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Religion in the Post-Enlightenment Era

In popular culture, religion is often constructed as a ‘belief system’, where belief is an idea about the supernatural. Belief is understood in terms of ‘propositional belief’, i.e. asserting the belief in the existence of a transcendent, and as the personal conviction of an individual. As evidenced by the narratives of evangelicals in this case study, belief is also, at times, constructed in opposition to scientific ‘fact’ and, therefore, as ‘non-rational’. This latter construct is not to be taken necessarily as criticism; rather practitioners of alternative spirituality, such as neo-paganism and Witchcraft, have long articulated a conception of knowing that is centred around the experience of the numinous and altered states of consciousness in opposition to modernist logical rationality (Magliocco 2004; Luhrmann 1989). Indeed, lately, Protestant worship in Pentecostal and Charismatic congregations has also emphasised the dimension of emotional experience (Luhrmann 2012).

The model of religion as propositional belief is one that has developed throughout many centuries within Christianity. Nonetheless, it has often been taken as universal in the study of religion and still dominates the popular imagination. It has been critiqued systematically by anthropologists of
religion (Needham 1973; Ruel 2002; Asad 1993), who have benefited from exposure to non-Western and non-Christian religious forms. More recently, the conception of religion as personal conviction and propositional belief has been shown to be reductive even for Christians in the West (Bielo 2012; Lurhmann 2012).

The present study of a group of highly committed Christian evangelicals in Britain is a case in point. Christians at Bethelehem, as I named the church, describe themselves as ‘mainstream conservative evangelicals’; yet they consider statements of faith to be secondary to a relational conception of belief. Belief is not an affirmation, but trust in God, which is expressed in human relationships. Drawing on Georg Simmel’s sociology of religion, the article proposes a theoretical framework to account for an experiential and relational conception of belief. Employing Simmel’s insights to illuminate contemporary empirical realities requires an interpretative process that is necessarily selective. The theoretical concepts here proposed are part of a wider framework that, however, cannot be included within the limits and remit of the present article.

The reduction of religion to personal conviction and propositional belief regarding the transcendent was a Christian model that came to be viewed as the universal character of religion, which reflected a modernity’s cultural and social changes, in which religion came to inhabit a separate sphere from science. Simmel was a modern and, to an extent, a modernist sociologist, and much of his writing on religion is explicitly biased in favour of Christian Protestantism. Yet, his deep appreciation of the social and cultural transformations of modernity made him conscious of the need to elaborate a concept of religion that responded to the new cultural milieu. At a time when science was becoming the privileged form of knowledge, Simmel favoured a mystical religion that drew its legitimacy from the inner ‘yearning’ of the individual (Simmel 1997, 9). He was thus preoccupied mostly with the individual dimension of religion (Vandenbergh 2010; Varga 2007; Lamine 2008); yet his insights on belief, and his concept of religiosity as relational, offer a path towards an understanding
of belief that is experiential and relational. In order to do so, the article focuses on his writings on the social dimension of religion.

Simmel’s reflections on religion and belief, and on the separation between religion and rationality resonate with the concerns raised by twentieth-century’s scholarship in anthropology and sociology of religion. Therefore, the first section of the article presents a concise account of these debates. This is followed by an interpretation of Simmelian thinking on religion, with a particular focus on his insights on belief and the social dimension of religion. Simmel’s notions of belief, religiosity, and relationality are developed in the subsequent sections of the article to illuminate the narratives of informants. Simmel’s characterising of religiosity as a sense of surrender to God is reflected in the personal accounts of conversions. The case study shows that evangelicals, much like Simmel, conceive of human beings as relational and interpret their Christian religiosity as being in relationship with others. Personal conviction and propositional belief are not totally absent, but they are certainly secondary to a relational and experiential belief.

The Problem with Belief

E.B. Tylor’s definition of religion as “belief in Spiritual Beings” (Tylor 1958, 8) is cited regularly more for its flaws than its validity. It encapsulates the mentality of early anthropologists infused with scientific positivism, but also a cultural bias reflecting Protestant ‘propositional belief’, an intellectual statement; rather than practice, emotion, and non-logical forms of knowledge. The conflation of religion with belief and, in particular, propositional belief about the ‘spirit world’, or transcendent, has been criticised as reductive for many years. Ninian Smart (1968) pointed to the many dimensions making up ‘religion’, such as the experiential, narrative, ritual, social, ethical, doctrinal, and material. Rodney Needham (1972) placed a mirror in front of scholars’ use of the term ‘belief’ to highlight its changing historical dimension and Christian bias, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1978) stressed the changing nature of religious tradition and its cultural specificity, which
could not be generalised across cultures. Propositional belief was finally recognised as a product of Christian culture that had been used to talk about other religious traditions thus imposing alien meanings to them.

