breaks new ground here in its identification of visible happiness as a presumed evangelical identity marker. Based on qualitative research into the lives of evangelical students at a US college, Wilkins' work focuses on happiness not as an internal state but "an emotional culture learned and given meaning through social interaction…" (2008b: 283) Moreover, happiness is assumed by these evangelicals as both desirable and achievable, and an experience that distinguishes Christians from non-Christians. Happiness, as Wilkins puts it, is compulsory, and the performance of emotions that suggest its absence – anger, sadness, disappointment – imply a Christian faith that is incomplete or inauthentic. By contrast, evangelical Christians learn to interpret their own happiness as a signal of their intimacy with God and their moral correctness. This impulse to manage the presentation of the self can be viewed as a mutation of Weber's Protestant ethic – nurturing a need for a present-day expression of virtue in practice as a means of allaying psychological uncertainty. However, the object of anxiety here seems to be different – not one's eternal soul (because you're already 'saved') but one's degree of acceptance within a given community.

Wilkins' study underlines how the cosmeticization of evangelicalism is not simply about surface appearances expressed through consumer choices – as might be implied in the Hillsong example above. This is one important aspect, and indeed reflects the importance

attached to performed identity among younger generations in the age of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. But the restoration of a physically convincing Christian presence is also about the management of emotions and the cultivation of a particular sense of selfhood (Hochschild 2013). We find a commercialised combination of the two patterns in some elements of the Prosperity Gospel movement, such as the thriving ministry and publishing empire of Joel Osteen, which combines an invocation of self-empowerment with the commercial products that promise to enable the desired process (Sødal 2010). Such fusions of evangelical theology, self-help principles and pro-business motivations have now spread across the world, becoming highly popular in parts of Africa. Such ministries have even become established within the traditionally more staid British context, such as the London-based neo-Pentecostal Bishop Wayne Malcolm, who calls himself 'The Business Bishop' and has authored 25 books on "self-development and entrepreneurship as they relate to the Christian faith".[1]

It is easy to see how a collection of values central to late modernity achieve convergence in such developments, not least those associated with consumer choice and individualism, both of which also have obvious resonances with erstwhile evangelical essentials of conversionism and the notion of faith as a personal experience. My argument here is that the direction of travel reflects a heightened dependence on models of selfhood that are publicly affirmed and amenable to commercial exploitation. Daniel Vaca's study includes some astute observations about the determination of US evangelicals in the 19th and 20th centuries to be *distinctive*, i.e. identifiably different from their non-evangelical peers. The same impulse can be found in the neoliberal 21st century, but the driving momentum now is towards adapting norms of distinctiveness from wider spheres of consumption.

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[1] https://www.thebusinessbishop.com/ (accessed 23/10/20)

Strategic authority and the populist turn

If the *cosmeticization* of evangelicalism evokes an authority that is normative and exemplary, embodied, self-directed and often reified within commercial or media landscapes, our second strand presents authority as embedded within networks of power and cultural identity that have a more explicitly political focus. The template here was set by the US New Christian Right, which sought common cause with groups theologically divergent from its own professed values if agreement on a single issue might advance the cause further in the public sphere. This impetus has led conservative Protestants in recent decades to collaborate with Roman Catholics and with Mormons, for example, on campaigns against same-sex marriage, alliances that would have been unthinkable in earlier times. This phenomenon is described by Michael Lindsay in terms of "elastic orthodoxy" (2007: 216), a willingness to co-operate with groups who hold a similar view on a specific issue (if not on others) that has been crucial to evangelicalism's success. Indeed, following Christian Smith's (1998) work, Lindsay argues that this is what has distinguished evangelicals from fundamentalists: while both retain a strong commitment to core beliefs, fundamentalists have aligned this with a separatist tendency founded on a determination to avoid being polluted by the wayward convictions of those outside of the faith. On the other hand, evangelicals, rather than avoid pluralistic society, engage with it, both as a means of exerting influence on wider culture and as a prerequisite for effective evangelism.

