EXPLORING ATTITUDES TO EVANGELISM:

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF STREET ANGELS AND CLUB ANGELS

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Beth Keith
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Along the wall was a row of boxes containing flip flops, bottled water and spikeys\(^1\) which we loaded up into bags. Plastic gloves were handed round and I was shown to a cupboard where various yellow high-vis jackets hung. I chose the smallest one, it was heavy, awkward and way too big. Unaccustomed to having my beliefs displayed so visibly, I felt self-conscious. I took a selfie. I didn’t look like me. Fortunately, there was little time to ponder, as we collected together in a huddle, one big bundle of yellow, to pray for the night, and for safety on the streets.

It’s almost 11pm as we split into groups of two’s and three’s and begin our patrols. Most people we meet recognise us. Some cheer, some ignore us, and a few join us for a while to hear more about what we’re doing. It’s a quiet night, we talk to bouncers and members of the police. We hand out our supplies of spikeys and walk a few miles round the streets. With not much going on Luke explains that now he would normally pray walk; “pray and walk, walk and pray”. He knows I’m here to do research, he doesn’t pry into why I am doing this or whether I have any religious affiliation. Does he offer the opportunity for us to pray? I’m not sure. If it was offered, I don’t take it up, so instead of praying Luke recalls other evenings, with stories of rapes averted, injuries patched up at the resident ambulance, vulnerable drunks reunited with friends or sent home in taxis. Alongside these seemingly normal events Luke talks about the more occasional times when parents write into the project to say thanks, or when a person contacts the Street Angels to ask for support to change their lifestyle.

We turn a corner and Luke points to an imposing Church building which is now called Halo, he explains that several club venues have sacred names or theme nights; “Heaven and Hell, Communion, Transcendence”. Luke finds this poignant. The radio\(^2\) cuts through our chat, Angels are needed to help a vulnerable woman who has drunk too much and lost her friends. But, she’s not in our area so other Angels respond. Later, we find a young woman, heels in hand, walking out of town alone. We approach and ask if she needs help, or at least some flip flops. She seems confused and incoherent. She’s lost her friends and is trying to get home but is walking in the wrong direction. She’s got no money, but has a phone. Eventually one of the Angels gets through to her Mum. We find her a taxi and ensure the driver knows where to go, and that Mum will be waiting.

Another night, another uniform. This time black t-shirts with the Club Angels logo on the front and printed across the back:

\begin{center}
CHAT \\
HELP \\
LISTEN \\
CARE
\end{center}

ps. we’re Christians (ask us more if you want)

This team is younger, with everyone between eighteen and twenty-five. Stories are shared about last week’s club night, coffee is drunk and the evening prayed for.

We arrive at Tiger Tiger just after 11pm, the bouncers are friendly and we walk to the back of the venue to the quiet room which the Angels work from. One of the volunteers, who used to work behind the bar, shows me round the venue. I lose count of the number of bars, six or seven, with dance floors for different music tastes. The atmosphere in the front room is overpowering, the music deafening. We squeeze through the crowd, and get some looks as people read the backs of our t-shirts. In the office, three women sit in front of a wall of security monitors. I’m introduced as someone who’s coming to see what the Angels do. “Ooh the Angels are amazing”, “We love love love them being here, they’re fantastic”, “Can’t praise them enough.”

We make our way back to Angel base, when through the radio a bouncer asks for assistance. A few minutes later a girl appears, half walking, half carried by her boyfriend and a club angel called Sarah. They sit down, she’s given water and promptly hurls into a vomit bucket, as Sarah holds back her hair and helps her up. Over the next hour the three of them sit at a table, as the girl continues to vomit, cry and have a minor panic attack. Sarah calms her down, looks after her, and holds the bucket. After a while the boyfriend starts asking “Who are you angels? Why do you do this?”