Malcolm Ruel (2002) went further and argued that the term ‘belief’ had evolved within the Christian tradition itself. In his essay “Christians as Believers”, Ruel details the shifts in the concept of belief within the Christian tradition showing how belief changed from the original Greek *pistis* (trust), to *kerygma* (proclamation). ‘Belief’ was used to refer to ‘becoming a Christian’ and therefore to belonging to a specific community, thus drawing the dividing line between Christian and non-Christian, although it retained the meaning of trust. As the church organisation developed, clear religious boundaries were being drawn. From the Council of Nicea, in 325CE, emerged a set of beliefs that identified the ‘true Christian’. Propositional belief, then, was a marker of identity. In medieval Europe, dissenting voices sought to criticise the organisation of the church as well as promote different theological conceptions (D’Onofrio 2003); yet being a Christian was more and more a matter of affirming a set of beliefs.

Propositional belief acquired a personal dimension with the Reformation. Martin Luther broke new ground by making personal faith the only way to salvation. Protestantism cultivated the intellectual, ethical, and individualistic elements of Christianity. Personal faith fitted the modern milieu, where religion came to be differentiated from other spheres of social life.

The dominance of the materialism of positivist science delegitimised religious knowledge. It was thus reduced to belief, understood in rationalist fashion, as a set of claims regarding non-empirical reality. This historically and culturally specific construction of religion has been abstracted and universalised. Religion, as we know it, and its conflation with a Protestant model of belief, is a product of modernity.
At the height of modernity, Simmel saw the existential threat to religion posed by modern science. The advance of science and instrumental reason pushed religion into a corner. For Simmel, the only way for religion to ‘survive’ was by means of a subjective mysticism. Modern religion had to adapt to the individualism of modernity and become a subjective experience. This does not mean that religion had to retreat into the private sphere; rather religion could no longer be about doctrine, but the subjective experience of the person. Simmel’s writings on religion thus focus on the individual experience and are often suffused with mysticism. His notion of religiosity identifies a person’s sensibility and a state of mind.

Religiosity, for Simmel, is an individual sensitivity. This has led to an interpretation of Simmel’s conception of religion as ‘diffused religion’ (Watier 1996), a focus on religious subjectivities (Strhan 2013), and comparisons with today’s spirituality (Varga 2007). I propose, instead, to examine his reflections on the social dimension of religion to develop a conceptualisation of belief that accounts for the relational dimension of religiosity. His understanding of belief as ‘belief in’ (Simmel 1997) (trust) and the sense of self-surrender of religiosity are the starting point for an interpretation that can illuminate the religious identity of Christian evangelicals today. The ethnographic data show that contemporary evangelicals construct belief in terms of ‘belief in’ and that their religious experience is one of awe and relationality. The article thus contributes a fresh conceptualisation of belief by developing Simmel’s notions and linking them to empirical data.

**Georg Simmel and the Social Dimension of Religion**

Georg Simmel was an acute interpreter of modernity. His writings on religion show a particular appreciation of individual religiosity, which he deemed necessary for religion to survive modernity. Simmel felt that the modern age posed an existential problem for religion. The rise of modern science, in particular, defined the limits of rationality according to what was “provable” within a
framework of positivist science. According to Simmel, science defines as “believable reality only that which is scientifically probable” (Simmel 1997, 4). Simmel noted the separation between science, understood as objective rationality, and religion, understood as belief in the transcendent, which reflected the profound changes of modernity. Against this background, “the object of transcendent faith per se is characterized as illusory” (Simmel 1997, 9). Thus, modernity sweeps away the “object” of faith, intended as a set of claims regarding transcendence. For Simmel, in the modern era, when legitimate knowledge is only scientific knowledge, the conception of religion as ‘belief that’ (propositional belief) becomes less binding. This should not be understood as an overall progressive ‘disenchantment’, but a cultural shift that ushers in a new conception of religion. A new form of religion was needed to express the subjective religious sentiment.

