‘Embracing the divine chaos’: transcending the sacred-secular divide in the 1990s British rave church movement

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Introduction

From 1986 St Thomas's Church, in the Crookes suburb of Sheffield, hosted religious services that took the form of raves. Named after the time that they started on Sunday nights, The Nine O'clock Service (NOS), was welcomed into the Church of England as a way to connect with young people on their own terms, by drawing on their club and dance culture. NOS's Communion and Teaching services looked, and sounded, like raves using EDM (electronic dance music), or house music. But they also incorporated elements of various Christian liturgical traditions into the services, for example using Latin chants, candles and incense, or Orthodox iconography, alongside strobe lights and night club-style visuals.

The Church of England recognized NOS's potential and its leader, the 'rave vicar' Chris Brain was accepted for ordination, celebrating his first communion in August 1992. The group became increasingly autonomous from the diocesan structures of the local Anglican church, with apparently increasingly little supervision from 'its parent church'.¹ At one point NOS reportedly had more staff and a larger congregation than Sheffield Cathedral.² In its status as an experimental form of Christianity, NOS received a fair degree of largely positive media coverage, which often focused on Brain as the central figure, for example, in Radio 4's religious programming in 1990, on the World Service in November 1993, and in a number of accounts of contemporary evangelicalism.³ Brain's own account of NOS was included in an overview of evangelism in Britain in 1993, in preparation for then Archbishop of

1. Bryan Spinks, *The Worship Mall: Contemporary Responses to Contemporary Culture* (New York: Church Publishing, 2011).

2. Rupert Till, 'The Nine O'clock Service: Mixing Club Culture and Postmodern Christianity', *Culture and Religion* 7, no. 1 (2006): 96.

3. BBC Radio 4, 'Changing Churches', 1990. The segment on NOS is available online: "'The Nine O'clock Service' - Radio 4 - 1990", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYOunsaMZSU> (accessed 12 August 2018); Robert Warren, *In the Crucible: The Testing and Growth of a Local Church* (Crowborough: Highland Books, 1989), 225.

Canterbury's call for a decade of mission.⁴ Brain himself became something of a star and was treated as such by the church. In the subsequently more negative press coverage of the group, there is a much repeated anecdote about Brain wanting the priestly robes worn by De Niro in *The Mission* for his inauguration, and getting them.

The vicar of St. Thomas Crookes, Robert Warren described his experience at NOS services in 1989. He presented Brain as part of a solution for the church: NOS '[was] very well organized, and run much more like a business than a church. In [his] view that [was] a compliment'.⁵ He praised NOS's hard work and justified their high expenditure on equipment – their sound system was no more expensive than a church organ after all. He found preaching at its services the most challenging and rewarding of his various services.⁶ Indeed, the NOS services developed in complexity and moved beyond merely presenting an alternative format of service towards rethinking the entire function of the church. Much of the congregation's broader leadership already lived in community or closely shared environments, and members were frequently engaged in local social justice and environmental concerns. Rather than borrowing space from St Thomas's, NOS moved to their own location at the Pond's Forge Leisure Centre in central Sheffield. The venue had been originally built for the World Student Games in 1991.⁷ The new autonomous space encouraged NOS to hone their own form of worship and explore more maverick theologians beyond the strict confines of the evangelical tradition within which Robert Warren and St.

4. Chris Brain, 'Untitled', in *Treasure in the Field: The Archbishops' Companion for the Decade of Evangelism*, ed. David Gillett and Michael Scott-Joynt (London: Fount, 1993), 164–175.

5. Warren, *In the Crucible*, 225.

6. Warren, *In the Crucible*, 227.

7. John Rogerson, 'The Lord is Here: The Nine O'clock Service' in *Why Liberal Churches Are Growing*, ed. Ian S. Markham and Martyn Percy (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 45–52.

Thomas's stood. Their new Planetary Mass was a 'weekly celebration of life' and a 'joint ritual of celebration and repentance on behalf of our culture'.⁸

In that respect, NOS used rave culture to claim back rave practices from the secular.⁹

Planning these masses involved about a hundred people working together as artists and designers, technicians, prop-makers, singers, dancers and so on, indeed all the crew one would expect at a large-scale rave. In Brain's words the team who built NOS 'were at the heart of house music and multi-media experimentation in the early 1980s, and activists in social, political and environmental concern'.¹⁰ They brought this expertise and outlook with them into the church. The Planetary Mass merged DJ with Priest, mixed and sampled together imagery drawn from the world religions, and used contemporary technology to turn spiritual imagery into an immersive sensual experience through sound and light projections.

'On a good day', Warren had written 'the future of the Nine O'clock Service looks very exciting. On a bad day I wonder what on earth I have got myself into'.¹¹ In August 1995 NOS ceased to exist as a formal entity in the midst of scandal and recrimination. Brain was accused of bullying, drug and sexual abuse and financial mismanagement. Up to 40 women were believed to have been abused by him. He was no longer the face of the church's potential to connect with a new generation in new and exciting ways. Instead he came to represent everything that could go wrong when power was put in the wrong hands with too few checks and balances in place. Unlike most of the DIY cultures we might associate with

⁸ Howard, R. (1996). *Rise and Fall of the Nine O'Clock Service*, A&C Black, 96.

⁹ Spinks, B. D. (2011). *The Worship Mall: Contemporary responses to contemporary culture*, Church Publishing, Inc, chap 2.

¹⁰ Brain, 'Untitled', 166.

¹¹ Warren, *In the Crucible*, 231.

rave, NOS had developed a hierarchical and authoritarian structure, with Brain and his inner circle at the heart of it. As the Service collapsed, the traditional church structures of pastoral oversight faced criticism. Brain himself was hospitalized and up to 150 members of the church were reported to need counselling.

