Title: The Authenticity of Christian evangelicals. Between individuality and obedience.

Based on ethnographic data in a Christian evangelical church in the UK, the article shows how Christians construct their individual and group identity through appeals to authenticity. Authenticity, as it emerges from the local narratives, shares much with philosophical and sociological understandings of it; yet it is articulated within the framework of tradition. By grounding authenticity in Christian tradition, evangelicals construct an identity, which they understand as distinctive rather than morally superior to other moral traditions. Christian authenticity is a moral pursuit that requires obedience, the acceptance of God’s will. This is contrasted with the celebration of individual self-authority that is at the core of Western society. The tension between individuality and obedience to God is the motif that makes Christianity distinctive in the eyes of the informants. It is also the basis for the formation of the Christian self.

Key words: authenticity, Christian evangelicals, individuality, compassion, obedience, Heidegger, Kierkegaard
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Authenticity’s rise to prominence speaks of the search for distinctiveness of the individual in the mass society of the twentieth and twenty-first century, where the person is at once called to be herself whilst also ‘wearing different hats’. In a highly differentiated society, the person develops different personas to interact appropriately in each situation. She adapts to the demands for professionalism at work and intimacy in the home; yet, pulled into different directions, the self is fragmented. The search for authenticity is the aspiration of a unity of the self, that prevents the person from being reduced to her social roles. In philosophy and sociology, the preoccupation with authenticity is understood as a manifestation of the heightened individualism of the modern and late modern era in contrast with pre-modern traditional societies. In a society where ties are looser, the person is called to exercise self-autonomy in fashioning and expressing her own identity in terms of lifestyle and ethics (Giddens *Modernity*). The theoretical literature on authenticity has too often dismissed tradition as alien to modern and late-modern culture; yet the authenticity emerging from the narratives of Christian evangelicals in this study is one grounded in tradition.

My informants employ the notion of authenticity in constructing an ethical self as well as a group identity, which is seen as distinctive because it belongs to a specific tradition. The
informants consider Christian tradition as providing a distinctive moral path, which is often in opposition to social conventions and norms. Authenticity is thus not simply a matter of individual religiosity, but of group consciousness. Informants feel they live in a multi-faith society where Christianity may be nominally a majority religion, but it is not practised by the majority and holds no interest for the wider population. They, therefore, understand their Christian identity as distinctive because it is not shared by the wider population. Their claim to distinction, however, does not extend to consider Christian authenticity to be necessarily superior to other religious and non-religious moralities; rather they understand Christianity as a particular tradition among others and thus having a legitimate place alongside other faiths and cultures. Tradition thus plays an important role in the construction of authenticity of Christian evangelicals.

This article makes a contribution to the literature on authenticity by showing that authenticity is articulated through an active engagement with tradition. Tradition is an indispensable framework of reference, on which religious actors draw to construct their idea of authenticity. Based on ethnographic research in a Christian evangelical church in Britain, the article contributes empirical insights on how evangelicals construct authenticity individually and communally. The approach of the study is constructionist (Vannini and Williams), focusing on the narratives of actors and on how actors construct authenticity. It does not seek to impose a concept of authenticity on actors’ narratives, but to observe how they construct authenticity. Evangelicals’ conception of authenticity bears a strong resemblance with the notion of authenticity in the philosophy of Heidegger and Sartre and, in particular, of Søren Kierkegaard, a deeply Christian philosopher, for whom authenticity was intentionality (“purity of heart”) that willed authentic behaviour. Therefore, the article begins with a very concise reference to philosophical notions of
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authenticity, as these help us understand the rise in prominence of authenticity in today’s Western culture and illuminate the local narratives of Christian evangelicals.

Authenticity, in philosophy and sociology, is grounded in an understanding of modernity as a fundamental break from a supposed pre-modern world of tradition. Accordingly, authenticity is an outcome of the ‘detraditionalisation’ (Giddens *Consequences of Modernity*) of modernity, a break from pre-modern society where the individual was subject to traditional values and social order. This understanding of modernity is also at the basis of notions of authenticity in the social scientific study of religion. In today’s societies where individual autonomy is a principle, it is “individuals themselves who are responsible for the ‘authenticity’ of their own spiritual approach” (Hervieu-Léger 60). Authenticity is as a ‘modern disposition’ (Bielo 18) of dislocated selves seeking a “religious life or practice that … not only must be my choice, but must speak to me; it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this.” (Taylor *Varieties* 94).

The notion of authenticity that emerges from the empirical data in this study resonates with the need for a spiritual path that is meaningful to the person. Authenticity is thus the person’s intentional pursuit of moral development. It is not a static essence to which one aspires, but a constant search and effort, which forms the self. Yet, unlike philosophical accounts, Christian authenticity is grounded in Christian tradition, on which basis authenticity is deemed distinctive. Informants, as the data section shows, identify obedience and compassion as the most distinctive traits of Christianity. Obedience is constructed in antithesis to capitalist individualistic society and also constitutes the basis on which informants affirm their individuality. Compassion, explored in the final section of the analysis, is understood as the authentic ethics and practice of Christianity.