Simmel’s notion of religion needs to be understood within his epistemological framework of Forms and Contents. Simmel followed Kant in distinguishing between a priori Forms and empirical Contents. For Kant, a priori Forms were universal and constant; for Simmel, Forms were always changing and dependent on the content they took. Accordingly, Forms provide a mould for empirical occurrences, such as human drives and needs. Later, when Forms become part of Simmel’s Lebensphilosophie, Forms are understood to be in opposition to Life (Leben). From the never ending flow of Life, Forms crystallise. However they do not fossilise Life; rather, the process of Life is such that Forms are adapted and surpassed by new Forms. In short, Forms are constructs that become ‘obsolete’ or crack under the force of Life. The Form of religion is thus the ‘objectification’ of the religious sentiment (Religiosität).

Simmel’s notion of religiosity (Religiosität) is that of an innate disposition, a sensitivity that is expressed through a Form. For Simmel, the new century called for a new Form. Religion, understood in terms of propositional belief and institutional organisation, no longer gave adequate

1 The use of the capital ‘F’ for Forms, ‘C’ for Contents and ‘L’ for Life (Leben) is to distinguish the epistemological concepts of Forms, Contents and Life from all other meanings of these words.
expression to the subjective religious sentiment, leading individuals to “satisfy their religious needs by means of mysticism” (Simmel 1997, 20). Religion needed to turn inward, not in the sense of receding into the private sphere; rather it needed to assume more mystical tones. Mysticism is the new Form that can express the human yearning for transcendence. Simmel understood mystical religion as the way to give psychological unity to the fragmented modern psyche (Simmel 1904/1997, 41). Religiosity is therefore more than a fundamental human drive. It is a sensitivity that is peculiar to some people and only superficially in others. It colours how they experience life. Most importantly, it is a form of consciousness, a mind-set, and one that is relational. The religious mind-set is relational in the sense that it connects all of reality, which is interpreted according to the structure of the religious world.

“What makes a person religious is the particular way in which he reacts to life in all its aspects, how he perceives a certain kind of unity in all the theoretical and practical details of life … Religiousness thus can be seen in this light: as a form according to which the human soul experiences life and comprehends its existence” (Simmel 1997, 5).

The relationality (Wechselwirkung) of religion has, therefore, an epistemological dimension (Vandenbergh 2010). For Simmel, relationality identified the linking up of reality, which the mind effects in an effort to understand the world around (Papilloud 2000). He applied it to the religious domain to argue that religiosity was a frame of consciousness, a schema through which the person understood herself and the world around. Accordingly, religion, by interrelating all aspects of reality, is a schema that orders life. Simmel expressed the inherent relationality of society in the relationship I and Thou (Simmel 1984). Accordingly, society emerges from interactions, but also, from an epistemological point of view, all reality results from the mind’s relational process of understanding. The I and Thou, for Simmel, is not merely an epistemological principle, but also a primordial unity between self and other. As Simmel wrote: “We experience the other person, the
Thou, both as the most alien and impenetrable creature imaginable, and also as the most intimate and familiar.” (Simmel 1980, 106). Simmel’s conception of the self is thus inherently relational.

Religious relationality, for Simmel, has also a social dimension. Following Lactantius’ etymology of religio from religare\(^2\) (bind together), Simmel suggests religion is relational because it provides unity by connecting the person to others. Accordingly, religion is the crystallisation of social relationships and, in particular, of relationships of trust (Simmel 1997, 118, 125-126, 157-158). For Simmel, the believer projected onto God their experience of social relationships and the interrelationality of reality. He stated that: “it is relations between people that find their substantial and ideal expression in the idea of the divine.” (Simmel 1997, 118). However, we should be careful not to give a too Durkheimian reading of Simmel’s notion of religiosity. Simmel did not intend to reduce religiosity to social relationships or God to social unity (Laermans 2006, 486). Religious relationality is, once again, an attitude of trust of the religious personality, which is evident in the propensity to ‘believe in’.