This has been a key feature of Anglo-American evangelical Christianity for decades now, and as broader cultural spheres have been engaged, so evangelicals have borrowed more openly and more concertedly from resources outside of their ecclesiastical contexts in order

to enrich and advance their communities. This enrichment has evolved from a means to making mission more palatable to the unconverted – 'friendship evangelism', the Alpha course, youth camps and festivals – to an aspect of evangelical life itself. It includes the absorption and celebration of some of the most influential cultural trends in western societies – from an embrace of therapeutic language to a foregrounding of sentimentality as a dominant evangelical mood (Brenneman 2013; Stevenson 2013). The embrace of norms from the business world has arguably added an edge to evangelical cultural engagement, a sense that these are routes not just to wider appeal, but to visible vitality. To be at the 'cutting edge' of particular cultural fashions has not just become an advantageous feature of evangelical church life; it has become a key identity marker that evangelicals see as setting themselves apart from more moribund non-evangelical churches that do not share their success.

Christian Smith's (1998) account of evangelicalism in the USA maintains that evangelicals have persistently managed to be both cultural engaged *and* theologically orthodox. And yet there is also no doubt that such cultural engagement has, in recent years, taken on new forms that imply a broader shift in patterns of shared values. Even in the US, levels of religious observance at the national level have declined, and the perception of a secularising society slipping further away from the moral anchor of Christian teaching has reinforced a sense among evangelicals of being a persecuted minority, inspiring some to seek new ways of securing their position. At the same time, a broader shift in US society saw large segments of the white working classes feeling increasingly marginalised, beleaguered and economically unstable (Hochschild 2016: 221). As the two causes merged in the public imagination, the populist rise in support for a white, conservative, Christian narrative of the American nation led to a step change in the culture wars and the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016.

Several impressive volumes have emerged in recent years charting these momentous changes (e.g. Fea 2018; Marti 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2020). My argument here is that they are shaped in part by a tendency within the evangelical world that extends well beyond the USA. This arises out of a shift in the distribution of power in wider society and an internalisation of the notion that secularisation – or, more accurately, de-Christianisation – has emasculated evangelical opportunities for organic cultural influence. This generates a tendency to extend the strategic harnessing of authority in the public sphere that distinguished earlier forms of the New Christian Right.

In practical terms, this includes legal campaigns, strategic lobbying of politicians, mobilisation of funding as leverage, and the nurturing of political capital likely to secure advantage in shaping local and national agendas. Indeed, these have evolved into a new style of evangelical activism, altogether more ruthless, more uncompromising and more cynical than the methods of earlier times. Donald Trump managed to retain the persistent support of white evangelicals, so Gerardo Marti argues, not because he is one of them or embodies their theological convictions – but because he has shown himself to be willing "to enforce their convictions through the apparatus of the State." (Marti 2020: 214) Marti takes this analysis further, returning to Weber in order to present these changes in terms of shifts in authority:

> "…today's evangelical conservatives have given up on spiritual revival as a means of change…Borrowing Max Weber's conceptual framework, white evangelicals have turned away from the charismatic authority of the Church in favour of the rational-legal authority of the State." (Marti 2020: 220)

While it is rational-legal authority that is cited here, I would argue that the pattern

exemplified points to a phenomenon that is culturally more pervasive and conceptually more

specific. Weber defines legal authority as having rational grounds, defined as "resting on a

belief in the 'legality' of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to

authority under such rules to issue commands…" (Weber 1947: 328). Legal-rational authority

is that associated with the state and its branches of government within modern liberal

democracies. What Marti identifies among evangelical conservatives supporting Trump is a

particular *orientation to* legal-rational authority. It is one that mirrors some of the

assumptions and practices associated with neoliberalism, specifically those connected to what

William Davies calls the "strategic mindset" (Davies 2017: 67). According to Davies,

axiomatic to neoliberalism is the conception of economic participants as competitors, who

have equivalent status at the outset of an economic process but unequal status by its

conclusion. It conceives of participants as either winners or losers. But there are different

ways of playing the 'game'. One way is to play in a 'spirit' of fairness, observing a given set

of rules and seeking an outcome that reflects the fairest account of the participants' respective

inequalities. Another way is to be strategic, and this approach "does not look at the rules in

terms of how they formally define victory, but looks at *other competitors* and asks how they

would least like the game to be played." (Davies 2017: 67, emphasis in original) This

'strategic mindset' is motivated by victory without any loyalty to rules of fairness, and will

countenance bending or breaking the rules of the game if this may secure the desired

outcome. On this understanding, authority emerges within a template for achieving one's

ends drawn from neoliberal economics; to be adversarial, combative, and ruthless is justified

as it grants competitive edge and power within the public sphere. Such strategic tools may

appeal as a fresh resort to religious agents who perceive their own power to have diminished

as a consequence of secularisation. And insofar as the "economization" of culture proceeds

along neoliberal lines, their wider application in spheres of education, healthcare, welfare and sport, for example, lend them legitimation within the everyday lives of ordinary citizens. Put another way, the use of such strategies by evangelical actors is an understandable – perhaps inevitable – extension of the wider neoliberalisation of society.