**The modern concern for authenticity**
The search for authenticity is often understood as an inheritance of the inward turn exemplified by Protestantism (Taylor *Ethics* and *Sources*). The Reformation emphasised self-scrutiny, inherited from Cicero’s humanism (Davies) and Augustine, making the self the focal point of faith (Ruel). The question of authenticity, more specifically, reflects how modern individualism took a particularistic turn in the nineteenth-century. Georg Simmel, one of the fathers of sociology, distinguished between eighteenth century ‘quantitative individualism’ and nineteenth century ‘qualitative individualism’ (Simmel 81). ‘Quantitative individualism’ identified the universal ideal of freedom and equality of the individual reflecting the Enlightenment’s values of the eighteenth-century; whilst ‘qualitative individualism’ identified the uniqueness of the individual as evidenced by the Romantic movement of the nineteenth-century. In the nineteenth century, the value of the individual did not lie solely on being human, but on being distinctive. What mattered was that the individual “was this specific, irreplaceable, given individual” (Simmel 78).

The rise to prominence of individual particularity called for a life and ethics that were meaningful to the individual. It was no longer sufficient for the individual to be subject to a universal abstract moral law; a personal engagement and transformation had to take place. This is evident in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard, for whom the individual has to embrace an inward journey of self-discovery and pursue with passion moral self-realisation. For Kierkegaard, as Golomb (“Was Kierkegaard an Authentic Believer?” 2) writes, “authenticity consists in acts of willing passionately and sincerely to become a genuinely authentic individual, despite one’s awareness that becoming authentic requires a perpetual movement without definite results”. Kierkegaard’s authenticity is a Christian ethical pursuit. He thought that “Christian faith had been reduced to the comfortable code of shallow bourgeois ethics” (Golomb “Kierkegaard's ironic
ladder” 67), and that what was required was not the external righteous behaviour of abiding by a set of rules, but an inner transformation. Therefore, for Kierkegaard, authenticity could not be enunciated propositionally, as a rational argument, but felt and embodied. Authenticity revolved around “one’s innermost self and the subjective “inwardness” of passion.” (Golomb Was Kierkegaard an Authentic Believer? 3). Kierkegaard’s proto-existentialism paves the way for authenticity becoming a significant feature of twentieth century philosophy and central to existentialism.

The father of existentialism, Martin Heidegger, gave the most influential philosophical conceptualisation of authenticity. For Heidegger (Being and Time), the self is a relation between what one is at a given moment and what one can be. Authenticity is a constant search to be one’s own to overcome the arbitrary nature of one’s social existence, which he calls ‘thrownness’ (Geworfenheit). One is ‘thrown’ into the world and constrained by one’s social status and ties. Authenticity requires the person to go beyond conforming to one’s role in society, choose one’s potentiality and be resolute (263). Heidegger is conscious of the fact that there is no stable core self to which to be ‘true’, there is a ‘becoming’, which is forged through social relations and often in tension with our social self. In other words, the individual is not separate from the world, but engaged in it, shaped by it, and in conflict with it. Therefore, authenticity is no mere self-expression, but the formation of a responsible self, accountable for their actions. Heidegger invents the term Eigentlichkeit for authenticity to mean ‘real own’. Authenticity is thus going beyond one’s every day social existence (facticity/thrownness) by being conscious of one’s social persona and yet choose oneself and ‘take hold’ of oneself (197).

In Heidegger’s account, self-determination is a core trait of authenticity; yet, such self-determination is based on the consciousness of the individual being social as well as for
themselves, *pour soi*, in the words of Sartre. Sartre’s contribution was to question the very possibility of being authentic, in the sense of being our ‘true self’. We are in ‘bad faith’ (self-deception) when we think we can be our true self because there is no core self (Sartre). Like in Heidegger, Sartrean authenticity lies in recognising and transcending one’s social existence (facticity); yet it is a will to self-creation. Authenticity is the radical freedom of being conscious of social existence and of motivating oneself to be. These concepts of authenticity all capture the tension between being part of society and being shaped by it, and responding to the modern imperative of being a unique individual. Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre were key in developing the language of authenticity in our culture and identifying the ‘dilemma’ of authenticity and some of its traits, such as intentionality (Kierkegaard), ‘facticity’ or ‘thrownness’ as the constraints imposed by social existence on individuality (Heidegger), and self-creation (Sartre).