Simmel distinguishes between ‘belief that’ (propositional belief) and ‘belief in’ (trust). ‘Believing in’ God does not simply equate to holding something to be true; rather “it implies a certain spiritual relationship to Him, an emotional dedication, an orientation of life toward Him” (Simmel 1997, 166). By analogy, our ‘belief in’ others does not mean that we believe in their existence; but that we assume a spiritual attitude in regard to them. Simmel explains that religious belief can be expressed in theoretical form, but that it is not “the content of a mental image”; rather it is “an emotional fusion with Him experienced as a real event” (Simmel 1997, 130, emphasis in the original). In other words, the believer trusts God and experiences an encounter with the divine, from which arises a relationship with God. This conception of belief bridges the dichotomy between transcendence and

\(^2\) In Divinarum Institutionum (IV, xxviii), Lactantius argues that religion derives from religare (connecting) against Cicero’s interpretation of religion as relegere (to treat carefully), as written in De Natura Deorum (II, xxviii). http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/02m/0240-0320,_Lactantius,_Divinarum_Institutionum_Liber_IV,_MLT.pdf
immanence, shedding light onto the experience of believers of an immanent transcendence. This concept of relational belief allows us to go beyond the reductive notion of propositional belief.

There is a further element to Simmel’s understanding of religiosity that can aid a more nuanced appreciation of religious experience today. Simmel identified the sentiment underlying religion as the sentiment of pietas (Simmel 1997, 161), which in ancient Rome was a sense of devotion to parental authority, and one’s own country. Pietas gained autonomy from the social realm (Simmel 1997, 158). In other words, it was no longer confined to the original secular devotion of Roman religion, but became identified with religion. It became detached from that specific context and came to express a feeling of dependency towards a higher principle. Pietas is thus the feeling of being “bound to some general, higher principle” (Simmel 1997, 156) to which one surrenders. The aspect of pietas that interested Simmel and which he considered a characteristic of religion was the “unselfish surrender and fervent desire, of humility and exaltation, of sensory concreteness and spiritual abstraction; and all this occurs not only in alternating moods, but in a persistent unity” (Simmel 1997, 161).

The notions of awe leading to self-surrender, belief as trust, and the relationality of belief are not abstract ideas removed from reality, nor do they pertain solely to Simmel’s age. They are the dominant elements in the narratives of contemporary evangelicals in this case study. My informants’ religiosity is one of self-surrender to a higher authority, which is trusted not on the basis of rational logical arguments, but on the basis of a personal experience of God (Simmel’s ‘belief in’). As it is shown in the evidence below, the trust of ‘belief in’ is experiential and carries a sense of awe, which leads to self-surrender of the person. Finally, my informants construct their religiosity as relational, which prompts them to say that “Christianity is not a religion, but relationships.” Belief, they say, needs to be lived out in relationships. In the next sections, I apply my interpretation of Simmel’s
insights on religion and belief to the narratives of Christians in a contemporary evangelical church in the UK.

**Bethlehem – A Case Study**

The data presented in this article are based on a three-year ethnographic research of an independent evangelical church, which I call Bethlehem, in a town in the UK. Bethlehem was set up around 30 years ago. It is a ‘free church’, an independent evangelical church, whose founders had Baptist affinities. Today, Christians at Bethlehem consider themselves a relatively conservative mainstream evangelical church with no specific denomination. The church attaches great importance to social engagement in the local community in the form of providing groups for local people around their needs, such as parent and toddler groups, youth groups, and a group for elderly people. The identity of the church is rooted in the importance of forming ‘caring’ relationships with others. Bethlehem is not Pentecostal, Charismatic, nor does it sit within the ‘emerging church movement’ (Bielo 2011; Marti and Ganiel 2014), which engages in theological deconstruction and, often, promotes progressive stances. When I began to study Bethlehem, I focussed on individual religiosity; yet the aspect of relationality emerged quickly as a defining characteristic in informants’ narratives.

The data collection strategy privileged the actors’ narratives emerging from interviews and the discussion in a home bible study group, which was selected for its internal cohesion and the religious commitment of its members. The fieldwork included participant observation of church activities, of the weekly home study group, of social events, and unstructured interviews with members of the church, some of which have been followed up with informal interviews to ensure feedback from the informants. The data were fully transcribed and analysed thematically through NVivo software to avoid imposing limited viewpoints and to identify discrepant data. The data, presented in the following sections, come from the transcripts of individual interviews and the field notes. The analysis of the data is divided into two sections. The first section analyses the narratives
of conversion of two informants. The length of these two accounts was to provide a fuller picture of their experience, which I did not want to reduce to a few quotes. The first account illustrates the Simmel-derived notion of ‘belief in’ as trust and experience of God, while the second is an instance of the sense of self-surrender, which Simmel associated with religiosity. The second section explores the role of relationships in evangelical religious identity and practice.