This harnessing of what might be called *strategic authority* is coupled in some contexts with populist narratives that merge religious and national identities. In the US context, Whitehead and Perry conceive of Christian nationalism as a "cultural framework – a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems – that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life." (2020: 10) This perspective is strongly associated, the authors argue, with support for authoritarian control, heteronormative understandings of the family, and a notion of American identity that privileges those who are Christian, white and native-born. And yet they also find that support for Christian nationalism and conventional markers of religious observance for the most part push in opposing directions. While Christian nationalism is a strong predictor of a range of conservative positions and of support for President Trump, for example, those who are more religious tend to support more inclusive perspectives, e.g. promoting greater acceptance of cultural and religious 'others' (Whitehead and Perry 2020: 117). Thus, in the US context, a form of nationalism has drawn on evangelical Christianity as a symbolic resource in the service of a politically populist agenda, so that the strategic instrumentalist logic we observe among evangelicals also works the other way around, with evangelical identities deployed in the advancement of a more complex set of political values.

While the most striking examples of strategic authority can be found in the USA, it is not an exceptional case, and further developments elsewhere in the world suggest a wider pattern, enabled by the enculturation of neoliberal values and driven in part by a motivation to overcome the marginalisation (or perceived marginalisation) of evangelical Christian

interests within liberal democracies in the global north. In the UK, legal levers have been used to advance a conservative evangelical agenda by campaign groups like Christian Concern, who are responding to a perception that the Christianity they represent has been marginalised within the public sphere (McIvor 2020). Both lobbying of politicians and formal litigation by evangelical activists have gathered apace since the introduction of changes in the legal status of religion, following the Human Rights Act (1998) and Equality Act (2010). The former has established on a formal basis the right to religious freedom, while the latter makes religious exceptions more difficult to justify, especially when they clash with other 'protected characteristics' such as sex or sexuality. Here, the law is used as an arena through which evangelicals may contest secularisation and secure Christian interests.

In the UK over recent decades, conservative evangelical churches have made concerted use of wealth as a means of resisting liberal reforms within the Church of England. Some have threatened to withhold payments to diocesan coffers in protest against policies they perceive to be unbiblical (Wood 2011). The ordination of women from the early 1990s appears to have triggered this strategy, continued in response to the consecration of women bishops. In 2010, the evangelical network Reform issued a letter to the Church of England stating that, should measures to consecrate women be pursued without any opt outs for traditionalists, then they would encourage newly ordained clergy to leave the Church of England and their member churches would stop contributing to Church funds (Taylor 2010). Movements towards greater acceptance of homosexuals have been met with similar responses, usually from the same networks (Vasey Saunders 2012: 158). This strategic use of leverage is significant as such networks tend to have populace, wealthy congregations and produce large numbers of young ordinands when the wider Church of England is struggling in terms of attendees, clergy numbers and funding. Evangelicals have also established networks of mutual financial support which help them to bypass wider Anglican structures of

accountability, just as episcopal accountability is evaded when churches seek oversight from similarly minded conservative bishops rather than their appointed diocesan bishop (Fry 2019: 292-3). Indeed, in this way, emboldened conservative evangelical churches forge more significant relationships with global networks stretching well beyond the UK, such as the Global Anglican Futures Conference (Wyatt 2017).

The recent exposure of abuse that took place at the evangelical Iwerne camps has highlighted long-standing efforts by conservative evangelicals to maintain connections to the UK's elite public schools (Laville and Sherwood 2017; Thornton 2020). This initiative – described by critics as a "strategic ministry" (Nicholas 2021) – sought to channel evangelical values into public life by focusing efforts on those elite educational institutions (including top ranking universities) which have traditionally produced the nation's leaders and professional class. Some Pentecostal churches express a concern for 'future leaders' by encouraging young, underrepresented black men and women to study at Oxford or Cambridge, as with Kingsway International Christian Centre's 'Breaking Educational Barriers' initiative.[2] By contrast, these more conservative evangelical networks focus their energies on those already studying at centres of educational privilege in order to maximise their chances of influence. Therefore, wealth *and* cultural capital emerge as sources in the strategic advancement of evangelical causes.