\(^1\) A plastic stopper which protects a drink from being spiked with substances.
\(^2\) Angels work in partnership with other safety agencies using the Businesses Against Crime radios.
EXPLORING ATTITUDES TO EVANGELISM

Evangelism has seen something of a resurgence in recent years, invigorated by Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation *Evangeli Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel,* and within the Church of England by the active encouragement from both Archbishops. In setting evangelism within their priorities, and introducing initiatives; such as *Thy Kingdom Come,* which actively encourages Christians to pray for evangelism between Ascension and Pentecost, the Archbishops have reinstated the value evangelism within the Church of England. This renewed interest comes after a period during which contextual mission took centre stage, and suspicion or reticence towards evangelism and evangelistic language grew amongst some wings of the evangelical church in Britain.

My interest here was to take an in-depth look at attitudes towards evangelism, amongst evangelicals, and amongst the recipients of their evangelistic practices. To do this I engaged in a small scale reflexive ethnographic study of an evangelistic mission project: Street Angels and Club Angels.

Before turning to discuss research methods and findings, a brief discussion of some aspects of the background context is necessary. To do that, narratives about evangelism within the Church of England are discussed, noting an increasing reticence towards evangelism amongst some evangelicals, which has often been associated to societal changes as Britain develops as a post-Christian society. Attitudes to tolerance and civility are explored and responses within evangelical churches to these cultural changes are discussed. This highlights the shift to contextual models of mission over proclamation evangelism, and the ambiguity encountered as evangelicals seek to balance values of tolerance, understandings of salvation, and contextual mission practice.

CULTURAL CHANGES AND EVANGELICAL RESPONSES

The decline in church attendance and the rise of pluralism and secularization have contributed to post-Christian culture within Britain. Some see this as a substantial move towards secularization, with the prediction that Britain will be a secular society by 2030. Others offer a challenge to secularization theory pointing to residual beliefs and new forms of spirituality. Stringer argues that the decline in Christianity reveals other kinds of religiosity previously hidden beneath the dominant Christian discourse. Examples can be found in studies on club culture, which support the view that new social forms of religion are developing through emotional and alternative spiritual expressions. Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas have contributed much to the discourse by documenting the rise in spirituality, and discussing the how the turn to the subjective within modern culture undermines traditional religion, placing the self as the centre of meaning. These studies of new spiritual rituals, alongside studies on the persistence of belief, suggest it is more appropriate to view Britain as post-Christian rather than secular. In this post-Christian and pluralistic environment an ethic of tolerance and civility takes...
precedence compelling not just a 'tolerance of others' beliefs but of being 'tolerable to others.'"12

Understandings of contextualisation shape the extent to which Christians and churches view themselves as counter-cultural or enculturated, shaping both the gospel proclaimed and the means of proclamation. Contrasting positions across evangelical wings of the Church of England could be characterised in the work of Rico Tice and Steve Hollinghurst. Tice, in Honest Evangelism, advocates resilience and the proclamation of truth in an increasingly hostile culture.13 In contrast, Hollinghurst in Mission-Shaped Evangelism advocates for a fully enculturated approach.14 These stances emphasise the polarities of understanding, whereas many evangelicals and evangelical churches hold their faith in the tension between resistance to modern culture15 and accommodation to it.16

Christian Smith, writing about American evangelicalism, uses a subcultural approach to argue that evangelicals have flourished in this tension; neither accommodating fully nor entirely resisting modern culture. He refers to this as engaged orthodoxy,17 here the theology of a counter community sits in tension with the missiological drive to engage. Accordingly, evangelicals can capitalize on culturally pluralistic environments, socially constructing subcultural distinction and engagement, emphasizing connection and tension between themselves and others.18 This tension can be summed up in the phrase ‘in the world but not of it’. Mathew Guest, writing from a British perspective, draws on Smith's concept of engaged orthodoxy to critique evangelical developments,19 showing the ways in which evangelicals have embraced some cultural norms, whilst retaining some cultural distinction.20

Several writers working within the discipline of sociology of religion address attitudes of reticence towards evangelism. Hunter describes the ethic of tolerance and civility in post-Christian environments21 as standing in direct opposition to the exclusivism of Christian soteriology: that salvation is found through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Evangelism, standing in the shadow of the shameful history of colonialism, TV preachers and religious wars, may be perceived as something to be feared, associated with intolerance and superiority, an embarrassment for Christians and offensive to non-Christians.