**Becoming Christians**

When thinking of conversion to evangelical Christianity in the West, one would normally expect it to consist of people becoming believers and subscribing to a ‘statement of faith’. Bethlehem, the church in the case study, has such a statement, which is read out aloud in front of the congregation by those who decide to become members of the church. The ‘statement of faith’ is the emblem of propositional belief; yet it was never mentioned by informants as part of their conversion experience at any point during the fieldwork. The only mention was by one of my informants regretting that people had to stand in front of the congregation making a pledge, which seemed embarrassing. There is a variety of views and interpretations at Bethlehem, yet my selected informants are all very committed Christians who are active in the church. They are not ‘one-day-a-week Christians’, nor are they unsure about their religious identity; yet they shy away from espousing any rigid religious statement in favour of a more intimate and difficult to define experience.

The ‘coming to faith’ of Nicholas and Lucy, in the extracts below, illustrates the elements of Simmelian ‘belief in’ and the sense of self-surrender that lead to conversion. In the first extract, Nicholas, a sixty-year-old founder of Bethlehem, shows that belief is ‘belief in’, trust, and that goes against what is considered ‘rational’ in our society. The religious actor needs to take a leap of faith into the unknown and trusts that there might be other realities beyond materiality. This is evident in the case of Nicholas, who began to frequent the youth club of a church with his friends in his
teenage years. The church had a café and they thought they could “have a good laugh at those Christians”. He did not grow up in a Christian family. He thought that Christians were “a bit like flat earth society people.” So, at first, he was surprised by the “rational thinking” of that group of Christians.

“… there was actual rational thinking. People there who understood my questions and surprised me by having answers, so from a number of conversations […] I guess it was a sort of challenge, you know, you say you don’t believe in God, but maybe he is there, why don’t you try him? […] trust him. It’s about trusting. Pray and just see what happens. If he is there may be he’ll do something. And I prayed, I started to trust that may be he is there, and I just felt different. […] and the more I looked into what they were saying and claiming, and what the bible was saying, the more it made sense to me. […] I made that step of faith and say ‘God, if you’re there, I want all this’ […] and something happened. I felt, literally felt quite high […] Today, 40 years on, how do I describe that? I don’t know. At that time, it was a something that happened there, the spirit of God, is one way of looking at it, emotions is another one. Something happened, and probably a mixture of the two, that made me feel […] I just felt different. […] I mentioned to my family that I’d become a Christian. They just laughed and said ‘don’t worry, it’ll pass’.”

Nicholas expected Christianity to be irrational and was challenged by the approach of the evangelists. It was not so much an intellectual and theological debate, but a matter of experiencing God. He was told to “trust,” not to believe specific truths. He did. He made a “step of faith” and “felt different”. In the full interview, Nicholas does not mention being persuaded by ideas or subscribing to a particular theological tradition, but trusting that may be God is there. Simmel explains that religious belief can be expressed in theoretical form, but that it is not “the content of a mental image,” rather it is “an emotional fusion with Him experienced as a *real event*” (Simmel
Belief is experience rather than assent. This perspective enables us to understand why Nicholas prayed although he had no belief. Simmel explained that:

“[T]here is prayer to obtain faith – completely senseless behaviour from the standpoint of common rationality because one evidently can address the prayer only to one in whom one already believes. ... But that one acts in this way proves that one prays to obtain something else, an actual inner reality, a transformation of the way we are that finds in the holding of something to be true only a point of conscious support or an external reflection” (Simmel 1997, 130-131).

Nicholas felt that something had happened, he “felt quite high.” It was a deeply emotional and personal experience that gave a new direction to his life. It was not, however, ‘once and for all’. Nicholas, at the time of the interview, had been going through a period of questioning his faith radically. He had doubted God’s existence and realised how much “the life of faith is a journey.” He struggled with faith, but found that:

“living the Christian life is […] a million times better than anything else […] So, even if I couldn’t intellectually understand it, something in there is hugely attractive. […] There’s something about this I don’t wanna lose and so I step back in faith and I hold on and, suddenly, I discover he (God) is still there and I can experience him.”