Philosophical conceptions of authenticity to this day are attempts at reconciling modern individualism with an ethical horizon proposing authenticity as the individual’s pursuit of moral responsibility (Ferrara). Ethical self-determination and responsibility are also present in the sociological research on authenticity. Authenticity is here identified with self-autonomy and motivation (Vannini and Burgess; Weigert) and fulfilling one’s moral commitments (Erickson “Our Society” and “Importance of Authenticity”). Crucially, at the core of sociological approaches is the notion that authenticity is a social construct. The focus is therefore on how actors construct authenticity. Studies of cultural and consumer production, such as the music industry, advertising, tourism, and food products, emphasise the ‘authenticity work’ (Peterson) done by different actors in staking claims, producing an image of a product, and communicating it. This is not limited to producers, marketing, and advertising agents; rather it is a process in which a
range of actors are engaged, including consumers, music fans, and industry experts. The empirical research suggests that authenticity is felt and understood by informants as an ethical pursuit; its traits are often emotional intensity (Holden and Schrock), anti-conformism (Lewin and Williams), and individual self-expression (Widdicombe and Wooffitt).

The authenticity as understood by members of subcultures resonates with that of religious actors in many respects. Members of youth subcultures construct boundaries to define their identity by stressing how they differ from mainstream culture (Williams and Copes). For instance, for punk members ‘rejection’ of mainstream society is essential to be truly accountable to their perceived self rather than external pressures. Punks’ opposition to mainstream culture is an attempt at “undoing societal influence in order to lead meaningful lives.” (Lewin and Williams 71). The search for authenticity reflects the tension between one’s perceived self and outside society, much as it was theorised by Heidegger and Sartre. As Lewin and Williams explain, “striving to understand one’s genuine self and demanding accountability to it brought meaning and understanding into the lives of the punks we studied. The goal of self-actualization ultimately manifested in the development of a self-concept that subjectively existed outside of social influence.” (79). The subculture is the community and way of life that allows the person to express her individuality. Thus, some subculture members see the belonging to the subculture as the realisation of their true self as they have always been. For instance, some ‘straightedge’ subculture members claim to have always been ‘straightedge’, even before they knew about the subculture (Williams “Straightedge Subculture”; Wood).

Studies in subcultures have shown how the claim to authenticity constructs the boundary of a subculture identity. The choice of clothes, language, and how to act with others are used as markers of subcultural identity on which the claim to authenticity is made. This sometimes
includes dismissing others as not authentic for adhering in perfunctory manner to the subculture style (Widdicombe and Wooffitt). One has “to simultaneously follow the rules and yet appear to be above the rules. Authenticity to oneself is perceived as being above conformity to the mainstream culture, but also above conformity to one’s subculture that challenges the mainstream subculture.” (Brekhus 1068). This points to individuals identifying with a group identity, but also forming their own self as distinctive (Williams “Youth-Subcultural”). The construction of authenticity among subculturalists identifies the individual’s formation of the self as unique, the pursuit of a meaningful life consisting of the ability to express oneself in spite of societal pressures, and the belonging to a distinctive social identity.

Christians in this study, as the data show, are similar to subculturalists in constructing their authenticity in opposition to outside society. However, they also identify individual self-expression as a trait of consumer society, which they wish to avoid. They see authenticity in the obedience to God and selfless caring for others rather than in self-expression and self-realisation. Being a Christian might bring about self-realisation, but that is not the motive for seeking authenticity. Crucially, unlike subculturalists, Christians in this study never claim to be authentic, although they aspire to be so. Scholarship in sociology and anthropology of religion understands the search for authenticity among Christians as a condition of ‘detraditionalised’ modernity. Accordingly, authenticity is individualised religiosity (Pessi), responsive to contemporary culture and providing a meaningful experience for the individual (Guest), “a flight from authority, from inherited paradigms of thought, and from various forms of pressure to conform” (Barbour 210), and, in the US, it is constructed as a critique of modernity and of the Christian Right (Bielo). This conception tends to focus on innovation in terms of worship, organisation, and theological reflection. However, it can overlook the role of tradition and neo-traditionalism (Spear;
Montemaggi ‘Relational Christian Self of New Monastics’) in the formation of the Christian self. Theoretical notions of authenticity have discounted tradition, often in contrast with empirical studies (Marti and Ganiel) who show that religious communities, including evangelicals experimenting with innovative ways of doing church, do so within a tradition of reference, even when that might be a tradition other than their own. The concept of authenticity in this study, by contrast, considers tradition the fundamental framework of reference for the actors’ construction of authenticity.