José Casanova devotes a chapter of his *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994) to 'Evangelical Protestantism', tracing its development through stages characterised by civil religion, fundamentalist sectarianism and the political projects of the New Christian Right. Casanova's focus remains on how global conditions induce evangelicalism to adopt a public role, in the US context one driven by a defensive effort to protect the Christian lifeworld, and a reformist passion to restore American culture to a Biblical standard (Casanova 1994:157).

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[2] https://www.kicc.org.uk/events/kicc-breaking-educational-barriers-conference/ (accessed 24/4/21)

The examples above appear to fall along the same trajectory, perhaps reinforced by the 'cultural backlash' that has seen religiously inflected authoritarian populism arise across the globe. Widely understood as a counter-response to globalisation, mass migration, and perceived marginalisation among nativist majorities, it explains both a resurgent nationalism and the coupling of religion with nativist agendas (Norris and Inglehart 2019). It also exemplifies a strategic mindset among religious actors that models how power might be more effectively harnessed within a post-secular political context.

Conclusion

To point out the cultural affinities between evangelicalism and late modern capitalism is nothing new, but the enduring resonance of this connection invites questions about how it may have changed over time. Such emulation of global markets and neoliberal norms as exemplified above is also not universal within evangelicalism, and it is important to note developments that affirm a much more critical orientation to neoliberal developments on both sides of the Atlantic (Guest 2017; Marti 2020; Steensland and Goff 2014)

The analysis offered above suggests evangelicalism's adoption of neoliberal norms has taken particular directions in recent decades, generating subtle mutations of authority that mirror wider cultural templates for what counts as credible, effective and legitimate. It is a complex adoption that echoes the tendencies of the past, but reacts to very different cultural circumstances, and so ends up with very different results. If, as historian Mark Noll suggests, missionaries were the key brokers of any knowledge about the world that was presented to the churches in the 19th century (Noll 2009:147), then in the present day, a very different arrangement is in place. Evangelicals, like their fellow citizens in the 'global north', enjoy

access to an apparently limitless resource of information via the web, which connects them to global networks of like-minded individuals and global markets of consumer goods. Social media creates further opportunities for actively engaging with a 24/7 circulation of data, all tailored to the consumer preferences of the individual consumer (Mavelli 2020). What we have found in recent years is that such circumstances do not generate unprecedented levels of empowerment as individuals bypass the constraints of traditional authorities. Instead, the networked society produces its own authorities – largely commercially driven – which determine the shape of the new terrain and frame which opportunities are available. The momentum of neoliberal conditions leads individuals, organisations and movements to emulate the logic of the market in order to remain active participants. Religious groups are no exception, and the pro-business instinct of evangelical Protestantism has perhaps made it especially prone to emulating neoliberal norms and values.

I have attempted to trace how an internalisation of neoliberal norms has engendered novel mutations of evangelical authority. These mutations become expressed in embodied dispositions rather than explicit creeds - what Bourdieu might call variants of the evangelical 'habitus'. I have delineated two main directions of travel, abbreviated as the *cosmetic* and the *strategic*, both issuing important implications for what counts as authoritative within evangelical circles. These authorities are secondary insofar as they do not ultimately supplant primary authorities like scripture or the Holy Spirit; rather, they offer templates for how evangelical convictions may be clothed in cultural forms that are compelling to a 21st century audience. The *cosmetic* can be glossed in traditional Weberian terms as a form of routinised charisma, morphed in many contexts into a commodified or 'cosmeticized' credibility. It derives its appeal from evangelical exemplars and public models of evangelical identity, but one that is primarily evident in embodied forms and cast onto physical experiences. Borrowing from wider commercial spheres of fashion, entertainment and media, it emerges in

an impetus for the flawless, slick, professional performance. Joel Osteen and Hillsong both embody these tendencies and model them for a global evangelicalism keen to follow their example. By contrast, the *strategic* represents a distinctive orientation to legal-rational authority, more a method or inclination than a foundation for evangelical action. But in borrowing so concertedly from current trends amidst global populism, it represents a heightened politicisation of evangelical identity, one focused on securing influence and profile via instrumentalist means. Both forms circulate as capital within public space, and as such constitute major opportunities for empowerment in the future. Tasks for future sociologists will include charting how successful evangelicals harness the potential of these resources and figuring out what the consequences might be for the values of this movement.

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