NOS and the figure of Brain in particular quickly became a cautionary tale and foreshadowed the later exposures of sexual abuse within church structures more generally. However, we see NOS as more than a morality tale. In this chapter we present an historical analysis of NOS which is broader than a focus on the power of a charismatic personality and which is derived from a focus on subculture as a way of understanding collective actions in a given locality. We believe that by reinserting NOS within its wider context, it is indeed possible to unpick how Brain came to be in such a position of power, but beyond that to more fully grasp what it meant to meld the sacred and the subcultural. Whilst not underplaying the impact of Brain's abuse, we seek to move beyond historical explanations based on his character alone. Such a focus has tended to see those who invested their lives into the NOS project, and were abused in return, as dupes, persuaded by his individual power. This undermines the value of the intellectual and theological labour invested by those that he betrayed. Nor was NOS unique in its merging of rave with church services. Similar experiments emerged around the UK during the same timescale, some still ongoing: in Scotland – the Late Late Service in Glasgow¹² – the north – Synergy in Leeds; Visions in York¹³ – the midlands – Redemption, initially The

12. 'The Late Late Service: The Glasgow Dance Worship Pioneers', *Cross Rhythms*, 39, 1 June (1997).

Available online:

http://www.crossrhythms.co.uk/articles/music/The_Late_Late_Service_The_Glasgow_dance_worship_pioneers_/40758/p1/ (accessed 14 August 2018). Channel 5 (UK), 'God in the House', 1996. Part 3, 'World of Wonder' on Glasgow's Late Late Service available online: 'Late Late Service', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQQbcb5YPBA> (accessed 12 August 2018).

13. 'Visions: Feet on the Ground, Living on the Edge', <http://www.visions-york.org/> (accessed 14 August 2018).

Hap Club, in Birmingham; Joy in Oxford – the south west – Resonance from Bristol ran a spiritual chill-out tent at the Glastonbury Festival for much of the 1990s – and London – Abundant; Grace;¹⁴ Thursdays; and Holy Joes, the latter holding ‘church in a pub’ events in Brixton on Tuesday nights, and running the Harry Music and Arts Festivals from the mid-1980s as a small scale alternative to the much higher profile Greenbelt Festival.¹⁵ By focussing on the rave communion as a broader force beyond the NOS scandal itself, we will draw out the historical relationships between religious and subcultural practices, and test their wider relevance for an understanding of the mutual connections between the sacred and the profane.¹⁶

It is instructive in that respect to place our understanding of NOS in relation to existing academic work on youth and subcultures, the social and cultural history of the Christian churches and theological practice. Academic and popular responses to NOS at the time and since act as markers in the history of how popular culture and religion, and indeed culture and identity, have been understood. From NOS's early days, through its demise and into the subsequent theological literature, it has been repeatedly used as a moral lesson. NOS sometimes features in theological training literature, largely as a warning against cultism, or chasing youth cultures, or as an example of how not to deal with predatory abuse within the

14. ‘Grace: Fresh Vital Worship since 1993’, <http://www.freshworship.org/> (accessed: 14 August 2018).

15. At the time of the NOS scandal in 1995, Tim Riches of Synergy in Leeds is quoted as estimating that 200 rave-style services existed in the UK, although this figure seems rather high to the authors. Andrew Brown and John McKie, “‘Cult’ Priest in Hospital and Barred as Minister”, *Independent*, 26 August 1995. Available online: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/cult-priest-in-hospital-and-barred-as-minister-1597924.html> (accessed 14 August 2018). Although not updated since 2012, the ‘Alternative Worship’ website gives a decent overview of the range of groups that can be historically connected to the original rave church movement: <https://www.alternativeworship.org/index.html> (accessed 14 August 2014).

16. Theologian Rachel Atkinson connects NOS and the rave church movement to an ongoing thread of experimentation broadly grouped under the term ‘alt.worship’: ‘Alternative Worship: Post-Modern or Post-Mission Church?’, *Anvil* 23, no. 4 (2006): 259–273. While acknowledging these broader currents, we are strictly concerned in this chapter with understanding its expression in the context of early 1990s Britain.

church.¹⁷ A ‘Chris Brain-style cult’ quickly became short hand in guidance literature.¹⁸ In contrast, Rupert Till’s article on NOS from 2006, used it as an access point into the role of popular culture within wider debates on the advance of secularisation. Here NOS acts as short hand for the appropriation of contemporary cultural styles by the church. In that respect, Till usefully demonstrated, perhaps unwittingly, how work on NOS service has tended to re-enact the history of work on subcultures more generally. It has thus been understood either in terms of delinquency and degeneracy affecting even the Church of England (‘the moral panic’), or as illustrating the incorporation of once autonomous (‘authentic’) subcultures into traditional structures of power (‘the sell-out’), whether that be rave selling out to the church, or more commonly the church selling out to the world in pursuit of power and popularity.¹⁹

Subcultural histories

However, there are limits to analyses of NOS through moral panics and the sell-out alone, be they based on naughty vicars, celebrity cults or secularisation. They both tend to downplay the agency of those involved in subcultures and paint them as subject to forces they can’t control. We might recognize the value of the models, whilst also thinking historically about the role of context. For example, critics of the ‘moral panic’ concept, and especially the central role accorded to the mass media in the generation of a panic, have emphasized the agency of the public, who don’t necessarily believe what they read in the press after all. The originators of the model, Stanley Cohen and Jock Young, who had developed it to understand

17. Margaret Kennedy, ‘White Collar Crime: Vulnerable Women, Predatory Clergymen’, *The Journal of Adult Protection* 4, no. 4 (2002): 23–33. Elizabeth Puttick, ‘A New Model of Spiritual Needs and Values’, *Women in New Religions* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 232–247. Janice D. Villiers, ‘Clergy Malpractice Revisited: Liability for Sexual Misconduct in the Counseling Relationship’ *Denver University Law Review* 74, no.s 1-2 (1996): 22–29.