Theorising authenticity

This article draws on the wider sociological scholarship, especially on subcultures, to contribute a theorisation of authenticity as a process of the formation of the self, at the individual and group level. As mentioned previously, this theorisation stresses authenticity as a social construct. Thus, the notion of authenticity and its traits, as described here, are the construct of informants. Authenticity is an *emic* category, not an *etic* one. The theoretical contribution lies in connecting this construct to the actors’ formation of their self and group identity and in showing the role of tradition in this process. Accordingly, identity is here understood as ‘narrated’ (Hall; Somers). It does not presume a stable core; rather it emerges from the social relationships of actors. The identity of Christians in this study is constructed through practices and narratives, which constitute tradition. I understand tradition as a repertoire of meaning with which the person engages to craft her own religious identity.

Tradition is a body of knowledge, practices, and narratives, which connects the individual to a community and the present to the past. Tradition includes symbols, rituals, beliefs, moral principles, and theologies, as interpreted by the actors. Being socially embedded, tradition is not
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static, but the result of interpretation to make meaning in the present. In Handler’s and Linnekin’s words, “tradition is not a bounded entity made up of bounded constituent parts, but a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present though making reference to the past.” (Handler and Linnekin 287). For the purposes of this article, tradition is limited to the actors’ interpretation of Christian history, beliefs, symbols, and practices, and thus does not include historical or scholarly understandings of it. It is recognised that authoritative theologies and texts as well as leaders have influence on lay actors (Montemaggi ‘Sacralisation’); however, the focus is exclusively on the informants’ interpretation and practice of Christianity. Therefore, there is no assumption that the informants’ understanding of tradition is necessarily historically accurate or theologically informed. They might be incomplete, inaccurate, and selective, but informants cannot be ‘wrong’. The focus is on their interpretation and practice of Christianity and how this shapes their identity. The self-understanding of the individual as a Christian is dependent on the person interpreting tradition for their everyday life. Equally, the person’s everyday life guides her interpretation of tradition. In practising and interpreting tradition, tradition is constructed by informants to be meaningful to their lives today.

**Bethlehem Church**

The data presented in this article are based on a three-year ethnographic research of an independent evangelical church in a British seaside town, which I call Bethlehem. Bethlehem was set up around 30 years ago, with a strong focus on being a church active in the community. Christians at Bethlehem consider themselves a relatively conservative mainstream evangelical church with no specific denomination. Indeed, Bethlehem members often describe the church, at times with a tinge of disappointment, as a ‘proper church’ with no ‘raising of hands’ or people
being ‘knocked off’ by the Holy Spirit’. They are not charismatics nor are they ‘emerging Christians’ ‘deconstructing’ Christianity and elaborating a ‘contextual theology’ for the post-Christian era (Bielo; Marti and Ganiel). When I began to study Bethlehem, I focused on individual religiosity; yet I did not foresee authenticity to be a prominent theme, nor did I expect informants to construct authenticity as a distinctive moral path. In particular, obedience as distinctive trait of Christian authenticity emerged much later in the analysis.

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 three sections. The first section analyses how informants construct authenticity in opposition to outside society. Obedience is here a significant trait of communal authenticity, through which the group constructs Christian identity. The second section explores how obedience and the relationship with Christian tradition forms and validates the self. The third section examines how informants identify compassion as the overarching ethics of authentic Christianity. Informants understand the practice of Christianity as an exercise in compassion.
The mind-set of authenticity: obedience

In the extract below, Christian evangelicals at Bethlehem construct Christianity in opposition to the culture of consumerism and individual financial success. The critical stance towards individualism and the importance of money in our society makes Christianity distinctive or, as often put by informants, ‘countercultural’. The term has only a tenuous link to the 1960s counterculture. It is not part of a critique of power, authority, and of hegemonic cultural frameworks. It is employed to emphasise the distinctiveness of Christianity vis-à-vis mainstream materialistic culture. Obedience to God emerges as a fundamental Christian trait that stands in stark contrast, not only with the money-driven society, but also with the value of individual self-authority that is at the core of Western society. The extract is based on the field notes taken during a home group discussion and it is therefore not verbatim. The topic of the discussion was “stewardship”, understood as the ways in which members could commit to the activities of the church.

Arthur: We are stewards; we are not owners of anything. The culture we live in is one that says to us ‘that is mine’.

Nicholas: It’s countercultural

Arthur: The Bible says that God gives it all. I want you to manage your money wisely to serve others and for kingdom’s purposes. God says ‘I’m keeping tabs, I’m watching what you do’. The effect of culture on us is huge. How we guard money is a reflection of the way we are. God is looking to challenge our prospective.
Nicholas: God wants to lead us, learn the right way.

Arthur: how much of God’s money am I keeping for myself? It’s upside down. …We are either countercultural or not at all. You’re either in it or you’re out of it. If we do things begrudgingly … it’s not the attitude God wants. It challenges to our core.

The mind-set Christians should aim to have is one of humility based on the belief that one’s possessions, abilities and fortune are granted by God and, therefore, need to be used to serve God. This is contrasted with capitalist culture, where people feel that what they have is the fruit of their labour, that they own it, and have control over it. The contrast with Western capitalist values is underscored by the reference to the theological concept of ‘Kingdom’, as the realisation of human nature and society according to God’s design. The Kingdom is a term that is familiar to the audience and, therefore, is left unexplained. The reference to the Kingdom shows that ethical living is understood within the framework of Christian tradition and, in particular, of evangelical tradition. Most participants would relate to the term and use it regularly, although the interpretation of its meaning might vary depending on the context in which it is used. In this example, the Kingdom is in opposition to capitalist society, where one’s worth depends on one’s property and capital, which is thought to be the result of one’s work and therefore can be used according to one’s wishes. It is also in opposition to consumer society that promotes self-gratification and consumption, rather than an ethical lifestyle. This is contrasted with the Christian framework according to which one’s wealth needs to be employed according to God’s will.
Christians are ‘countercultural’ for they recognise God’s sovereignty over them. From this follows the need to be obedient and be guided by God, rather than by one’s self-interest or, even, one’s conscience. As Will, during a home study group, once said: “you need to make yourself open to the answer you don’t want.” Obedience is constructed as a distinctive trait of Christian tradition, which is contrasted with Western culture of self-authority and self-expression. Obedience is not supine adherence to set rules, which are not present at Bethlehem; rather it is instrumental to the formation of the virtuous self; for it is based on engagement with tradition and self-reflection. Obedience emerges as an intentional state of mind (similar to Kierkegaard’s purity of heart) of following God, who is accessible only through tradition. It is useful, at this point, to draw a parallel with the ‘obedient will’ of medieval monastic discipline (Asad; Foucault “Discipline” and “Technologies”). The disciplinary practices of medieval monks were part of the formation of moral dispositions, with the disposition of obedience being the most important one. The object was “the development of the Christian virtue of willing obedience, a process that … re-organised the basis on which choices were to be made.” (Asad 167). Similarly, Christians at Bethlehem pursue a moral path by willing to be obedient.

The emerging construction of authenticity involves intentionality; yet it is not exhausted by the individual’s will. Unlike Heidegger’s and Sartre’s accounts of authenticity, Christian authenticity requires the reining in of self-determination by recognising that one’s conscience is not the ultimate authority. The person needs to be accountable to God. This aspect, which contrasts with the ubiquity of individual autonomy in Western culture is felt by informants as a distinctive aspect of Christianity. Obedience, however, is not an end in itself; rather it is instrumental in sustaining Christians in their pursuit of an ethical life. It enables one to break away from a self-centred mind-set and to perceive one’s everyday life from a Christian ethical
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perspective. As remarked by Nicholas, one needs to follow “the right way” and make use of what one is granted in this life according to the ethical ideals of the “Kingdom of God,” rather than what is valued by culture. If ‘outside culture’ is dominated by self-interest and one’s conscience is not sufficient to guide the person’s moral development, how do Christians know the will of God?

Christians at Bethlehem seek answers by reflecting on their daily lives and relating them to tradition, and by seeking understanding through practice. However, without clear-cut rules and moral prohibitions, the attempt to understand God’s priorities fills my informants with an immense sense of inadequacy and doubt. As Selina once put it: “When we ask for revelation from God, we need to be prepared to deal with what comes from it.” In the battle against pursuing their own self-interest, emotional needs, and basing their decisions solely on intellectual reflection, Christians seek guidance from an engagement with tradition by reading the Bible, discussing texts and practices in groups, and reflecting on their involvement in church activities. Thus, Christian authenticity is constructed as a moral pursuit, which is sustained by a dialogue with tradition. This formation of a virtuous self, according to Christian tradition, is dependent on a change in perspective. Once again, it is obedience that sustains the formation and development of the self, as evidenced in the following section.

**Obedience as the intensification of individuality**

Obedience can also take the form of relinquishing control, which is experienced as freedom. By being obedient, the person inscribes herself within an understanding of existence that goes beyond materiality. As Arthur states in the extract below: there is something “eternal”, bigger than he is and bigger than his daily concerns. This reflection widens Arthur’s horizon and inserts him and his life within the religious framework of ‘God’s design’. Arthur’s surrender of the self has
the effect of intensifying his individuality. This sense of freedom is not so unlike Sartre’s radical freedom achieved by transcending facticity. Here too, informants relinquish their social persona and transcend it to be subject to God rather than society.

I also think God takes a lot of delight in seeing the potential in us, in everyone of us, I believe, occasionally being released. That, to me, is incredibly authentic and incredibly privileged position. I think all that I’ve got is God given. […] But there’s nothing more fulfilling in my view than seeing people … you love and care for or grow in a relationship with, you see them flowering in their potential … God sees us all like that, like little children, you know, when we start to release, sorry, to fulfil the potential that he’s put within us […] he enjoys seeing us becoming more and more the type of person that he intends us to be. […] It’s not like some self-help philosophy or whatever. To me, it’s more genuine than that, it’s more linked to something which is supernatural, eternal, and, yet, it’s real now, in the here and now.

I’ll never forget the sermon by this old minister. He said unless you wanna enter the kingdom of heaven you need to be like the seed and the seed needs to die to re-grow. And there’s a wonderful picture there of death and then out of that death comes new life. I thought this, this is just me. I don’t think I’m bad, but if I want to really know God, to have this relationship with him, rather than just knowledge, I need to die to myself and I’ll be reborn. And I think God’s spirit then touched me for the first time. And it’s been a process ever since. Some days I really struggle, sometimes it’s not so much of a struggle. I think I grow more and more aware all the time.
The self-surrender is expressed by Arthur as a metaphorical death and rebirth. The attitude of obedience leads to a relinquishing of self-autonomy and self-control. No longer burdened by the sovereignty of the social self, but rather submitting to God, the person is ‘free’ to realise her potentiality. This might be likened to mystical experiences, such as those of Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart, where the self is ‘annulled’ in God (Flood 196-200). However, here there is no mystical sublimation of the self. The self does not cease to exist in God, nor is there an abdication of one’s will; rather the individual gains ‘self-control’ by relinquishing the sense of control over their life. This form of authenticity resembles the ownership of oneself in Heidegger and Sartre’s account of freedom, which comes from transcending facticity. Unlike in Heidegger and Sartre, however, my informants’ authenticity is anchored in the framework of Christian tradition. Accordingly, the individuality of Christian authenticity is dependent on the person acting in accordance with God’s will. In the eyes of my informants, this recognition of God’s sovereignty and its eternal dimension make Christian authenticity distinctive. Christian authenticity, unlike ‘self-help philosophies’, as Arthur remarked, is distinctive because it does not exalt self-autonomy, but rests on the formation of an obedient will.

Authenticity entails a constant striving for ethical living. Arthur characterises the search for authenticity as “present continuous” emphasising its ongoing effort. Selina conveyed this humorously saying “I’m a work in progress!” It is a continuous effort because people are seen as morally flawed, because any moral development is gradual and never complete, and because it also requires an active engagement with tradition to reflect on what constitutes God’s will in one’s daily life. As mentioned previously, Bible study and preaching at Bethlehem do not rest on clear cut moral and doctrinal guidelines. However, the interpretation of Christian tradition at Bethlehem
converges around compassion. Compassion is a ‘people-oriented’ ethic that emphasises accepting the person and refraining from judgement (Montemaggi ‘Relational Christian Self of New Monastics’). At the core of Bethlehem’s communal identity is a focus on acceptance of people and caring for them, as explored in the next section.

**Compassion as an authentic trait of Christianity**

People in the local community see Bethlehem as a welcoming and friendly church. Church members strive to care for one another and for the people with whom they come into contact. This is grounded on a feeling of compassion. Compassion here should not be confused with pity; it is rather a feeling of empathy and recognition of the dignity and humanity of the other person. Compassion leads to accepting the other regardless of background or lifestyle without judgement. Informants construct Christianity as a value system grounded in compassion. They do not think that it is exclusive to Christianity or practised systematically by Christians, but that compassion is a fundamental trait to which they should aspire. Again, authenticity is constructed in opposition to an individualistic and selfish outside culture. In Lucy’s reflection, compassion emerges as a distinctive Christian trait, but also one which allows her to be her ‘true self’. Christianity provides Lucy with the legitimacy of being compassionate rather than self-serving.

I think that my personality is a huge thing because, like I said, even as a child I liked to do things for other people. I’ve always had: ‘she’s very caring, she wants to help people’. And I did and maybe that was part of the change in me when I became a Christian that it was all kind of validated. It actually, you can live your life … with that personality, with that desire to help others without being weird. You know, it kind of
gave it an expression. … maybe because that was me and my personality and then it fitted, it all came together, it felt right. … I’ve always wanted to kind of be able to help others. … the way life and the world is constructed is not easy to really express that without people thinking: ‘mhm, strange’ or that … you’re kind of doing for ulterior motives. And I think for me it was kind of ‘yeah, this is fine, this is what the Christian life is all about’…. you’re not just out for yourself, but you’re almost go to the other side and give yourself … in small ways for someone else, without expecting anything back.

Lucy comes from 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, following the ‘Alpha course’, an introductory course on Christianity, she underwent a rather dramatic conversion, which is not a typical experience at Bethlehem. People at Bethlehem have sometimes remarked that Lucy’s change was very significant. It was not, however, a short-lived conversion experience; rather she has now been a Christian for over ten years. In the above extract, Lucy identifies authentic Christianity with love and compassion. As someone who values caring for others, Lucy sees her own personality validated by the Christian framework. She constructs Christian authenticity around compassion by stressing its opposition to a competitive environment outside, where caring acts can be mistaken for the pursuit of self-interest.

Authentic Christian life frees the person to go beyond the logic of competition and wealth accumulation. By being a Christian, Lucy can be ‘true to herself’. Christian authenticity gives legitimacy to Lucy, who no longer needs to comply with the values of a competitive capitalist
society, but is free to express her compassionate traits. Christian authenticity here captures an alternative value system that frees the person from the competitive logic of the capitalist economy. Celia, another member of Bethlehem church, recounted walking down the street and seeing one of the mothers, who would regularly attend the church group of mothers and toddlers. She remembered a verse where Jesus feels compassion for people and she said she felt compassion for that mother. She said that God enabled her to feel care and compassion for her. Through compassion Celia feels closer to people in the community and seeks to reach out to them, not to convert them, but to express her compassion.

Being an authentic Christian, for my informants, means feeling compassion for others and ‘serving’ them. Such feeling of compassion is willed. Much like in Kierkegaard, Christians will themselves to be authentic, in accordance with their understanding of Christianity. Compassion is practised by – what informants call – serving. As the quotes below suggest, serving is willing compassion. Moral actions are serving when they are carried out with spiritual intention. Serving is not out of compulsion or fear of divine judgement; rather it is born out of the person’s understanding of her actions as the reflection of her relationship with God. The intentionality of serving refers to the required ‘mind-set’, as expressed by Lucy. In similar fashion to Arthur’s comments highlighting a new and ‘true self’ arising from the awareness of his relationship with God and obedience to God, the obedient self comes to be part of God’s design through serving.

What is serving? I think it’s preferring someone else’s needs to your own and not necessarily thinking of yourself as better than people, […] always thinking about others as better than yourself. […] I don’t think Christians do it by any sense, but I
think that’s the end deal [...] what you can do to help them (others) in whatever situation. And I see it as doing it for God when I do it for someone else. (Dorothea)

What’s the difference between serving and caring? I think [...] I’m the centre manager here and under a normal business model [...] I would have people under me who would do the rolling their sleeves up [...], but that’s not the model that we hold up to here. [...] If I walk into the kitchen and the kitchen staff are busy, I roll my sleeves up and worked the dishwasher. [...] I think it’s about putting yourself in somebody else’s shoes. [...] Serving is about making everybody else’s burden lighter, making their work easier. [...] that’s what Christianity is all about. (Godwin)

The whole serving thing to me is [...] a kind of an attitude really: what you do, you do to please God. And sometimes the things you do to please God are not necessarily the things you would have wanted to do or chosen to do, but you know that it’s the right thing and [...] there’s a kind of a real joy in that. [...] I don’t want people to say ‘oh Lucy is such a good person’. I want to say ‘God’s amazing, look what he’s enabled her to do, look how he uses her’. (Lucy)

Christians practise authenticity serving others. Serving is doing something for others, whilst avoiding doing something for one’s own gratification, including self-fulfilment. Therefore, it might include something one does not want to do. It requires obedience and the intention to act in accordance with God’s will. Serving contributes to building the Kingdom of God. It is action that is not merely ethical, but that has spiritual significance. The term Kingdom of God
emphasises God’s sovereignty over and above human constructions. Through this path, the Christian ‘true self’ is formed. The effort becomes effortless because, as Lucy says, it is done to serve God. God enables the person to be selfless. The pursuit of authenticity leads to a change in terms of one’s priorities, as Dorothea remarked in her interview. Following the Christian path means one’s career, one’s health and wellbeing, one’s self-fulfilment are not the priorities, being compassionate is. This does not stop Christians at Bethlehem wanting a career, health and self-fulfilment. My informants often spoke of their attempt at seeing lack of success and difficulties in life as part of God’s design. However, the tension between the values of the Kingdom and worldly pressures fills them with a sense of inadequacy.

The Kingdom represents a system of values that is set against – what is seen as – a dominant selfish culture. In the eyes of my informants, being authentic Christians is distinctive, because authenticity requires Christians to challenge the dominant culture by being obedient, rather than independent; by caring for others, rather than by making money; and by living their everyday lives within the framework of tradition, rather than by autonomous spiritual lifestyles. It is a path that is not always a source of joy, and that might entail sacrifice. The contrast with the outside is a source of identity, but also of the inevitable tension between being and acting in accordance with God’s will and one’s human needs.

Conclusions: between individuality and obedience

The philosophical and sociological literature reviewed in the first part of the article shows that the preoccupation with authenticity comes from the radical cultural and socio-economic shifts of modernity. In particular, modern heightened individualism in a differentiated society calls for a lifestyle and ethics that are meaningful to the individual. The literature on authenticity emphasises
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the break of modernity from the past often equating tradition with a pre-modern cohesive social order now long gone. This approach leads scholars to neglect the role of tradition, as interpreted and constituted by local actors. The article showed that the construct of authenticity among Christian evangelicals in the study is grounded in an engagement with tradition. The constructionist approach of the study takes authenticity and tradition as constructed. Therefore, the notion of authenticity presented is the result of the meaning-making of informants, their interpretation of authenticity, and their engagement with their tradition, as they understand it.

The article showed that the authenticity emerging from the narratives of informants shares important traits with the authenticity in existentialist philosophy and in the sociological studies of subcultures. Like for Heidegger and Sartre, Christians construct authenticity as a ‘true self’ formed by being in opposition to social norms and pressures. Like subculturalists, they reject consumer materialist culture. However, informants consider Christian authenticity as distinctive for being the expression of a specific tradition. Christian authenticity, in contrast with philosophical accounts of it that emphasise self-authority and self-expression, is anchored in tradition, in the interpretation and practice of – what are considered to be – Christian traits. It is tradition what gives Christian authenticity its distinctiveness and shapes its communal identity. Informants consider obedience and compassion to be key traits of Christian tradition and, therefore, central to their authenticity.

Christian authenticity is a moral pursuit that requires obedience, the acceptance of God’s will. Obedience runs counter to Western society’s celebration of self-authority, and is thus considered distinctive by informants. At the individual level, obedience is instrumental to the formation of the authentic self. The person reflects on her experience, on her Christian practices to discern the ‘right way’ of being. This process enables the person to go beyond her personal desires
and act in accordance with God’s will. Christian authenticity is not, however, supine adherence to set rules and morals or following leaders with no reservations. It is the recognition of the ‘sovereignty of God’, seen as something ‘bigger’ than the person and ‘bigger’ than society with its materialistic and competitive logic. It engenders the ‘authentic mind-set’ that is necessary for the action to be an expression of the authentic self, rather than a general sense of duty.

The construction of authenticity from the narratives of informants is that of a state of mind of acting intentionally as a Christian. Authenticity is not merely the pursuit of moral actions; rather actions need to be carried out with intentionality. The authentic self is formed in the process of challenging one’s mind-set, one’s desires and needs. This is not, however, predicated on the negation of the self that was typical of medieval asceticism. On the contrary such self-transcendence reasserts the self, which gains validation by being inscribed in the framework of tradition. Authenticity therefore requires self-direction; yet self-direction comes from obedience. In other words, by being obedient the person transcends herself and gains a mind-set whereby she is true to herself, which is ‘true’ because it is in accordance with God’s will. The authentic Christian’s individuality is expressed by doing intentionally what is good in the eyes of God. Authenticity therefore requires a continuous self-scrutiny and effort at interpreting God’s will and at directing one’s actions accordingly. The individual wills obedience. Being a Christian requires the person to commit and submit to God in order to release her human potential. Self-realisation is, however, but a by-product of the process of forging a Christian identity and it is ‘true’ self-realisation only when ‘in accordance’ with God’s design.

The tension between individuality and obedience to God is the motif that makes Christianity distinctive in the eyes of the informants. The practice of ‘serving’ embodies this tension. Serving, as understood by informants, is at the same time in opposition to the materialism and self-
centredness of outside society, and an exercise in obedience. It requires obedience because serving is not limited to the acts of kindness a person feels drawn to do; rather it is often what the person does not want to do, but understands it as the will of God. However, serving is authentic only when it is intentional. The individual needs to embrace it. Serving is *willing* selflessness. It challenges Christians to go beyond their own needs and desires, and to put others first, not for one’s self-realisation, but to serve others and God. It embodies obedience to God and compassion for other people. The authentic Christian self is called to feel compassion for others by accepting them for who they are and refraining from moral judgement.

In conclusion, Christian evangelicals at Bethlehem construct authenticity as a moral pursuit of the individual grounded in the interpretation of tradition. They identify in obedience and compassion the key characteristics of Christianity that guide the individual’s search for moral development and distinguish the Christian moral path from others. They do not claim moral superiority; rather they recognise that ethical living is not exclusive to ‘authentic Christians’. Unlike subculturalists, my informants construct authenticity as something to be pursued but that they cannot claim for themselves at any given moment. They identify the essential traits and practices; yet they shy away from saying that they themselves are authentic. Authenticity is never attained. It is the person’s attempt at *willingly* seeing others with compassion and acting in accordance with the will of God. The search of authenticity forms a Christian self that is seen as continuous attempt at overcoming one’s ego. It is the aspiration at the core of Christianity, seen as a distinctive identity.

**References**

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