Evidence from sociological studies on evangelicalism show that as evangelicals embrace a code of civility and tolerance,22 discomfort about evangelising is reported and models of evangelism embrace social action, popular culture and play down conversion.23 Guest writes it is no longer seen as acceptable to openly affirm views that are socially offensive or which emphasise the radical difference between those inside and those outside of the faith.24

Guest identifies evangelical developments in the UK, arguing that incarnational mission has brought a radical accommodation of beliefs through which traditional understandings of the gospel are being reconfigured.25 He argues that ecumenism, social action and engagement with popular culture have liberalised evangelical values,26 and so blurred concepts of evangelism. This raises questions for evangelical exclusivist soteriology and the practice of evangelism. In such an environment, mission practices which embrace culture may question previously held aspects of soteriology which emphasise differences between Christian and non-Christians.

The perceived failure of the ‘Decade of Evangelism’ in

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19 Ibid., 153.
20 Hunter, 183-4.
21 Ibid., 151-54, 183.
22 Ibid., 183-4.
24 Ibid., 91.
25 Ibid., 166.
26 Ibid., 35-45.
the 1990s, followed by the rise in contextualisation, and an increasingly post-Christian context which encourages civility and tolerance, have together contributed to the shift away from evangelism as proclamation. This shift is evident in the lack of literature written on proclamation in the UK since 2000.

During these years the number of books written about contextual mission far exceeds the number of books written about proclamation, with books written on evangelism tending to emphasise contextual factors, for example, Mission Shaped Evangelism: The Gospel in Contemporary Culture, and Evangelism after Christendom, and Evangelism in a Spiritual Age: Communicating Faith in a Changing Culture. Whilst these developments have contributed to the missional practice of the Church, they also reveal a possible crisis of confidence in the language and understanding of evangelism.

The shift away from evangelism and the rise of contextual theology and fresh expressions of church can be perceived as setting up incarnational mission in opposition to proclamationary evangelism, with the current renewed interest in evangelism within the Church of England seen by some as a step back from developments made in contextual mission. Whilst this is not necessarily the case, a lack of breadth and quality in theological discourse on the relationship between contextual mission and evangelism contributes to a lack of clarity in this area. Stone writing about the theology and practice of Christian witness writes of the crisis in evangelism, identifying a gap in the theological study of evangelism and noting that resistance to and avoidance of thinking theologically about evangelism is powerful. Those who think theologically rarely think about evangelism, and those who think about evangelism rarely take the discipline of theology very seriously.

Paul Chilcote and Laceye Warner, in The Study of Evangelism, also note the false dichotomy between theory and practice regarding evangelism, the scarcity in scholarly literature, and the difficulties in locating landmark studies. They note that much of the literature on evangelism is practical “how-to” guides of a particular form or style which tend to lack theological engagement. They also stress the increasing number of texts from the academy which address the biblical and theological heritage of the Church but offer little guidance in terms of application. The lack of breadth and quality within the academic discourse has left a noticeable gap offering the Church little resource to navigate the cultural challenges within a prevailing narrative of civility and tolerance. So, it is in this context that I wanted to explore attitudes to evangelism, with the hope of offering some insights into current understandings and practices.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

This small-scale study takes a reflexive ethnographic approach and draws on Smith’s work tracking subcultural narratives and theological rationales. It is limited as ethnographic research due to the time constraints, however draws on ethnographic interviewing and participant observation methods, which have been used extensively in studies of religious practice and ritual. The Angels project was appealing as a case study, because it interweaves practices of evangelism with social action, ecumenism and engagement with popular culture, in line with developing trends in evangelicalism. In addition its relationship with secular partners within the city centre night-time economy made this an interesting case in which to analyse internal and external cultural discourse about the project. As such it offered the potential to reveal insights into how volunteers work within the tensions of engaged orthodoxy, how they engage with an ethic of civility and tolerance, and how recipients of the project perceived and evaluated the ministry.