18. Patrick Angier, *Changing Youth Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 1997).

19. For a more detailed analysis of how NOS can be seen as both moral panic and sell-out, see our companion piece: Lucy Robinson and Chris Warne, ‘Moral Panic, Sell-out or Subcultural Solution?: the 1990s British Rave Church Movement Caught Between the Local and the Global’ (forthcoming).

social representations of youth crime in the 1960s,²⁰ have both subsequently revisited their model in this light.²¹ Cohen himself has also noted that the proliferation of moral panics has simultaneously led to an increasingly self-conscious use of the term within the press, presumably creating a similar space for them to be consumed ironically by the reader. Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton also revisited the model in the wake of the expansion of the media, and of the tendency of the press to use the term itself, rethinking the concept in the light of the forms of micro media produced by subcultures themselves, rave especially.²² There is also the possibility that the moral panic reflects actual social concerns. In the case of NOS, we might point to the genuine concerns in the public about sexual abuse in and outside the church, that were still largely unrecognized, and that the moral panic at least created a space for airing.

In the same way, we can look beyond the often top-down structures of the ‘sell-out’ narrative, where popular experience is corralled into safe, institutional frameworks. Some theological scholars have recently explored a more complex understanding of the relationship between popular culture and religious practice. Victor Turner for example argued that leisure, including popular culture, filled the secularisation gap though ‘the function of the ritual frame’; a concept picked up by nearly 20 years later by Graham St. John.²³ In the American context, works like R. Laurence Moore’s *Selling God* (1994), Colleen McDannell’s *Material Christianity* (1996), David Morgan’s *Visual Piety* (1997) and Leigh Eric Schmidt’s

20. Stanley Cohen, *Moral Panics and Folk Devils* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1972); Jock Young, *The Drugtakers: The Social Meaning of Drug Use* (London: Paladin, 1971).

21. Stanley Cohen, ‘Moral Panics and Folk Concepts’, *Paedagogica Historica* 35, no. 3 (1999): 585–91; Jock Young, ‘Moral Panic: Its Origins in Resistance, Ressentiment and the Translation of Fantasy into Reality’, *British Journal of Criminology* 49, no. 1 (2009): 4–16.

22. McRobbie and Thornton, ‘Rethinking “Moral Panic”’, 559–74.

23. Victor Turner, ‘Carnival, Ritual, and Play in Rio de Janeiro’, in *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival*, ed. Alessandro Falassi (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 77; Graham St. John, *Rave Culture and Religion* (Routledge, 2004).

Consumer Rites (1995) are all recognized as a new genre of work that moved away from the grand narratives of historical materialism within Cultural Studies.²⁴ Both Christopher Partridge and Graham St. John, for example argue that the transmission of alternative spiritual ideologies is founded in the practices, technologies and experiences of popular culture.²⁵ It is significant that both writers place rave at the heart of their analyses. We will go a step further by seeing how the rave church movement can be used to understand how young Christians in the British context of the late 1980s and 1990s worked through the issues and concerns of their era from their lived immersion in popular culture.

As historians we therefore want to add the experiences of the subculturalists themselves to the story, mediated and culturally reproduced through institutions as they may be. As academic research in the 2000s started engaging more and more explicitly with concepts of experience and participation, work around subcultures and religious practices (and their overlap) became increasingly produced through the ethnographic lens, with subcultural work developed by the participant observer, merging his or her experience with analysis.²⁶

Although not subcultural historians themselves, the perspectives on NOS developed by William John Lyons and Rupert Till would all fit into this category. For example, Lyons

24. Lynn Schofield Clark, 'Why Study Popular Culture?' in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch (London/New York: IB Tauris, 2007), 20; David Morgan, 'Studying Religion and Popular Culture: Prospects, Presuppositions, Procedures', in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch (London/New York: IB Tauris, 2007), 24.

25. Christopher Partridge, 'The Spiritual and the Revolutionary: Alternative Spirituality, British Free Festivals, and the Emergence of Rave Culture', *Culture and Religion* 7, no. 1 (2006): 41–60; Graham St. John, *Rave Culture and Religion* (London: Routledge, 2004); Graham St. John, *Technomad* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2009).

26. Bryan Rill, 'Identity Discourses on the Dancefloor', *Anthropology of Consciousness* 21, no. 2 (2010): 139–62; Giles Beck and Gordon Lynch, "'We Are All One, We Are All Gods": Negotiating Spirituality in the Conscious Partying Movement', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 24, no. 3 (2009): 339–355; Philip R. Kavanaugh and Tammy L. Anderson, 'Solidarity and Drug Use in the Electronic Dance Music Scene', *Sociological Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2008): 181–208; Gordon Lynch and Emily Badger, 'The Mainstream Post-Rave Club Scene As a Secondary Institution: A British Perspective', *Culture and Religion* 7, no. 1 (2006): 27–40; Julie Gregory, 'Too Young to Drink, Too Old to Dance: The Influences of Age and Gender on (Non) Rave Participation', *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 1, no. 1 (2009), 65–80; Charity Marsh, 'Understand Us Before You End Us: Regulation, Governmentality, and the Confessional Practices of Raving Bodies', *Popular Music* 25, no. 3 (2006): 415–430.

analysed a sermon given by John Rogerson, then Professor of Biblical Studies at Sheffield University, at NOS in August 1992 which the latter published with a short reflective introduction in 2002. Lyons traced the relationship between the text and the ‘cultural setting of the Church of England’ both before and after the news of the abuse within NOS was made public.²⁷ We must think therefore, not just in terms of the press and media representations of NOS, not just in terms of the powerplay at work as an institution adjusts to new challenges, but also of the ideas, the active analysis and the experiences that lay behind the headlines.²⁸ Thus, in this chapter we integrate the different elements of both subcultural practices and religious identities: sound, visual, affective networks, intellectual communities, structural processes and cultural representation. NOS services were, after all, both the noisiest and the quietist that many people had ever attended.²⁹ Working within this domain, we explore the ways in which rave and religion can be seen as part of a shared agenda and context, rather than using one to illustrate the other.³⁰

Subcultural agency and secularisation

By the time that NOS came to St Thomas's the changing role of the inner-city church was at the front of concerns facing Church of England. As part of a longer trend of post war secularisation, there had been a decline in religious practice according to traditional measures such as opinion polls, and church attendance numbers, with a corresponding growth of new religious movements and what has been described as 'discursive Christianity'. Whether rooted

27. William John Lyons, ‘Preaching at the Nine O’clock Service: A Study of Shifting Meaning in a Published Sermon’, in *Delivering the Word: Preaching and Exegesis in the Western Christian Tradition*, ed. William John Lyons and Isabella Sandwell (New York: Routledge, 2014), 232.

28. It should be noted that one of the authors writes as a former participant in a rave church in Birmingham, and that much of the analysis of the subcultural practice of the movement featured below is derived from that experience.

29. Warren, *In the Crucible*, 227.

30. Till, ‘The Nine O’clock Service’, 93–110.

in the early 1950s or in the 1960s, secularisation became an umbrella term not just for changing belief and weekly practices, but also for a decline in deference, shifting national identity and legal liberalisation.³¹ It is clear that the churches of the 1980s were divided over the role of female leadership, and facing new ecumenical challenges from a broadening of faith practices such as the growth of new age spiritualities, the spread of charismatic experiences more usually located within the non-establishment Pentecostal traditions, and the more visible presence of heterodox off-shoots of Christianity such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons.³² However, whilst there were campaigns to maintain the traditions of religious worship, such as Campaigns to Keep Sunday Special and the Prayer Book Society (founded in 1972), some of the counter measures developed by various Christian groups were nonetheless based on an increasing value of social purpose and relevance. These tensions around purpose and relevance gave rise to some important political forces in Thatcher's Britain.

Quakers were central to the peace movement at Greenham Common. CND was led by 'the most famous Catholic Priest in the country', Bruce Kent.³³ The Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, became 'a thorn in the Conservative side' speaking out over the Falklands War, and the Miners' Strike. He called for a compassionate response to unemployment, supported women priests and made moves to conciliate with Rome. Runcie commissioned a report on the impact of social deprivation in cities, and the Church of England's possible

31. Jeremy Black, *Britain Since the Seventies: Politics and Society in the Consumer Age* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 109; Robin Gill, *The 'Empty' Church Revisited* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017); Alan D. Gilbert, 'Secularization and the Future', in *A History of Religion in Britain Practice and Belief from Pre-Roman Times to the Present*, ed. Sheridan Gilley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 520; Simon J. D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularisation and Social Change, c.1920–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000* (London/New York: Routledge, 2009).

32. Black, *Britain since the Seventies*, 111-2.

33. Alwyn Turner, *Rejoice! Rejoice! Britain in the 1980s* (London: Aurum), 309.

responses. *Faith in the City* was released in 1983, and promoted by David Shepherd, the Bishop of Liverpool, himself more associated with the evangelical tradition in the church, in contrast to Runcie's liberalism. Runcie himself published a set of lectures on 'authority in crisis', in which he set out an alternative to the pulls of authoritarianism and permissiveness.³⁴ In 1990 he wrote about the importance of prison reform and the possibility of ecologically responsible scientific knowledge.³⁵ Under Runcie the response to secularisation was to build a more social gospel, delivered in a more contemporary manner.³⁶ The role of evangelism in this rejuvenation was nonetheless problematic. Was there room within Runcie's social gospel for the type of conversion experience that he himself had had as an adolescent? Would caring for the social welfare of the populace also care for their spiritual welfare? Such questions were also inseparable from anxieties around the direction of popular culture under Thatcher, and the apparent drift from the collective social obligations of the post-war consensus towards the individualisms of market capitalism, a development often connected with the wider story of secularisation. In his book *Death of Christian Britain*, Callum Brown points out that evangelicalism and its relative numerical and cultural retrenchment is nonetheless one of the key elements that has been largely omitted from historical work on secularisation.³⁷ He also points out that it has developed in the UK context in an intensely gendered form, mediated as it has been by a succession of prominent male, charismatic leaders and teachers, from William Wilberforce and the Wesleys, through to David Watson and John Stott. We might take Brown further and argue that evangelicalism's resilience was in part down to its ability to function as a coherent subculture, built around its

34. Robert A. K. Runcie, *Authority in Crisis? An Anglican Response* (London: SCM Press, 1988).

35. Robert A. K. Runcie, *Reform, Renewal and Rehabilitation* (London: Prison Reform Trust, 1990); Runcie, R., et al. (1990). "God is green, so is science. (Ecology). *New Perspectives Quarterly* 7(2): 68.

36. Black, *Britain since the Seventies*, 108.

37. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 118-126.

own networks, forms of identification, styles, codes and languages.³⁸ Indeed, it was evangelicalism in its gendered form which was key to NOS's development, with Brain another potential addition to the line of successful, male, evangelical leaders. For all the emphasis on NOS by the wider church as a solution to the problem of outreach, it is notable however that most of NOS's successes came from recruiting from within the church, rather than bringing people who were previously unconnected with it. According to Lyons and Till it was the switched off, Christian young, rather than the sinners in need of saving, who were attracted by NOS. This suggests that they saw in it the potential for solutions to a number of problems that they had experienced within and without the church. If we consider the broader rave church movement in this way, that is as a subcultural solution to a series of specific, contextual issues faced by a generationally and socially aligned cohort, then we can begin to understand its wider significance for the relationship between the sacred and the profane.

The rave church movement as practice transcending the sacred and the profane

Our point then is that rave culture presents itself as a subcultural solution for a number of dilemmas faced by young evangelicals in late 1980s and early 1990s Britain. Rave had a number of advantages: it was young and dynamic, understood as the first genuinely revolutionary subculture since punk; it was precisely of its moment. It simultaneously articulated the reach of Thatcherism and also provided the grounds for its rejection. Rave was part of their world too and offered every opportunity to escape the parallel evangelical subculture. Finally, the respective practices of each subculture were closely aligned, and gave credence to the rave church a space in which to overcome a series of binaries and

38. We further develop this analysis of evangelicalism in the 1980s Britain as a clearly delineated subculture in Robinson and Warne, 'Moral panic, sell-out or subcultural solution?'

contradictions: religious versus secular, mind versus body, sacred versus profane. In this section, we will therefore look at three ways in which this more general alignment of subcultural practices resulted in specific forms of sacred song expression within the broader evangelical rave church movement.

‘In the world but not of it’: redemption and creation

One of the key threads that runs through evangelical subcultures is an ambivalence about the believer’s presence in the world, and especially her or his relationship to contemporary culture. The foundational commitment to the authority of the bible within evangelicalism usually means there is a straightforward biblical trope to represent the way that any dilemma or faith problem is understood. In this case it revolves around condensing a prayer of Jesus for his disciples (John 17:14-15), with Paul’s injunction to the early Christians at Rome (Romans 12:1-2) into the phrase ‘be in the world but not of it’.³⁹ Before their engagement with rave, evangelical Christians therefore did so from within a long tradition of debate and discussion about the extent to which it was helpful to engage with contemporary phenomena, especially in the realm of music, leisure and popular entertainment. For those specifically involved in the rave church movement, this often came in the form of discussions about rock and pop music, whether at church youth groups, University Christian Unions, one-off youth gatherings and festivals, or through engaging with the burgeoning Christian media devoted to the question.⁴⁰

39. A good example of the often folksy advice that can be attached to this trope can be found on one of the numerous American evangelical websites, GotQuestions.org, a ‘Christian, Protestant, evangelical, theologically conservative, and non-denominational (...) para-church ministry, coming alongside the church to help people find answers to their spiritually related questions’. ‘How can believers be in the world, but not of the world?’, <https://www.gotquestions.org/in-but-not-of-world.html> (accessed 10 August 2018).

40. The Greenbelt Festival has already been mentioned, but it was one of several on the Christian circuit, with each representing a broad strand within evangelicalism. These included the ‘Spring Harvest’ gatherings at various Butlins holiday camps over the Easter vacation, the ‘Crossfire Festival’ on the Aintree race course, and the ‘Soul Survivor’ family festival at Minehead. Specific media targeted at young Christians included *Buzz*, *Strait* and *Cross Rhythms* magazines. Books tackling the question of Christianity and rock music: Stephen R.

Alongside a strong defensive position that saw all engagement with contemporary secular pop culture as problematic and likely injurious to spiritual health, two strands moulded those who resisted such isolationism, which we identify as Redemption on the one hand, and Creation on the other. It is important to underline that these are not necessarily formally-held positions – although they were certainly formally articulated by certain Christian writers and theologians⁴¹ – but rather informal or even subconscious ways of structuring the frameworks of faith and belief. In some ways, it is possible to understand the story of NOS as a collective in the process of moving from one perspective to the other – the more they embraced creation theology, the more they emphasized their autonomy as a group from the rest of the evangelical movement, which was more comfortable with a theology of redemption. In that respect, it was perfectly possible for groups or individuals to move across these two frameworks according to need, or to remain ambivalently committed to neither or both.

Adhering more classically to the broad evangelical perspective is the Redemption framework: this starts with the premise that the world is fallen, and that the consequences of that fall run through all human activity and creativity. Thus, all contemporary culture bears its trace to a greater or lesser degree. However, this fallen nature of humanity that provides the context for its redemption. The incarnation and redemptive sacrifice of Christ is therefore understood not just as a means to rescue individual sinners, but as a way of bringing all of creation back in

Lawhead, *Rock Reconsidered: A Christian Looks at Contemporary Music* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981); John Blanchard, with Peter Anderson and Derek Cleave, *Pop Goes the Gospel* (Durham: Evangelical Press, 1983); Pete Ward, *Youth Culture and the Gospel* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1992). The debate is neatly summarized by Trystan Owain Hughes, 'Pop Music and the Church's Mission', *Anvil*, 22, no. 1 (2005): 41–53. 41. In the UK, the Redemption focus was largely associated with *Third Way* magazine and its attempts to work through theologian Os Guinness's appeal for evangelical Christians to find a middle way between outright rejection and uncritical acceptance of contemporary culture. Creation theology was most associated in the 1990s with the writings of ex-Dominican Matthew Fox, especially *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear, 1983).

line with its original purpose. It was then a simple step to develop a position whereby the concept of creation extended beyond the original divine creation in order to encompass all human acts of creativity that stem from that original inspired act. Therefore, all products of human creativity, providing they bear the sign of the divine spark, are potentially redeemable for the believer.

The Creation perspective on the other hand, more loosely connected with Catholic and liberal traditions, may perhaps be seen as the more radical in relation to evangelical orthodoxy. This approach takes issue with the notion of a fallen creation, and argues that traditional Christianity's emphasis on sacrifice, sin and worldly corruption are historically derived from patriarchal structures that have sought to eliminate both the natural, and its embodiment in the feminine, from patterns of spiritual thought and action. Contemporary Christians were consequently seen as both alienated from their own bodies (the origins of the contemporary crisis of sexual identities) and from the natural world (the origins of the contemporary environmental crisis). The Creation perspective therefore presented itself as a break with modern forms of evangelical Christianity and emphasized the need for a thorough reworking of worship practice, pastoral care and church organisation.

It is important to underline that each respective emphasis on Redemption or Creation, produced very specific forms of practice that sought to reshape the relationship between the worldly and the divine. Through their interest in the potentially divine nature of culture, Redemption-ers were free to use any contemporary form and redeem it through incorporation into worship: a club night became a worship night. Songs that celebrated love were

reinterpreted as picturing the relationship between God and the believer.⁴² Sampled vocal phrases – a feature especially of American garage house, happy house, and early hardcore rave – and themselves taken out of their original context, were re-contextualized in a set list, or harmonized with chosen visuals to emphasize their new spiritual meaning. The origins of disco and house in the African-American church traditions of singing, yearning for freedom, call and response, and full body engagement were also embraced as a form of historical recovery, and a means of connecting to historic civil rights movements where religious activism had brought about meaningful social change.

In contrast, Creation-ers emphasized the need to counter male hierarchies of stardom and performance, hence the initial attraction of anti-hierarchical rave. This highlighted the need to recover the physicality of worship, with a focus on styles that appealed to the whole body and all the senses, and its reinsertion into the horizontal, social relationship of the collective. By the mid-1980s, much of evangelical charismatic Christianity's worship styles had become oriented towards the individual ecstatic experience within the crowd, replicating the format of a pop/rock concert where everyone faces the front and venerates the performer. NOS themselves adopted this format in their initial services but were clearly exercised by its limitations, and played with it in sometimes provocative ways. When they presented their Planetary Mass at the Greenbelt festival in 1992, parts of the audience were shocked by the 'bikini-clad dancers' who took part in the production. Brain explained to his detractors that he was invoking a universal eroticism, and reclaiming it from the pornographers. Of course, in retrospect, revelations about Brain's sexual abuse gave a subsequently more sinister tone to this justification, but if we accept that such production decisions were not taken by Brain

42. The Biblical precedent here is the 'Song of Solomon' (or 'Song of Songs'), an Old Testament love poem interpreted by Christian theologians as picturing the relationship between Christ and the church.

alone, then we can also place it in the context of the wider endeavour to challenge ideas of what constitutes worship, and what constitutes a performance. This notion of ‘worship in the round’ had pushed NOS to move outside of the traditional ecclesiastical architectural space of St. Thomas’s, initially in the form of the Sunday night club ‘Fruit’ in a centrally located night club in Sheffield, and subsequently to the Ponds Forge leisure centre. NOS’s designated DJ, Winnie Brain (Chris Brain’s wife and the mother of their child) used the Fruit club-nights to intersperse group favourite floor fillers with periodic short bursts of ambient music to enable individual meditation and reflection within a context of shared euphoria. In the same way, Oxford’s Joy and Birmingham’s Redemption deliberately hid the DJ behind a projection screen or placed her or him at the back of the room with the sound desk, in order to let the visuals take centre stage.

[Eclecticism and sampling](#)

The second way in which rave could find common ground with evangelical Christianity was in its global eclecticism. For all its origins in the Western heartlands of central Europe, the UK, and of course the US, evangelical Christianity was accustomed to adopting a global perspective on its historical development. Whether that be in its formal origins in the 19th century abolitionist movement or its long-standing commitment to the project of world evangelisation through the various missionary movements, evangelical Christians were comfortable with being locally situated, but connected to a global web of knowledge interchange, cultural exchange, geographical mobility and supranational organisation. Any evangelical church would provide access to pamphlets, books and devotional literature from a global network of otherwise cottage-industry scale publishers. It would be typical to find some form of DIY display highlighting the missionary work of members of the congregation. Periodic visits from globetrotting celebrity speakers or worship leaders accompanied the

growth of developing world and charity action in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴³ Organisations such as Tear Fund and World Vision, sat alongside more traditional charitable enterprises of evangelisation and Bible translation (the Wycliffe Bible Translators). The theology of incarnation is also important here: from this perspective, Christianity belonged to all, and could embed itself in any local language or culture, whilst retaining a universal dimension that transcended local difference.

Rave made similar claims to eclectic universality, and its myriad genres and sub-genres, its cross sub-cultural appeal – bringing together ex-punks, ex-indie kids, ex-hip hoppers and ex-hippies – while potentially competitive and fragmentary, could also be celebrated under a multi-cultural umbrella. This was exemplified in the mid-1990s dance music festival Tribal Gathering. The practice of electronic music composition using specific forms of technology encouraged an approach to creating tracks by the process of assembling layers, loops and blocks, structured around a dynamic of crescendo and the breakdown. In turn, digital sampling potentially opened up the whole history of recorded music as a source from which these compositional elements could be drawn.

In the rave church context, this started with the reuse of existing records: ‘spiritual’ tracks such as The Source Feat. Candi Staton ‘You’ve Got the Love’, itself a hybrid of disco, gospel

43. The origins of NOS itself were frequently traced to the visit by the American evangelical charismatic pastor John Wimber, leader of the Vineyard churches, to St. Thomas’s in 1985. The group that became its leaders reportedly experienced various overwhelming manifestations attributed to a new presence of the Holy Spirit. The same year saw a UK speaking tour by American evangelical social justice activist Jim Wallis of the Washington-based Sojourners movement.

and the Ibiza Balearic scene;⁴⁴ Inner City's social-spiritual positive 'Hallelujah '92';⁴⁵ or the more traditionally gospel-styled Voices of 6th Avenue's 'Call Him Up'.⁴⁶ Alternatively, DJs created their own club-oriented sacred songs: Perotin's 'Viderunt Omnes' mixed perfectly with Dub Poets 'Black and White' even to the point of the seemingly preordained breakdown at 3:53 into the mix;⁴⁷ Thomas Tallis's 'Spem in Alium' blended with a track from DJ Pierre's *Love Trax*;⁴⁸ the 'Introitus "Resurrexi"' from the Gregorian Easter Mass sounded like it was deliberately composed to align with Darkman's 'Annihilating Rhythm', and so on.⁴⁹

Existing Christian worship forms were equally transformed by adding an expedient backbeat. Musical practices of folk and everyday culture were especially attractive idioms when they were drawn from other ecumenical groups experimenting with the sense of embodied worship, for example, chants from the Taizé Community in France, or songs from Scotland's Iona Community written by John Bell and Graham Maule.⁵⁰ This apparent historical

44. Truelove Presents... The Source Featuring Candi Staton, 'You Got the Love (Erens Bootleg Mix)' (Truelove Electronic Communications, 1991), <https://www.discogs.com/release/66632>.

45. Inner City, 'Hallelujah '92' (10 records, 1992), <https://www.discogs.com/Inner-City-Hallelujah-92/release/44781>.

46. Voices of 6th Ave., 'Call Him Up' (Ace Beat Records, 1992), <https://www.discogs.com/Voices-Of-6th-Ave-Call-Him-Up/release/95411>.

47. Perotin, 'Viderunt Omnes', *The Hilliard Ensemble Perotin* – (ECM Records, 1989), <https://www.discogs.com/Perotin-The-Hilliard-Ensemble-Perotin/release/1557025>; Dub Poets 'Black and White' (Massive B, 1992), <https://www.discogs.com/Dub-Poets-Black-White/release/39939>. Mix uploaded to <https://soundcloud.com/user-138192158/perotin-in-black-and-white>.

48. Thomas Tallis's 'Spem in Alium', *The Tallis Scholars, Peter Phillips Spem In Alium* – (Gimell, 1985), <https://www.discogs.com/Thomas-Tallis-The-Tallis-Scholars-Peter-Phillips-Spem-In-Alium/release/1248813>; DJ Pierre 'Love Izz...', *Love Trax* (Strictly Rhythm, 1992), <https://www.discogs.com/DJ-Pierre-Love-Trax/release/68947>. Mix uploaded to <https://soundcloud.com/user-138192158/spem-in-acidium>.

49. Chor Der Mönche Der Benediktiner-Erzabtei, Beuron and Pater Maurus Pfaff, 'Introitus "Resurrexi"', *Gregorianischer Choral: Ostermesse (Missa In Dominica Resurrectionis)* (Archiv Produktion, sd), <https://www.discogs.com/Chor-Der-M%C3%B6nche-Der-Benediktiner-Erzabtei-Beuron-Pater-Maurus-Pfaff-Gregorianischer-Choral-Ostermesse/release/1024398>; Darkman, 'Annihilating Rhythm (The Original London Monster Mix)', *Annihilating Rhythm / Seduction* (Strictly Rhythm, 1992), <https://www.discogs.com/Darkman-Annihilating-Rhythm-Seduction/release/70823>. Mix uploaded to: <https://soundcloud.com/user-138192158/acid-gregorian>.

50. Taizé Community, *Songs and Prayers from Taizé* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991); John Bell and Graham Maule, *Wild Goose Songs. Volume 1, Songs of Creation, the Incarnation, and the Life of Jesus* (Glasgow: The Iona Community, 1987).

eclecticism, often characterized by contemporaries as post-modern, held a specific purpose in the context of the rave church. The eclecticism reached back to early modern, medieval and classical forms of religious practice and organisation that pre-dated the hard divide between the religious and the secular established by the modern liberal political settlement and which these groups sought to transcend. It's no coincidence that the re-published texts of various medieval and early modern religious mystics also circulated widely within the movement. These writings were seen to embody forms of spiritual practice that reflected a more integrated vision of the relationship between sacred and profane, and provided a ready source of inspirational texts for use in the visual environment of a rave service.⁵¹

In fact, this eclectic approach extended right through the creation of that visual environment. The process of sampling audio could be easily mapped onto that of sampling video, and the notion of the loop was also widely used to present images replete with symbolism, for example NOS's use of black and white images of a high diver plunging into a pool to reinforce the lyrical content of embracing the divine. Here contemporary filmic practices such as those time-lapse sequences seen in films such as Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), or BBC nature documentaries slipped in alongside images plundered from music video and overlaid with aspects of Christian iconography. Rave itself was used to playing around with religious imagery, especially traditions of Catholic Sacred Heart imagery often celebrated for their kitschness, but this was extended into borrowing from the icon traditions of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, or the visual language of banners and murals developed in the contexts of liberation theology in Latin America. This created an initially much less

51. In the wake of the success of evangelical mystic and theologian Richard J. Foster's writings on everyday spiritual practice – *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978); *Freedom of Simplicity* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981) – for which he drew on a diverse range of mystics from a number of Christian traditions, his UK publisher Hodder & Stoughton re-issued the writers referred to by Foster in a stand-alone series called 'Christian Classics'.

familiar visual palette for evangelical Christians habituated to the more generally austere emphasis of their worship traditions, and perhaps explains why some critics from the more conservative evangelical wing seized on this visual range as a sign that the movement had lost its anchor in biblical orthodoxy.⁵²

Mapping the structures of rave organisation onto the structures of the Christian church: the DJ as prophet

The final way in which rave culture was aligned with evangelical Christianity came through an understanding of how leadership and authority could be exercised. One of the challenges for the Western Christian churches of all denominations in the latter part of the 20th century was how to adapt its essentially hierarchical and ecclesiastical patterns of authority and management onto an era that was demanded less deference and more collective participation in order to achieve organisational goals. Here evangelicals drew on long free church traditions that were sceptical of centralized religious authority and combined them with patterns of organisation found fairly frequently on the free party rave scene, with its emphasis on collective organisation and shared contribution. Rave worship nights were similarly collective enterprises, involving creative contributions from DJs, musicians, visual artists, technicians, sculptors and set builders, as well as promoters, graphic designers and production managers. Here the overlap with the para-student worlds of the recently graduated in college and university towns, such as NOS's connection to the theology departments at Sheffield University and Ridley Hall, Cambridge, became an important sociological dimension of the rave church movement, with individuals frequently able to develop roles within the group that mirrored or tracked their early moves into their post-tertiary education

52. Tony Cummings, 'The Media Scandal Behind Sheffield's Nine O'clock Service', *Cross Rhythms* 29, 1 October (1995). Available online: http://www.crossrhythms.co.uk/articles/music/The_Media_Scandal_Behind_Sheffields_Nine_OClock_Service_/40388/p1/ (accessed 12 August 2018).

professional and work careers. Here the rave church provided an arena for sustaining the often intensive experiences of shared living in the proto-familial relationships characteristic of shared student accommodation.

While this seems an entirely secular model of collective organisation, rave culture also offered the possibility of giving this a spiritual twist, specifically through the idea of the DJ as tribal shaman, who channelled the spiritual collective subconscious through her or his timely choice of tracks to express the group's emotional self-understanding. Put in simple terms, for the evangelical rave church movement, the DJ became a prophet. This perspective gained anecdotal resonance in the story of when Winnie Brain met with the Kansas City Prophets on a visit to the Toronto Airport Vineyard Christian church at the height of the so-called Toronto blessing movement. Reporting on the meeting to the NOS congregation in late 1991, the Brains presented what they saw as the ultimate endorsement for their experiments in rave Christianity. One of the Kansas prophets, Bob Jones, was given to bestowing 'spiritual mantles' onto those whom he identified as having a special role to play in the forthcoming prophesied revival. In Winnie's case, Jones suggested her role had something to do with an unusual gift, which he represented by making a gesture akin to a DJ mixing. The general astonishment and appreciation of the NOS congregation for this story was confirmed when it was underlined that Bob Jones had never met the Brains prior to this encounter, neither had he heard of NOS, nor rave culture.

Conclusion

This anecdote underlines the extent to which NOS itself came to resemble something of a hybrid between traditional forms of church authority, new collective forms of organisation,

and as the group came to wider national prominence within Christian circles, a form of subcultural celebrity. Brain's ordination only further emphasized the connection between NOS, St. Thomas's and the wider historic context of evangelical subcultural traditions. In particular NOS simply replicated the broader tendency to celebrate particularly charismatic, often male leaders, whose teaching and ministry seemed to offer the solutions to a number of problems faced by the church in its time. Evangelical history is marked by a succession of these celebrity leaders, perhaps less frequently by their subsequent fall from grace as in Brain's case. This peculiar leadership dynamic can be used to explain the success of NOS, but also provides a clear structural explanation for the abuse of power, and particularly the abuse of sexual power that lay at the heart of its ultimate collapse.

However, those very same subcultural traditions also created a space for a creative encounter between the sacred and the profane in 1990s Britain, in which relatively small groups of evangelical Christians conducted experiments that sought to connect their everyday cultures with a yearning for social transformation and spiritual transcendence. In their critical and conscious engagement with the contemporary, in their deployment of sampling as a means to root eclecticism in time and place, and in their striving for forms of collective, communicative organisation, they underlined how the meeting between the sacred and the profane could produce more than just the cautionary tale of excess and abuse represented by NOS. It pushes us to re-examine the dynamics of contemporaneous experiments in popular culture completely unconnected with religion.

The relationship between contemporary religion and popular culture in the UK has certainly developed since the 1990s in general, and NOS in particular. Understanding this relationship

invites interdisciplinary approaches. Hitherto the focus has more predominantly been on how ideas about popular culture can illuminate research in theology,⁵³ often by using popular culture as a cipher through which to then interpret events ‘that transcend popular culture itself’.⁵⁴ We hope that through our own focus on the British rave church movement as an intertwined subcultural history, we have shown how a focus on popular culture can do more than just service the understanding of religion, but that the reverse can also be true.

53. Gordon Lynch, ‘Introduction’, in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch (London/New York: IB Tauris, 2007), 1.

54. Schofield Clark, ‘Why Study Popular Culture?’, 6.

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