As Simmel argued, the holding of something to be true is merely something that sustains the person at the conscious level; rather than the essence of belief. Belief is not an intellectual endeavour. Nicholas claims that he does not understand it intellectually, but he experiences God. Belief, here, is the experience of God as a real event, rather than the coming to accept a theological statement. This is something shared by all informants. Over and over again, informants talked of trusting and experiencing God. Narrating her conversion, Lucy recounts that it went against her rational self and
that it transformed her. Lucy’s story of conversion illustrates the self-surrender of the believer, characteristic of Simmel’s religiosity (*Religiosität*).

Lucy comes from – what she described as – a ‘non-Christian’ family, who “only went to church for weddings and funerals and christenings.” She was not interested in religion. She began attending Bethlehem church for its parent and toddler group. After two years, a few people mentioned to her the ‘Alpha course’, an introductory course on Christianity. She told me that she was not looking for faith, but went because she is “not very good at saying no.” After a few weeks, she noticed a change in her. Although she “fought against it” and wondered whether she was being “brainwashed”, she allowed the change to happen.

“I think within about two to three weeks, I knew that something really major was happening in me, which I didn’t understand at all and I guess, at the beginning, I really fought against it. I thought: ‘no, I didn’t come for this. This isn’t, I’m not, I’m not a Christian, this isn’t how I think’ and I thought: ‘am I being brainwashed? Am I actually being just coerced into believing in this?’ […] In a period of about three weeks, I really moved from not really caring whether God existed to actually thinking: ‘yes, he’s real and he’s there and he’s trying to talk to me’. It’s kind of strange because it was a very quick journey. I was not aware myself that I had changed, but my husband said: ‘you’re so different’. Cos I’ve always been a very volatile […] and shout and swear […] and it just left me. It just went. I stopped swearing. I just calmed down. I felt happier. […] My family noticed, my friends noticed and they were saying: ‘what’s happened to you? You’re really, you’re really content’. Even my daughter, who was six at that time, said: ‘mum, you’re much nicer than you used to be.’ And that was really shocking. […] I can’t even explain it. Something in my … it was like something deep in my heart that changed and I felt that all the anger, all the lack of patience, all the frustration had just been replaced by a sense of calm that everything was ok and I wasn’t a bad mother. […]
As time went on, [...] I borrowed a bible and I remember sitting for about three days and every time I opened it what I read really hit me, it was for me, it was about me. [...] I got to the point when I thought, d’you know, this is a real problem, because I’m not even challenging this, I’m just accepting this like a child, I’m not, I’m not even thinking about this as an adult. The next verse I read was from Luke where he says that ‘we’re expected to believe as children, not to question, but to believe as children.’ To me that confirmed that it came from God, that this wasn’t from within me, this was from outside of me. And that gave me a great peace.”

People at Bethlehem have sometimes remarked that Lucy’s change was very significant. Over ten years on, Lucy is still a Christian and an active member of the church. Notwithstanding difficult times, her transformation was not short-lived. Her account of transformation and ‘believing as a child’ places belief against rationality. The dominance of scientific thinking constructing religion as non-rational is evident in Lucy’s comments and her doubts about Christianity, just as much as in Nicholas’ view of Christians before his conversion. Like Nicholas, she had always thought that Christians were ‘loonies’; yet she made a ‘leap of faith’. In trusting, she let go. Simmel, in describing religiosity as a sense of surrender and dependence on God, captured well Lucy’s experience of relinquishing of control. Yet Nicholas’ and Lucy’s experience, much as that of many at Bethlehem, does not stop at being a subjective and emotional experience. Belief, in the Simmelian sense I propose, is grounded in relationships. Lucy’s experience of people at the church allowed her to trust that religion might be different from what she thought previously. Her conversion, like that of Nicholas, happened through relationships. Relationships are the way informants experience and also interpret God and, consequently, how they see themselves.

The Relational Self of Religiosity
I propose to adapt Simmel’s notion of religiosity as relational to highlight the role of relationships in the believer’s life and the ensuing construction of the self as relational. Personal conviction is still important to evangelicals; yet the ‘substance’ of being a Christian, according to my informants, is having a relationship with God, which is reflected in relationships with others and seeing oneself intimately interconnected to others. This emphasis derives from an interpretation of Jesus as concerned with the well-being of the person and not solely the salvation of the soul. This is illustrated by Godwin’s comments below. Godwin, at the time of the interview, played a leading role in evangelism as manager of the community centre of the church.

“The whole thing is evangelism, we endeavour to get to the message of it at some point. Jesus, when he walked the earth, he went out and he, he healed people, he didn’t always necessarily saved them for want of a better phrase. Sometimes just healed people because that’s what they needed and then he carried on. So, that’s the model: give people what they need, be willing to share what you believe, but literally it is about giving them what they need.”