I was interested in tracking the Angels’ practices, the rationale behind these, and how they were perceived by other secular organisations. To do this it was important to interview volunteers from the project, Church of England representatives who had oversight for the project, and representatives from the night-time economy. The fieldwork was conducted in May

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31 Stone, Evangelism after Christendom, 17.
33 Smith, American Evangelicalism, 121-127.
34 Charlotte Aull Davies, Reflexive Ethnography, (London: Routledge, 1999), 95.
35 Guest, Evangelical Identity, 35-45.
and June 2014, during which I participated as a team member with the Club Angels and Street Angels. I also conducted six interviews with volunteers, interviews with representatives from the night-time economy (the police, a club owner and member of the city council) and an interview with an archdeacon who oversaw the project. The interviews were recorded, during which I made notes on non-verbal points of interests; hesitations, repetitions, and body language. In analysing the data I combined notes from my research journal with interview transcripts and completed a themed analysis.

Interviewing is a joint process in which both interviewee and researcher construct knowledge and are together ‘involved in meaning-making work,’ therefore a reflexive approach is critical. Whilst rejecting the notion of a purely constructed model, I was aware that if interviewees felt I was either internal or external to the project (representing either Christian, or secular values) it could affect their responses. In reflecting on the potential social factors and power related issues which could affect the interviewee response I decided to introduce myself as someone engaging in research for my studies as Durham University. I chose not to mention any religious affiliation, as I wanted interviewees to respond to me without perceiving me as internal (Christian) or external (non-Christian) to the project. In not stating my religious convictions the interviewees were given an element of ambiguity.

I began by asking a few introductory questions, partly to put interviewees at ease and to gather information about the project. This also allowed me to track whether perceptions about the project differed between internal team members and external recipients of the project. I then pushed interviewees’ on whether the religious nature of the project made a difference, whether they had any concerns about the project and its Christian ethos.

**FINDINGS**

The themed analysis of data from the fieldwork was particularly revealing in four areas, which are discussed below, namely: the function of engaged orthodoxy as motivation and explanation, the tensions in using the in-group/out-group language present in this type of approach, the differences in levels of discomfort in talking about evangelism between internal team members and external recipients of the project, and finally, the differences between internal and external interviewees in evaluating the added value of faith to the project.

**ENGAGED ORTHODOXY AS MOTIVATION AND EXPLANATION**

Evidence from interviews with team members demonstrated the ways in which the rhetoric of engaged orthodoxy shaped the practices of the project. The theological rationale of engagement acted as a recruitment tool, and as motivation to sustain what was a costly volunteering experience.

Jess: “Christians should not be people who sit in stone buildings and pray silent prayers to a God who may or may not exist. Christians are those who are wanting to be in the world serving people because that’s what Jesus did.”

Liz: “We can go back to God’s people and say look there’s a world out there, Jesus came for the world, let’s turn up in it.”

Team members, whilst having a rhetoric for engagement, also raised concerns about the tension felt in balancing their beliefs with engagement with the night time city centre culture.

Jess: “I wonder whether they [the Church] see something inherently wrong in the vision but I do think we manage to toe the line of being in the world but not of the world.”

The rhetoric of being engaged and distinctly Christian appeared to envision and energise their practices and was used to recruit volunteers. However, there were suggestions that perhaps this project was more engaged than their fellow churchgoers could stomach.

**THE USE OF IN-GROUP/OUT-GROUP LANGUAGE**

Team members used in-group/out-group phrases in their discourse, such as ‘the outside world’ and ‘bridging a gap’, emphasising differences between

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36 Davies, Reflexive Ethnography, 96.
39 Davies, Reflexive Ethnography, p.96.
40 Ibid., 108.
Christians and other people. They saw themselves as a distinct group trying to connect with a different group of people and how they attempted to overcome the differences between them. Jess: “When we first went in we were aliens, those funny Christian people, crazy Christians, there was the element of alienation, what bridged that gap was showing people that we’re normal people.” Liz: “It’s about breaking their assumptions, we’ve turned up in their world.”

