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Rights and Relationships: Rhetorics of Religious Freedom among English Evangelicals

Méadhbh McIvor*

This paper uses evangelical reflections on the meaning of “rights” to explore the juridification of religion in contemporary England. Drawing on sixteen months of participatory fieldwork with evangelicals in London, I argue that English evangelicals’ critiques of Christian-interest litigation reflect the interaction of local theologies with developments in the law’s regulation of religion, developments that have contributed to the relativization of Protestant Christianity even as historic church establishment is maintained. Through an exploration of the tension between the goals of (rights-based) individualism and (Christian) relationalism as they concern the law, I show how litigation can affect religious subjectivity even in the absence of a personal experience with the pageantry of the court.

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“DO CHRISTIANS HAVE RIGHTS?”

SO ASKED Luke, the minister at Christ Church,¹ a conservative evangelical community in London, as he stood to preach one Sunday morning. London was then in the last throes of a heat wave, and the Victorian church building was uncomfortably warm. Despite the best efforts of a whirring air conditioner, the congregation was restless. We had spent the first half of the service fanning ourselves with the hymnals and prayer books stacked in the pews. As always, however, when the minister rose to preach, the congregation—including myself, an anthropologist researching the recent rise of Christian-interest litigation in the English courts—gave him their full attention. Pew Bibles were opened, and pens and notebooks were fished out of bags and pockets. (Ethnographers are not the only visitors to Bible-believing churches who fill notebook after notebook with notes. On any given Sunday, about a quarter to a third of those sitting in Christ Church’s pews jot things down during the sermon.) Standing at the pulpit in a suit and tie, his open Bible in his hand, Luke continued:

Do Christians have rights? Many of us would instinctively answer “yes” to that question. After all, in our ever more litigious society, everyone else seems to have rights. Women’s rights, gay rights, animal rights, children’s rights, students’ rights, and so we could go on. . . . But some Christians would say we don’t have any rights. I mean, that’s the whole point, isn’t it? When we become Christians, we give up our rights to rights. . . . So, which is it? Do Christians have rights, or no rights?

As Luke’s sermon hook indicates, one need not be a scholar of law and religion to have an interest in Christian conceptions of “rights.” In fact, the kinds of rights a Christian could or should rely on were the subject of many conversations at Christ Church, not least because of the growth of high-profile legal cases involving Christian claimants. Funded by conservative lobby groups and influenced by the legal strategies of their American peers, increasing numbers of English Christians—including nurses and teachers disciplined for praying for patients and students, registrars and hoteliers unwilling to serve LGBTQ+ clients or customers, and uniformed employees who had been asked to remove cross necklaces that went against their employers’ dress codes—were using the courts to claim a violation of their right to religious freedom. Given the number of column inches, news broadcasts, and watercooler debates generated by

¹Christ Church is a pseudonym, as are the names by which I call church members (some of whom picked these names themselves).

these cases, it was unsurprising that the subject surfaced in sermons and conversations among the Christ Church faithful, contributing to a general sense that conservative Christians were increasingly “marginalised” in English public life (Strhan 2015; McIvor 2019).

As with many such Christians in the United Kingdom, Christ Churchites see themselves as the inhabitants of a rapidly “de-Christianising” country. In practice, of course, Protestant Christianity remains legally and culturally privileged in myriad ways.² Yet it would be too simplistic to reduce their concerns over “de-Christianisation” to mere hyperbole. Despite the presence of an established church, the British state increasingly treats Christianity as one worldview among others in a plural, multi-faith nation, with even the heir to the throne—and prospective Supreme Governor of the Church of England—alleged to prefer the more inclusive “Defender of Faith” to the monarch’s traditional title, “Defender of *the* Faith” (Pierce 2008).³ This relativization is the product of centuries’ worth of political dispute, interreligious negotiation, and the collapse of empire as the legal privileges associated with established religion (and the penalties associated with its nonestablished variants, which have historically included dissenting Protestantism and Catholicism alongside non-Christian traditions) have been diluted. Yet it has taken on a particular salience in recent years, one that I date to a seismic shift in the state’s regulation of religion: English law’s transition from viewing “religious freedom” as a negative civil liberty to ensuring it as a positive human right (Sandberg 2011; Hill, Sandberg, and Doe 2011). For the first time in English legal history, Article 9 of the Human Rights Act 1998, which came into force in 2000, enshrined the right to religious freedom in a domestic statute (Sullivan 2006, 916). This turn to rights-based law simultaneously marked and established a new relationship between religion and the state, with Christianity now governed both as the national, established faith, and as merely one religious option among others. Under this regime, the right to religious liberty is no longer the preserve of those who profess Protestantism.

This paper uses intra-evangelical debates over the meaning of rights to explore the “juridification” (Årsheim and Slotte 2017) of religion in

²In addition to “symbolic” privileges, such as the monarch’s role as head of both church and state, twenty-six Anglican Bishops sit by right in the House of Lords (the upper chamber of the Houses of Parliament), thereby forming part of the legislature. The Church of England, through its governing body, can pass measures with the effect of state law. The vast majority of government-maintained “faith schools” are Christian.

³The monarch, as Supreme Governor of the Church, has been known as “Fidei Defensor” (Defender of the Faith) since the sixteenth century. In 2008, *The Telegraph* reported that Prince Charles would prefer a more ecumenical title that recognized British multiculturalism. Although he later claimed to have been misinterpreted, this alleged preference is still widely reported, including by the National Secular Society in a recent call for disestablishment (see Sherwood 2017).

contemporary England. Drawing on sixteen months (January 2013 to April 2014) of participatory fieldwork with evangelicals in London, it approaches these debates through the lens of what has recently been termed “churchstateness.” Churchstateness, in the words of Paul Christopher Johnson, Pamela E. Klassen, and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan (2018, 2), refers to the “often enmeshed and intercalibrated forms” through which “church” and “state” come together in historically and culturally specific configurations. I argue that my interlocutors’ varied responses to the legalization of their faith are the product of recent developments in English churchstateness, developments that have contributed to the relativization of Protestant Christianity even as historic church establishment is maintained. This shift in church-state relations is experienced in particular ways as it filters through a vernacular theology of rights-based individualism and Christian relationalism. As I explore below, my interlocutors’ responses to Christian-interest litigation reflect the somewhat paradoxical result of the English legal system’s move towards protecting religious freedom as a positive right (as opposed to a negative liberty), a shift that is experienced as a *lessening* of “free religion” for English evangelicals.

By locating this shift in the United Kingdom’s decision to incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law through the Human Rights Act, I hope to call attention to the ways in which cultural forms at both mid- and macro-scales—for example, local theological categories and nation-wide legislative shifts—bleed into one another, impacting religious subjectivity at the level of the individual. In this telling, shifts in legal history are relevant to the ethnographic present, and Parliamentary debates color the conversations held in church pews. It is now well recognized that religion and law tend to be “mutually involved,” such that state regulation both shapes and is shaped by religious expression (Sullivan, Yelle, and Taussig-Rubbo 2011, 2). Yet, as Isaac Weiner (2017, 35) recently noted of the US context, in the absence of grievances filed or cases taken, it is difficult to measure the law’s impact on everyday religious experience. Beyond those “trouble cases” (Llewellyn and Hoebel 1978) in which an individual claims a violation of their right to religious freedom, how can scholars apprehend the law’s ability to sculpt religiosity outside of the courtroom? In what follows, I use sermons, Bible studies, and quotidian interactions to shed light on the legal system’s ability to shape evangelical subjectivities, even in those moments when appeals to law are specifically denied. In so doing, I hope to show that the rejection of legalistic rights-based language is intimately linked not only to long-standing theological concerns over

the relationship between the individual and the community, but also to recent shifts in England's secular settlement. Thus, just as Talal Asad (2003, 16; cf. Engelke 2013, xxv) has encouraged us to approach the secular through its "shadows," I join with Weiner and others (Engel 2011; Fadil 2011; Fernando 2014; Mahmood 2015; Strhan 2015) in exploring the ways in which litigation can affect religious lifeways even in the absence of a personal experience with the pageantry of the court.

My argument unfolds as follows. Section one provides a fuller introduction to my primary field site, Christ Church, and to the particular legal and cultural context in which the church operates. It also offers an in-depth ethnographic account of "relational evangelism," an approach to spreading the gospel that emphasizes the importance of a preexisting friendship with the person being evangelized.⁴ The second and third sections argue that this relational focus colors my Christ Church interlocutors' understanding and critique of rights-based language. Drawing on Joel Robbins' (2004, 290–311) application of Louis Dumont's terminology of "paramount values," through which Robbins analyzes the clash between the values of Christian individualism and Melanesian relationalism in Urapmin Christian conversion, I show that claims to rights are evaluated on the basis of their impact on one's relationships with others. The conclusion ties the experience of these evangelicals "on the ground" to macro-level shifts in the state's regulation of religion, ultimately arguing that local evaluations of rights-based law are evidence of changing church-state relations in twenty-first century England.

RELATIONAL EVANGELISM

Founded in the late nineteenth century, Christ Church is a large, conservative evangelical, Bible-believing Anglican church. It is what some Christians call a "lighthouse church"; its reputation for "sound, Biblical teaching"—that is, its theological and social conservatism—means smaller churches look to it to lead the way on issues of doctrinal controversy. The vast majority of its approximately five hundred members are white British (although, as one might expect from cosmopolitan London, it has sizeable minorities from as far afield as Australia, Japan, South Africa, and the United States). It has a wealthy, well-heeled, and overwhelmingly

⁴Relational, in this sense, is both an emic and an etic term. Although those at Christ Church referred to "friendship evangelism" rather than "relational evangelism," the word "relational" was sometimes used to evaluate their interactions with others. Thus, although I use it as an analytic foil for local critiques of individualism, I believe it is a concept my interlocutors would easily recognize.

middle-class congregation.⁵ Many church members work in medicine, law, finance, teaching, and Christian ministry. Most are educated to degree level. It is assumed that a child graduating from the church youth group at age eighteen will attend university (and a prestigious one at that). The church's association with privilege was something its congregants often referenced, both easily and uneasily, in their recognition of a "Christ Church type": well-educated and financially secure. Some church members worried that conservative evangelicalism, despite its aspirations to the universal, was in practice the preserve of the elite.⁶

In addition to attending one of three Sunday services, many Christ Church members are part of a mid-week Bible study group. They are encouraged to pursue daily Bible reading and contemplation (although, in busy London, this aspiration is not always met), and often give up their weekday evenings to run youth group sessions or evangelistic courses. As such, their church participation is significantly higher than the national average. (Although almost 60 percent of residents in England and Wales identified as "Christian" in the 2011 census, fewer than 5 percent of the population regularly attend church services, with approximately 1.5 percent attending services of the established Church of England.⁷) The church takes a conservative approach to such Anglican bugbears as equal marriage, women priests, the reality of hell, and the interpretation of the Bible. Luke, the minister, teaches that the Bible is "God-breathed," without error, and the ultimate authority in matters of Christian belief and practice. Because the Scriptures are thought to specify hell as the eternal destination of nonbelievers, the church places great stress on the obligation to spread the gospel to those who are "not yet" Christian. Almost half its income goes to finance missionary work at home and abroad, and although the congregation does collect nonperishables for a local food bank, they are generally wary of forms of Christian ministry that cater to physical needs while ignoring what they see as the eternal crisis facing every unsaved man, woman, and child.

Rather, it is the individual souls of these men, women, and children that the congregation focuses on. As is well known, Protestant theology's unit of salvation is not the church, clan, or lineage, but the ostensibly bounded Christian individual. Ernst Troeltsch (1925 [1991], 184), for

⁵I use "middle class" in the British sense of ranging from comfortably well off to elite.

⁶The association of conservative evangelicalism with the upper and middle classes is not a recent phenomenon; as early as the 1851 census, evangelical Christianity proved more popular among the wealthy than the working class (Bebbington 1989, 110). For a contemporary ethnographic account of privilege and evangelicalism (and its associated anxieties), see Anna Strhan's (2015) *Aliens and Strangers?*

⁷See statistics compiled at: <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/uk-christianity.html>. Accessed June 6, 2018.

example, writes that Protestantism posits God's grace as "seeking out the individual": "The idea of a God who judges the individual, who follows the development of each and intervenes in the destiny of each, runs throughout the entire Bible" (Troeltsch 1925 [1991], 218). Salvation, then, "cannot be shared" (Robbins 2004, 299). The gospel message, on the other hand, both can and should be shared, and many church members see it as their Christian duty to engage with nonbelievers in the hope of welcoming them into the Kingdom.

One of the settings where I heard frequent reference to the importance (and the difficulty) of this engagement was the meetings with my women's Bible study group, which I began attending in the autumn of 2013. Bible study groups are, in a sense, the backbone of evangelical life, a "vital social institution" consisting of opportunities not only for in-depth, close text analysis of Biblical passages, but for the building of strong, supportive friendships, the development of accountability networks, and the sharing of prayer requests (Bielo 2009, 10). Group studies provide, as Carol J. Greenhouse puts it of Southern Baptists, "two bonds": "one that ties the individual to what is believed to be the authentic word of God and a second that ties believers to what becomes an epistemological community, their fellow Christians" (1989, 82).

The group I was welcomed into displayed all these characteristics. One of several such study groups that met in the church building on Monday mornings, my group of eight was made up of women in their thirties, forties, and fifties. Our meetings began in the church lounge, where the thirty or so women who were part of a Monday morning Bible study would collect cups of tea or coffee from volunteers in the church kitchen before spending a few minutes chatting about the previous and coming weeks. We were then read the church notices—*please keep praying for those coming to Christianity Explored*;⁸ *we need more volunteers for Mums 'n' Tots; does anyone have a spare buggy they could lend to X and Y, our mission partners in Cambodia, who will be visiting London in July?*—before breaking up into our subgroups. Mine met in a small room at the back of the church, where we would sit around a collapsible table on orange plastic chairs, a small plug-in blow heater directed at our feet (the room's location was such that it rarely got much sunlight and could therefore be quite chilly; as the autumn progressed, we found that many of the layers of clothing that one might normally remove upon entering a building—scarves and coats, for example—were reappropriated as blankets draped

⁸Christianity Explored is an evangelistic course that the church offers a number of times of year. It is a more conservative version of the popular Alpha course, with less scope for charismatic expression and a greater emphasis on sin and judgment.

over our laps). Despite the majority of Christ Church members being English, my group was surprisingly international,⁹ with members from South Africa, Australia, and the United States. Most had lived in England for many years. (Kristen, the American, was the only recent arrival.)

Although they always began with a chance to socialize over a cup of tea, our Monday morning Bible studies were not entirely informal affairs. They required—in theory at least, if not always in practice—advance preparation, and as one might expect from a church where services seemed to have more in common with academic lectures than effervescent assemblies, this preparation was text based. We spent autumn 2013 working our way through 1 Timothy, a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the leader of the church at Ephesus. At the beginning of term, each of us had been given a soft-backed A5 booklet, the rosebud yellow cover of which read “Studies in 1 Timothy.” Inside the booklet were questions relevant to each of the Bible passages we would be studying. These questions were designed to encourage us to think through and engage with the text, and under each of the questions (of which there were seven to nine per study) was a space to write down our answers. In addition to these booklets, our group leader, Georgina, would sometimes quote to us from *Teaching 1 Timothy*, a paperback Bible commentary by Church of England minister Angus MacLeay (2012).

Our group was not the only one using these resources. In fact, for the first time at Christ Church, all of the small groups—men’s groups, women’s groups, mixed-gender home groups, and student groups—were studying the same portion of the Bible. Written to encourage Timothy in his leadership, it contains a number of verses that are controversial within the Church of England, including the requirement that women “learn quietly with all submissiveness” and do not “teach or . . . exercise authority over” men (1 Timothy 2:11–12), as well as condemning what my interlocutors refer to as “homosexual practice” (1 Timothy 1:10). Given the debates over gender and sexuality then consuming the Church (Dormor and Morris 2007; Clucas and Sharpe 2013; Clucas 2012), 1 Timothy was both timely and challenging for my interlocutors. But although these particular verses were, of course, the subject of much discussion, the theme we returned to week by week was neither gender nor sexuality, but the importance of living good Christian lives as a means of attracting others to the church, and the development of the kind of relationships with non-Christians that

⁹I say “surprisingly” because most members are English (a narrower category than British), and the church is, in many ways, a bastion of English establishment. It does, however, have international links. It supports missionaries throughout the world (as well as in Britain) and sometimes hosts visiting ministers, curates, or Bible college students from abroad.

would allow one to explain why Christians could live in such a distinctive, attractive way.

One November morning we tackled 1 Timothy 6:1–2, in which the Apostle Paul asks those “who are under a yoke as bondservants” to honour their masters, as this will bring glory to God. Question six of our study guide read, “What is at stake in the way we behave at work?” Catherine, a tall blond woman with a slight South African accent, answered: “It’s obviously God’s good name.” Non-Christians will look at the lives of those professing to be Christian, and if they do not see any evidence of the work of God, they will judge the gospel accordingly. Christians, she continued, must both “behave well and be observed to behave well.” Linda, who worked part-time in London’s financial district, agreed: “I’ve always been told to remember that my boss is God.” Not only was she representing God, and therefore under an obligation to demonstrate His grace to those around her, but she was also accountable to Him, and ought to keep her words and actions consistent with her Christian faith. Everyone agreed that this was important to remember, because it focused on the need to work well even when one’s colleagues were not looking.

The group then moved on to a discussion of explicit evangelism. Kristen, who had recently moved to London with her husband and children from the American Midwest, suggested that “you must be willing to incorporate your faith into your work.” This, she thought, included being able to talk about the role it plays in your life: “talk about your weekend; say you went to church on Sunday.” Catherine agreed that one should not “hide” one’s Christianity. After a short pause, she asked the group: “Do you think people should try to evangelize at work in more *overt* ways?” Kristen was the first to respond. After acknowledging that her nationality meant her evangelizing sensibilities might be slightly different to those of her English sisters, she explained that yes, she thought Christians should evangelize in the office. However, she stressed, this had to be “friendship evangelism.” She differentiated friendship evangelism from the kind of evangelism where there was no preexisting relationship between the speaker and the hearer. “Handing out pamphlets outside your work” was not “honoring God,” but developing real relationships of trust and friendship—the kind that would allow your non-Christian friends to notice your distinctiveness and then allow you to explain its cause—was.

Although a relative newcomer to Christ Church, Kristen was not its only proponent of “friendship evangelism,” or what sociologists have referred to as evangelicalism’s “personal influence strategy” (Smith et al.

1998, 187). As the anthropologist James Bielo (2009, 116) notes in his account of Bible studies in North America, an emphasis on relational witness has taken root alongside the growth of the seeker-friendly church model, with diverse evangelical communities keen to spark interest in the gospel through displays of friendship and kindness. Christ Churchites, on the whole, are not what Omri Elisha (2011) terms “socially engaged evangelicals,” those who feel compelled to engage in charitable outreach as a result of their faith. Yet they would agree with Paul, one of Elisha’s Tennessee-based activist interlocutors, when he declared: “[Evangelicals] have always been good at proclamation evangelism—preaching sermons and handing out pamphlets and such—but we’re terrible at loving people” (Elisha 2011, 6). Successful evangelism, in this understanding, requires acts of relational love.

James, a trainee minister, expounded this strategy during a sermon in which he encouraged the congregation to be “welcoming” to outsiders. One way to gauge how welcoming they were being was to ask: “How much time do we regularly give to those currently outside the Kingdom of God?” Christ Church was then gearing up for a nation-wide mission drive, “A Passion for Life,” which was scheduled to take place in the week before Easter. Although this mission week was then six months away, James told the congregation that they ought to be “investing” in their relationships with non-Christians now:

We need to know people if we’re to have any chance of welcoming them into God’s Kingdom. . . . We have to be investing in friendships now in order to have any chance of being able to share the gospel with people in the future. How much time do we *really* give to those who are currently outside the Kingdom of God?

James stressed that Christians ought to have a “genuine” (as opposed to “superficial”) interest in their non-Christian friends. It was this kind of relationship—the sort where you knew about a friend’s financial troubles, or ill health, or messy love life, or recent bereavement—that would allow you not only to demonstrate God’s love in practical ways, but to share the gospel with them.

James’ question was no mere rhetorical device. Indeed, it was the kind of question with which many of his listeners were already struggling. As the sociologist Anna Strhan notes of evangelicals in London’s financial district, this is partly to do with their tacit acceptance of “modern urban comforts and logics of interaction that tend towards privacy, detachment, and self-sufficiency,” combined with class-based assessments of what might constitute polite conversation (2015, 54). It was for this reason that

Georgina, who led our Bible study, found it easier to witness to relative strangers than she did to those in her immediate social circle. After all, the social cost involved in offending a stranger by explaining that he or she was, by nature, deserving of hell was easier to deal with than alienating a cherished friend—or even a socially significant acquaintance—with the same message.

The conflict between wanting to see one's non-Christian friends saved and not wanting to offend them with the message that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) was internalized as a source of shame for many of my evangelical interlocutors. Many church members could recount examples when they knew they ought to have shared the gospel with a named individual but had failed to do so. Even Kristen, the American who had advocated "friendship evangelism" in the workplace, once told us of a former classmate with whom she had been reluctant to speak about Jesus. Although they had been close throughout school and university, it took her ten years to broach the subject of the gospel. Afterwards, he had asked her why, if her faith was so important to her, she had waited so long to share it with him. "I was ashamed," she said, "when he asked me that, because I didn't have an answer." Years later, his question still weighed heavy on her heart.

Further, as the church well knew, the Christian's desire to cultivate non-Christian friendships in the hope of creating gospel opportunities could be interpreted as tokenistic or insincere by outsiders. Church members were aware, as James pointed out, that no one wanted to be thought of as a "project": "You see, Biblical evangelism, friends, is sharing the gospel with *people*. It's not about . . . seeing people in our office as projects." Relational evangelism, then, is lauded in theory but difficult in practice. The desire to see one's non-Christian friends coming to Christ, but the worry that one might alienate them in the process, meant that getting one's relationships "right" was a source of great concern at Christ Church. Did spending time with a non-Christian colleague in the hope of later inviting them to church mean you saw that person as a "project"? If a neighbour turned down one evangelistic advance, how long did you have to wait before making another? And—most guilt-inducing of all—at what point did your concern not to alienate your non-Christian friends become an excuse not to boldly proclaim the gospel? In what follows, I argue that Christ Church's emphasis on relational evangelism plays a key role in their evaluation of the concept of "rights," because reliance on these rights may have an impact, whether positive or negative, on the relationships that ought to be giving rise to gospel opportunities.

RIGHTS FORGONE

Although evangelical Protestantism posits salvation as an individual matter, even bounded individuals exist in webs of relationship to one another. This can create a tension between Christian individualism, on the one hand, and one's obligation to kith and kin on the other. Such a tension is masterfully explored by Joel Robbins in his study of Christian conversion among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. Drawing on [Dumont's \(1996, 94\)](#) terminology of "paramount values," the values that structure how the various elements of a society relate to one another, [Robbins \(2004, 292\)](#) argues that Melanesian people are neither individualist nor holist (the two values analyzed by Dumont) but "relationalist." By this he means that Urapmin society is structured neither in terms of individuals nor around social wholes, but in terms of relationships between people. The clash between the Urapmin's newly adopted Christian individualism, which condemns the expression of individual will as a failure to subjugate the self to God, and their traditional morality, which evaluates wilful acts on the basis of their effect on existing relationships, is a cause of great discontent among Urapmin converts (*ibid*, 293–94).

Robbins' emphasis on the individualism of Christianity is not without its critics (see [Bialecki 2015](#); [Bialecki and Daswani 2015](#); and [Vilaça 2011](#) for useful summaries of the in/dividualism debate in the anthropology of Christianity). Mark Mosko, for example, uses New Melanesian Ethnography to explore the *dividuality* of Christian personhood, arguing that "Christianity . . . involves elicitive detachments and attachments among dividual persons (converts, God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, the Devil, etc)" (2010, 217; see also 2015). Outside of the Melanesian context, Girish [Daswani \(2011\)](#) has approached Ghanaian Pentecostal conversion in terms of ongoing partibility, and Liana [Chua's \(2012\)](#) fieldwork in Malaysian Borneo shows that Christian individualism does not necessarily displace more relational forms of morality. Even ethnographers working in areas known for their cultural individualism, such as the Protestant United States, challenge our understanding of the indivisibility of Christian salvation, as Fenella Cannell's account of collective notions of "religious work" among Latter-day Saints shows (2017, 165).

Robbins' Dumontian terminology, however, remains relevant for my interlocutors, who strongly identify with "the bounded, possessive individual of Western ideology" ([Mosko 2010, 219](#)) even as they seek, on occasion, to suppress it. As with the Urapmin, they experience a conflict between the values of individualism and relationalism. However, whereas Urapmin relational sociality is challenged by Christian *individualism*, I argue that my informants see the individualism of rights discourse as a

potential threat to Christian *relationalism*. Further, whereas the Urapmin learned to interpret all wilful actions as sinful regardless of their outcomes, the Christ Church ministry team encourages an explicitly consequentialist approach to standing on one's rights. This consequentialist approach, which evaluates the desirability of insisting on one's rights on the basis of their relational impact (as opposed to one's inherent entitlement to so insist) suggests that although they refer to themselves as having the "right" to undertake certain actions, the idea of a "human right" to freedom of religion—that is, a preexisting, inviolable privilege guaranteed by the state—has little purchase for church members.

This was most evident in a number of sermons preached throughout summer 2013, during which Luke, the minister, asked the question with which we began: "Do Christians have rights?" Christ Church sermons, which are expository in style and typically last about twenty-five to thirty minutes, are usually delivered as part of a "series" devoted to a certain Biblical book. The sermons discussed here focused on 1 Corinthians and were aimed at helping the congregation develop a framework for Biblically based decision-making. On many matters, of course, the Bible was seen to give direct and easily applicable guidance about one's life choices. As regards sexual morality, for example, there was thought to be little room for interpretation: passages from Genesis, the Gospels, and the Epistles were all taken to confirm that the only legitimate place for sexual expression was within heterosexual marriage. Yet there are some areas of life where the Bible is less specific. How should a Christian decide, for example, whether it was acceptable for them to attend a particular party? How could they determine whether it was alright for them to see a particular film? "There's no chapter or verse in the Bible that I can take you to to help you make those decisions, and yet our lives are full of decisions like that, aren't they?" Luke hoped to use 1 Corinthians to give the congregation a set of principles that they might apply in order to determine the acceptability of the choices they made on a daily basis.

Luke is an animated preacher. He has little time for props or pictures; all he needs are his sermon notes, his pulpit, and his open Bible. As such, it was a mark of the importance of the issues we were dealing with that the sermon series on 1 Corinthians involved Luke projecting an image onto the screen that hung at the back of the church, which was usually reserved for song lyrics and church notices. The image in question was a flowchart, which laid out a number of questions a Christian should ask themselves before making a decision. The first thing to do, Luke told us, was to establish whether the Bible allowed the choice in question. This was, unsurprisingly, the most important question to ask. If the Bible marked something

out as a sin—theft, fornication, drunkenness—then the Christian could not, in good conscience, engage in that behaviour. If, on the other hand, the Bible did allow it, the Christian could move on to the second question, which was whether their conscience allowed it. “Too often,” Luke said, “this is where we stop.” But 1 Corinthians, he argued, encouraged the Christian to ask three more questions.

The first of the three additional questions was “What is the effect of this decision on other Christians?” In the text under discussion, the Apostle Paul is writing to the Corinthian church about the acceptability of their eating food offered to idols. The letter explains that they are free to eat this meat: “We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do” (1 Corinthians 8:8). Yet the fact that they are free to do so does not mean that they *ought* to. Weaker Christians—perhaps those who had only recently converted, or who had been deeply involved in the worship of idols before their conversion—might see stronger Christians eating meat offered to idols and become confused, compromised, or led back into idol worship as a result. “Therefore,” Paul writes, “if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble” (1 Corinthians 8:13). Luke illustrated this principle with an example he thought more applicable to middle-class Londoners:

Take Josephine. Josephine’s been an alcoholic for many years, and she’s been wonderfully liberated from her alcoholism by the gospel of Jesus Christ. And she comes to church and she comes to take communion, but the only wine that’s being distributed at the Lord’s Supper is alcoholic, and she can’t go near alcohol without causing her to stumble. And every communion service is a struggle for her inwardly. . . . Are Christians free to drink wine? Absolutely. In our Lord’s Supper, yes, at home, yes. But what would be the loving thing of that church leadership to do? Surely it would be to find some way of serving non-alcoholic wine, so that Josephine, and possibly others, would not be caused to stumble.

Unlike the sorts of actions that would be met with a “no” when subjected to Luke’s first question, “Does the Bible allow it?”, which were deemed unacceptable by virtue of their inherently sinful nature, the validity of the actions of a Christian in a situation like the one imagined above was approached from a gospel-shaped, consequentialist perspective. It is tempting, Luke noted, to ask “Am I allowed to do this as a Christian?”; but a better question, he thought, was “Is this a loving thing to do as a Christian?” Christian freedom, in other words, ought to be understood *relationally*.

A similar approach was evident in the next of the questions on Luke's flowchart: "How does this further the gospel?" This was the subject of a sermon on 1 Corinthians 9, in which Paul tells the Corinthians that as a full-time Christian worker, he has the right to receive a salary from those he preaches to: "Those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:14). Yet, so concerned was he that people heard the Good News that he was willing to forgo this right to payment. With this in mind, Luke argued, Christians should be "regularly forgoing" their rights in the hope of welcoming others into Christ's Kingdom. Luke asked us to think about the "rights" we held so dear—"the right to a Sunday evening, the right to watch cricket on Sunday morning, the right to time with friends, the right to a holiday, the right to respectability and everyone thinking well of us"¹⁰—and to compare them with what Paul had given up. He concluded with a prayer for forgiveness for those times "when we have stood on our rights when we should have forgone them, and when we have not shared Christ's concern and love for lost men and women":

You see, as long as defending our rights is the lodestar that orders our priorities, I'm not sure we're really Christians. Because of all people, we Christians know the ultimate example of someone abandoning their rights. And it's not supremely Paul. It's the Lord Jesus Christ.

Although framed by Luke in terms of "rights," the above examples are not, of course, the same kinds of rights at issue among England's increasingly vocal evangelical activists. As with trends in the American courts (Lewis 2017), Christian-interest litigation and lobbying in the United Kingdom tend to focus on codified, statutory rights, including the right to religious freedom and the right to free speech (McIvor 2019). Luke's focus was less on legal entitlements than on actions a Christian might feel entitled to take by virtue of their apparent acceptability within a Biblical framework (and, of course, the law of the land). Yet a similar logic was applied in discussions of rights-based legal cases. For example, James, the trainee minister, once gave a sermon in which he argued that "Jesus limits His freedom to serve a larger purpose. . . . He limits His freedom for the sake of the lost":

Christian people, we are free people. Free from sin, free from the burden of the law, free from guilt, free from what people think of us. It's liberating. Yet the challenge, to each and every one of us here this evening, is how we exercise that freedom for the greater good of the gospel.

¹⁰These "rights," of course, reflect middle-class pastimes and leisure activities outside the reach of many.

A couple of weeks after this sermon, James and I had coffee at a café a short walk from the church. I asked if he could elaborate on the kind of situations in which one might better serve the gospel by opting to forgo one's rights. One example, he suggested, related to Christians who sought to enforce a right not to work on Sundays. This issue had featured in the case of *Mba v London Borough of Merton*, the appeal of which had been lost about a month before James and I sat down for coffee. In this case, Celestina Mba, a children's care home worker, argued that she had been discriminated against by her employers when they sought to enforce her contractual obligation to work Sunday shifts. The case had received widespread press coverage (BBC 2013; Bowcott 2013), and it was perhaps for this reason that the following hypothetical came so easily to James' mind:

If you're working for a firm that says you need to work shift work on a Sunday, to then assert your right to not work on a Sunday, well, you knew that when you signed up for that company. Is it possible to find another place of work? Because that's going to be an offence. That's going to really hack off your manager and maybe your other colleagues, as they're having to work the roster so that you have Sunday off. That's not going to do the gospel any favours. It's just going to make you look like a really difficult person.

He went on to argue that those who insisted on their rights in a belligerent way—to be “provocative” or to “cause a stink”—were not promoting the gospel but damaging its reputation. Unlike the ideal Christian employee discussed by my Bible study group, who knew that her ultimate boss was God and that she ought to represent Him well, Christians who sought to “cause a stink” were neither living attractive lives nor building up solid relationships with their non-Christian colleagues. Instead, they were placing their individual desires ahead of the salvation of others, mirroring the selfishness of the unconverted.¹¹

As with many members of Christ Church, James feels that English public life is increasingly hostile to Bible-believing Christians. He even wondered whether preachers like him might soon end up in prison for proclaiming the gospel. Yet he did not feel that rights-based claims were an appropriate way to counter this trend. Instead, he worried that standing

¹¹The association of the non-Christian world with greed and selfishness is not limited to English evangelicals. Greenhouse's (1989, 115–18) study of suburban Baptists in Georgia also highlights a presumed association between litigiousness, selfishness, and non-Christians. Nor is it necessarily “Christian.” David Engel (2011, 255), for example, has recently noted a tendency among Thai Buddhists in Lanna for the customary law of injuries, which had previously been governed by reference to local spirits, to give way to a Buddhist conception of legal compensation as “counterproductive, materialistic, and selfish.”

on one's rights meant one was buying into the individualistic logic of what Luke had labelled "our ever more litigious society," in which "everyone is insisting on their rights" to the detriment of others. James' and Luke's aversion to this sort of litigation stems, I suggest, from the tension between the values of individualism, here imagined as a selfish, stubborn attempt to enforce one's rights at the expense of one's colleagues, and Christian relationalism, portrayed in terms of building meaningful friendships with non-Christians and denying one's rights for the sake of others. Luke's advice to his congregation, as it so often was, was to look to Jesus as the perfect model of this rights-denying attitude: "Jesus loved you enough to put aside His rights in order to die for you, and trusting in Him you and I are called to be like Him, putting aside our rights." By positing Jesus as the truly virtuous Man to whom all Christians should aspire, Luke's approach seemed to incorporate an evangelical consequentialism under a broader ethical framework of divine emulation (cf. Elisha 2008, 168, on Jesus as a model of "active compassion" in evangelical social activism; Robbins 2015 on the power of cultural exemplars).

Now, given their evangelical theology, this flowchart approach to Christian living might seem somewhat surprising. The following of a checklist seems to advocate exactly the kind of legalistic morality that an evangelical Christian ought to reject. Further, evaluating the acceptability of one's actions on the basis of their potential consequences seems to grate against the Christian understanding of moral absolutes. It is for this reason that we must remember that these relational, consequentialist questions—what is the effect of this on other Christians, and what is the effect of this on the spread of the gospel—were ultimately secondary; they were the questions one was to ask once one had already determined that an action was not discouraged or forbidden by the Bible. Indeed, Luke himself recognized the risk of legalism inherent in this approach. "The Pharisee in us," he acknowledged, always seeks out rules and regulations to follow. He tried to guard against this by stressing that the flowchart ought to be approached lovingly, not legalistically.

Yet the sheer flexibility of a system that rejects rules and regulations can sometimes leave the faithful crying out for guidance, for conventions to be given or virtuous models to aspire to. Robbins (2004) writes that the Urapmin, by abandoning the complex regime of taboo observance that they practiced before their conversion to Christianity, now inhabit a world of moral discontent. Although they are pleased to live in "free time," in which they are no longer bound by ritual law, the loss of the ritual system has meant that they are now unable to understand themselves as moral subjects. Unlike the taboo system, which provided "a

very workable framework for regulating the will" (Robbins 2004, 221), Christian sin is so all-encompassing that any expression of wilful behaviour is seen to threaten their very salvation. Ironically, this led one pastor, a Bible college graduate named Kiki, to encourage his congregation to be as self-controlled as someone living under the strictest of the Urapmin taboo regimes: "The image of someone following a stringent version of its taboos," Robbins writes, was "the most compelling model [Kiki could] find for a life of moral rectitude" (Robbins 2004, 221). Luke's flowchart, I suggest, indexes a similar tension between freedom and its use. By laying out a step-by-step approach to the decision-making process and encouraging a relationalist, consequentialist ethic, it functioned to curb the excessive freedom associated with "free time," reminding the Christian that although he or she had been liberated from the power of sin, this liberation entailed relational responsibilities.

RIGHTS AND RESIGNATION

In addition to elaborating the somewhat paradoxical relationship between Christian freedom and the strict moral code that my informants adhere to, the ministry team's tips for ethical decision-making also tell us something about the Christ Church congregation's approach to "rights" *per se*. As regards the growing body of Christian-interest case law, it was in relation to those situations where one would have to answer "no" to the first or second of Luke's questions—does the Bible allow it, does my conscience allow it—that support for Christian claimants was most strongly expressed. This was most evident in cases involving service provision to LGBTQ+ persons. In particular, great sympathy was expressed for "conscientious objectors" such as Peter and Hazelmary Bull, bed and breakfast owners who would not let double bedrooms out to couples who were not in (mixed gender) marriages. Yet even in those cases where my interlocutors felt a great deal of compassion for the people involved, they were not spoken of as the victims of human rights violations. Rather, they were seen as the early casualties of the dismantling of Britain's "Christian heritage," from which its traditional civil liberties were thought to flow. This tone of resignation suggests a shift in churchstateness (Johnson, Klassen, and Sullivan 2018), a local recognition that the relationship between Protestantism and English law is no longer as intimate as it once was (Sullivan 2006).

This was brought out during a conversation with Leah and Lucy, two Christian solicitors, with whom I met one summer's morning to discuss a number of real and hypothetical legal cases. Both women came with

their Bibles (Lucy's, which was hot pink and decorated with Christian fish stickers, was particularly memorable) and made frequent reference to them throughout the morning. The first case we discussed was that of Lillian Ladele, a registrar who had resigned when her employer, Islington Borough Council, refused to accommodate her objection to registering same-sex civil partnerships. Ladele had been a registrar for a number of years before civil partnerships were introduced, and therefore could not have known that she would be expected to perform them. As such, both Lucy and Leah were extremely sympathetic to her case. As far as they were concerned, she had been right to politely refuse to facilitate the formation of civil partnerships; as Bible-believing Christians, they would have done the same.

Both women expressed disappointment at the fact that Islington Council had not agreed to accommodate Ladele's religious beliefs. However, the very fact of the court's decision meant that they no longer expected to be able to rely on conscientious objection as a "right." Her case had clarified the law, and although they disagreed with it, they accepted that the judgment represented the "conventional wisdom" of an "increasingly secular" Britain. As with professions that would require the Christian to go against his or her conscience in any other way, for example, through exaggeration or lying, being a registrar had simply been added to the growing list of jobs which Christians, in good conscience, would no longer choose to apply for. Although "a lot of these cases focus on issues that are very controversial, like homosexuality," Lucy argued that there were "a really wide range of issues" that might prevent her taking a particular job: "These things make the headlines, but I couldn't take a job even as an estate agent." She explained this inability to take a job as an estate agent or a registrar not as an infringement of an inviolable "right" to work in these professions, but as a choice she simply would not make. In the terminology of Luke's flowchart, this was because it was forbidden by both the Bible and her conscience. Leah agreed:

I think if you're actively choosing not to apply for a job because you don't feel, because of your faith or your conscience, that you can do it, then I don't think I would see that as discrimination against me, because it's my choice.

To repeat, this is not to say that Leah or Lucy agreed with the tribunals that found against Christians seeking to be exempt from workplace duties on the grounds of conscience. On the contrary, they thought it both unfair and disproportionate that Christian registrars could not be accommodated, and that Christian bed and breakfast owners were no longer

able to set their own guest policies. In an ideal world, they would prefer Christians to be able to work in all (legal) professions. What is important for my argument, however, is that the language used was that of resignation, sadness, and disappointment at the way things were going, not outrage or indignation at an inviolable right denied. Although Christian lobbyists publicize these cases as an element of what Ronald Niezen (2010, 70), writing of different forms of rights-based activism, terms the “politics of indignation,” my church interlocutors—who, as theologically and socially conservative Christians, form a part of these activists’ target audience—view them as the unavoidable result of secularization. This resignation suggests an acceptance of the inevitability of the status quo: “One does not fight what one cannot change” (Greenhouse 1989, 208).

In other words, the idea of an enforceable “right” to freedom of religion, as an entitlement owed the individual by the state, had little purchase for the members of Christ Church. Charters and declarations of human rights tend to posit these rights as existing independently of their recognition or violation. Yet my informants saw them as having been brought into being through these very instruments. This suggests that the move towards codifying freedom of religion as a “positive legal right,” as opposed to the traditional common law approach of respecting religious freedom as a “negative accommodation” (Hill, Sandberg, and Doe 2011, 25), has actually come to be understood by conservative evangelicals as a weakening of their religious liberty.

Indeed, one could argue that it is due to their *lack of faith* in the human rights project that the members of Christ Church could take the consequentialist approach to rights outlined above, in which—so long as it did not violate what was taken to be Biblical law—the rightness or wrongness of a Christian’s decision to rely on their rights was evaluated not according to their inherent entitlement to do so, but according to its impact on gospel-spreading relationships. In such a context, it made sense for Luke to argue that “the gospel is more important than rights.” The state’s efforts to provide a more robust foundation from which to “protect” religion—or, perhaps, its efforts to more efficiently regulate it (Sullivan 2005; Hurd 2015; Mahmood 2015; Su 2016; Wenger 2017; Thomas 2019)—have inaugurated a churchstateness in which Christianity, despite its establishment, is increasingly relativized; and, perhaps as a result, increasingly *relationalized*.

Yet relationality is not always easy, particularly as Christianity itself views the person as an individual-in-relation-to-God (Dumont on Troeltsch 1996, 96). The emphasis on relationships was never an attempt to deny or challenge the individual nature of salvation: “To say that the

individual is incomplete without the community is not to demand a transcendence of individuality but, rather, to point out the error of atomic existence" (Smith 1968, 256). That the individual-in-relation-to-God remained in tension with the individual-in-relation-to-others was most clearly articulated by Naomi, an optician in her twenties. Naomi is both naturally friendly and exceptionally eager to evangelize. She would often approach me if she noticed me sitting alone at church, and she seemed particularly keen to help me find God during my research. However, it was not just me that Naomi hoped to help on the journey to Christ. She was deeply conscious of her duty to share the gospel with everyone she met, and experienced real frustration when this was not possible or appropriate.

Naomi and I were sitting together on the Sunday evening when James gave the sermon quoted above, in which he challenged his listeners to reevaluate "how much time [they] *really* give to those who are currently outside the Kingdom of God." We continued sitting in the pew long after the service had finished, chatting over the cups of tea that had been brought to us by volunteers on the coffee rota. Naomi explained that she was already following James' advice about investing in relationships. She had built up strong friendships with her non-Christian colleagues and had had many gospel conversations as a result. But she only worked closely with three people, she told me, and that did not seem like very many. "If this is true"—and she was convinced that it was—then telling three people was simply not enough. She ought to be telling *everybody*. She sighed in frustration as she repeated the core point of James' sermon: that she should spend more time serving those who were not yet Christians. But how, she asked, was she supposed to do that? She volunteered with the church youth group on Fridays, attended church twice on Sundays, went to a Bible study group on Wednesdays, and worked full time, often on Saturdays. Although she tried to see her non-Christian friends during the week, something had to give. She wondered aloud, "Should I leave my Bible study group?" But if she were to do that, what about her own spiritual growth? Wouldn't her relationship with God suffer as a result?

Naomi was not the only Christian who worried about striking a balance between, as Daswani puts it of Ghanaian Pentecostals, her "individual aims" and her "moral obligations to others" (2011, 275), and the sort of bind she felt herself to be in was not unknown to the Christ Church leadership team. It is in this context that we return to the final question on Luke's flowchart. As noted above, after determining that an action is neither forbidden by the Bible nor the individual's conscience, the Christian was encouraged to ask three more questions. "Chapter 8 made us ask: What is the effect of this

decision on other Christians? Chapter 9 made us ask: How does this further the gospel?" The third question, which Luke examined in relation to 1 Corinthians 10, was: "How will this decision affect my spiritual life? In the Christian race, will this decision slow me down or speed me up?" Luke reminded the congregation that it was important they safeguard their own relationship with God. Winning someone for the Kingdom at the expense of one's own holiness was to be avoided. Individual sanctification remained at the core of the Christian walk. For Naomi, however, the tension between individualism and relationalism was never fully resolved. She felt herself to be at a crossroads and continued to debate the relative merits of leaving her Bible study group, cutting down on her church service, or even quitting her job, so that she could more fully devote herself to evangelism without compromising her own spiritual growth.

Nor was the tension between individualism and relationalism fully resolved at the level of the Christian discrimination cases. Robbins writes that paramount values do not only structure the relations between different elements of a society, but "determine what cultural form something has to take in order even to be eligible to be reckoned as good" (2004, 291). The claimants in the legal cases appeared to be the subjects of ambivalence precisely because they created a conflict between two paramount values, making it difficult for them to be "reckoned as good." They were simultaneously admired for standing up for their Biblical values and chastised for failing to do so in a relational, winsome way. One woman, for example, found that she sometimes thought the clients were "brilliant" for "standing up" for Christianity—a positive evaluation rooted in individualism—but sometimes thought the cases went "too far" and were ultimately "detrimental" to Christian witness—a negative evaluation rooted in relationalism. Even James, who gave such short shrift to Christians who insisted on the right to have Sundays off, was much more sympathetic to claimants who were asked to act against (what he accepted as) their conscience. Yet in a context in which "God's agenda" was increasingly seen to come into conflict with "the government's agenda," deciding whether the gospel was better served by forgoing one's rights and resigning quietly or insisting on them through a highly publicized court case was proving increasingly difficult to determine.

CONCLUSION

Given the exceptional prominence of the "Christian 'marginalization' narrative" in English public life (Donald, Bennett, and Leach 2012, 112), it is, perhaps, unsurprising that some conservative evangelicals fear

the coming erosion of their traditional civil liberties, including religious liberty. For the members of Christ Church, who view these liberties as rooted in England's (somewhat nebulous) "Christian heritage," this risk seemed all the greater. Yet the threat to civil liberty, the apparent dilution of "freedom of -," was rarely discussed in the language of Britain's recently adopted human rights framework. By contrast to an ideology of rights in which individual, positive entitlements are enforced against an overbearing state, the members of Christ Church tended to speak of rights in consequentialist terms, evaluating their use in terms of their perceived impact on the spread of the gospel. For those who are always hoping to welcome others into the Kingdom, the claim to rights—so often thought of in terms of Marx's "egoistic man, man as a member of civil society that is an individual withdrawn into himself . . . and separated from the community" (quoted in [Sharma 2006](#), 78), or critiqued as evidence of the West's focus on the individual as "the centre of the moral universe" ([Wolterstorff 2008](#), 3)—was usually discussed relationally.

Much like the human rights project, Protestant Christianity is often understood in terms of its individualism. This understanding of the person has had an impact beyond theology. In [Dumont's \(1996, 94\)](#) analysis, Christianity's emphasis on the individual in relation to God was a key contributor to the emergence of the "essentially non-social moral being" as the carrier of modern society's "paramount values," although he notes that the "outworldly" individualism of early Christianity took many centuries to develop into its contemporary "inworldly" form ([Dumont 1996](#), 95; cf. [Mauss 1938 \[1996\]](#); [Shanahan 1992](#); [Weber 1905 \[2005\]](#)). Indeed, because of the relationship between Christianity and the development of individualism in the industrialized world, there is a sense in which the grounding of human rights in bounded individuals could be said to have its roots in Christianity ([Freeman 2004](#), 387–89; [Wolterstorff 2008](#); cf. [Moyn 2010](#); [2015](#); [Sherwood 2012](#)), even if the rights deemed to flow from being created in God's image have been inconsistently applied to those outside of Christendom ([Sharma 2006](#), 185).

As such, one might imagine that the individualism of rights discourse and the individualism of evangelical Christianity were easy bedfellows. It is this narrative that I have sought to disrupt. By focusing on the individualism/relationalism binary as it is deployed in discussions of rights-based Christian-interest litigation, I have offered an account of Christian subjectivity that emphasizes the connection between local expressions of the good and macro-level shifts in the state's regulation of religious practice. The congregation's reflections on the (il)legitimacy of relying on rights-based law, which stress the value of gospel-spreading relationships over

and above legal claims, suggest the complexity of evangelical personhood even in markedly individualist contexts like the “lost city” of London (Strhan 2015, 31). Such an account requires an understanding of the theological tools available to build these categories—that is, self and other, individual and relational—even as it acknowledges the agency through which these categories are contested. As Girish Daswani and Jon Bialecki rightly put it, “Questions of personhood are not quantum grids constituting fixed and mutually irreconcilable positions; nor are they entirely plastic flows, capable of taking any form whatsoever” (2015, 273).

Yet these micro-level community reflections cannot be understood in abstraction from the broader legal context in which they occur. Rather, as I have argued, they can be usefully framed as evidence of changing churchstateness, “the interpenetrating and mutually constitutive forces of religion, law and politics” at work in contemporary England (Johnson, Klassen, and Sullivan 2018, 3). Through the lens of churchstateness, it becomes clear that the relationship between English Protestantism and the law—a relationship that stretches back to the sixteen-century establishment of the Church of England—is in a state of flux. Since the coming into force of the Human Rights Act 1998, which enshrined the right to religious freedom in a domestic statute, Christianity occupies two slightly contradictory regulatory roles. It cleaves with Crown power as the nation’s established faith, yet it is also governed by rights-based law (just like any other “religious” position). Under this regime, Christianity is made relative twice over: first, in relation to other religions; but second, in relation to the other “protected characteristics” recognized in antidiscrimination law.

In a context in which “religion”—even *established* religion—is recognized alongside intersecting (and occasionally competing) identitarian characteristics such as ethnicity, race, gender, and sexual orientation, many evangelicals have come to feel that religious freedom is a right increasingly likely to be “trumped” (Donald, Bennett, and Leach 2012, 82–83).¹² This suggests that some evangelicals experience English law’s ostensible efforts to increase protection for religious beliefs and practices—the long transition from the “passive toleration” of religious difference to the “active promotion” of freedom of religion as a human right (Sandberg 2011, 192)—as a dilution of their religious liberty. Rejecting one’s rights in the name of others may be both an ancient Christian trope and a contemporary evangelistic crusade, but it is also, I would argue,

¹²It is worth highlighting a difference, here, between UK and US case law. Although the US Supreme Court has not been unwilling to rule in favor of Christians claiming “conscientious objections,” most notably in cases such as *Burwell v Hobby Lobby* (2014), the UK courts have been unprepared to grant these exemptions.

a reasoned legal strategy—one rooted in both local theological concerns and a shifting church-state framework.

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