Relationships provide a context for belief. As the narratives of conversions of Nicholas and Lucy show, being in relationships with others was crucial for them to become Christians. This was also the case for those, like Camden, who had been brought up Catholic. In his interview, Camden told me that it was through his wife that he decided to go to Bethlehem. In joining Bethlehem he came to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Bethlehem’s stress on relationships was also a factor for Celia and her husband Arthur in joining the church and moving into the neighbourhood. Celia recounted that they were “immediately embraced and welcomed.” As they became part of the church, they formed relationships inside the small group of study. Celia told me of a time when she was ill and members of the home group brought food for her and her family for a week to the amazement of their neighbours. Similarly, during the fieldwork I recorded that the home group organised a food rota to help out Elinor after the birth of her first child. After a fire that destroyed
the interior of Lucy’s house, people from the church hosted Lucy and her family and continued to provide food and support for weeks.

“We ate somewhere different every night. People fed us, people took my washing, people bought books for the children. It was just incredible. There was a sort of sense that, you know, you’re family. Coming around you when you most needed them. And then what was really nice was when we moved to the rented house, there was a little flurry of activity and people brought bits and pieces and things to make it home. And then people kind of left us alone to settle down, which I really appreciated.”

Being a Christian is constructed by informants as “a lifestyle of having relationships,” as Walter put it. Talking about prayer, Arthur said that they needed to put aside what they thought they needed and ask instead to “be accepting of one another, forgiving one another, building relationships.” For my informants, it is in relationships that God is manifest. Bethlehem is far from the perfect oasis of caring relationships that it seeks to be, as members at times lament. Relationships are often circumscribed within the church and, often, within smaller groups. Members of the church have voiced self-criticism about their failure at caring for people in the community and, at times, for those who have some association with the church.

The criticism further endorses the centrality of relationships to the identity of the church. The interpretation of being a Christian in terms of relationships, however, is not the simple extension of social life onto the religious sphere, but an ethical imperative, which often causes discomfort. Relationships are also not seen as easy and, therefore, require commitment. Informants often talked about their struggle with forming relationships and being open, as shown by Camden’s remarks below.

“We were invited to home group straight away. [...] I found the home group a bizarre concept and very strange praying in front of people. That was a big challenge for me to
get over and say my first prayer in front of Winifred as well. I thought it was very weird to start with, I must admit. I found the relationships very strange. I found the whole concept of meeting as a group, I found that quite strange, […] suddenly, it was like a switch going … ‘actually this is really, really good. This is the right way of doing it’. If you like, it’s about living together as Christians and about learning from each other and this is a great way of actually showing that to each other and learn from each other.”

The difficulty of relationships is partly understood by informants as a consequence of the individualistic and materialistic structure of life in Western society. Informants construct the identity of the church in opposition to the world outside. Being a Christian assumes connotations of challenging the dominant culture, in the words of my informants, being a Christian is being “countercultural,” which they understand as running contrary to the values of individualism and materialism of mainstream society. Bethlehem seeks to be the refuge from selfish and empty consumerism, a place of relationships in an individualistic competitive, and lonely world. In opposition to a society, seen as dominated by individual autonomy, Christians at Bethlehem understand human beings as “interdependent,” as they put it. This understanding of the self as “interdependent” can be read as contrary to traditional Protestant individualism. However, in ‘good Protestant tradition,’ evangelicals in this case study, construct being a Christian in the form of a ‘protest’ against mainstream individualistic society.

Simmel noted that Protestantism’s identity and continuity rested on being a ‘protest’ against something (Simmel 1904, 681). This protest is evident in the narratives of evangelicals, which are often dependent on a contrast between the “real church” and the “traditional church,” being a “one-day-a-week Christian” and being a “follower,” being “world-friendly church” and being “countercultural”. My informants contrast Bethlehem’s style of Christianity with the world outside and with a church that is not “real,” because too detached from people’s lives or too comforting. It
is on this basis that they affirm a relational self and an interpretation of Christianity and of belief as relational. As shown elsewhere, this change is given legitimacy by grounding interpretation on tradition (Montemaggi 2015). Reference to Christian tradition, in the form of text, narratives, and practices, establishes a link between today’s meaning-making and the past granting legitimacy to religious change. In sum, evangelicals at Bethlehem have reconstructed belief as relational and experiential, moving away from doctrinal statements to focus on a personal relationship with Jesus and people around them. They have also grounded their construction of Christian identity on a relational conception of the self. This is a long way away from the nineteenth and early twentieth century’s Protestant belief as a propositional statement and an individual’s personal faith. Belief, for my informants, is firmly located and expressed in relationships.