This was in marked contrast to those interviewed who were external to the project; representatives from the police, the city council, club owners and staff, who did not use in-group/out-group language, instead they talked about the project using the language of partnership and community involvement.

Team members returned back to this in-group/out-group language throughout interviews, defining themselves a culturally separate from the night-time culture of the city, whilst at the same time being highly uncomfortable with exclusivist soteriology. They appeared hypersensitive to the offense of evangelism in setting itself apart, whilst embracing a language which enhanced in-group/out-group dynamics. This posed a confusing mix of values, in which the values of being tolerant and civil clashed with their soteriological motivations to engage in evangelism and witness.

**DISCOMFORT IN TALKING ABOUT EVANGELISM**

All interviewees showed a wariness towards proclamatory evangelism, and gave evidence to demonstrate the importance of the values of civility and tolerance. Certain sensitivities, about evangelism were discussed by all interviewees, team members and those external to the project, with all interviewees keen to stress the pastoral aspects of the Angels’ practice.

Luke: “It’s making the city a safer place, and it’s protecting the more vulnerable people.”

Joanne: “they bring the pastoral, soft, and reassuring safeguarding approach to the situation.”

All interviewees were negative about any type of manipulative evangelism, or church recruitment.

Michael: “There should be no manipulation here.”

Joanne: “I know that they’re predominantly a Christian volunteer force they’re not forcing Christian approaches on people.”

One team member discussed her approach to evangelism as her ‘personal ethic’. Jess: “I will respond if asked, and the great thing about that is that I often am asked, ‘why are you doing this for free’? And I say ‘it’s because I’m a Christian’, and they say ‘what’s that got to do with it’? And I say ‘there’s a God that loves you’ but that’s not the first agenda.”

The value of tolerance and civility appeared to be the dominant value amongst team members shaping their practices and beliefs. This was made noticeably evident when a couple of Street Pastors visited the project. Street Pastors are a similar type of organisation to the Street Angels. In reaction, volunteers made defensive remarks, concerned that the Street Pastors might not be civil or tolerant. They were concerned that if the Street Pastors ‘evangelised’ it may affect the relationship the Angels had with their partners in the city.

Team members showed signs of discomfort in talking about sharing their faith with others. They also engaged in a hypersensitive and apologetic attitude to how the project could be viewed by others: Liz: “I went in to the club fully expecting he’d say no... making every apology in advance for how bad it might go and he just said, ‘yeah that sounds great’.”

However, interviewees representing secular agencies were not opposed to people coming to faith through the project as long as the project complied with tolerant values. Furthermore, some saw it as a symbiotic transaction and vocalised it that way.

James: “Part of the agreement is that we are allowing them to be inside the venue and so they can connect with a younger crowd that may not necessarily be part of the church. And they get to have mutual conversations about their faith.

Joanne: “I think the role of the Street Angels absolutely fits with their Christian values, so it sound like a match made in heaven...we meet each other’s needs.”

**IDENTIFYING THE VALUE OF FAITH TO THE PROJECT**

There were clear differences, between those internal and external to the project, in the way they talked about the value of faith to the project. This was particularly evident when interviewees were asked if the religious nature of the project affected partnership working and whether it was important the project retained its Christian ethos.

Team members seemed tentative and paused for some time before answering, referencing other perspectives or points of view, seemly reticent to offer their perspective. This hesitant response was markedly different to their
Liz: “I think it would definitely depend who you asked.”

Luke: “For me the project is very much about… but that’s not necessarily everyone’s perspective so they won’t have the same views. There’s part of me that says it does [need to be Christian] and part of me that says it doesn’t.”

Some team members also had concerns about the suggestion that Christian projects brought something different, some particular added value by nature of their faith basis.

Michael: “As soon as you start talking about what particular things a Christian project would have it suggests others wouldn’t, and I wouldn’t want to suggest that.”

This was in marked contrast to those external to the project, who did not refer to others perspectives but explained clearly and confidently how the Christian ethos of the project brought added value, ensured accountability, and provided a hook for getting volunteers.

Joanne: “They don’t get seen as vigilantes, because you know who they are, they’re Christians. So you have a protocol and framework, that ticks the boxes in terms of safeguarding. It’s got reassurances built in because it comes from the church.”

James: “Because it’s Christian it’s less authoritarian. Yes it’s good to see the police on the streets, but that’s more from a security point of view, for aggression and things like that. But for those ladies that are going out and maybe have lost their friends, and need help in other ways, it’s a good reassurance that there’s people in the city centre who can help.”

**DISCUSSION**

The study showed that the rhetoric of engaged orthodoxy played a role in shaping the practices of the project. It acted as a recruitment tool and as motivation to sustain what was a costly volunteering experience. Whilst evangelism lay at the heart of volunteers’ motivation, it also posed a confusing mix of values in the social context of civility. This appeared to raise more questions for Christians volunteering within the project than other partners, with Christian interviewees being more tentative in promoting the value of a religious project than those representing secular organisations and businesses.

To consider these tensions further research on a 24-7 Prayer mission project in Ibiza by Sai-Chun Lau is used to compare practices and attitudes to engaged orthodoxy. This project aims to connect with club culture, firstly, by running club nights and secondly, by being incarnational in clubs by wearing similar clothes, joining in, but refraining from alcohol and drugs. They retain their cohesion and orthodoxy by grouping together for extended prayer and worship and suggest that through this they can be incarnate in the club culture and yet retain their subcultural Christian identity.

The Angels take a very different approach. There is little prayer or worship that creates the core values of the group. Their theology of being present in the world is the driving motivation, but in being present they are also identifiable as Christian by their uniform, unlike the ‘incarnational’ presence of 24-7 Prayer team members. The Angels are fully engaged in the city centre through their commitment to work within the city’s values of tolerance and yet retain a distinct identity through their uniformed presence. In some ways this mirrors the distinct identity markers of other city centre agencies, for example, the Police, Paramedics, and Council Workers who each have a uniform. Even the bouncers, though less formal, wear a uniform of all black.

The wearing of uniforms provides identifiable markers showing the Angels are working in partnership with the city centre and that they are accountable and legitimate. The uniforms also act as public markers of Christian belief. Whilst not all volunteers are Christians, it is well known that the Angels are a Christian volunteer force. This takes belief out of the private sphere, so those encountering the Angels feel able to ask questions about faith. For volunteers, the uniform also has an effect on their confidence in talking about their faith. The presence of the uniform has, in effect, already ‘outed’ them as Christians, and so when opportunities arise to share their faith volunteers report feeling confident because the private/public divide about belief has already been crossed. In accommodating to the ethic of civility and tolerance, the Angels have been welcomed into the city, and given an identifiable role as Christian witnesses engaging in pastoral care. This has the effect of enabling a more orthodox evangelistic approach of proclamation and presence than is evident in the 24-7 Prayer mission.

The nature of the tension between engagement and orthodoxy found here, creates both uncertainty and

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opportunity. In developing a more engaged approach the Angels risk a less cohesive sense of orthodoxy, and yet this opens up the possibility for new modes of evangelism to form within the culture of the night-time economy. It is possible to see how this approach, balancing the tensions in accommodating to culture, has developed away from models of incarnational mission seen in the 24-7 Prayer club project, and perhaps offers a development on from incarnational mission to include a stronger emphasis on evangelism. This project appears in some ways to have also moved beyond modes of evangelism which emphasised differences between those inside and outside the faith. Whilst the rhetoric of engaged orthodoxy proved a confusing mix for team members to articulate their practices are an example of witness as identifiable Christian presence, moving faith from the private to the public sphere, making itself known alongside other partners in the city.

Beth Keith is a pioneer curate at Sheffield Cathedral and a member of the Archbishops’ Task Group for Evangelism. She has recently finished a doctorate investigating how clergy view mission and evangelism within their vocation to ordained ministry.
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To contact the editors please email anvil@churchmissionsociety.org

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