In conclusion, the model of religion and belief that has dominated the social scientific literature on the study of religion and that is still the privileged way to conceive of religion and belief in popular debates does not fit the ‘conservative’ evangelicals of the presented case study. As I mentioned, my informants do not belong to an openly progressive church or to groups engaged in theological deconstruction and rethinking, neither do they practise a charismatic Pentecostal Christianity, which tends to privilege the experiential aspect of religion. They are Western ‘mainstream’ evangelical Christians, who interpret and practise Christianity through relationships and understand belief as trust based on experience. Theological concerns are trumped by the ethical imperative of forming caring relationships, grounded in a trusting relationship with God. By applying a Simmelian relational understanding of belief, we can see that belief is not so much personal conviction, but a relationship with God, which, in turn, calls on Christians to form relationships with others.

**Conclusions**

The article has interpreted and adapted Georg Simmel’s insights on the social dimension of religion to explain belief as relational and experiential. The Christian Protestant model of religion as an
individual’s belief in the transcendent has been shown inadequate in providing an account of a group of contemporary Christian evangelicals, who defines itself as ‘conservative’. Whilst in popular debates religion is still identified with a belief in the existence of a supernatural or transcendent entity, this conception does not reflect the experience of religious people. The narratives of Christian evangelicals, in this case study, called for a more nuanced understanding of religion and belief.

Building on Simmel’s reflections on the social dimension of religion, the paper developed a notion of belief as trust, based on the experience of believers, which is grounded in a relational conception of the self. Therefore it is no mere return to trust in God; rather Simmel’s ‘belief in’ identifies a relationship with God based on the experience of God as a real event. ‘Belief in’ is therefore to be understood as relational and experiential. This perspective has the value of going beyond the dichotomy between transcendence and immanence. Believing, as experiencing the transcendent, makes the transcendent immanent. It is present in the person’s belief. This is, however, not the result of a learning process of communicating with God (Lurhmann 2012), but of the experience of relationships in the church community and in the neighbourhhood.

Belief is at once a personal experience based on a person’s sensitivity and is relational, connecting the person to others. For Simmel, the sensitivity of religiosity was more present in some than others. He did not equate it with religious behaviour or adherence to religious doctrine. On the contrary, religiosity is characterised by the emotion of awe. It is a sense of dependence on something higher and self-surrender. This is prominent in the experiences of my informants, especially when recounting their conversion to Christianity. Conversion, however, is not solely an individual’s experience, but is grounded in relationships. The self, for Simmel as well as my informants, is relational: interconnected with others. Relationality, for Simmel, had also an epistemological dimension: it identified how the mind understood the world. The element I stress in this article is
the relationality of human beings as social and in interaction with others. Simmel’s insights, as developed in this article, are therefore valuable in shedding light on the narratives of Christian evangelicals today.

Going against modern rationalism and individualism, and Protestantism’s own nineteenth-century’s intellectual and individualistic faith, evangelicals at Bethlehem articulate their relational belief in opposition to outside society, which is perceived as materialistic, rationalist, and individualistic. They are not opposed to science, however, and share an understanding of rationality reflecting positivist science; yet they are attuned to the emotional and immaterial aspects of religion. They compare religion to music, which is not to be analysed under a microscope, but felt. This relational and experiential belief makes propositional belief secondary. Simmel’s conception of reality and society as relational thus befits the emphasis on a religiosity grounded in relationships, as constructed by the narratives of informants, and which is in accordance with contemporary scholarship in sociology and anthropology of religion (Bielo 2011, 2012; Coleman 2012; Day 2011). An appreciation of ordinary believers’ nuanced experience, which ethnographic research makes possible, helps us understand everyday experience of religion and reveal the cultural biases that still today too often reify religion according to abstract concepts. This study contributes to the study of religion in anthropology and sociology by showing that the model of propositional belief fails to account for the religiosity of ‘mainstream evangelicals’. The study also bridged the distance between abstract social theory and empirical research by operationalising Simmel’s sociological notions for today.

References:


