Université de Montréal

Paradoxical Commitments
Evangelicals, Muslims, and Relational Authenticity in the American Bible Belt

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Abstract

In the past decade, a movement among American evangelicals has emerged that is highly critical of fundamentalist theology and social conservatism. Recently, these evangelicals have garnered national attention through their perhaps unexpectedly positive outlook on immigration and religious diversity. This research focuses on an evangelical church in Nashville, Tennessee whose members seek "authentic relationships" with Muslim immigrants. I discovered that my informants' moral inclination to evangelize their Muslim neighbours was complicated by their desire to acknowledge and respect religious diversity. Paradoxically, they articulated their respect for religious otherness as the most effective means by which to evangelize in the long term. In this thesis, I describe these competing commitments—evangelism, on the one hand, and the acceptance of difference on the other—as a paradoxical situation called a double bind (Bateson 1972). I observed that for my informants, living double bound can contribute to significant changes in religious beliefs and social behaviour as they recognized and attempted to navigate different levels of sociability, namely between their in-group values and norms of religious exclusivism and the perceived values and norms of religious pluralism in their broader social context. Some epistemological issues in the anthropological study of religious pluralism are discussed.

Keywords: anthropology of Christianity; evangelicals; inter-religious relations; authenticity; cosmopolitanism; pluralism; conviviality; immigration; United States

Résumé

Aux États-Unis, les chrétiens évangéliques (*evangelicals*) sont souvent associés à la théologie fondamentaliste et au conservatisme social et politique. Cependant, depuis quelques décennies, un mouvement au sein de ce groupe religieux tente de transformer la relation entre la spiritualité conservatrice et l'engagement social dans la société. Récemment, ces évangéliques ont attiré de l'attention à l'échelle nationale pour leurs perspectives positives vis-à-vis l'immigration et la diversité religieuse. Cette recherche porte sur une église évangélique à Nashville, au Tennessee, dont les membres cherchent à développer des « relations authentiques » avec des immigrants musulmans. J'ai découvert que l'inclination morale de mes informateurs d'évangéliser les musulmans est devenue compliquée par le désir de reconnaître et de respecter la diversité religieuse. Paradoxalement, ils ont articulé leur respect de l'autre comme étant une composante essentielle à leurs efforts d'évangéliser dans une perspective à long terme. Dans ce mémoire, je décris ces engagements concurrentiels—d'un côté l'évangélisation et de l'autre côté la reconnaissance de la différence—comme une double contrainte (Bateson 1972). J'ai observé que ceci fait partie d'une tentative de reconnaître et de naviguer différents niveaux de sociabilité. Plus spécifiquement, ils naviguent les normes et les valeurs de l'exclusivisme évangélique et celles du pluralisme religieux dans le contexte social en dehors de leur groupe. Quelques enjeux épistémologiques de l'étude anthropologique du pluralisme religieux sont discutés.

Mots clés : anthropologie du Christianisme; chrétiens évangéliques; relations interreligieuses; authenticité; cosmopolitisme; pluralisme; convivialité; immigration; États-Unis

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Introduction

Sunday Morning in Nashville, Tennessee

It was Sunday morning in Nashville, Tennessee. I tossed my field notebook in the passenger seat of the car before straightening my back to tuck in my shirt and align my belt. I had about ten miles to drive to get to a church in the suburbs just outside of the city. A few months earlier, I had seen a local news piece about an evangelical pastor who was encouraging his congregation to become friends with Muslim immigrants. A few months before that, President Donald Trump was sworn into office and quickly attempted to fulfill his promise to sign an executive order which during the campaign he repeatedly referred to as a "Muslim ban". It was reported that over 80% of evangelicals voted for Trump, and so I was curious to hear what this pastor had to say.

I was on my way to the late morning service that started at eleven o'clock. The roads out of town were quiet. Hundreds of cars filled the parking lots of each church I passed. During the 20-minute drive I counted 23 steeples, even seeing a line of four in a row. As I continued along the highway, the neon trim of an art deco cinema marquee flickered in the distance, just barely visible behind the digital billboard of a roadside gun store and shooting gallery. "DEFEND YOURSELF", the billboard read above an image of an instructor helping a woman to train her eye down the sights of a pistol. Around the bend, a tall, bronze-coloured statue of Nathan Bedford Forrest, a lieutenant general in the Confederate Army and founding member of the Ku Klux Klan, signalled that I was about to exit Nashville's city limits and enter the neighbouring suburbs. I pulled off the highway and merged onto a major thoroughfare lined with corporate headquarters, upscale shopping centres and, again, more churches. The early morning services were about to let out, and so the road was dotted every couple hundred yards by patrol cars from the local sheriff's fleet. The light racks atop the cars flickered in anticipation of the imminent release of thousands of hungry worshippers on their way to Sunday brunch.

As I pulled into the church, welcome banners directed me to the guest lot, a vast expanse of asphalt that wrapped around the back side of the complex. Pickings were slim near the main entrance, but I found a spot not far from the side doors, squeezed in between a couple of luxury SUVs. A slim hallway lined with photos of Kenyan sunsets and dark, African faces wearing grateful smiles led me to the main worship hall. The lobby outside was teeming with activity. The sign at the refreshments counter was inviting, and so I helped myself to a cup of complimentary coffee. I felt a tinge of guilt as I stirred in a shake of powdered creamer. The feeling reminded me that I was not a member of this community. I was a stranger, but I meandered around the lobby in total anonymity, just another white face beneath a clean haircut and atop a straight shirt and khaki pants. In the corner was a set of display tables advertising the church's overseas missionary and evangelism efforts. A dramatic image from a mission in an "undisclosed location" in Africa that "is very hostile and violent to Christians" showed a local man being baptized by full immersion in a barrel of water. That year, the caption praised, the church had participated in over 400 conversions worldwide. On the very next page, a mission coordinator recalled the success of recent development projects in another part of Africa, "I'm in a constantly conflicted state about non-profit work and short-term mission trips. It's harmful when we think we're 'saving' these people from something. True, authentic, person-to-person relationships where each person listens to the other are the only true way to make a difference". The juxtaposition of these apparently disparate perspectives on mission caused me to do a double take as my eyebrows twitched in confusion.

With about five minutes until the beginning of the next service, I filed into the main hall. An elderly lady welcomed me at the threshold and gleefully handed me a brochure containing that week's community bulletin and the program for the worship service. A glance at the brochure revealed that last week's offerings alone totalled nearly $50,000. I found a spot at the end of a pew towards the right side of the hall as families and individuals slowly filled in the gaps. The late morning service was considerably more youthful than the 8:30 crowd, but still showed a fair mix of generations. Of the almost 1,500 people that would line the pews that morning, nearly everyone was white except for a handful of African American worshippers and the adopted children of several young families. Flanked by two jumbo screens that slowly cycled through images of shining celestial light, the church band was fully assembled on stage and was waiting patiently for the pews to fill. Directly above the stage was the centrepiece of the hall: a

smooth, dark-stained wooden crucifix that hung by thin cables and almost appeared as if it were floating. A simple white cloth sash laid over the cross's arms, carefully draped from behind. At the worship leader's cue, everybody stood and the service began with a series of songs. Light, fluttering drums and the determined strums of an acoustic guitar provided a steady rhythm while the electric guitar's melody gently swelled. The lyrics opened up, "I am surrounded by the arms of the father, I am surrounded by songs of deliverance". When the mounting vocals met the guitar in crescendo, so too did the congregation, and the hall became consumed with collective praise for the divine. The words of the chorus celebrated, "I'm no longer a slave to fear, I am a child of God". Some people rocked softly from side to side with their heads tilted back and eyes closed. Others tilted their heads downward, their eyes clenching in concentration. Several worshippers raised their arms up high and slowly pumped their elbows to the rhythm. Later that week, I was telling a friend about my experience at the service. Although not a particularly devout man himself, he was born to the daughter of missionaries and was familiar with the scenes of Christian worship, "Oh yeah, there's always a few of those people putting their antennas up", he told me.

A powerful, stern-looking man probably in his 60s stood in the row in front of me. His left arm was extended out from a pastel-coloured polo shirt and it swayed gently back and forth. His hands were rough and his wedding band squeezed his stubby ring finger as his pinky reached a bit further out than the rest. His brow was furled and his eyes were clamped shut as he tightly mouthed the words to the song. It looked as if he was on the verge of tears. He seemed uncharacteristically fragile for such a severe man and he appeared to momentarily surrender his confident Southern masculinity to the paternal embrace of the Lord, "My fears were drowned in perfect love, you rescued me, and I will stand and sing", the song continued. As I watched that man, I once again felt like a stranger, but this time more like a trespasser. I was in a space where believers openly experience an emotional transcendence as they convene and communicate with their god in worship. It is a sight that for the uninitiated like myself is almost uncomfortably intimate.

After the worship, the pastor began his lesson. At tall man surely over six feet, he gracefully floated up to the centre of the elevated stage. He held a copy of the New Testament in his hand and spoke into a microphone headset with gentle but confident voice. He opened with a few jokes about the Nashville hockey team's poor performance in the playoff game the

night before. And then he got serious. That month, his sermon series had been from the Book of Revelation. He had talked about the apocalypse, evangelism and the eternal destiny of the soul after death. Surely, this is not light subject matter for evangelicals. “I’m going to say at least one thing that’s going to offend someone in here today. I’m hoping for two or three, but I’ll settle for one”, the pastor said as he primed the crowd for a provocative lesson. “Heaven is not whatever you want it to be. If you don’t like diversity, you’re not going to like heaven! Heaven is not the country club next door. And if you’re subtly racist, heaven is going to do business with you…” What was going on here? Here I was in the bastion of conservative America listening to a white evangelical pastor poke at the ribs of his wealthy, predominantly white congregation. He continued on dispelling what he saw as the all-too-common fear-based interpretations of the nature of heaven and hell and the tendency of “hard-headed American exceptionalism” to project its own image onto the story of Jesus. He regretted the pastors that “rail against Islam” and the Christians who “rightly believe in judgment but mistakenly think that they can be the judge”. Would the graceful God he knows condemn someone to eternal torment? Would Jesus exclude someone just because they believed different things? The pastor left these questions hanging in the air as spiritual food for thought. He concluded with a reminder about the Christian’s essential role in the world, “You not only want to stay as close to Jesus as you can, you want to take with you to heaven as many people as you can, and you don’t have the time to think about who’s going to be there”.

Research Problem and Questions

When the pastor implored his congregation to acknowledge diversity, he was not just alluding to the long history of race relations in the South. He is on the advisory board of a local community organization whose primary mission is to build friendships between Muslim immigrants and Christians in Nashville. He has written books about it and over the past few years has made the rounds on Christian radio and as a guest speaker in other churches and on interfaith panels. In a time when suspicion and fear of Islam have a tight grip on many evangelicals, prejudice and even violence against Muslims are rife in Tennessee. His congregation is trying to rethink the relationship in a way that “breeds harmony and not hate”.

Evangelicals are predominant in Tennessee, but they have typically been absent from interfaith circles or efforts to engage religious others without trying above all to convert them. So why is this pastor encouraging his flock to go out and "to take with you to heaven as many as you can" while at the same time lifting the Great Commission's urgency by telling them, "to not think about who's going to be there"? I spent three months sitting in on church services and interfaith dinners and having conservations with both this church's leadership and ordinary members. Throughout my time with this group of evangelicals in Nashville, I heard similar messages full of curious contradictions. Both the leaders and the laity spoke of the fundamental importance of evangelism, but awkwardly acknowledged that there was an infringement inherent to its practice; they said they make a point to be intentional about evangelism around non-Christians while at same time desiring "genuine", unconditioned friendships with them; they were supportive of their Muslim neighbours right to worship freely, but truly saddened when they reflected on the eternal destiny of the "unchurched[1]". The presence of these contradictions suggested that the people that I met in Nashville were attempting to inhabit an uneasy space for spiritually conservative Protestants. Somewhere they became committed to taking a hands-off approach to what is normally a very hands-on process of constructing and cultivating social relationships with religious others; nurturing them towards the desired goal of personal conversion.

This ethnography is about a group a deeply reflective and self-conscious people who feel compelled to enter into the lives of others with the intent to see them transformed, but, paradoxically, seek to respect, and even to validate otherness in order to be more effective in bringing about that transformation. It is about a quest for authenticity in both spiritual and social life. In recent years, a rapidly growing phenomenon among American evangelicals has emerged in which cultural critique, political progressivism and socially focused theologies lead the way. Although they often eschew labels, a growing stream of "progressive" (Gasaway, 2014) or "emerging evangelicals" (Bielo, 2011b) is becoming more visible in American society. Uniting them is a longing to be unencumbered by the social anxieties and compulsions of the conservatism that they feel prevent Christianity from "being good news" for others. Similarly,

[1] This expression is common in evangelical circles and it refers to all non-Christians. « Church » in this sense does not only refer to the institution but to the Christian faith itself

my informants seek to be the harbingers of that message by pursuing "genuine friendships" with non-Christians. In such friendships, they pursue a type of relational authenticity (Meintel forthcoming) in which the perceived authenticity of their religious life and practice is reflected and validated through their social relationships. For my informants, a key element of this relational authenticity is a posture in which religious otherness is accepted and respected through attempts at mutual understanding and an avoidance of the pressure to convert to Christianity as a condition for social acceptance. They have begun to think that if their relationships are primarily driven by the project to bring about conversion, they will lose the mutual respect that makes them meaningful and "real". However, they do not so easily ignore the divine command "to make disciples of all the nations", the reminder that outreach to non-Christians must have an ultimate purpose. At times, their faith is in as much risk as their friendships because the very process of rethinking the nature of evangelism can lead to uncomfortable doubts and sharp criticism from within their own religious community. In this way, I suggest that for my informants, the quest for relational authenticity can lead to what anthropologist Gregory Bateson described as a double bind; or a precarious situation in which all recourse for action involves risk and potentially negative consequences (1956). It is a double bind of feeling caught between conflicting messages of exclusivism and acceptance, intentionality and spontaneity, infringement and respect. For some people, the dissonance that results from living double-bound is welcomed as an intellectual and spiritual tension that serves to strengthen their faith and broaden their social networks. For others, it can be confusing, uncomfortable and burdensome, even leading them down the road of deconversion.

I conducted my fieldwork in Nashville in order to explore the nature of this apparent paradox of commitments as it was illuminated through evangelical discourses on interreligious contact with Muslim immigrants. Located in an area of the American southeast aptly named "the Bible Belt", the region's ambient religiosity is a social fact that permeates both the public and private lives of the people who live there. The growing foreign-born population and the ever-increasing intensity of debates around Muslim immigration and the compatibility of Islam and "the American way of life" are the inescapable backdrop for interreligious relations in Nashville. Muslims in Tennessee have been greeted by their evangelical hosts in a variety of ways including intimidation, violence and aggressive attempts to convert them. Some evangelicals, however, have chosen a different approach. By "seeking commonality without

denying each other's particularities" and developing common objectives such as "the flourishing of the city", the people I met are attempting to break the mould that has for so long dictated that their only expressed interest in out-group sociability is to win converts. On one hand, their doctrine compels them to honour the golden rule of hospitality and welcome their embattled Muslim neighbours. On the other hand, the question of how exactly they are supposed to do that becomes problematic when their pursuit of an elusive unconditioned welcome conflicts with their heritage of fervent evangelism. I suggest that these efforts evidence not only a rupture with predominant in-group expectations for social engagement but also with prevailing outside assumptions that a heightened sense of religious exclusivism is fundamentally incompatible with cosmopolitan pluralist notions of conviviality. Why has this group become so concerned with relational authenticity and how does the pursuit of it affect their spirituality and sociability? Moreover, if these changes are in part a response to rising diversity from immigration, what could they reveal about the ways in which religious pluralism is imagined and lived by religious groups who would seem not to have such pluralism as their objective?

An Overview of the Thesis

In Chapter 1, *Finding the Right Angle*, I will describe how I came to focus on the research questions for this thesis and the methodological approach I used to guide me through the many unexpected turns the project took along the way. This includes an outline of the research methods, a discussion about my personal relationship to the field site and the intersubjective nature of the encounters with my informants. In Chapter 2, *The Paradox of Being Genuine*, I will present the theoretical framework for this research, suggesting that my informants' quest for authenticity in social relationships can lead to a paradoxical situation in which they are unsure how to manage the social expectations of conflicting value systems between their religious group and the diversifying social environment around them. I will describe this as a double bind, a concept that comes from the systemic interactionist tradition of the Palo Alto school. I will then lay the historical groundwork leading up to the contemporary ideological split among American Protestants. Beginning first with a definition of the religious, social and in many ways political category known in the United States as "evangelicals", I will present a short

history that focuses on the different ways in which American evangelicals have imagined out-group sociability. Specifically, the rivalling perspectives on the place of proselytism and the pursuit of personal conversion in social engagement with the other will be discussed. My hope is that this background will provide some relevant context for understanding the views and tensions expressed by my informants in the field regarding interreligious relations. In Chapter 3, *New Neighbours in the Buckle of the Bible Belt*, I will present Nashville as the research site in more ethnographic detail and with a brief history of the encounter between Christians and Muslims in Tennessee. This will lead into a description of Raven Hill Church and its leadership's and congregation's role in local interfaith circles. Evangelical communities have typically been absent from interfaith efforts in Nashville, and so Raven Hill's recent involvement has added a layer of complexity to local conversations on the matter. In Chapter 4, *Evangelist or Friend? Double-bound by Intentions and Expectations*, I will take the reader into the in-depth conversations that I had with members of Raven Hill as we discussed their experiences with interfaith outreach and social relationships. Their spiritual and social tensions and insecurities will be described in detail through their own words as well as the vision of the pastor who encourages his congregation to take such risks. Finally, in Chapter 5, *Can Evangelicals Be Pluralist?*, I will remain close to the conversations with my informants, however this time I will focus on their views of religious pluralism. I will highlight the ways in which they recognize and negotiate between different contexts of sociability and propose that this recognition is perhaps a minor but significant change in evangelical sociability. This final chapter will conclude with a discussion about this change's implication on how we (in the social sciences) imagine and define religious pluralism.

Chapter 1: Finding the Right Angle

Introduction

The city of Nashville, Tennessee offered itself as an interesting context for this research. In addition to its Bible Belt characteristics, over the past decade, the city and surrounding region has experienced a rapid and significant increase in cultural and religious diversity due to immigration and refugee resettlement. The reaction has been split between the city and its suburban and rural environs where since the September 11th terrorist attacks, Muslim communities have received exceptionally high levels of negative attention. In the past ten years especially, high-profile crimes and violence against the state's Muslim communities have been the backdrop for an intensifying xenophobic rhetoric that paints Muslim immigration as a direct threat to Christian dominance and Islam as incompatible with "the American way of life" (Tennessee Immigrant & Refugee Rights Coalition, 2015).

However, in the eyes of many who live there, Nashville has been able to cultivate a seemingly safer, more accepting environment than the surrounding area. The city's religious character is highly pronounced and it is not muffled when it comes to public discourse on immigration and hospitality. Just as references to scripture often serve as the vehicle for the fear and rejection of Muslims, they are commonplace in the rhetoric of evangelicals who view their new Muslim neighbours as an opportunity for evangelism. Christian religious rhetoric about immigration in Nashville focuses largely on compassion and sympathy for the plight of refugees, for victims of prejudice and for the difficulties of adapting to life in a foreign land. It is common for churches to motivate their congregations to get involved in intercultural and interfaith relationships by volunteering with local immigrant and refugee service organizations. Although some evangelical communities are involved in these service efforts, the absence of this diverse majority group is palpable in the circles/networks of Christian and Muslim interfaith organizations in particular. For those evangelicals who are already engaged, their discourse on immigration is replete with religious messages of social justice that are part and parcel of an effort to intentionally demonstrate to new non-Christian neighbours what they believe is the uniquely positive and transformative message of Christianity. What seems to result is a

paradoxical discourse that permeates socially engaged evangelical circles whereby the recognition and acceptance of religious diversity are embraced as part of a clearly articulated effort to increase the effectiveness of evangelism.

1.1 Going with the Flow

In order to document this discourse on immigration and inter-religious relations in a way that suited the limited scale of this project, I focused on a single suburban evangelical church called Raven Hill Church of Christ. At the time of the research, the leadership there had been engaged in activities with both interfaith organizations and refugee and immigrant service organizations for several years. Although that church and its members were the primary interest of the research, I also attended interfaith activities/events and conducted exploratory observations and interviews at both liberal and conservative churches around the city. The research period spanned five months from February through June 2017. This included two months of pre-arrival online surveying of potential field sites in Nashville and solicitation of informants by email and telephone during February and March 2017. I arrived in Nashville on April 1, 2017, and returned from the field on June 27, 2017.

The research's questions and focus evolved significantly during the pre-fieldwork phase. Using an inductive analytical approach (Olivier de Sardan, 2008), I allowed the field to challenge and modify my categories and hypotheses in a way that preserved the research's core questions but led me to explore them in different and sometimes unexpected contexts. The inductive emphasis not only allows for flexibility in the field, but also elevates the presence of the researcher as an important element in what is fundamentally an intersubjective encounter between the researcher and their subjects. The centrality of intersubjectivity here constitutes an approach to fieldwork in which the production of knowledge is recognized as taking place in the very moments of the encounter itself (B. W. White & Strohm, 2014). This subjects the analytic framework to real-time changes over the course of multiple encounters. While this is different from some more deductive approaches in which frames of analysis are elaborated beforehand and deployed in the field in order to support or contest certain variables and

concepts, both are valid approaches to production of social science knowledge[2]. At the core of this research was an interest in the paradoxical commitments I perceived to be at play among evangelicals who attempt to position themselves favourably in the face of religious diversity while remaining devoted to the evangelization of religious others. My impressions of the competing elements that constituted the paradoxical relationship between evangelism and the acceptance of diversity changed significantly from my first encounter with an informant to the last as certain preconceived notions of their religious beliefs and actions were challenged by what I was hearing and learning. While the trajectory of these changes to the general plan will be described in this section, I will return to this point later in this chapter when I discuss the research methods I used once I had settled on the right angle.

Initially, my research was interested in the how such evangelicals reconcile their commitment to evangelism with their role as impartial social service providers to non-Christian refugees and immigrants. I wanted to see how the progressive Christian rhetoric against proselytism and moral pressure was perceived by volunteers and if it translated into specific actions and behaviours. In November 2016, I established contact with employees at the local branch of a federally funded refugee resettlement organization affiliated with the National Association of Evangelicals. The staff were receptive to my requests to accompany their volunteers during interactions with refugees. Unfortunately, the chaotic political climate in the United States following the 2016 presidential election threw the organization into disarray. The federal refugee resettlement programme was targeted as part of the January 27th, 2017, executive order clamping down on immigration. With the suspension of the programme, federal funding was slashed and the office I had been communicating with announced it was shutting down operations and would close in the following months. My contacts became less and less responsive before finally informing me that they would no longer be able to accommodate the presence of a researcher.

At that point, I had the option of keeping the research plan mostly intact and shifting my site to Memphis, Tennessee where the local office of the same organization would remain open. However, as an unexpected consequence to this sudden shock to my research plan, I discovered

[2] While both the deductive and inductive approaches are utilized in sociology (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2014), anthropology's heritage of thick ethnographic and experiential descriptions have favoured the more inductive methods

that there was a nascent effort in Nashville to bring evangelicals into interfaith dialogue activities with local Muslims. I was intrigued by the idea of doing observations in such a context. I came to see that removing the Church/State tensions present in government-funded service situations could allow me to study the core paradox at the heart of my research questions and in a context free from external ethical controls. In other words, I could better explore the core claims of the progressive evangelical position on the acceptance of diversity, namely the claim that they *want* to be accepting and not that they just *have* to be. It would be a great opportunity for observing evangelicals in a context where religious apologetics, a staple of the evangelical social posture, were meant to take the back seat to open questions, listening and attempts at mutual understanding of the other.

In early February 2017, I discovered an evangelical pastor in a local news piece about Christian and Muslim relations in Nashville. The video featured the pastor's efforts with a small interfaith organization of which he was on the board of advisors. I contacted the organization and they were very excited to hear that I was interested in their work. They agreed to let me participate in their interfaith dinner activities. At the same time, I contacted the pastor and he, too, was enthusiastic about my research. He said he would be happy to meet me for an interview and to help plug me in to the interfaith circles in Nashville. I decided that I felt comfortable enough with the potential for this new interfaith angle, and so I committed to it.

Once in the field, I began observations at the pastor's church, but focused primarily on the interfaith dinners. After a month or so, I had observed all of the dinners scheduled during the research period and only met a handful of evangelicals. The vast majority of participants were from mainline Protestant or Catholic traditions. I would later come to see the embryonic state of the interfaith programme despite the presence of a large Muslim population in Nashville for over 40 years as an important piece of contextual data. However, due to the limited number of dinners scheduled during the research period, I realized that it was not the best context in which to study my target demographic. I decided it would be better to shift my full attention to the pastor's church where I could more reliably find participants who were members of an evangelical community whose particular discourse on interfaith relations I could follow more closely.

In the end, the decision to focus primarily on a single church and on the personal stories and perspectives of its members allowed me to step back and take account of what I found to be

a spectrum of evangelical beliefs and postures about interfaith relations. As the contours of the progressive evangelical phenomenon began to appear in front of me during interviews and observations, the inductive approach helped me to be more comfortable going along for the ride instead of continuing to contrast what I was hearing with my certain preconceived notions of the discourse and behaviours that I had expected to hear and see. This is not to say that "going along for the ride" was itself a comfortable experience. I distinctly remember the feeling of slight panic after my first interview. Although it generally went well, it broke significantly with my expectations for my informants' religious convictions to be in clear-cut contradiction with their views on diversity. My preconceived idea of what constituted certain evangelical positions were directly challenged. For example, after that first interview in which an informant told me that they "don't believe in the fires of hell," I thought to myself, "Oh no, I've totally missed the mark. These people are just liberal Christians, what am I doing here, there's no double bind here!" That feeling stimulated me to question my preconceptions and how they played a role in framing my interview questions. This type of reflexive response happened to a certain degree after each encounter, slowly refining or reformulating the way I approached the core aspects of my research questions. After having returned from the field several months later, I sat down to analyze that first interview and it ended up being one of the model examples I used in this thesis for describing the phenomenon I had set out to document.

1.2 Finding the Right Church

There are hundreds of evangelical Protestant churches in Nashville and extensive Christian faith-based social networks that link people across communities and denominations. My primary criteria were that the church be part of an evangelical tradition and have outreach initiatives directly interested in Muslim communities in the city. Many churches send members to local immigrant and refugee resettlement organizations where volunteers often interact with religious others (including Muslims), however I was looking for efforts that go beyond service relationships. I searched church websites and local interfaith networks and decided to settle on Raven Hill Church, a church located in an affluent suburb of Nashville and that is part of the conservative Church of Christ tradition. The Churches of Christ are a denomination that,

although not united by a central governing body, have a common social history and theological heritage (see Chapter 3). In Nashville (and in Tennessee more widely) the Southern Baptists are the predominant Christian denomination; however, the Churches of Christ play an influential role in the local cultural and religious landscape. One of the leading universities in Nashville is affiliated with the denomination and the region of Middle Tennessee has the highest density of Churches of Christ in the United States.

Raven Hill Church is a large congregation of roughly 1,800 members. The congregation is predominantly white and there are a handful of people from other ethnic backgrounds (including African American, Latino and east Asian)[3]. The congregation had been constituted for nearly 90 years and had a reputation locally for the breadth and success of its social ministries, with its tripartite mission being to "Reach up" (worship), "Reach in" (community) and "Reach out" (evangelism). If the weekly offerings were any indicator, the community benefits from significant financial contributions from its members (during the research period the average weekly offerings amounted to some $40,000). It is also known locally as "a progressive community" whose habitual line-stepping within the Churches of Christ has attracted ire from sister churches and praise from mainline Protestant communities. Its leadership's decisions regarding theology, liturgy and social engagement have been featured multiple times in local newspapers. The head pastor had come to Raven Hill from the American Midwest about a decade earlier, where he had also been engaged in urban interfaith work. In our conversations and in his books, he explained that he sees the tensions with Muslims as one of the most pressing and important issues for Christians in America today. My conversations with him in chapters 3 and 4 will reveal more about his theological approach and experience in interfaith dialogue. One hot-button issue is the church leadership's public commitment to engage in interfaith relations with Muslims, something upon which many local Churches of Christ look with a mixture of bewilderment and scorn. It almost seemed like a microcosm of the larger picture of interfaith relations in the city. I had found the right church.

[3] In a conversation with one African American member, he commented jokingly on how « white the church is » and how his family was very surprised that he decided to join a white church, saying that churches in Nashville remain largely segregated. He estimates he is one of about only 15 African Americans at the church

1.3 Finding the Right People

In this section, I will outline the participant inclusion/exclusion criteria, explain my strategy for recruiting participants, and describe the final study group. The solicitation and recruitment of participants began via email several months before arriving in the field and continued via email, telephone and in-person communication throughout the research period. The most important inclusion criteria for my core study group were that participants are members of Raven Hill Church and are intentionally involved in interpersonal relationship-building activities with Muslims. Such relationships include friendships, interfaith dialogue activities and social assistance to Muslim immigrants and refugees. During the fieldwork, the criteria were slightly widened from active *involvement* to active *interest in involvement* because several participants were active in church conversations about interfaith relations but had not yet interacted with any Muslims.

Although I was conscious of having a relative gender balance in my core study group, my research questions did not dictate that a specific gender be targeted over another. The gender balance of the Raven Hill group ended up in a slight favour of men due in part to the preponderance of men in church leadership positions. I also did not have a strict idea in mind regarding the age of the participants. That being said, my literature review on the subject of progressive Christianity led me to expect most of the people I would find to be in their 20's and 30's. The existing social science literature shows primarily university- or young professional-aged upper middle-class Christians that inhabit non-traditional religious spaces. Christians identified as "progressive evangelicals" or "emergent evangelicals" often have a profile that includes rejection of their conservative evangelical upbringing, an emphasis on personal Christian spirituality and a pursuit of new forms of practice (Bielo, 2009, 2011c; Chia, 2010; Harrold, 2006). These unorthodox "new Christianities" include intentional communities (rural and urban), multi-site congregations that meet in different venues such as school gymnasiums and "pop-up churches" that meet in bars, cafes and public parks. My findings build upon the existing literature in some regards, however the choice to ground my research at Raven Hill, a traditional religious institutional context, resulted in a wider age range of participants, and thus broke with my expectation for a younger group. Although it was not intentional from the

beginning, this allowed me to explore the progressive phenomenon both within the confines of an established evangelical tradition/institution and in a context in which the views of people from different generations were reflected. My analyses in this thesis do not focus on this generational aspect, however it is worth mentioning how it differs from other studies on progressive evangelicals that do focus on this (see Bielo, 2011; Chia, 2010; Harrold, 2006).

When it comes to the recruitment technique that I used, I have chosen to favour the term "referral sampling" over the commonly used term "snowball sampling". Although they are similar, the former better illustrates a targeted search within existing social networks rather than an emphasis on random selection. In a context like Nashville, the Christian religious landscape is simply too vast and too complex to approach from a random selection perspective, especially considering that conservative evangelicals are predominant there. My objective was to penetrate and stay within a traceable social network of informants (Figure 1). First introduced by sociologist Douglas Heckathorn (1997), the "respondent-driven" approach was developed in order to more effectively recruit participants among hidden populations. These include populations involved in illicit activities (ex. sex workers, drug traffickers, etc.), that have vagrant lifestyles (ex. the homeless) or people who are participants of social movements (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004). This approach puts an emphasis on a "network perspective" that builds on the social relationships of existing participants. Here, I embrace this network perspective. However I prefer not to use the terminology "respondent-driven" because it could imply that my research had a collaborative element that was not present. Although I followed leads (referrals) from respondents, I did not put the participant search entirely in their hands; in this sense, they did not "drive" the recruitment.

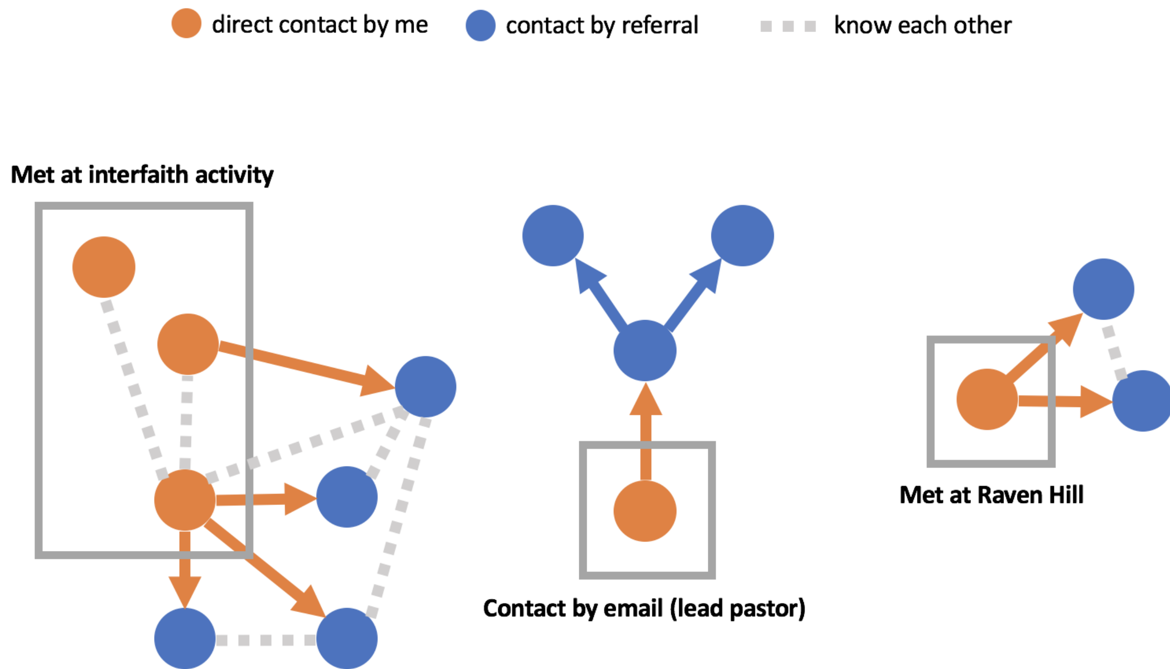

Figure 1. This network map describes the referral sampling method used to recruit the core participants in this research.

The referral approach was helpful for this research not only because the target demographic could be considered participants in a social movement, but also because many people that could be considered "progressive" intentionally eschew political or denominational labels. It is a sort of rhetorical appeal to the universality of Christian identity and a statement of allegiance to an idea that is perceived to be above and beyond culture and politics (Bielo, 2009). I commonly heard people refer to themselves simply as "Christian," "a follower of Jesus" or "a Jesus-person." People that I spoke with also tended to add qualifiers that seemed to portray certain social postures: humility ("I'm a self-conscious Christian"), confidence ("I'm unapologetically Christian") and self-criticism ("I'm barely Christian"). Although there are some churches that market themselves publicly as "progressive" or "inclusive" communities, so-called progressive evangelicals can be found in many different evangelical Protestant denominations, such as in the case of Raven Hill. In general, the avoidance of labels (although itself a social marker) and the potential for membership in a wide variety of church communities give progressive evangelicals the characteristic of Heckathorn's "hidden populations". When it comes to the recruitment of participants, had I just sent a snowball rolling I would surely have

amassed a disjointed group of participants. Although my recruitment context was narrowed by the choice to focus primarily on a single church, even within Raven Hill there was still significant internal diversity when it comes to the social, political and theological positions of its members. Raven Hill is rooted in a very conservative tradition, and so I was just as likely to meet a conservative member as I was a progressive. Also, due to the large size of the congregation, “referral sampling” allowed me to meet members who were likewise active in intentional outreach to Muslims.

In the end, I conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with a total of 19 participants. The number is comprised of what I will call core participants and secondary participants. My initial goals for the total number of participants changed throughout the fieldwork as the circumstances dictated that I pivot from the interfaith dinners (with no particular emphasis on a single church) to Raven Hill as my primary context. By the time that I decided to do so, I had already conducted a half-dozen very interesting interviews with people connected to but outside of Raven Hill. I determined that a goal of 15 Raven Hill members would allow me to build a solid core of participants whose experiences would be diverse enough to compare and contrast not only with each other but also with perspectives from the broader socio-religious environment. The number is in part reflective of the research approach that favours in-depth discussions and thick ethnographic accounts of the thought processes and experiences of my informants. It was also determined based on a desire to have mostly lay members but also several members of the church leadership. I wanted to be able to compare the articulated vision and mission of the church as it pertains to interfaith relations to the way in which that vision and mission were understood and perceived in the general population. Due to cancellation and rescheduling issues with several participants, I was only able to interview a total of 14 people from Raven Hill (three leaders and 11 lay members). However, I was able to comfortably determine that I had reached saturation with those 14 core study group participants. A table containing the basic demographic profiles of the core participants can be found in the Appendix section. When it comes to Muslim participants, I conducted interviews with five people whom I met during interfaith activities that were attended by Raven Hill members or through direct referral from Raven Hill members.

In conforming with the information and consent form signed by my participants, their names (and in some cases the genders and other demographic details of their profile) have been

changed for confidentiality purposes. All changes were considered for their ethnographic relevance and due to the potentially recognizable social networks of my informants, some details have been withheld. Also, the names of the churches (including Raven Hill), organizations, street names and some geographic indicators have been given pseudonyms.

1.4 Data Collection

I used three data collection methods in this research: participant observation, individual semi-structured interviews, and the compilation of secondary sources (documents and media). I conducted participant observation at Raven Hill Church where I attended a total of six Sunday services during the research period. I would arrive around 15 minutes prior to the service and hang around the lobby area outside of the main hall where coffee was served and people arrived and visited with each other. Although I was able to strike up some short conversations with people when I attended the services alone, I was more successful meeting people once I began interviews with members who offered to introduce me to others. During the services, I followed an observation guide and paid attention to the general ambiance, basic demographics of the people present, people's expressions and behaviour during worship, the liturgy, and the content of the sermons. A copy of the observation guide for the church activities can be found in the Appendix section.

I also conducted participant observation during interfaith activities. I attended five private interfaith dinners, three public faith-based activism events and one private interfaith organization meeting. I arranged my attendance at the private dinners by contacting an interfaith organization that was created several years earlier by a group of Muslims in response to the intensifying negative rhetoric and violence in Tennessee. It has the primary goal of spreading awareness about rising diversity in Nashville through casual group activities involving people from diverse religious, cultural and social backgrounds. The interfaith dinner programme was relatively new, having only been established two years prior to the research period. They were held either in the private homes of volunteer hosts who invited members of their community (ex. church/school/family) to meet and engage in conversation with local Muslims whose attendance was recruited by the organization. The dinners, which were facilitated by a

representative of the organization, typically lasted for two hours and were attended by between eight and 16 people. The facilitator initiated and guided the conversations with questions that encouraged the participants to ask each other questions touching on a range of topics from day-to-day life to deeper questions about religious beliefs and cultural practices[4]. The public events I attended included a banquet-style event that was organized by the same interfaith organization as the private dinners; a Christian "faith leaders round table" organized by another church[5]; and a benefit gala organized by the city's leading Christian faith-based medical clinic that primarily serves immigrant and refugee communities[6].

Although the participant observation was essential for getting an idea of the social contexts in which people representing evangelical traditions were and were not present when it comes to interfaith outreach, it was also important to have in-depth discussions with my participants so that I could learn about their religious history, their views on religious pluralism and their social experiences with Muslims. Conducting individual semi-structured interviews seemed like the best approach for gaining these insights. Of the 19 people with whom I conducted semi-structured interviews, 17 consented to audio recording. I transcribed the audio recordings for analysis. Most interviews lasted around 90 minutes, with some being between 30 minutes and 60 minutes depending on the availability of the participant and on the abundance of their answers. The interviews took place in various locations (cafes, public libraries, churches, and private homes) that were mostly determined by the participant[7]. Before starting each interview, I presented my project to the participant, summarized the information and consent

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[4] During the dinners, I followed an observation guide and paid attention to the general ambiance, basic demographics of the participants, people's expressions and behaviour, and the content of the exchanges (topics of conversation, what did Christians want to know/learn about Muslims, what did they share about themselves, etc.). A copy of the observation guide for the interfaith activities can be found in the Appendix section

[5] The event focused on developing approaches to more effectively create awareness in local congregations about the increased deportation of unauthorized workers under new federal and state-level immigration laws.

[6] I found out about all these events through local contacts that I had established via email or telephone both prior to arrival and during the fieldwork period

[7] Inviting the participant to choose the location opened the potential for more data collection as their choice was sometimes indicative of the social spaces they frequented. For example, nearly half a dozen participants recommended we meet in local coffee shop that doubles as an evangelical charity whose profits fund development programmes overseas

form, allowed them as much time as they needed to read it and ask questions, and finally had us both sign it[8].

As for the structure of the interviews, I took a page from anthropologist Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan who speaks of a "conversational approach" as one of the most effective and participant-friendly ways in which to conduct an interview. He describes this interactionist perspective on interviews as one in which open-ended questions encourage narrative answers from participants and do not attempt to extricate or deny the researcher's participation in the interaction (Olivier de Sardan, 2008). In a similar fashion to what anthropologist Michael Agar describes as a game of question and response (different from a rally of questions and answers) (1982), this also allowed for a flow to be established in which I could request clarifications, reformulations and elaboration by my informants without being too clinical. This approach seemed appropriate for this research in part because of the potentially sensitive nature of the main topics. Also, such open questions are designed in order to elicit the participants' subjective meanings in a way that actively contributes to the reformulation of questions and the discovery of new lines of inquiry for future interviews. This was important in this research because I did not want to assume to know the participants' responses in advance and end up with overly "contrived" data that sought more to support my initial hypotheses than to reflect a dynamic social phenomenon. During interviews, the sequencing of the questions varied depending on my read of the situation at the time and I tried my best to reduce the feeling of a clinical interview.

As Olivier de Sardan explains in his work on the intuitive nature of qualitative research, the field is a fundamental training ground for the researcher who, although not resigning to navigate it simply by "the right feeling", has to adapt to the respondents' seemingly natural resistance to prefabricated questions and frameworks (2008). I felt it worked best to offer personal stories about myself and I encouraged the participants to ask me questions in return and to think of our meeting as more of a conversation than a dry rally of questions and answers. Some participants were naturally more open and comfortable, sometimes voluntarily diving into

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[8] I allowed them as much time as they needed to read through the form and ask any me questions pertaining to the project. We both signed the information and consent form and I provided them with a copy to keep, highlighting my contact information should they have any questions or concerns in the future. I created 2 different interview guides, one for Christian participants and another for Muslim participants. These guides as well as a copy of the information and consent form can be found in the Appendix section

sensitive topics such as struggles with faith and other personal histories. Others were more reserved and I found it best to begin with basic demographic information and slowly ease into more sensitive and complex topics. Since one of the primary objectives of my research was to explore an apparent paradox, I could not shy away from addressing it directly. I had to take the risk that some questions could potentially be perceived as undue challenges or "gotcha questions". At the same time, I did not want my attempts to cushion harder questions to be perceived as clever trickery or bait-casting. Sometimes the participants' answers were so short and dry that I feared that I had triggered their defences, while other times I was myself taken off guard by their intellectual honesty and what I felt were unexpectedly candid descriptions of internal thought processes, political and religious beliefs and accounts of past and present behaviours. The interviews were neither unguided conversations nor quests for total precision. By previously committing to an inductive analytic approach, I tried not to be bound by the expectation of having totally clear-cut answers to each of the topics I wanted to explore with the participants.

When it came to the Muslim participants, I aimed for a similar conversational approach. However my questions were of a different nature than those with Christians. Interviews with Muslims were interested in building a context around what I was hearing from Christians. I focused primarily on their experiences as a religious minority in Nashville, encounters with prejudice or discrimination and their social relationships with Christians. An underlying claim of the progressive evangelical discourse on interfaith relations is that religious others can trust that they will not be subjected to moral pressure or any type of coercive attempts at evangelism. It was important to get an idea of whether or not, why or why not, Muslim participants trusted that their evangelical friends not only respected (or seemed to respect) their differences on an individual level, but also, and perhaps most importantly, that they would be there to advocate for their rights in public social and political spaces.

Finally, in addition to participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I collected documents and information from a variety of sources. This method was important in allowing me to familiarize myself with American Christian perspectives and subjects of interest related to interreligious relations and current events (particularly the progressive streams). Although I was able to immerse myself to a limited degree in the worship and religious activities of my informants on Sunday mornings, they were all people with their own lives, jobs and activities

that were dispersed across social and geographic spaces that would have been impossible to follow closely. At the most context-specific level, I collected weekly pamphlets and other community announcement flyers from Raven Hill Church. These documents contain a multitude of information about church life and regular activities. Also, I read and analyzed theological books and other published writings by members of the church leadership, several of whom are lecturers or professors at a local evangelical university. Throughout the research period, I followed local newspapers such as *The Tennessean* and did research into past news stories and reports related to immigration, interfaith, and Muslim/Christian relations. In order to get a feel for the scope of the national Christian discourse on interfaith relations, I regularly monitored progressive Christian media sources including *Christianity Today*, *Sojourners*, and *Red Letter Christians*. From these sources, I was able to identify recurring themes and prominent voices in the progressive evangelical community.

I also created a Twitter account and monitored the posts of various Christian news sources, theologians, and pastors, both local and national. Immersing myself in the national Christian media universe during the research period helped me to better understand the relevant social, political and theological issues from a Christian perspective. As the fieldwork progressed, I began to recognize the names of the theologians and authors that participants would sometimes reference during interviews. This exposure also helped me to learn the language with which evangelicals describe their life experiences and talk about social and political issues[9]. As time went by, I was able to better understand my interlocutors and pick up on key words and expressions that led to deeper questions and more elaborate answers during interviews. I arrived at a personal pinnacle of this exercise in local familiarization towards the end of the research period when I began to sincerely laugh and feel a sense of understanding behind the comedy of a Christian-themed satirical online newspaper called The Babylon Bee[10], a site that seems to rather evenhandedly lampoon the idiosyncrasies of both conservative and liberal Christians.

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[9] Referred to by some as "Christianese", some linguists have recently taken an interest in the study of evangelical language and expression as a "religiolect" (going in a different direction from Susan Harding's language-focused analysis of fundamentalism). In fact, as some researchers have noted, it is not only a matter of different words but also syntax (preposition choice, phrasing, etc.). See Sarah Leiter's piece "Christianese: A sociolinguistic analysis of the evangelical Christian dialect of American English" available on the open source site academia.edu

[10] The site appears to be modeled after the popular satirical online newspaper *The Onion*: http://babylonbee.com/

1.5 “What’s *your* faith background?”

Whether I first met them in person or was referred to them via email, I contacted all of the participants by email in order to arrange the interviews. As part of the email exchange, I sent a description of my project and the types of things I wanted to talk about during the interview. I wanted to make sure that the participants knew what they were getting into and that they would not be caught off-guard by questions about potentially sensitive topics. Usually, the first response I would get to my invitation message was a question about my own religious identity: “Can you tell me a bit about your faith journey?” or “What’s your faith background?” I had a couple of different reactions to these questions, and both had to do with intentions. My more sensitive side led me to think reflexively about how the participants might perceive of *my* intentions. If I was a professed Christian, would they trust me more with their opinions and reflections? If I was not, would they feel uncomfortable and withhold their true thoughts and feelings, doubts and uncertainties? Had they talked to non-Christians about interfaith relations before and felt judged or misunderstood? On the other hand, my critical (and sometimes frankly cynical) side led me to be suspicious of *their* intentions. I was well aware of the diversity of approaches that many evangelicals adopt in order to “reach the skeptics.” There is an entire evangelical literature that talks about how to adapt evangelism to be more effective “in the postmodern world.” If I was not a professed Christian, would I just be an opportunity for evangelism? Perhaps naïvely at first, I did not think that the answer to that question is almost surely “yes,” and I was in Nashville precisely to discover the nuances of my respondents’ thoughts on evangelism. However, the underlying concern was that my otherness would distract or cloud the conversation. Would they prune and adapt their answers in order to impress me with a veneer of intellectual critique? In the end, it is the very management of evangelistic intentions and their effect on trust in social relations that were at the heart of my research, so I would have to acknowledge my own feelings of trust and, really, “authenticity” in their answers, as part of my analyses.

I felt like I had to more consciously check my critical side in order to really see this phenomenon, particularly given the secular and even anti-religious discourses (especially around Christianity) that are prevalent in academia. The mainstream representation of

evangelicals portrays them as backwards, bigoted or in other ways constituting what anthropologist Susan Harding has described as the commonplace representation of conservative religious groups as the "culturally repugnant other" (1991). In some discussions with other students and faculty during the development of this research project, I was warned (albeit at times jokingly) about "falling for their trickery," "going native" or being duped by their clever rhetoric into misinterpreting as openness what was really a coercive ideological persuasion. Whether or not such comments were made in jest, they are revealing of the particular space into which we venture when we study religious phenomena and discourses (and particularly Christianity, see Robbins, 2006) and the perception of our work by others in academia.

It was in the face of the "faith journey" questions that I really came to see just how intersubjective these encounters would be. I could not (and decided that I should not) attempt to extricate my own identity from my interactions. For the reader's information, I had a non-religious upbringing in a home with parents of Jewish and Protestant heritage. I do not personally identify with a particular religious tradition and do not hold a religious worldview. Perhaps I could have used parts of my family history to feign a generic Christian background in the hopes of avoiding what I suspected were the evangelistic intentions of my informants. But then who would I be to sit there expecting openness and honesty from them without returning the same? After all, I set out to study how evangelicals interact with religious others, so why would I want to contrive the conditions of my own encounter by attempting to remove or diminish my own difference from them[11]? I have to admit, however, that my responses to the faith journey questions were not uniform. I became more comfortable and got better at communicating my position each time somebody asked and as I got a feel for how much it did or did not affect the interviews. In the earlier responses, I was still working out how and what to say, and so would shoot for what I thought was the most neutral position. I would say that I was "agnostic" or "had an agnostic worldview." This was not untrue, but it was also not the best response because I came to learn that many of my informants' ideas of "agnostic" were not quite

[11] Scholars studying religious groups have argued that being up front about one's own position is not only important for building a rapport of confidence between the researcher and the informants, but also because it can lead to valuable data, particularly when the group studied is one for whom religious identity is an important aspect of sociability, such as is the case for evangelical Christians (Mossière, 2007b)

the same as mine. I had thought that I was expressing a stable and comfortable condition of living with a non-religious worldview[12] and also that, personally, I do not feel compelled to associate collectively with other non-religious people under the moniker of "atheist." However, it quickly became clear that what many of my informants heard when I said "agnostic" was that I was "on the fence." In this way, I did not want to mislead my informants to think that I was "a seeker." I eventually settled on being more direct about the fact that I had a non-religious worldview and if they asked if I was an atheist, I would sometimes accept the label for simplicity's sake. I would always mention my family's mixed religious heritage in an attempt to avoid them thinking that part of my life history involved a rejection of religion or of Christianity in particular. I did not want them to think that I was either "one of the ones they lost" or that I was coming in with a political or otherwise ideological agenda that sought to intentionally cast them in a negative light. As anthropologist Deirdre Meintel explained in relation to her experiences studying spiritualist mediums:

> When the subject is religion, as Hervieu-Léger (1993, 22) has noted, there is no high scientific ground from which to speak: whether one is religious, without religion, or worse, has left religion (*défroqué*), one can be accused of having a built-in bias (Meintel, 2007a: 136).

I wanted above all for my informants to see that my curiosity to learn about their perspectives was real, but also that I was comfortable where I was and preferred to be acknowledged and respected as such. However, it was important that I reel in my critical side a bit and not let it slip into a cynicism that would in fact prohibit me from seeing the very phenomenon I had set out to study.

1.6 "Now you're getting into the *really* hard questions!"

One of the core elements of the conceptual framework of this research revolves around anthropologist Gregory Bateson's concept of the double bind (Bateson et al., 1956). Described

[12] I had been envisioning something more along the lines of what Jewish agnostic writer Lesley Hazleton has described as a "cherishing of both paradox and conundrum" and an acknowledgement of "the unknowable and yet exploration of it at the same time, and to do so with zest, in a celebration not only of the life of the mind, but of life itself" (Hazleton 2016: 21)

in detail in Chapter 2, I use this concept to describe the situation in which competing commitments to evangelism and to the acceptance of religious diversity pull my informants in opposing directions when it comes to how they imagine their actions across different social contexts. My pre-fieldwork analysis of both the wider progressive evangelical discourse on interfaith relations and the particular perspectives of the Raven Hill leadership helped me to identify key thematic elements to explore during the interviews. My objective was to encourage the participants to reflect on their personal religious convictions, perspectives on evangelism, views about religious diversity and their relationships with both Muslims and non-Christians generally. Although the double bind is a cognitive phenomenon, the focus of this study is concerned primarily with its social elements rather than those of more of the psychological or neurological nature. I tried to identify the double bind by paying attention to and noting social and discursive cues that revealed cognitive dissonance in the participants' statements. For this reason, chapters 4 and 5 include long excerpts from my interviews that are meant to temporarily immerse the reader in my informants thought processes, with all their redundancies, pauses and contradictions included[13].

However, the content of their statements proved not to be the only indicator of the double bind. An important characteristic of the double bind is that it interrupts an individual's thought process resulting in a dissonance that can cause discomfort or confusion (Wittezaele, 2008). In my analysis of the interviews, I lean on the contributions of anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell, an occasional collaborator of Bateson and the pioneer of kinesics, or the study of non-verbal expression in human communication (Winkin, 2001). When I asked participants questions that seemed to provoke a cognitive dissonance, they would often respond by saying things like "That's a *really* good question," "Now you're getting into the really hard questions," or "I'm going to have to think about that for a minute." These verbal hesitations were accompanied by long pauses, sighs, softening of the voice, leaning back in the chair, and breaks in eye contact that would sometimes drastically alter the pace and fluidity of the conversation. Some participants exhibited palpable strain and stuttered as they attempted to recover from a logical

[13] Naomi Quinn has written on discourse analysis methods in anthropology and its importance to studies whose framework examines a cognitive element as part of the observed phenomenon (Quinn, 2005). She talks of discourse analysis as a means by which to apprehend "cultural meanings that are implicit in what people say, but rarely explicitly stated" (ibid: 4)

hiccup that they would sometimes themselves acknowledge. In this way, I approached the interviews from both thematic and structural analysis perspectives (Riessman, 2005), paying attention not only to *what* was said, but also *how* it was said. The relevance of these non-verbal elements will hopefully be illustrated if I am at all successful in the descriptions that accompany the interview excerpts in chapters 4 and 5.

1.7 Being Local

It is important to address the question of being local, as I grew up in Nashville and this fact certainly had an impact on the fieldwork. While I did not frequent religious (and particularly evangelical) circles during the time that I lived in Nashville and I do not identify personally with the religious group studied in this research, I was unavoidably surrounded by and exposed to evangelical culture and politics during my upbringing. This familiarity with evangelical people certainly had an influence on my research perspective and my intuition about some elements of the social phenomenon documented in this thesis. Referred to as "autoethnography", the trend of studying subjects that are "closer to home" emerged in the wake of the anthropology's "crisis of representation" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). During this period of skepticism and questioning of the discipline's colonialist heritage and its objectivist epistemological assumptions, many ethnographers began to see the importance of not trying to extricate their own identities from their analyses. Part of this included a trend among researchers to turn their analytical eyes onto themselves or onto communities with which they had close ties. This autoethnography has been described as having a particular methodology and process that "accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on the research" by incorporating insights that emanate from the researcher's closeness to their subjects (ibid. 275). While some scholars feel that emotionality has taken too central of a role in many autoethnographies, it is all-the-while important to recognize that fieldwork in familiar locations or among one's own cultural group can be very different from that of more detached observers and can result in the researcher "having more of a stake in the beliefs, values and actions of other setting members" (Anderson, 2006: 383).

In this particular situation, my "being local" was not quite a case of autoethnography in the sense that I was studying a cultural group to which I do not belong or share many important core values and beliefs, despite my familiarity with the group. In other words, I was not doing research "on my own group." That being said, my familiarity with Nashville (its social histories, politics and culture), did play a role in how I navigated the field. Although I no longer reside permanently in the city, I maintain close family and friendship ties to it that do give me a certain personal stake in aspects of the sociopolitical environment, including a sense of personal investment in helping to revolve the type of intercultural/interreligious conflict that forms the backdrop of this study. In this way, my identity as a citizen of Nashville (albeit a relatively removed one) looking for ways out of social conflict is a factor that could be said to have an impact on my perspective.

In addition to these deeper considerations, my familiarity with the research site came with some practical advantages. I knew the layout of the city very well and was thus able to navigate easily, pick up on references in my informants' interviews (high schools, neighbourhoods, etc.) and also relate to my informants through a shared knowledge and understanding of the local context (history, politics, etc.). If my being local detracted at all from the fieldwork, this would probably be in the sense that I had to perhaps more intentionally than in other fieldwork environments hone my attention to things that I might otherwise look past (elements of the social, religious and political context that had become normal to me through extended experience living there). This, however, was tempered to a degree by the fact that I had not lived permanently in Nashville for nearly 10 years by the time I returned for the fieldwork.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described the methodological approach I used in this research and the intersubjective nature of the fieldwork. By favouring an inductive approach, I was able to explore a changing field while at the same time conserving the core interests of my research questions. My decision to settle on a single church, Raven Hill, allowed me to focus on the discourse and practices of a community who was taking its first steps into the world of interfaith

outreach. In the next chapter, I will present the conceptual framework of the thesis and will discuss in more detail how my informants quest for relational authenticity contributes to a paradoxical situation in which they attempt to navigate between the value worlds of their in-group and the diverse social environment around them.

Chapter 2: The Paradox of Being Genuine

Whether we like it or not, authenticity, as a motivating force in the modern world, is here to stay.

Charles Lindholm (2013)

Introduction

Authenticity was a recurring theme in the conversations I had with my informants. They routinely used words such as "real," "genuine" and "authentic" when describing their prospects for interreligious social relationships. They would describe authentic relationships as ones that were not conditioned by the pressure to convert in order to be recognized or accepted. Paradoxically, however, they would explain how that same authenticity helped to create the most favourable conditions for what they hoped would be the eventual evangelization of the other in the long-term. My attention to the concept of authenticity in this research is not an attempt on my behalf to prove or validate the authenticity claims of my informants nor is it to demonstrate that my informants' social relationships are indeed authentic or are more or less authentic than others[14]. Instead, I aim to identify and describe my informants' pursuit of a relational authenticity (Meintel forthcoming), asking how they view authenticity in social relations, why it is so important to them and what effect it has on their sociability. In the first section of this chapter, I limit my attention to the perspectives from which authenticity has been approached in the anthropology of religion, and particularly in the study of Christianity[15]. In the second section, after situating my interactionist perspective within the relevant literature, I will bridge the concept of relational authenticity with the central problem that I suggest it poses for

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[14] I try to avoid what Dimitrios Theodossopoulos has called "the trap of authenticity" in which researchers studying authenticity attempt to critique (in)authenticity claims and end up falling into the very constructed polarity that they the intended to confront in first place. Theodossopoulos considers this trap to be one of several "anthropological dilemmas" regarding authenticity (2013)

[15] If, as Charles Lindholm has suggested, anthropologists have since the emergence of the discipline been in search of authenticity in the other that we claim to have lost in ourselves and in our own worlds (2002), I should mention that this particular research is not about *my* quest for authenticity nor to propose a definition for it. To do so would be for a very different kind of thesis and it would require a far more rigorous literature review of the philosophical contributions of eminent thinkers behind our contemporary conceptions of authenticity (such as Taylor, Beaudrillard, Trilling and Lindholm, if only to mention a few)

my informants: the double bind, a concept developed by anthropologist Gregory Bateson in the context of a series of collaborations with colleagues in the field of psychiatry and social psychology in the 1950s. As I will attempt to explain in the following pages, my informants' quest for a relational authenticity can lead to situations in which they are unsure how to act in order to satisfy the competing commitments to both unconditioned and evangelical sociability.

2.1 Towards a Relational Authenticity

Scholars have approached authenticity on several different levels, from the doctrine-authenticating prerogative of religious institutions to individual religious experience and the relationship between spirituality and sociality. Beginning on the most macro level, sociologist and religion scholar Peter Beyer has described the role of institutional authority in authenticating religious beliefs and practices. In Christianity, for example, institutions like the Catholic Church and the various governing bodies of the Protestant denominations serve as centres of power from which the guidelines of official doctrine and practice emanate; followers look to these institutions as the guardians of authentic religious tradition. However, that does not guarantee that they are stable in that role. According to Beyer, contemporary phenomena such as migration and diaspora have affected the legitimating power of those authorities, diminishing the importance of power centres whose authenticity was previously assumed by their location in the geographical cradles of tradition (i.e. Rome or Jerusalem) (1998). Institutional Christianity's attempt to dictate what does and does not constitute pure tradition has been continually challenged not only from within as with Protestant Reformation and other theological movements, but also by the religion's own insistence on expansion and evangelism. Beyer points out that the official torchbearers of Christian religious tradition have necessarily brought themselves into interaction with other religions and cosmologies that they have sought to evangelize. Over time, this has required authorities to figure out ways in which to incorporate indigenous cultural characteristics that greatly differ from its Western and European heritages (ibid.).

Building on Beyer's contributions, sociologist Meredith McGuire describes how, historically, although the Catholic Church has integrated numerous pagan elements into its

rituals and cosmology (i.e. solstices and the Roman cult of saints), it has all the while fought to control which elements are accepted in an attempt to maintain its legitimating prerogative (2008). The Church has exerted this power by denouncing religious hybrids and "unauthorized syncretism" that it has deemed unacceptable, and particularly in colonial non-European contexts (i.e., the veneration of certain idols in Cuban Santeria). As McGuire explains, it is not surprising, then, that many theologians came to view syncretism negatively and as a "watering down" of pure Christian tradition, a question that is still highly contested today. In this way, a resistance to religious hybridity, or anti-syncretism, has also become a hallmark of religious authenticity. I would suggest that, similarly, the anti-institutional Restorationist Movement among European and American Protestant fundamentalists (such as the Churches of Christ) articulated its objective as quest to reconnect with the "authentic" and "primitive" Christianity that the movement's leaders saw as having been corrupted by human cultural influences (Hughes, 1996). In this way, both for institutional authorities and anti-institutional fundamentalists, the acknowledgement of the extent to which divinely ordained religious traditions have been influenced by human cultural change risks "demystifying the sacred" (McGuire, 2008).

However, thinking beyond the imperatives of official doctrine and notions of "pure tradition", McGuire calls on anthropologists to consider the diversity of the "lived religion" exhibited by groups and individuals. She describes how both historically and today many groups actively borrow from multiple religious resources, despite the assertions of illegitimacy from religious authorities. The prevalence of religious hybridity and intentional "bricolage" has in many ways transferred the authenticating power not just to the non-institutional group level but also to the individual level. Today, this individual autonomy (or at least non-institutional autonomy) over religious cosmologies and practices has become the hallmark of modern authenticity. Sociologist François Gauthier eloquently described this "subjective turn" in contemporary religiosity as a result of the heightened individualism associated with consumerism and a "culture of authenticity" in Western societies (2012). Although Gauthier's study is situated primarily in Quebec, a context whose religious landscape is unique in its recent history of rapid and aggressive secularization, his observations about the diminishing relevance of religious authority over spiritual and social life are particularly salient. He describes a "symbolic market" that offers vast resources for spiritual bricolage and a contemporary culture in which the pursuit of individual happiness and self-fulfillment seems to eclipse the institutional

conformity formerly associated with religion. In this way, authentic religion becomes something that the individual validates based largely on their own criteria for physical, spiritual and social wellness, seamlessly combining more traditional forms of (western) religiosity with practices such as meditation, yoga or spiritualist healing (ibid).

Perhaps the most subjective expression of religious authenticity can be seen in those who seek experiences that provoke personal emotive and physical sensations as markers of authentic spirituality. The jubilation and exuberance of Pentecostal worship dances, spiritual gifts and alter calls (Mossière, 2007a) and the tingling touch of otherworldly beings channelled by spiritualist healers (Meintel, 2007b) have the visceral emotive and physical sensation of embodiment that connect the individual to the divine. Anthropologist Thomas Csordas went a step further and spoke of "somatic modes of attention," calling on researchers to embrace embodied sensations as a unique form of knowledge. For example, the somatic experiences, or felt bodily sensations, of charismatic Catholic ritual healing were to be considered not just as trances but as intersubjective experiences that speak to the "cultural patterning of bodily experience" (Csordas, 1993: 141). For him, it was not just an acknowledgement of the importance of bodily sensations to his informants' perception of religious experience, but it was also a methodological approach that saw "embodied experience [as] the starting point for analyzing human participation in a cultural world" (ibid. 135).

Despite the trend towards more individual forms of religiosity, Gauthier reminds us that the subjective turn has not however led people to withdrawal from the social aspects of religious life. On the contrary, he describes contemporary religiosity as "highly relational," and although it is no longer as dependent on institutional arbiters of tradition, it is strongly concerned with the social recognition of one's identity by others:

> Si la modernité est en partie émancipation à l'égard des traditions, de la société et des institutions, elle est également une injonction à la négociation constante avec les autres. D'où l'apparition des discours et des théories sur la *reconnaissance*. L'identité exprimée exige une validation, une légitimation et donc une reconnaissance par les autres ou par une instance du social (2012: 104, italics in the original).

In this way, people are more and more often seeking to have their religious or spiritual beliefs and practices acknowledged as legitimate and authentic by their peers and by society at large. With the help of sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger, Gauthier suggests that the simultaneous

quest for individual affirmation *and* social recognition creates a paradoxical situation in which authentic religiosity, emanating both from within and without, is at once dependent on the autonomous self *and* on the receptiveness of the other:

> L'identité nécessite une altérité à laquelle se confronter et se constituer: « c'est le jeu de la reconnaissance qui permet que s'assure, dans l'échange [comme validation mutuelle], la stabilisation des significations individuellement produites et leur possible socialisation » (Hérvieu-Léger, 2001: 109 in Gauthier, 2012: 104).

One of the most interesting examples of this turn towards an emphasis on authenticity in social relations has been studied by anthropologist James Bielo. His research on so-called "emergent evangelicals" in the United States is among the first in the discipline to focus on the youthful, intellectual class of evangelicals, and particularly those with a penchant for theological liberalism and social progressivism. Bielo describes emergent evangelicals as having a "deep-seeded desire to be authentic" (Bielo, 2011: 18). Their personal narratives commonly include a hard-fought emancipation from a conservative upbringing and they express strong critiques of dogmatic biblical literalism and the megachurch culture that has come to epitomize American evangelicalism (Bielo, 2012). They seek a more intimate and authentic spirituality that they define in opposition to the shallow spectacle and exaggeration of concert-hall worship (Bielo, 2011c). For many emergent evangelicals, authentic Christianity is hindered by the what they observe as the consumerist rat race of their middle-class conservative background. By "living simply" in intentional communities, practising contemplative prayer and focusing on cultivating relationships with one another, they "respond to this cultural critique by creating structures of experience intended to produce a highly relational religiosity" (Bielo, 2012: 270). They commune in private homes, engage in a thriving online community and plant their own churches. According to Bielo, relationality has always been a central theme in evangelical religious practice, however, for these emergent evangelicals, relationality goes beyond the recital of verses in small-group Bible study and embraces a monastic type of close-knit living that seeks to breed "authentic relationships".

Bielo situates the emergent evangelical pursuit of spiritual and social authenticity in anthropologist Charles Lindholm's analysis of the prevalence of authenticity discourses in contemporary Western culture. Instead of focusing on the emic evangelical perspectives of what

constitutes “the postmodern era,” Bielo suggests that the different ways in which emerging evangelicals pursue authenticity are best understood as reactions to the broader social and cultural conditions of (late) modernity, and particularly to the feeling of estrangement associated with urban industrialism. Anthropologist Deirdre Meintel has linked this emergent evangelical shift towards intimate and proximal living to her own research on French Canadian spiritualists whose religious practice they claim serves above all to “improve social relations” both within and without their religious group. Meintel and her colleagues in Montreal have extensively documented the coexistence and friction between the different “regimes of authenticity” discussed in this section (Meintel, 2014). While acknowledging that all forms of religious authenticity have important social components, she has recently called on researchers to pay attention to this emerging “social dimension” of authenticity characterized by an increasingly expressed interest in having spirituality and religious experience correlate to positive transformations in social life. Meintel describes this type of connection between spirituality and sociability as a form of “relational authenticity” (Meintel, forthcoming).

Perhaps Gauthier would agree with Bielo’s observation that authenticity has become a significant facet of social and religious life, and in the case of many Christians, it is apparently above all a definition of authenticity that is akin to Protestant notions of sincerity and genuineness. It is not just about genuine spiritual experience but also, and very importantly, about the genuineness that gets expressed in one’s everyday interactions. Anthropologist Webb Keane documented the Protestant emphasis on sincerity in his study of Indonesian converts to Christianity[16] (Keane, 2002). His research corroborates the link that other scholars have made between modernity and authenticity, and he suggests that it is not so surprising if we take into account the Protestant origins of the widely shared definitions of the modernity itself[17]. In his ethnography, Keane frames the cultural change of his informants as the adoption of the Protestant “representational economy” and its imbedding in their everyday practices. He draws similarities between the common scholarly conceptions of what constitutes “becoming modern” and the religious conversion of his informants. In addition to adopting ideological orientations

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[16] See also (Robbins, 2004, 2017) for a fascinating discussion about the impact of Christian religions conversion on cultural change

[17] The relationship between Protestant values and the definition of the modern subject was famously revealed and critiqued by Max Weber (Weber, 2002 [1905])

regarding the relationship between the past and the present and an emphasis on individual agency, the pursuit of a self-conscious sincerity becomes central to social life. It is a sincerity that is "contingent upon practices" and recognized "in an endless series of socially grounded affirmations" (ibid 79).

It is not surprising, then, that my informants in Nashville so often invoked the idea of sincerity and authentic relationships. However, instead of focusing on the type of deep in-group social relations sought by the evangelicals studied by Bielo, I focus specifically on evangelical out-group sociability and their pursuit of relational authenticity with religious others. By seeking a form of relational authenticity that is demonstrated through openness and the acceptance of religious difference while at the same time upholding the moral importance of evangelism, a conflict of values emerges. My informants seemed unsure how to simultaneously validate the competing values behind evangelism and the acceptance of difference. In the next section, I will attempt to illuminate this tension by turning to anthropologist Gregory Bateson's concept of the double bind.

2.2 The Double Bind

In order to illustrate this authenticity paradox, I turn to the concept of the double bind. It is the situation of being stuck between multiple competing messages all of which require action and in which any available action taken can result in undesired consequences. Unlike a contradiction, which would be an incoherence within one system, the paradox of the double bind emanates from the encounter and misunderstanding between different systems each of which has norms and codes for informing action. The double bind is applicable to the study of human social phenomena in a sense that is far broader than the confines of its origins in psychotherapy[18]. In order to make the case for this, it is important to first look back at the context

[18] The double bind was originally developed as a theory for explaining schizophrenia. By viewing the disorder from a systemic perspective, it was conceptualized as a confusion regarding the interpretation of messages (on both verbal and non-verbal levels) by both the schizophrenic patient and those with whom they interact socially. In this way, the schizophrenic patient was not viewed only as experiencing cognitive difficulties that were entirely internal, but instead as also experiencing communicative and relational difficulties/incoherencies to which the non-schizophrenic subjects with whom they interacted contributed (Bateson et al., 1956)

in which the concept emerged. It was first presented in 1956 by anthropologist Gregory Bateson and his colleagues during the seminal conferences of the Palo Alto school. The Palo Alto school brought together anthropologists, linguists, psychologists and cyberneticists in a multidisciplinary collaboration. The communication of messages through interconnected channels and feedback loops became the inspiration for the fundamentally interactionist approach that Bateson and his colleagues would embrace in their search for a new way of studying human social dynamics. Bateson was later inspired by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy and the development of general systems theory, which emphasizes the relations between separate elements that constitute a structured whole, or system. Systems theory has become a sort of meta-perspective that applies to a wide range of disciplines from biology and physics to political science and sociology. Its use in sociology has favoured spatial metaphors such as in the Chicago School's analyses of urban social dynamics with concentric circles or zones (residential, industrial, etc.) and Wallerstein's famous world-systems theory with its core-periphery model (White & Côté unpublished manuscript). Bateson's use of systems theory was particularly interested in the interaction between systems and he sought to develop a more widely applicable theory of communication (ibid.). This led to multiple interdisciplinary collaborations that culminated in the Palo Alto conferences.

The Palo Alto school proposed that this systemic perspective could be useful for understanding not only human cells and the functioning of machines, but also human behaviour in social systems. However, it is important to note that the application of the systemic perspective to human social dynamics does not imply a reduction of human behaviours to the automated nature of machines or computers. Instead, the systems theory's grounding in the study of the interaction and interconnectedness of all of the components of a system whole allows for a comparable theoretical approach when applied to human sociality (Marc & Picard, 2006). In this way, Bateson sought to understand human behaviour not only as a result of isolated, internal processes, but instead as the result of interactional and communicational phenomena, and he did so primarily by viewing the family as one such relational system

(Wittezaele, 2008)[19]. When it comes to my informants' paradox, this perspective takes account of its cognitive nature, but focuses primarily on its emergence in and through social interactions and the contexts in which those interactions take place.

By combining the concepts of authenticity and the double bind, I hope to offer a unique perspective from which to look at what are in many regards the ages old paradoxes of religious life and practice. I situate the paradox between evangelism and recognition not as much in a theoretical discussion about the (in)compatibility of the two hermetically sealed value sets of evangelism and acceptance, but instead as the encounter between value worlds that when constructed socially have different behavioural expectations, both of which imply recourses to seemingly opposing actions. My informants framed their reflections about spirituality and evangelism in a quest for authenticity, and particularly a quest for unconditioned friendships with non-Christians in which evangelistic intent was viewed as a hindrance to authenticity. It is my observation that this posture towards interfaith relationships suspends them in a paradox of commitments. The simultaneous commitment to evangelism and to the acceptance of religious difference requires a balancing act in which teetering too far in either direction can result in significant spiritual and social consequences. The moral and behavioural norms of their religious community compel them to place a high value on personal salvation and to intentionally engage in evangelism. However, they reject methods of evangelism that are centred around proselytism, moral pressure and the exploitation of emotional vulnerability. These are perceived to be antiquated approaches that are not effective in out-group social contexts in which religious diversity is not only a social fact but is also widely accepted. Instead, they place an emphasis on establishing "genuine" interpersonal relationships in which they are encouraged to learn from and respect the other's worldview. The relationships are to be free from moral pressure and "transactional" pursuits of personal conversion. Paradoxically, they describe this approach as being "more effective" in eventually leading to "a change in heart" and the self-elected conversion of the other. On the one hand, it can become problematic for them when the pursuit

[19] The influence of the systemic approach on mental health sciences and therapy was paradigm-shifting as it inspired practitioners to approach their patients' maladies from an inter-relational perspective as opposed to solely focusing on the intrapsychic causes of their disorders (Balas, 2008). As psychotherapist Louise Landry Balas explains, she was able to concentrate on the observable verbal and non-verbal elements of her patients' expressions and symptoms instead of trying to infer what was going on inside of their mind

of such relationships with religious others leads to spiritual doubts, and potentially leads them to question the very premise of evangelism itself. As other scholars who have studied intellectual doubt and cultural critique among evangelicals have observed, if not managed in a sustainable way, such doubts and questions can lead to a significant shift or even a loss of faith, which can in turn result in considerable social consequences within their religious community[20]. On the other hand, it can become problematic for them when the intention to evangelize jeopardizes the "genuineness" of the friendship and causes the non-Christian friend to lose trust or to feel disrespected. This loss of trust and respect not only risks destroying the potential for evangelism, but can also be hurtful to both parties invested in the relationship.

I suggest that the authenticity double bind is a form of "reflexivity-in-action" (Berliner, Lambek, Shweder, Irvine, & Piette, 2016) and my informants' attempts to navigate within it can result in an observable cognitive dissonance that they then attempt to resolve. First developed by social psychologist Leon Festinger (1957), the concept of cognitive dissonance is used to describe the human psychological tendency to calculate rationally and, in so doing, to recognize inconsistencies in thought and/or action as well as in-between thought and action. Festinger proposed that the tendency for rationality drives people to attempt to resolve dissonance when they recognize it, and they do so in three primary ways: by changing their beliefs, by changing their behaviour or by changing their perception of their behaviour. It was in part through these attempts to resolve the dissonance that I was able to observe the authenticity paradox lived by my informants.

2.2.1 A Note on the Use of Concepts from the Cognitive Sciences

Although the double bind concept was originally developed partly in collaboration with mental health scientists, its underlying focus was the development of theories of communication that could reach across disciplines. It is not at all my intention to suggest that the people I encountered are suffering from a psychological disorder. Instead, my use of the double bind

[20] The loss of faith or "deconversion" (Barbour, 1994) has been documented before in relation to evangelicals for whom the cultural critique and intellectual doubt (among other factors) is not sustainable for them and leads to either significant spiritual change or disaffiliation from their religious group (Harrold, 2006)

here is an attempt to recognize that there is indeed a cognitive element to the social situations experienced by my informants and I think that it is more interestingly studied and explained through a specific concept rather than just through the sometimes-vague trope of "paradox". The double bind describes a very specific situation involving competing injunctions and that calls on the researcher employing it to adopt a systemic approach that is meant precisely to avoid such vagueness. In his call for anthropologists to revisit their relationship with the cognitive sciences, Maurice Bloch reminds us of that "cognitive issues are not on the periphery of the social sciences" and that they can be integrated into anthropological studies without necessarily falling into the trap of reductionism (2012: 1). The marriage of the cognitive and social sciences has been successfully achieved by a number of scholars including Tanya Luhrmann's ethnography about charismatic evangelical Christians who speak to God in worship and prayer (2012) and Webb Keane's bridging of social anthropological perspectives on ethics and the psychological and cognitive factors contributing to the human capacity for ethical intuition (2015). My objective in this thesis neither claims or attempts to be anywhere near the interdisciplinary achievements of Bloch, Luhrmann or Keane. However I do hope to meaningfully apply the double bind to the social phenomenon I observed. It is a concept that originated in cognitive science but that also is firmly grounded in the group-level interactionist perspective of anthropology and sociology.

2.3 Historical Context

Before diving into the specifics of my informants' experiences in Nashville, it is important to take a step back and to give some historical background to the term that I have thus far been using to describe them: evangelical. In the remainder of the chapter, I will describe the general characteristics of American evangelicals in order to offer a functional definition for this thesis. The remainder of this chapter aims to give the reader the necessary context for the theological, social and political elements that are in play in my informants' reflections on social engagement with the other.

The story of American evangelicals that I will offer focuses primarily on the ways in which they have reacted to social change and engaged with society at large. I will pay particular

attention to evangelical activism and draw a distinction between the mission for personal morality and for social justice. The story begins in the early 20th century with a dramatic court case that epitomized the clash between religious fundamentalism and secular/liberal modernity. It split Protestants along theological and social lines in a way that would later manifest into enduring political allegiances. I then describe these allegiances and the mutual indignation that has come to characterize the relationship between conservative and progressive Christians in the United States. Since the 1970s especially, polls show that evangelicals time and time again favour conservative political candidates and they are considered the lifeblood of "the Religious Right". However, while their social and political conservatism is almost taken for granted, there is an increasingly influential progressive movement among evangelicals. The differences between the two camps are visible not just in theology but, also, and most importantly for the subject of this research, in the ways in which they imagine the role of Christians in society and their social engagement with others. In telling this brief history, my objective is to lay the groundwork for an exploration of the social and spiritual stakes that my informants in Nashville seem to contend with as they imagine their engagement with Muslim immigrants.

2.4 Identifying American Evangelicals

Today, over 70% of Americans identify as Christian, of which roughly a quarter identify as evangelical Protestant (Pew Research Center, 2017). The statistics, however, vary depending on who does the surveying. Pew Research Center, a public opinion and demographic research institute, identifies evangelicals by inquiring about church affiliation, frequency of church attendance and the self-proclaimed importance of faith in one's life. Pew's findings suggest that there are around 60 million evangelicals in the United States today, with the rest being considered "mainline Protestants" and Catholics. On the other hand, if you look to Christian research groups, you will find a significant difference in both methodology and results. LifeWay Research, a partner of the National Association of Evangelicals, does not survey with questions about church attendance or affiliation. Instead, they target core beliefs. The questions are designed to evaluate respondents based on their orientation towards four primary points that reflect the basic tenets of evangelical theology: *Biblicism* (the authority of the Bible), *Activism*

(commitment to evangelism), *Crucicentrism* (the importance of the crucifixion of Jesus as sacrificial atonement for humanity's sins) and *Conversionism* (profession of faith in Jesus as necessary for salvation). An individual scoring highly on all these points is considered to be an evangelical, regardless of whether their church is traditionally evangelical or mainline. According to LifeWay, there are between 90 and 100 million evangelicals in the United States today, or roughly 30% of the population (Leith Anderson & Stetzer, 2016). Evangelicals are the majority religious group in many areas, cities and communities across the United States, and especially in the South (Ownby, 2005).

The terms "evangelical" and "mainline/liberal" often represent the opposing categories of a persistent dichotomy in American Protestantism. In the broadest terms, evangelicals typically put a high emphasis on personal morality and piety. Informed by literalist approaches to the sacred texts, they are greatly concerned with salvation and evangelizing the "unchurched". Mainline Protestants, on the other hand, commonly approach the Bible with a more allegorical perspective (however to varying degrees), however, while maintaining a belief in the spiritual truth behind the narrative. Traditionally, they have been more concerned with the alleviation of social ills rather than personal conversion, and so their assertions about morality are more widely accommodated in American society than those of evangelicals. As historian Ted Ownby explains it:

> Evangelicals, historically, have felt a more defensive estrangement from the broader American culture while mainline groups, broadly speaking, were more at ease, or at least more at home, in their position at the centre of American culture (2005: 32).

The question of how to identify who is and who is not an evangelical remains fogged by theological disputes and complicated by socio-historical factors and political posturing among American Protestants. While denominations and traditions such as Baptist, Pentecostal, Reform, Mennonite and Adventist are all commonly considered evangelical, they are not the only churches in which evangelicals can be found worshipping. This is true especially in the South, where over three quarters of all Protestants are considered evangelical (Ownby, 2005). Denominations that are typically considered mainline in other regions of the country such as Presbyterians, Methodists and Episcopalians have a sizeable population of evangelical followers in the South. Some definitions of "evangelical" also include the characteristic of believers as

being "born again", an aspect of social and religious life that is often attributed to the fervour of evangelical spirituality and proselytism. While none of my informants described themselves as being born again, they all embraced a perspective of continual spiritual renewal as a part of their personal and social development.

The term "evangelical" is also widely recognized as code for describing conservative white Protestants in particular (Harvey, 2005). Historically, the role of evangelical Christian spirituality in the lives of white and African American Protestants reflects the disparate social realities of each group as well as the asymmetrical power relations between them. Although still today the majority African American Christians are members of evangelical Protestant denominations, they show a stark difference from white evangelicals in regards to worship style and theology as well as to the ways in which their faith is mobilized and communicated outside of religious contexts. According to some scholars, these differences are so significant as to justify that the groups each be studied as unique streams of American evangelicalism (ibid.). In this chapter, and in this thesis more broadly, I will focus primarily on the history and experience of white evangelicals.

The unique characteristics of American evangelicals emanate from a number of theological and social movements dating back to the frontier era of the 18th century and even to before the political formation of the United States. Scholars of American religion have chronicled these shifts as a series of "Great Awakenings" of which there are three that are recognized as being pivotal moments in history[21]. A rejection of institutional authority (both religious and state) was a particularly strong sentiment for Protestants on the 18th-century American frontier whose "revival" and "restoration" movements contributed to continuing friction between religion and government[22] (Hughes, 1996). The contemporary categories of "liberal" and "conservative" Protestants began to emerge in theological disputes in the late 19th century (Bielo, 2011b). In the next section, I will describe the contemporary schism between so-

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[21] The effects of the three Great Awakenings on American politics were famously/controversially chronicled by economic historian Robert Fogel. He proposed that the new streams of political Christianity in the 1960's onward constituted a forth Awakening (Fogel, 1995). However, he was not a scholar of religion and his analysis has been scrutinized for a number of reasons. Relevant and provocative as is might have been, it has not been widely accepted.

[22] This history will be expanded upon in more detail in Chapter 3 and in the context of the particular denomination of the church studied in this research (Church of Christ tradition).

called fundamentalist and modernist Christians in the United States. Taking a page from anthropologist Susan Harding's seminal ethnography of conservative Christian activism, I will begin with an event in the early 20th century called the Scopes Trial, a decisive moment when cosmological discrepancies came to a head. It was an event that in many ways foreshadowed the theological and social polarization of American Christianity that persists today.

2.5 The Great Fracture

In 1925, in Dayton, Tennessee, a high school science teacher named John Scopes was issued a fine by the State for teaching a lesson on Darwinian evolution. At the time, many Southern Christians were grappling with the growing national trend of theological liberalism, which, among other things, sought to reconcile Christian faith with human evolutionary biology. In response, conservative Protestants began to more aggressively push back against efforts to integrate faith and science (Waldrep, 2006). Just months before Scopes gave his lesson, the State of Tennessee had passed legislation prohibiting the teaching of Darwinian evolution in public schools. When he decided to defend himself in court, a legal battle erupted and the "Scopes Monkey Trial" consumed national media attention. Due to the sweltering summer heat, the proceedings were moved to the lawn of the courthouse where spectators arrived in droves and radio microphones were set up to broadcast the trial's debates across the country. It was a conflict between so-called "Fundamentalists" and "Modernists"; between authoritative, literalist interpretations of the Bible and more liberal approaches that sought to embrace scientific inquiry as complementary to the Christian spiritual worldview.

As Harding explains, although many Christians at the time purported to be "fundamentalist" in the sense that they believed the supernatural elements of the Bible to be true as written, the Scopes trial played a key role in creating the image of the capital "F" Fundamentalist that persists today. The expression specifically describes white, conservative Protestants who openly avow an opposition to liberal theology and allegorical interpretations of scripture (Harding, 2000). The trial framed the cosmological debate in a contest of logical assertions between the narrative content of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science. The fundamentalists were left appearing ignorant and stubborn in the face of scientific rationality.

After a rancorous and theatrical trial, the modernists won the day, leaving fundamentalism and Bible-believing Christians publicly ridiculed and humiliated. Conservative Protestants were henceforth thought of as simpletons and disciples of a dogmatic and combative form of Christianity that was fated to eventually die out (Waldrep, 2006). The judgment was steeped in the language of a class struggle between cosmopolitan urbanites and backwoods hillbillies (Harding, 2000).

In the wake of the Scopes trial, conservative Protestants largely retreated from public life. Although remaining very active in their own circles and focusing on evangelism, many adopted a separatist posture vis-à-vis American society. In her ethnography, Harding narrates this "fundamentalist exile" using court transcripts, news reports and other writings from the time of the trial. She oscillates between the perspectives of the trial's winners and losers to paint a vivid picture of the events and their aftermath. The reader is left with an unexpected sympathy for the fundamentalists and a stinging dose of reflexivity about the liberals' aggressive foray into the American public arena. The fundamentalists were portrayed as a stagnant, homogenous group helplessly trapped in the past:

> They were cast out of public life, marked as a category of inferior persons whose very existence required explanation. The [Scopes trial] also constituted, in and after the fact, an apotheosis of the modern gaze, its authorial point of view, its knowing voice, its teleological privilege, its right to exist without explanation (Harding, 2000: 74).

I wanted to include the Scopes trial in this chapter because the rifts that it illuminated between American Christianities reflect in some essential ways the relationship between mainline and evangelical Protestants today, and the high social stakes of association with either camp. The tone of the trial is reminiscent of what sociologist Robert Wuthnow called "the great fracture in American religion" that still cut deep half a century after Scopes when he coined the expression (1989). In 1984, the National Council of Churches, a trans-denominational social advocacy organization, released a statement summarizing liberal and conservative Protestant positions at the time:

> Liberals abhor the smugness, the self-righteousness, the absolute certainty, the judgementalism, the lovelessness of a narrow, dogmatic faith [while] Conservatives scorn the fuzziness, the marshmallow convictions, the inclusiveness that makes membership meaningless—the 'anything goes' attitude

> that views even Scripture as relative. Both often caricature the worst in one another and fail to perceive the best (Shriver, 1984: 194; in Wuthnow, 1989: 22)

When conservative Protestants finally returned to the public arena after decades of exile, their evangelistic social engagement was defined perhaps stronger than ever by the urgent mission to save America's "lost soul" and to bring about radical moral change. In the next section, I will briefly describe the explosive return of fundamentalism in the United States and the emergence of a group that began to call themselves "evangelicals" as well as the response from a group that came to be known as "progressive evangelicals".

2.6 Personal Morality versus Social Justice

2.6.1 "Reclaiming America for Christ": The Rise of the Religious Right

During the decades following the Scopes trail, the fundamentalists brooded over the liberal victory as conspiracies circulated of high-nosed urban elitists doing Satan's bidding in the spread of the "secular modernist regime" (Harding, 2000). Another split occurred in the decades following Scopes, but this time it was between fundamentalists who wanted to distinguish themselves from the isolationism of charismatic groups like the Pentecostals (ibid.). Fundamentalists began calling themselves "evangelicals" and although many remained in rural areas, they began to settle in the suburbs of American cities, creeping closer to mainstream society but staying at a safe distance from the seemingly irredeemable profanity of its urban centres (Bielo, 2011a). During the Civil Rights era, the majority of evangelicals ignored the rapidly escalating social tensions and continued to focus on proselytizing and "winning converts". Social justice issues were widely thought to be a distraction from the pursuit of personal devotion and evangelism, which many evangelicals saw as the ultimate expression of social concern (Gasaway, 2014). Some groups were so preoccupied with the eternal destiny of their souls and so passionately convicted about the negative consequences of impiety (or even worse, disbelief) that they could not bring themselves to focus on anything else but proselytizing (Holloway & Foster, 2006). In this way, they gazed from afar or in silence on what they saw as the overwhelming magnitude of sin in mainstream culture. Many evangelicals were not inclined

to engage in public life if not with the single mission to reach the “unchurched”. However, in the 1950s, as it became clear that *de jure* segregation would soon come to an end, many suburban evangelicals actively endorsed institutional racism and sought to preserve the system that guaranteed white dominance in society, especially in the South (Harvey, 2005).

For evangelicals, the cultural and social changes of the 1960s and early 1970s were particularly troubling. The country was rapidly changing as the celebration of psychedelic drugs, New Age spirituality and rock n’ roll music began to define the new generation. A new feminist movement along with the push for gay rights also fundamentally challenged traditional patriarchal family values. Also in that decade, the nation’s highest court ruled against prayer in public schools and expanded access to abortion. It was around this time that conservative Protestants became increasingly suspicious of liberal social reforms and were attracted to conservative politics (Gasaway, 2014). Indignant from past humiliations and feeling besieged by what they perceived as America’s imminent moral decay, evangelicals marched back into public life at the end of the 1970s. As Harding recounts in her ethnography, the moral crusade of Southern Baptist preacher and conservative political activist Jerry Falwell thrust fundamentalist Christianity back into relevance and recaptured the nation’s attention.

First under the banner of Falwell’s Moral Majority, and then televangelist Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition, evangelicals set out to “reclaim America for Christ”. The movement came to be known as the Religious Right and was a highly influential network of political activists that profoundly reshaped public life in America. By activating a politically dormant segment of the population, the Religious Right forced moral issues on to the national stage, particularly abortion and gay marriage. The movement’s unapologetic emphasis on personal moral reform clashed head on with the liberal Christian and secular focus on social justice issues[23]. The intensity and partisan nature of this “man-made ravine” in American religion was already weighing heavily on society by the end of 1980s (Wuthnow, 1989). As Wuthnow described it at the time, “[the divisions] have become a mire of bitter contention, consuming the energies of religious communities and grinding their ideals into the grime of unforeseen animosities” (1989: 21).

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[23] Despite some efforts to branch out to conservative Catholics (and even to orthodox Jews), the movement was not as effective with Catholics, whose leadership/institutions largely backed social welfare reforms/programmes and other positions associated with liberal American Christians (Bendyna, Green, Rozell, & Wilcox, 2001)

In many ways, the Religious Right came to embody what it means to be an evangelical in the United States, and it still largely does today. The movement refurbished the historical commitment to evangelism into a new social activism in which evangelicals stood resolutely for the defence of truth claims and the urgent pursuit of personal conversion as the driving factors of engagement. Also, the movement's coupling with the country's leading conservative political party and the emphasis on personal morality sent the message that conservative spirituality necessarily implied an adherence to conservative social and political values. Liberal Christians were seen by the movement's most ardent voices as complicit in country's moral collapse. They were painted as having "a low view of scripture" because if they truly followed God's word, they would stand alongside evangelicals in their mission to save the nation through personal conversion. It is in this way that the expression "progressive evangelical" at first sounds like an oxymoron. In the next section, I will describe the emergence of Progressive Evangelicalism and the movement's mission to reclaim the social justice message for spiritually conservative Protestants.

2.6.2 "Salvaging the gospel": The Progressive Evangelical Response

In the 1960s, a small group of spiritually conservative Christians saw an opportunity to reintroduce Americans to the gospel by adopting a totally different social posture from the majority of evangelicals at the time. Compared to their conservative counterparts, they were social progressives who put social justice at the forefront of their activism. However, they distinguished themselves from mainstream liberal Christians with their steadfast commitment to Christian universal truth, biblical authority and the importance of personal faith (Wuthnow, 1989). For them, salvation was certainly a concern, but without participation in good works and without fighting to rid society of systemic inequality, poverty, racism and war, personal faith alone could not guarantee it. Theologically, Progressive Evangelicalism is rooted in a "public

theology of community", a perspective that seems to echo some elements of the Social Gospel of mainline Protestants in the early 20th century[24].

Through an analysis of Christian print and web media since the late 1970s, religion scholar Brantley Gasaway chronicles the emergence of contemporary Progressive Evangelicalism. He takes readers from its roots in the Civil Rights era and through its public positioning on the country's most hot-button social and political issues. Progressive evangelical leaders found spiritual inspiration in the parable of the Good Samaritan and its message of acting for the "common good". They urged their adherents to "love one's neighbour through faithful political engagement" and reminded them of the "inherent duties of care and responsibility for each other" as Christians (Gasaway, 2014: 59). The movement is deeply rooted in a critique of fundamentalist theology and individualist approaches to social activism. Instead of viewing social problems as a distraction from the project of personal salvation, the progressive movement's justice-centred theology seeks to earn salvation though enacting what they interpret to be the true fundamentals of Jesus's teaching: peace, justice and inclusion. The words of its most prominent activists suggest that it is indeed a response to the coupling of religious and political conservatism at that time and its emphasis on personal morality over the correction of "structural sins". In a plea to regain control of the Christian gospel, Jim Wallis, one of the founding figures of the progressive movement, urged fellow evangelicals to action when he proclaimed:

> We must recover the evangel. The public image of evangelicalism in this country is a distortion of the best of that tradition. The evangelical nationalists offer a political vision that is a corruption of the original gospel message and the radical impulses of evangelical movements in more recent times (Wallis, 1981: 217).

By the early 1980s, the battle lines had been drawn. The conservative and progressive movements sought to be polar opposites in regards to the content of their messages and the ambitions of their platforms. Nevertheless, they dialogically fed off of each other and are actually quite similar in their desire for Christians to be increasingly active in politics and for

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[24] The Social Gospel sought to make the public case for Christian truth by actively working to remedy humanity's ills. The movement put justice at the center of its concerns and set out with an explicitly biblical perspective to address a range social and economic of issues plaguing the country at the time. Adherents of the Social Gospel thought that they should "create a new social and political order" by actively working to live out the words of Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth" (Tichi, 2009: 206)

the nation's policies to emanate from their respective interpretations of the Bible (Bielo, 2011b). Jim Wallis stated early on that "[the conservative's] problem is not in mixing faith and politics—biblical faith does have political meaning, but in the fact that this patriotic religion does not stand for the same things as the original evangel" (Wallis, 1981: 215). Progressive leader Ron Sider reiterated the movement's objective when he argued that "American public life needs to be shaped by biblical principles", but that the evangelizing of the nation should come about "democratically" and through example rather than through hard persuasion and moral pressure (Gasaway, 2014: 56).

Gasaway describes a movement that sees itself as trapped in a "false choice" between faith and politics. They see themselves as fighting against both liberal secularism and conservative fundamentalism. Some leaders also make a point to call out liberal Christians' wobbly positions on salvation, and warn against "secular fundamentalists". In 2005, Jim Wallis stated that the progressive movement stands up to

> religious right-wingers who focus only on sexual and cultural issues while ignoring the weightier issues of justice; liberal secularists who want to banish us from public life and liberal theologians whose cultural conformity and creedal modernity serve to erode the foundations of historic biblical truth (Wallis in Gasaway, 2014: 12)

Both the Religious Right and the Progressive Evangelical movements articulate a clear agenda to pursue socially and spiritually transformational objectives, including the evangelization of American society. Where conservatives preach the virtues of obedient faith and personal salvation as a cure to the country's "morally corrupt culture", progressives preach a call to action for social justice and endeavour to see the "kingdom of God to break through". The conservative movement has perhaps enjoyed the most sweeping success. However the progressives have also had influence on the highest levels of power in the United States. Shortly after his rise to the presidency in 2009, Barack Obama appointed Jim Wallis along with a number of other influential progressive evangelicals to his faith advisory committee[25].

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[25] The curious position of progressive evangelicals in relation to the more widely accepted political left can be seen in articles such as this one in the New York Times, where the author writes, "But as a group they can hardly be characterized as part of the religious left either. Most [members of the advisory committee], like Mr. Wallis, do not take traditionally liberal positions on abortion or homosexuality. What most say they share with the president is the conviction that faith is the foundation in the fight against economic inequality and social injustice." http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/15/us/politics/15pastor.html

Although the progressive movement has gained considerable traction in the past ten years (Goodstein, 2017; Merritt, 2013), some socially liberal and spiritually conservative Christians find the progressive movement's overtly political ambitions and their willingness to engage in partisan debates to be problematic (Bielo, 2011b). While many evangelicals, both socially conservative and progressive, clearly now find it important to be present and active in their broader communities, for some groups there is a lingering discomfort when it comes to making bedfellows of faith and politics. As described earlier in this chapter in reference to James Bielo's work, news trends in evangelical Protestant spirituality such as "The Emergent Church" seek to once again reimagine evangelicals' relationship with society. This time, the emphasis is not only on justice-centred social engagement but also, more specifically, on "authentic" interpersonal relationships that are free from conservative social norms.

Conclusion

In this first two sections of this chapter, I presented the two primary components of this research's conceptual framework: the quest for relational authenticity and the resulting double bind. The choice of these two concepts is rooted in the interactionist perspective that I have taken in regards to studying emerging evangelical discourses and practices on inter-religious relations. I suggested that the quest for relational authenticity creates social situations in which people seek the recognition and validation of particular ideological dispositions as well as social behaviours. This desire for recognition can become complicated for the evangelical subject as that quest leads them to engage in out-group social situations in which they feel their genuineness is validated by behaviours and values that contradict those of their in-group. These contradictions can in turn lead to a double bind in which the subject is constantly negotiating what is and is not proper belief and action. In the second half, I talked about the rift between conservative and progressive American Christians (primarily Protestants) through a brief history of each camps' modern manifestation in politics and public engagement. During the time of the Scopes trial, scientific pursuits were challenging many Americans' previously taken-for-granted religious cosmologies. Moreover, technological advancements and urbanization were fundamentally altering the way that Americans lived their lives. The increasingly disparate

Christianties were pitted against each other numerous times through American history, whether during the temperance movements of the early 20th century, the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's and again a decade after that with the rise of conservative Christian activism. Today, one of the most pressing social and cultural issues revolves around immigration and rising diversity. Similar to the ways in which previous issues provoked thunderous debates between Christians regarding the most fundamental elements of tradition and morality, the question of how to welcome cultural and religious others has stirred up an intense debate over the past ten years. In the next chapter, I will describe the impact of this immigration debate on my field site in Nashville, Tennessee and specifically the ways in which Christians in Nashville have reacted to rising diversity from immigration. Evangelical approaches to social engagement with religious others remains largely divided along the old fault lines of Wuthnow's "great fracture".

Chapter 3: New Neighbours in the Buckle of the Bible Belt

Figure 2. The states in dark grey represent what is typically considered the Bible Belt. The red dot indicates the location of Nashville, Tennessee

Figure 3. Nashville, Tennessee (image credit Nashville Commercial Real Estate)

Introduction

In a way, I went to Nashville looking for Jesus. However, not in the way some of my new Christians friends might have hoped. I grew up there, and so returning to a familiar place meant that I had to try to wear an outside observer's glasses and perhaps more precisely hone my attention on things that I might otherwise have looked past. Lo and behold, I found Jesus around every corner! Rumoured to be home to over 800 houses of worship (Miller, 2008), Nashville's religious character is undeniable. Even if I had not already known that the city hosted the headquarters of both the National and Southern Baptist Conventions, some of the world's largest Christian publishing houses and the nation's most prominent Christian music production companies, I was constantly bombarded with religious symbols and references. You see it in the intersections with churches on three or even all four corners (Figures 6, 7 and 8), the billboard advertisements with quotes from scripture, and even just driving in a school of Jesus fish bumper stickers (Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4. The "Jesus fish" is a symbol with a range of theological meanings including a reference to the fact that Jesus's apostles were fishermen and he proclaimed he would make them "the fishers of men". Its official name is the ichthys (ΙΧΘΥΣ), a Greek acronym meaning "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour" (original photos)

Figure 5. Many cars are adorned with Christian messages (original photos)

One morning, I turned on the television and a stiff looking man in a lab coat told me that his non-profit pharmacy offers low-cost prescription pills, "because the message of our Lord Jesus Christ inspired me to make sure all people get the medicine they depend on." Another day, I sat down in a popular coffee chain and a couple of men next to me happened to be planning their next Bible study. "Have you read the latest by J.I. Packer (an evangelical theologian)? My adult classes are really responding to it!" Later, I was at the gas station putting $15 on pump #4 and over the speakers a breathy acoustic hymn praised "the light that overwhelms the darkness" and "the kingdom that reigns forever". There are Christian cafés, Christian microbreweries and Christian ride-share services. There is no ignoring the city's ambient sense of evangelism and it does not take long to see why Nashville is known as "The Buckle of the Bible Belt".

The Bible Belt is a common expression used to describe a large swath of the American South where evangelical Protestant traditions run deep. It stretches over roughly 14 states from Texas to North Carolina and from southern Indiana to northern Florida (Figure 2). Tennessee sits snuggly in the middle with eight bordering states. Over 80% of Tennesseans identify as Christian with over half identifying as evangelical Protestant (Pew Research Center, 2016). The majority of Tennessee Christians are Southern Baptists, but any drive through the countryside, small towns and especially the state's larger urban centres will reveal an enormous diversity of Protestant traditions (and a few Catholics here and there). From Pentecostals and United Methodists to Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ and nondenominational churches, according to many locals, Tennessee is "God's country".

Figure 6. LEFT: a street corner in Nashville where five nearby churches are advertised RIGHT: a yard sign declaring, "He is Risen!" (original photos)

Figure 7. an intersection in Nashville with churches on three corners: Church of Christ, Baptist and Presbyterian (original photo)

Figure 8. Five white church steeples on the horizon near Nashville (image credit – Google public submissions)

What drew me back to Nashville, though, was not only the intensity of its religious character and the naturalized presence of Christianity in public life. In the past 10 years, the Bible Belt region, the state of Tennessee and the city of Nashville in particular have experienced rapid population growth along with increasing cultural and religious diversity due to immigration. Although some have greeted these demographic changes with excitement and optimism, the widespread reaction has been a combination of hesitation, resentment and fear.

3.1 Demographic Change

Nashville's economy recovered relatively quickly from the 2008 national financial crisis and has been experiencing a significant boom since the early 2010s (Dubois, 2014). Steady and rising employment opportunities have attracted both internal migration and foreign workers. Since 2000, 60% of Nashville's population growth has been from immigration and today 12% of the city's residents are foreign-born, an increase of over 85% (Nashville Major's Office of New Americans, 2017). However, similarly to many North American cities, whereas in the past immigrants were predominantly from Europe, today the primary countries of origin are India, China and various Middle Eastern and African countries (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Although the demographic landscape is still largely represented by the primary immigrant and forced migration heritage groups of the southeastern United States[26] (Americans of Anglo-Saxon and various western European heritage as well as the descendants of African slaves), recent immigration and refugee resettlement has created a situation in which minority groups are comprised of unprecedented levels of cultural and religious diversity. In sociological terms, this explosion in diversity has been most notably described by migration scholar Steven Vertovec as "super-diversity", and cities across the world are contending with the challenges it poses to a variety of societal issues (2007). Now with over 120 languages represented in the

[26] The diverse Native American population that was once predominant in the territory that is now Tennessee (Cherokee, Kaskinampo, Shawnee and nearly a dozen others) was decimated by western expansion, including by forced deportation under the Indian Removal Act of 1830, remembered widely as the Cherokee "Trail of Tears"

student body of Nashville's public schools, the city is certainly experiencing this demographic phenomenon. This is due in large part to Nashville's long history of refugee resettlement, which has contributed significantly to the city's religious and cultural diversity. Since the 1970s, Nashville has welcomed thousands of Kurdish Iraqis, most of whom are Muslim. The city is now home to over 15,000 Kurds, which is the largest population in the United States (Sawyer, 2017). In addition to a firmly established Kurdish Muslim population, there are emerging Muslim communities from Somalia, Sudan, Egypt and now Syria. According to the Tennessee Immigrant & Refugee Rights Coalition, the speed with which this new diversity has grown and evolved has led to widespread negative and even violent reactions from many long-term residents (2015). This combined with a pervasive fear of Islamic terrorism post-9/11, the prevalence of Christian fundamentalism, and an increasingly abrasive urban/rural socio-political atmosphere have all resulted in the far-from-hospitable treatment of many Muslim residents, both recent and established.

3.2 Backlash and Fear of the Other

"I've never experienced so much hate in my life," said Manar, a Muslim woman in her late 20s, as she shook her head and raised her eyebrows. I had met her at an interfaith dinner a few weeks earlier and she had agreed to talk with me more about her experiences in outreach and awareness activities aimed at bridging the gaps between Muslims and Christians. She was telling me about when in 2013 she went to a town about an hour and a half outside of Nashville to participate in a public awareness forum organized by a Tennessee-based Muslim advocacy group. The event was organized in response to an incident several months earlier when a local county commissioner posted a stock image on social media of a man aiming down the sights of a double-barrel shotgun and pointing it at the camera. The caption read "How to wink at a Muslim" (Figure 9). The commissioner was interviewed by the local newspaper in the days following the post and was asked by the reporter if he is prejudiced against Muslims: "I'm prejudiced against anyone who's trying to tear down this country, Muslims, Mexicans, anybody," he said. "If you're going to harm this country, I'm not in favour of you" (Tullahoma News, 2013). The overtly threatening gesture might be unique in that it came from an elected

official, but it was far from an isolated incident. Tennessee's Muslim communities are no strangers to prejudice and intimidation.

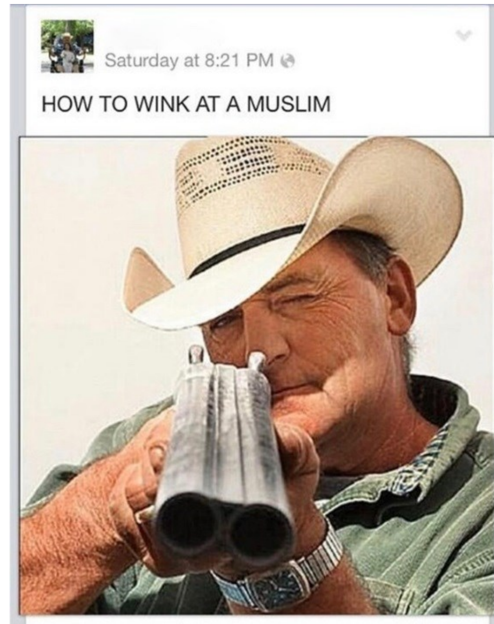

Figure 9. In 2013, a Tennessee County Commissioner posted the above image (not of him) on social media, stating afterwards that he "just wanted to give some advice" to his constituents (image credit TIRRC)

Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the public discourse on Islam and Muslims in the United States has severely deteriorated. On top of this, recent years have seen a surge in political attention on immigration, focusing on both economic and security themes. Generally, the attention in Tennessee has been concerned with undocumented workers from Mexico and Central America. In 2008 alone, over 60 bills were proposed in the state legislature seeking to make settlement in Tennessee more difficult for both economic immigrants and refugees (Pendry, 2011). Beginning in the early 2010s, an increase in refugee resettlement contributed to the growth of the state's Muslim population, and they quickly became a primary target. The state's Muslim residents are consistently the subject of an aggressive rhetoric revolving around national security and Christian religious preservation. For many evangelicals, it would seem that the only options for Muslims are to leave or to convert (Figure 10). The focus has mainly been on the Sharia, a widely misunderstood tradition of Islamic religious laws that many non-Muslims in Tennessee have come to perceive as an existential threat to both the

Christian and American ways of life (two things that are often believed to be one and the same). In addition to talk radio pundits and conservative legislators that sow the seeds of insecurity and distrust with anti-Muslim rhetoric and bill proposals aimed at halting refugee resettlement, civil rights watch groups have identified seven active anti-Muslim social and political action organizations in Tennessee (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017). According to many of these organizations, if Christianity itself is not at stake, then the country is on the brink of a Muslim takeover. Muslims are often portrayed as terrorist sleeper cells patiently waiting for the right time to strike.

Figure 10. Written in Arabic and meant to target Muslim immigrants, this billboard in Nashville was put up in 2015. It reads, "Where will you go after death? Is there forgiveness for your sins and bad deeds? Jesus said, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one goes to the Father except through me.' John 14:6" (image credit WKRN Nashville)

The fear and anxiety over Muslims in Tennessee came to a head in 2008 and an ever-continuing succession of legal battles, vandalism and violent attacks has beset mosques and Islamic community centres across the state. In the winter of that year, three white men in a small town an hour south of Nashville firebombed the local Islamic community centre with Molotov cocktails, burning it to the ground. Before fleeing the scene, they spray-painted "White Power" on the ruins. Later, when the men were arrested and charged with the crime, it was reported that they self-identified as Christians and said the community centre's teachings were against the Bible. By featuring both anti-Muslim and white supremacist messages, their statements and vandalism are but a glimpse into the dark history of Tennessee's thick amalgam of racism and

contemporary xenophobic rhetoric[27]. In 2009, the Muslim community in a neighbouring city to Nashville met strong resistance from local evangelical residents when they tried to obtain a building permit for a new community centre, and the matter had to be decided in court. The plaintiffs' attorney claimed that Islam was a false religion and that the project was not eligible for permits and tax exemptions as a religious organization. A theatrical trial dragged on for months as residents attempted to convince the court that the project was just a cover for what would actually be a terrorist training centre and staging area for the imposition of Islamic law in the city. The legal battle was only put to rest when a federal judge was forced to intervene by issuing an official statement to the town court confirming that Islam was indeed recognized as a religion under US civil liberty laws. The project was eventually approved, but building was stalled again when vandals burned the construction equipment. As a video news report shows, when the imam came to inspect the damage, residents fired guns in the air from across the tree line (O'Brien, 2011). In 2010, two more construction proposals in and around Nashville were stalled by petitions. Numerous demonstrations have popped up across the state protesting world religion classes in public schools that include the history of Islam (Figure 11). Incidents of vandalism and intimidation have not subsided, and many would argue that they continue to escalate (Andrews, 2017). In early July 2017, only two weeks after leaving Nashville at the end of my fieldwork, a mosque was defaced with messages saying "Fuck Allah" and strips of bacon were littered in front of the entry way. All of this for Tennessee's Muslims, who represent barely 1% the state's population (Pew Research Center, 2016).

[27] 150 years before this fire-bombing, the first organization of the Ku Klux Klan was founded in Pulaski, Tennessee, less than an hour's drive away from the crime scene

Figure 11. Anti-Muslim demonstrations across Tennessee (image credits WJHL 2015, WCYB 2015, Associated Press 2010)

When Manar went to that town to lend her voice to the conversation after the county commissioner's threatening social media post, it is not an exaggeration to say that she and her fellow participants were putting their safety at risk. She had hoped to help dispel some of the fears and misconceptions that residents had about Islam and their Muslim neighbours, but the town meeting, she said, was a disaster. According to a local newspaper, the event attracted the attention of anti-Muslim activists from across the region, with some travelling from as far as Texas and Florida (Benton, 2013). A town official noted that the out-of-state protesters outnumbered the actual residents. Manar recalled that when she stood behind the podium to share about her life story, she was heckled with slurs and insults. As some of the protesters railed about the moral inferiority of Islam and the secret agenda to overthrow American democracy, others clapped and cheered in approval. Manar was born in the United States and has lived nearly all of her life in Nashville. "After that experience," she said, "there are some places in Tennessee I just won't go."

3.3 A Call for Hospitality

The 2016 presidential election and the inauguration of Donald Trump have already had a profound effect on inter-religious relations in the United States. At the time that this research was being conducted, the full implications of those events were still rapidly evolving. While the campaign rhetoric and what would become the official statements of the White House regarding

immigration and Islam threw heavy weight behind the already widespread anti-Muslim sentiment in Tennessee, Nashville's reaction has been somewhat different. Shortly after assuming the office, the President signed an executive order halting immigration from a selection of Muslim majority countries and heavily restricting the federal refugee resettlement programme[28]. The administration cited the risk of terrorist infiltration as its primary concern (White House Press Secretary, 2017). For decades, Nashville has been a popular resettlement destination for various local economic and federal immigration policy reasons (Winders, 2006). In the United States, it is common that faith-based organizations play a central role in the provision of social services to refugees and immigrants, and often with federal and state government funding (Eby, Iverson, Smyers, & Kekic, 2011; Nawyn, 2006). In Nashville, the city's ability to sustain a robust network of charitable non-profit organizations to assist in resettlement efforts is directly linked with its Bible Belt characteristics.

Hundreds of churches play an essential role in providing the financial and human resources for refugee services, and it has become a meaningful point of pride for many local Christians. Volunteering in refugee assistance is widely perceived as a way of demonstrating Christian hospitality as well as an opportunity for evangelism. In addition to a plethora of independent faith-based organizations and church ministries that offer English-language classes, employment services and other forms of social assistance, federally funded faith-based organizations such as World Relief (the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals) have played a critical role in the coordination of resettlement efforts in Nashville. I spoke with representatives from both federal and independent agencies in the city, and since then-candidate Trump's announcement calling for "a complete shutdown on Muslims entering the United States" in late 2016, they had been flooded with requests from both individuals and whole churches looking to volunteer. However, in the wake of the executive order, resettlement funding was slashed and the organizations had to severely reduce their activities in the absence of newly arriving refugees. World Relief was forced to close down operations in several cities nationwide, including the office in Nashville in the spring of 2017.

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[28] The executive order was deemed unconstitutional by a number of federal judges and certain key provisions of the order (including the country-specific travel ban) remained suspended at the time that this research was being conducted

Figure 12. Supportive yard signs in Nashville (LEFT: image credit to A Room at the Inn; RIGHT: original photo)

Figure 13. Tennesseans showing support for Muslims after incidents of vandalism (Image credit: WKRN Nashville 2010)

Figure 14. Crowds pack the State Capitol in Nashville in protest of the "Muslim Ban" (Image credit: The Tennessean 2017)

These policy changes and the escalating anti-Muslim rhetoric from the country's highest offices of government represented a serious theological and social crisis for many Nashville Christians. Although small demonstrations and shows of support followed some of the more severe incidents I described earlier, it appeared that the dramatic political climate beginning in 2015 jolted Christian communities into action (Figures 13 and 14). Following in the footsteps of national mainline Christian and some evangelical organizations, hundreds of Christian leaders in Nashville joined in petitions denouncing the "immoral" and "hate-filled" policies. They compelled the more hesitant conservative evangelical churches to "follow the sacred texts, teachings and intentions of our traditions that call upon us to welcome the stranger and love our neighbors" (The Tennessean, 2017). The petitions were a call to revert back to the what they believe are the basics of Christian faith: "As Christians, we should help because of faith, not hate because of fear…That's the Christian thing to do" (Southern Christians, 2016). Yard signs began popping up around Nashville with messages of hospitality. One of the them (inspired by a local multi-church homeless ministry) puts a southern twang on a divine command, reading simply "Love your neighbor, y'all" (Figure 12). The refugee issue was undoubtedly a soft spot for Nashville's Christians and during the time that I was doing my fieldwork there it dominated conversations about inter-religious relations. The absence of evangelicals in those conversations, however, seemed to weigh heavily on a lot of people's minds.

3.4 Where Are the Evangelicals?

While the political crisis around immigration brought about unifying petitions and demonstrations, in some respects, the scale and reach of this solidarity can be misleading. At times, relations between liberal Protestants and conservative evangelicals can be strained, especially when it comes to questions about immigration, diversity and inter-religious outreach. It is not to say that there are not meaningful and long-lasting interdenominational relations between many churches in Nashville, however, when you take a step back and consider the depth of the hole left by the churches that remain silent on such issues (and in some cases, that are openly adversarial), the landscape begins to look much more complicated. For example, of

the nearly 140 signatories of the Nashville petition on refugee resettlement, representatives of the most predominant evangelical traditions, who represent the majority of Tennesseans, were few and far between.

Over the course of my fieldwork in Nashville, I attended multiple public events and private meetings that brought together leaders and lay members from different religious communities (both Christian and Muslim) to discuss interreligious relations. I sat in on the private committee meeting of an interfaith dialogue organization and went to a "faith leaders round table" hosted by a Latino evangelical megachurch. I broke bread with Bahá'ís, Muslims, Christians and Jews in people's homes at interfaith dinners and sipped on a glass of chilled white wine at a benefit gala organized by a Christian faith-based health clinic that primarily serves refugees. I attended a banquet-style public forum during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan that was opened with a speech by the self-declared progressive mayor of Nashville and attended by a federal congressman. Not only did I consistently find myself swimming in a sea of liberal Protestants, but I rarely came across any representatives and members of the evangelical traditions that are so predominant in the local landscape. Even at the event at the Latino megachurch, the outside attendees were almost entirely Catholics and mainline Protestants, with only one representative of an evangelical church. As I participated in and listened to conversations at these events, I noticed the murmurings about "the more conservative churches" and "those who are having a harder time getting on board". Clearly, the absence was felt.

At the Ramadan banquet event, I was seated at a round dining table with about a half-dozen others. To my left was a Bahá'í couple in their 50s who were seasoned participants in the city's interfaith circles. Coincidentally, I had already met them several weeks earlier at a smaller, private dinner event. The Bahá'ís are widely known for their cosmopolitan perspectives on diversity, and so their presence at such events was almost to be expected. To their left was a Muslim man in his 30s who had never attended an interfaith event before and next to him was another Muslim man who was on the advisory board of a small interfaith community organization. By his side was his teenaged daughter. There was only one Christian at the table and he was from a local Presbyterian church a member of which is the executive director of one of the city's leading interfaith dialogue initiatives. When the tour of introductions around the table made its way to me, I briefly explained my research and that I was studying a local Church of Christ (an evangelical denomination) that is beginning to get more involved in interfaith

outreach. “Is it Raven Hill Church?”, the Christian man asked. I chuckled and responded that yes, it indeed was. The man continued, “I’m almost done reading the head pastor’s book about how Christians can work towards better relationships with Muslims. It’s really outstanding. Isn’t he great?”. At first, I was stunned that he recognized my research site by my brief and relatively vague description. Later, though, I realized that it is not so surprising given the reputation of the Churches of Christ as bastions of conservative fundamentalism. During other interfaith dinners, the general reaction when I would tell people that I was doing research about Muslim/Christian relations and the efforts of a local Church of Christ, their responses were either disbelief or confusion: “Oh really? A Church of Christ? Don’t they just want to convert everybody?”, “Wow, I didn’t expect to hear that. Usually those guys are pretty intense!”, or just “Interesting…”. Raven Hill was noticeably different from its denominational sister churches and when I began digging beneath the surface I found that it broke with many of the preconceptions about evangelical churches. By spending time with its leaders and congregation, I was able to observe a community in the midst of significant changes. It was almost as if it were a microcosm of Nashville’s evangelical population and the hesitation and uncertainty that the encounter with rising diversity represented for them.

3.5 Raven Hill: Pushing Boundaries within the Churches of Christ

The first time I met Adam, the head pastor at Raven Hill Church, it was a scheduled appointment during his counselling hours. On the church’s website and in the weekly community bulletins, the building complex is often referred to as “the campus”, and its facilities indeed resemble a mid-sized school. The red-brick building was originally built by a Southern Baptist church and had become the home Raven Hill’s congregation when it outgrew its previous building about a decade earlier. It was the middle of the week and so the vast parking lot was remarkably sparse compared to Sunday mornings. I approached the office entrance and the receptionist buzzed me in. The staff offices are only a small section of the two-story network of hallways and classrooms. I took a seat in the waiting area in front of the receptionist’s desk as she paged Adam to let him know that I had arrived. He came out to greet me and led me back to his office. We passed through a narrow corridor flanked on one side by the dark-stained

wooden doors of the church ministers' offices and on the other side by a half-dozen cubicles where the support staff worked quietly at their computers. The scene was indistinguishable from a small corporate office. At the end of the hall was Adam's office, a sleek but cozy space that felt like it belonged to a professor or maybe even a psychologist. His desk was covered in papers and the back wall was lined with filled bookshelves. He is the head pastor at Raven Hill, but in the organizational structure of the church, he said he plays more of a "catalyst role" regarding the theology he delivers from the pulpit. Decisions about theology and missiology are ultimately made collectively by the "council of elders", a group of internally elected members (by the congregation) who oversee the spiritual and social direction of the church. Adam invited me to take a seat on one of the matching grey felt armchairs beneath a large window that looked out on the courtyard between the office wing and the worship hall. I wanted to talk to him about his involvement in Nashville's interfaith scene and how he sees his role there as the pastor of an evangelical church. He was eager to share: "I want to help you as much as I can here. I'm glad you're interested in this interfaith stuff. I think this conversation matters," he said as he rested his feet up against the coffee table and sank into the chair:

> **Adam:** We're coming out of a time in American history where conservative Christianity approached interfaith as "we're suspicious, we're going to convert you, we don't trust you, so if we're going to come to the table it's to win." Kind of the Crusade language—which is crazy that we would even think that would be effective. But then in the more liberal traditions, it was kind of what I would call modern classic liberalism, which is to say we're all travelling up the same mountain by different paths.

Adam explained that since he began preaching at Raven Hill about ten years earlier, the community had lost some members who could not support the direction that the church had taken on a number of theological and liturgical issues. Raven Hill is part of a very conservative tradition known as the Churches of Christ. It is a group that has no central governing body akin to the typical institutional structure of other Protestant denominations. Instead, its autonomous congregations are primarily united by a shared social history and ideological heritage. The full story of the Churches of Christ is a complicated one that is beyond the scope of this thesis, however, it is important to provide some historical bearings.

The underlying thread in the tradition is the quest to practise an "authentic Christianity" that honours the mission of the pre-institutional 1st-century church. The Churches of Christ arose

out of the Restorationist Movement on the American frontier in the late 18th century[29]. The openness of the frontier and the lack of centralized religious control led to a kaleidoscopic splintering of Christianity in North America, and, in the eyes of some Protestant leaders, to a troubling disunity among Christians and the spread of wayward interpretations of scripture (Hughes, 1996). The desire of some leaders to "restore" Christianity to what they perceived as its lost "authentic" and "pure" mission led to a series of "Back to the Bible" movements that sought to remind Christians of their essential purpose: to spread the gospel throughout the world and, in so doing, to unite all of humanity (ibid.). Denominations, as hierarchical institutions, came to epitomize the human corruption of divine ordinance, and so many restorationist groups shed their previous affiliations. Imagining their mission as a form of righteous countercultural activism, they rejected their established traditions in favour of a fundamentalist posture that purported to achieve the unadulterated interpretation of the sacred texts. In Tennessee and Kentucky, many Baptists and Presbyterians reconstituted as "churches of Christ" and were intentional in referring to themselves simply as "Christians". It was only in the early 20th century that the Churches of Christ, with a capital "C", was recognized as a denomination and appeared on the official national census (Holloway & Foster, 2006). Today, there are over 1.3 million members of the Churches of Christ in the United States (ChurchZip, 2014), with the majority living in and around the area of the movement's historical roots in middle Tennessee as well as in eastern Texas (Figure 15).

[29] At the time, the frontier constituted the areas now making up Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee

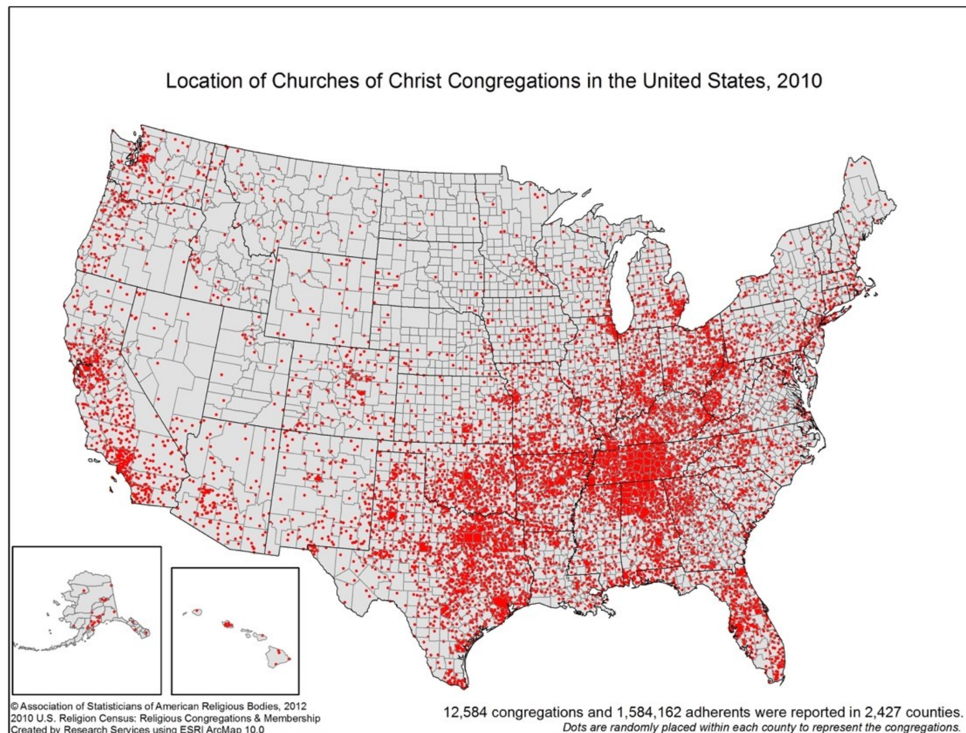

Figure 15. Middle Tennessee has the greatest density of Churches of Christ in the United States. Although they are not as numerous as the Southern Baptists, they have a significant presence and impact on the religious landscape (image credit: ASARB, 2012)

The most conservative streams of the tradition's foundational theologies are predominant in Tennessee, and over the course of their history, the Churches of Christ have gone through periods of sectarian isolation from society. During these periods, they reviled other Christians, accusing them of heresy and deploring their lack of evangelistic endeavour. It was not until the mid-20th century that they began to move towards a general integration into white conservative southern culture and politics[30] (Holloway & Foster, 2006). Although in recent decades the willingness of many Churches of Christ to engage more constructively with both other Christians and with society at large has increased, they remain characterized by strict social norms and prohibitions, fundamentalist theology and a fervent commitment to structuring out-group social engagement above all around proselytism.

[30] The vast majority of Churches of Christ are white, however there are traditionally African American Churches of Christ

In my exploratory interviews and observations, I had several conversations with fundamentalist pastors. One church was located near the campus of one of the most predominant universities in Nashville and one that is affiliated with the Churches of Christ. The pastor explained that over half of the church's budget goes towards overseas evangelism and that they send mission trips to nearly a dozen countries worldwide. At home, they have a homeless ministry and participate in a number of charitable activities. However, when it comes to immigrants, and especially Muslims, the pastor is not interested in interacting under any terms other than to evangelize them:

> Now, make no bones about it[31], we declare that the Lord Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life. [In our outreach,] we try to put an emphasis on those around us, so we do send members of our community to talk to the Muslims on the university campus next door, we invite them to our church. We even brought a Muslim on a mission trip with us and I'm not ashamed to say it, we converted one.

The pastor of another Church of Christ that was just down the road from Raven Hill told me about how he prepares his congregation for interactions with Muslims in their everyday lives, and especially at work where more and more people are noticing that they have Muslim colleagues. For him, being friendly is an important part of the strategy, but Christians must never lose sight of the objective. Seeking conversion is the first and foremost purpose of any social interaction with Muslims, and if that has a negative impact on inter-religious relations in the city, so be it. For him, the presence of religious diversity, and worse, the acceptance of it, represents the "corruption of the church by culture". In this view, the churches that have tried to respond to the growing diversity in Nashville by engaging in dialogue are just giving in and failing in their task to uphold authentic Christianity:

> In some ways, authentic Christianity is always going to be countercultural. You know, Jesus says that the world's going to hate us, he just says that—because the world hated him. I think there are a lot of professing Christians who are making peace with culture and being heavily influenced by it, embracing an ethic of extreme toleration and diversity where toleration and diversity—both wonderful ideas—but when taken to an extreme…it's great to tolerate people, but a lot of churches aren't just tolerating people, they're tolerating ideas, not challenging ideas. And so, they're starting to look a lot like culture with just a veneer of

[31] "Make no bones about it" is an expression meaning to express clearly and strongly a point or opinion, often regardless of its potential to bother or offend others

> Christianity. And the world doesn't really hate them anymore. It's like, "wait a minute, does that concern you or not?" I think they are—you know, Paul says in Romans chapter 4, "Don't let the world pour you into its mould", and yet I think a lot are doing that, which is a tremendous concern. When you insist on following the ethics of Jesus, you are going to be in some ways countercultural and you are going to bring upon yourself some potentially pretty strong negative reactions.

Adam as well as other members of Raven Hill's senior staff are lecturers at that same Church of Christ university I mentioned earlier. Several years before, a professor and member of Raven Hill was publicly scorned by local evangelicals for having organized and moderated an interfaith panel at the university. His attempt to bring more conservative Christians into non-evangelistic interaction with the city's Muslim population dramatically backfired. He was accused of offending "the supremacy of Christ" by suggesting that evangelicals' insistence on proselytism and defending truth claims could damage the trust that he feels that they need to build with Muslims in order to address issues of prejudice and social anxiety about Islam. The story quickly made the rounds in local and statewide newspapers and even ended up in a national online Christian news site. In an official response that was sponsored by the university's dean, the professor attempted to lay the scandal to rest by reaffirming his commitment to teaching that "Jesus is Lord of Lords, King of Kings". Clearly, among the evangelical community at large there was little patience for nuance.

Although the "Crusade language" that Adam talked about was evidently still a major factor in the relations between evangelicals and other religious communities (even other Christians), I was interested more in the ideas that lie beneath the rhetorical debates about politics and winning an ideological war. The lack of central governance in the Churches of Christ allows for an autonomy that churches like Raven Hill have benefitted from in order to take their congregation in new directions. I learned that for leaders like Adam, it was not just about the language of the interaction but also about a deeper theological questioning of what the relationship should be between Christians and people of no or other religions; a reflection, he said, that is uncommon among conservative evangelicals. His intellectual but unassuming tone and his care to qualify labels whenever he used them conveyed that he confidently inhabited a sort of mediator's role, staying conscious to avoid offending anyone. He situated himself and Raven Hill somewhere in between "mainline/liberal Protestants" and "fundamentalists":

> **Adam:** The moderate to conservative Protestant world is a lot harder to get into in this conversation. Mainline folks have been doing it for a while. Some of the mainline churches have influence in Nashville, but if you really want to influence Nashville you have to go to the more conservative churches. They're bigger, they have a lot of resources, a lot of really influential people in the city. Just go for the big dogs.
>
> **Me:** Is there a difference between your approach [to interfaith] and the mainliners?
>
> **Adam:** Yeah, the mainline folks…or liberal Protestants—and I don't use that as good or bad, just as a description—liberal Protestants have been doing interfaith work longer and probably do it for different reasons. Like it's much more common in a liberal Protestant church to have a universal approach to their eschatology. So, you know it would be much more common in a liberal Protestant church to say, "Well, of course, we would never evangelize because what would be the point of that," whereas in the evangelical church you would still have a decent amount of motivation to work with Muslims as kind of second-hand evangelism, like we're going to work with them and kind of look for opportunities.
>
> **Me:** With mainliners and saying they don't want to evangelize, do you find that they just have a different perception of what evangelizing is?
>
> **Adam:** Well, I think they have a very different perception of what Christianity is. Again, not good or bad, right or wrong, I just think it's a lot more utilitarian, common good, let's be good people, make good things happen.
>
> **Me:** You said universal eschatology before. What do you mean by that?
>
> **Adam:** "Everybody's in. There is a heaven, everybody's in." Now, they would have different shades of "everybody's in": eventually or everybody's in right away, you know, there's different ways to get at it. But yeah, if that's your eschatology, that's why a lot of liberal Protestant churches are full of people who grew up fundamentalists. The primary reason they couldn't stay in a fundamentalist church is the eschatology. "God's going to burn people forever", that has a lot of philosophical problems with it, *so*, I still want to kind of be around Jesus people and do Jesus things and speak Jesus language because culturally that's what I know.

In the broader evangelical community, there is a high level of fear and anxiety about Muslims. Adam explained that one of his motivations in interfaith outreach is to remedy that discomfort and enable his congregation to be more engaged with the city around them, a motivation that is grounded in the language and concept of mission. He does not deny the importance of

evangelism in the church's mission, but he feels that given the current state of affairs in Tennessee, it needs to be approached with caution:

> **Adam:** Christianity has to be good news in the realms in which Christians don't always inhabit. I try to be very consistent in that I think our job is to be the church, which is to love the world, and if people are compelled to Jesus because of that then so be it, but if not, that's not our business. Our business is to be the church, loving people well, serving people well, loving them regardless of their religion and all that. *And* if Muslims see that and they're compelled to that and they're interested to know more about Jesus, to me that's just the…that's just something other than being with the intent of evangelizing. And I also think you have to take seriously the climate that we're in right now. I think any kind of approach at evangelism can be very coercive.

For Adam, the dynamic between evangelicals and Muslims in Tennessee is above all in need of trust and cooperation, something that he hopes to achieve through the development of "genuine" person-to-person relationships. I spoke at length with two Muslim friends of Adam, both of whom are heavily involved in local interfaith activities and public awareness initiatives. "Adam is different", said Hassan, one friend who is a doctor originally from Pakistan and who had been living in Nashville for over 20 years. He explained that he does not even consider Adam to be an evangelical because in his experience, evangelicals are the ones who "only seem to care about converting," a statement that revealed the powerful social element of that label. Adnan, another friend who is a leading figure in the interfaith organization of which Adam is on the board of advisors said simply, "He gets it.". Adnan has lived in Tennessee for nearly 25 years and has experienced first-hand some of the worst of the anti-Muslim prejudice in the state. It was the Islamic community centre that he established that was burned down by white supremacist vandals in 2009 (earlier in this chapter). He commutes to work from a small town nearly an hour outside of Nashville where a local Christian radio pundit has singled him out by name, posted pictures of his house and children on social media and threatened him numerous times over the years. Those count among his worst experiences with fundamentalism, while other evangelicals he has met seem to maintain what he described as a polite but trepidatious distance from he and his family. His next-door neighbours at one point were from a Pentecostal church and they became close enough that they would dine at each other's homes. That ended, Adnan explained, when the neighbours began to get more and more insistent with their invitations to church. As he and his wife politely declined each invitation, a distance grew between them and they no

longer visit with each other. “With the others, the trust just isn’t there”, he said of some acquaintances who “just always talk about Jesus and not about how we can live together”.

Adam identified a need to help Christians to humanize Muslims at a very basic level, and this was a testament to how tightly the stereotypes and fears about Islam continue to grip many evangelicals. However, when I talked to ordinary members of the congregation, I learned that imagining evangelism in a sense that is broader than the direct quest for converts (through proselytism) and managing the intent to evangelize were aspects of spiritual and social life that were far easier said than done. As I spent time at Raven Hill, accompanied members of the congregation to different interfaith activities and had discussions with them, I learned that there were significant spiritual implications to rethinking the nature of relationships with the other. It was not just a matter of altering how they interact with people, but it was also a profound philosophical and spiritual question for them. Adam called on his congregation to take a chance and get to know their Muslim neighbours with “no strings attached”, saying that “if you just have a moderately open heart, I think as soon as you know someone’s story or you know their kids you can’t go back to who you were before that.” As I would learn, for many of my informants, the prospect of reimagining evangelism and changing the nature of their social engagement with religious others could give rise to deep spiritual and social insecurities.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented Nashville as the context for this research. It is a place where evangelical Christianity is predominant and where the relationship with Muslim immigrants has been complex and fraught with tensions and even violence. Throughout my time there I explored a number of different contexts for interfaith interaction such as small, private conversation activities and large public events that attracted the presence of local faith leaders and even figures as predominant as the mayor of Nashville. The absence of representation from the city’s evangelical communities was a stark reality that was punctuated for me by the surprise that many people I crossed at those events expressed when I told them that my research was interested in the outreach efforts of a Church of Christ. In the next chapter, I will take the reader into the conversations that I had with some members of Raven Hill Church as I asked them

about their views on inter-religious relations and their experiences with Muslim immigrants. I hope that through the presentation and analysis of these conversations I will be able to illustrate the double bind and the negotiation that my informants engage in between the social and spiritual expectations, both real and perceived, of their in-group and the increasingly diverse world around them.

Chapter 4: Evangelist or Friend? Double-bound by Intentions and Expectations

> *We humans are structurally made of contradictions, living peacefully, sometimes painfully, with our oxymoronic selves*
>
> David Berliner (2016)

> *Drop kick me, Jesus, through the goal posts of life*
> *End over end, neither left nor to right*
>
> Bobby Bare, country singer

Introduction

> If it's true that we are in a postmodern timeframe, evangelism in that traditional sense of the word is the antithesis of postmodern, so you're caught in this weird no-man's-land. Because evangelism *is* infringement. Whether one agrees with this or not, evangelism at its core *does* say that some stories are better than other stories. It's a beast that we have to continue to wrestle with for folks in my chair, people of Christian faith.
>
> Adam, head pastor at Raven Hill Church

In my conversations with Adam, the head pastor at Raven Hill, he never seemed to shy away from the tensions, paradoxes and difficulties of his role as a spiritual leader during what he felt were times of significant change in the relationship between Christianity and society. He has strong convictions about the potential for the Christian faith to transform both individuals and whole societies in a uniquely positive way. He seeks to spread that positive influence in every way that he can, and, for him, that is the fundamental role of Christians in any society. His acknowledgment, then, that evangelism is a form of infringement is stunningly left field compared not just to other Churches of Christ, but also to evangelical approaches more broadly. If one of the distinguishing characteristics of evangelical social engagement is its moral grounding in the quest for converts, those whom I interviewed conveyed a spectrum of views in regards to how evangelistic intentions should be managed and expressed; about how "to wrestle the beast".

In one way or another, all of my informants communicated that they had taken conscious steps to change both their behaviour and some of their core beliefs in regards to evangelism. Based on my conservations with them, I situate these changes primarily in the acknowledgement of a dissonance between the desire for relational authenticity and the norms of traditional evangelical social engagement with non-Christians. They all expressed a desire to pursue unconditioned friendships in which they, to various degrees, accepted religious otherness. Some of my informants measured the genuineness of their friendships primarily by the goodness of their intentions and by the compassion displayed in the evangelistic pursuit itself. In other words, they recognized that, for them, evangelism was an important motivator in relationships with religious others, and this was not contradictory to their notion of genuineness. Evangelism was not something to be avoided in and of itself, but was instead something to be approached carefully, patiently and under circumstances that they had determined to be appropriate (i.e. in the absence of pressure, guilt or fear). Some of my other informants, however, demonstrated a strong discomfort with evangelism. They seemed unsure about how to conceive of the relationship between unconditional engagement and evangelistic intentions. For them, the genuineness of friendship was not only measured by the goodness of their intentions, but, more importantly, by the lack of compulsion and the presence of mutual recognition. In this way, they would engage in a deeper reflection about the very premise of evangelism itself, in some cases viewing it as form of infringement that hindered relational authenticity. They would question the giver-receiver power relations inherent to evangelism and sought to reimagine those relations in a way that softened its one-way, "transactional" nature. By pulling from other Christian socio-theological concepts such as humility and grace, they approached otherness as an opportunity not just for bringing about personal transformation, but also as a spiritual challenge that could transform their own faith in the process. With the aim of being a "good friend", they wanted to avoid the inherently asymmetrical role of the evangelist by seeking not just to give but also to receive from the other spiritually.

In the following pages, I present five main vignettes from my interviews in order to demonstrate the spectrum of orientations I described above. Keeping Festinger in mind (see Chapter 2), I suggest that the changes in both behaviour and beliefs are the ways in which they attempt to resolve the cognitive dissonance between their desires to evangelize and to be "genuine". The different ways in which they perceived of the dissonance and then responded to

it were closely linked to their personal histories and experiences regarding both their spiritual and social lives. For some informants, their change in beliefs emanated from their perceived need to change their behaviour, and for others it was the reverse. Although I focus on five key informants whom, I think best illustrate the double bind, at the end of the chapter, I include examples that diverge from this. I include these contrasting examples in order to make the double bind clearer, but also to do justice to the range of views within the study group. I use excerpts from my conversations with informants and, in some cases, keep longer exchanges intact. I think that this allows the reader to get a better feel for the informants' responses and thought processes as they walked me through their views on evangelism. This is important for getting a feel not just for *what they said*, but *how they said it*. I kept their hesitations, redundancies and contradictions intact as well, and added descriptions of their tone and body language (shifts in posture, sighs, eye movements, etc.) to help illustrate not just the attention with which they approached the questions, but also the tension in their answers and their acknowledgment of that tension. In the excerpts when "…" is used in the text, it is to indicate a pause or hesitation. In the cases that the pause was long, I indicate the number of seconds.

4.1 Nancy: "I'm going to be her friend for whatever reason"

I met Nancy in a small town outside of Nashville near where she works. She was born and raised in the Churches of Christ and was a long-time part of the Raven Hill congregation. She had placed membership there because she appreciated its "progressive" approach compared to the churches of her youth. I let her chose the location and she suggested a trendy new lunch spot near the town centre. The building shared a wall with an historic church next door and had a wide Victorian sitting porch that wrapped around the front (a quintessential Southern staple). A chalkboard merchant's sign at the entrance advertised a new house cocktail: The Tipsy Presbyterian. Nancy and I found a table upstairs in a quieter corner of the restaurant. She sat straight in her chair and loosely cupped her palms around a matcha green tea latte, her favourite drink at this place. She is in her mid-50's and had spent a couple of years in Europe after college where she said went to explore different cultures and take a language course. She was sharp and

sarcastic, speaking confidently with a jovial Tennessee twang. Even when we broached sensitive topics she would keep things light with a joke or a chuckle.

Nancy had befriended a family of Muslim refugees through a volunteer program at a local faith-based resettlement agency that Raven Hill had partnered with. Her official service commitment of six months to help orient the family in their new life in Nashville had long expired, but she continues to see them. They dine at each other's homes, she has taken their children trick-or-treating on Halloween and she considers the mother a friend. For Nancy, she first thought about reaching out to Muslims during the divisive political climate of the 2016 presidential election. She was frustrated with evangelicals that she felt were being "willfully ignorant" about Muslims. She found the negative rhetoric about refugees particularly bothersome. I asked how she felt about the conservative evangelical rhetoric that Muslim immigration posed a threat to Christians in the United States, and how that fear is often used to justify not interacting with Muslims at all. She answered by sarcastically inhabiting the conservative point of view:

> **Nancy:** I don't know how that would be a justification because the answer to that would not be putting up walls and keeping those people out. Bring them in and indoctrinate them if you're going to be thinking that way. Get them in and make them be Christian! [she chuckled] On a simple level. That would appeal to those kinds of people.

I then asked her about her own views on evangelism and how it plays a role in her relationship with the Muslim family that she has befriended. She described her behaviour around them as motivated on some level by a broad definition of evangelism, but she is uncomfortable when it comes to the specific idea of seeking conversion. Above all, she explained, she wants to accept them as Muslims and have an unconditioned friendship. The conversation opened up:

> **Me:** Is it important to you that they are exposed to Christianity or maybe even become Christian eventually?
>
> **Nancy:** I'm less that way than I used to be [she chuckled], but I feel that as a Christian my foremost duty is to show them love. They will get settled, they've got to learn the language, they've got to learn the culture, you know, one thing at a time. I'm happy to bring them to church with me, happy to talk to them about that, but that is not my number one goal.
>
> **Me:** Have you invited them to church?

Nancy: I have. I asked them if they wanted to, but I just feel that logistically right now that's not what they need most.

Me: You said that you used to be more…what do you mean by that?

Nancy: I think conversion was more of a priority—I wouldn't say that my mind has changed, but just from a more practical standpoint I feel that they need their physical needs met first and as we develop a relationship…I mean the mother can't even speak English fluently, how am I going explain to her…you know, and I don't want her ever to feel that I won't be friends with her if she doesn't change her religion or that I think she's going to hell or anything like that—I mean I don't, but I'm just…for myself I just don't feel comfortable trying to push *that*.

Me: So, the right time is just not—so right now it's not something you think they'd benefit from?

Nancy: I don't shy away from those questions. If they come up, we will talk. If they come up in the conversation about how I feel that Christians act—and they're seeing Christian love, but I'm not making a concerted effort to do that right now. I don't know the right time. For myself, I would pray for that. If I find myself in the moment, then I will pray, "help me say good things, do the right things, do what I need to do." I'm sure other people would say that I need to be more…not aggressive, but proactive in that. I just don't feel comfortable with that because I want her to feel that I'm a friend and I'm going to be her friend from now on, not that I'm trying to convert her. I'm going to be her friend for whatever reason.

Me: Why is the priority different for some people? Why do you think that conversion or talking about spiritual things is so important for other people?

Nancy: I think that's an evangelical thing. Jesus said go around the world and make disciples of all nations, you got to do that now! [she widened her eyes and chuckled] There's been a lot of teaching that you've got to go out and save the world because otherwise they're all going to hell, and I just don't feel that that's productive or necessarily even true.

Me: What do you mean it's not productive?

Nancy: It's a very conditional friendship and I've seen it happen. When I was living in Europe, I was actually working for a church. It was sort of a mission, there was a church in the city that I was at and we were supposed to be kind of be bringing people in. But I always thought that my first duty was to make friends with people and bring them in sincerely and honestly, not like I'm trying to notch numbers. And I just so rebelled against that [she chuckled]. It didn't feel real, it was so motivated on guilt.

> **Me:** So, that's not the message that you—
>
> **Nancy:** That's not the message that Jesus had, I don't think, and it's not the message that I want to communicate. His message was love. Love those people. And I think it's up to him to touch their hearts and convict them. I'm glad to invite them to study with me, I'm glad to talk to them, but it's not my main motivation to get them baptized, you know? I don't ever want to pressure them to feel they have to be a way that I want them to be for them to be friends.

Throughout our conversation, Nancy made a point to try to distinguish her current behaviour both from her past self and from other evangelicals whom she regards as too forward or manipulative. When it comes to conversion, she expressed that there was a sense of pressure that makes her uncomfortable and she attributes that pressure to what she sees as inappropriate methods of evangelism. By juxtaposing realness, sincerity and honesty with contrivances, impatience and compulsion, it is as if she is trying to reimagine the nature of her relationship with her Muslims friends in a way that neutralizes her desire to eventually see them converted, a desire on which she is unsure how to act. She says that she tries not to think about conversion and even that it is not important. Yet, at the same time, she has already asked them to accompany her to church and she prays for the right moment to come when she can engage in a more formal type of proselytism. She seems to be contending with the evangelistic approach that she grew up with and that is still ambient in her community. When she gets the feeling from some of her peers that she "needs to be more proactive", she is reminded not to lose sight of the objective. She describes "the love of Jesus" as something that she can only attempt to convey and that it is ultimately the responsibility of the divine to "touch their hearts". She also explained that since her youth, she has relieved herself of the burden of eschatological urgency, and has thus made it easier to change her behaviour in a way that she feels portrays a more genuine and unconditioned friendship. However, she is still not settled in her new vision of things, as she articulates those changes as potential spiritual weakness:

> **Nancy:** Maybe it's because I don't feel that there's any danger from the fires of hell as some evangelicals do. Maybe that too, maybe I'm not as strong spiritually as I used to be. Not that I don't still love, but I just don't feel that same urgency. I think some people [at Raven Hill] would think that I need to be doing that more proactively and get them into church and stuff, but I just…you got to give it time.

Nancy mentioned that at Raven Hill there are certainly a number of conservative people, but that she does not often associate with them. In comparison to her upbringing and to the fundamentalism that is still prevalent in the Churches of Christ, she considers herself an open thinker and feels like a bit like an outlier: "I grew up in the Churches of Christ, but I lean *way* left. I'm kind of radical!", she chuckled.

4.2 Evan: "I think actions speak louder than words"

I was connected with Evan through Raven Hill's refugee ministry director several weeks before arriving in the field and had arranged to meet with him to talk about his involvement in refugee resettlement. He had been a member at the church for a few years, having moved to Nashville from Alabama to work at a major Christian publishing company based in the city. We met one afternoon at a popular coffee chain that was on his route home from work. We sat on the patio outside. He was in his mid-50's, but dressed youthfully, sporting clear thick-rimmed glasses, jeans and a black concert t-shirt. He spoke with a gentle voice and frequently took long, pensive pauses. An intellectual man, his desire to continue studying had led him to pursue a graduate degree in theology at one of Nashville's leading Christian universities, which he had recently completed. He occasionally leads Bible study sessions at Raven Hill on Sunday mornings. Like Nancy, he had been paired with a family of Muslim refugees and has remained "heavily involved in their lives", staying in contact with them long after the end of his service commitment. He considers himself "more progressive than other evangelicals" both theologically and socially on issues related to immigration and "how they treat the LGBTQ community". He explained his motivation to volunteer for the resettlement agency as emanating from his belief that Christianity is fundamentally a religion of compassion and hospitality. When it comes to evangelism, he is very reluctant. He talked about his own spiritual insecurities and how he does not want to presume that he is in the position to tell others what to believe:

> **Me:** Where is the balance for you between…accepting to sit down or interact with somebody of another faith, but not also just say that everybody and is same and believes the same thing. Where do you fall in there?

> **Evan:** Hmm…It may be different tomorrow and it was probably different yesterday, but today...uhm [he takes a long 5-second pause] …I'm not even…I'm pretty convinced that Jesus never intended to start a new religion…and that…uhm…he was here to help us see what it means to live out the life the way God intended. That's why his favourite term for himself is not Son of God, but Son of Man, meaning the fully human one, the one who shows us what it means to be human. Uhm…so…I am not…I'm not at all concerned about converting people to my faith. I'm just much more concerned about showing them what I believe my faith intends for them to see, and that's people helping people.

Like Nancy, Evan feels that the best way for him to evangelize is through letting the fundamentals of his faith be reflected in the way he interacts with others. He enjoys the opportunities he gets to talk about his faith, however, unlike Nancy, he said that he does not want to do so in the context of evangelism, but instead in the context of an intellectual discussion. He practises "contemplative prayer" and speaks of living with spiritual tensions. He humours the idea that other religions might also have spiritual truth to offer, but remains in a state of relative confidence about the truth claims of his own faith. However, he has come to break with certain eschatological beliefs from his upbringing, and sees those changes as important for enabling him to become friends with people of other religions:

> **Evan:** I think some people have a belief system, a way that they've grown up, to believe that their worldview and view of God, view of their religion is…is right. And there's a sense in which we all believe that, none of them are like, "Oh yeah, I'm practising the wrong thing" [he smiled and chuckled], but maybe a close mindedness to be open to anything else and only seeing their faith and religion, Christianity, as…—and I think this is where Protestantism, and evangelicalism in particular, has done Christianity a huge disfavour—only seeing it as means to an end post-death. It's only… "this world is not my home, I'm just passing through" type of theology.
>
> **Me:** And that might make people lose sight of how they're interacting with people?
>
> **Evan:** Yeah, "Everything's hell here, but it doesn't matter if I can just hang on long enough and get along to heaven." And so, if I have that kind of a worldview, I'm only going to approach my Muslim neighbour in a way in which I think I can convert him to that same view so that he can spend eternity in heaven and not the eternal fire of torment kind of thing.
>
> **Me:** So, how do you approach that differently?

> **Evan:** So, if I approach the Bible with that basic belief already, then yes, I'm going to see it saying that. But if I can take a step back and say, "What if that's not what it's saying," and try to read it differently, then I don't think that it really talks much at all about the afterlife like that, and that's not really what it's talking about when it talks about heaven and hell. I'm trying to be more open-minded and when I look at it as the story of God I see much more of it being about bringing heaven to Earth and bringing God's will and God's ways of helping our neighbours, loving our neighbours, loving those in need in the here and now, rather than trying to peddle posthumous insurance policies.

As for evangelism, he has seen the damage that even well-intentioned outreach can do to a relationship. A close friend of his is Muslim, a former colleague that he has known for over 30 years. Knowing him has not only had an effect on his own spirituality, but also his sociability when it comes to evangelism:

> **Me:** Has that friendship had an effect on the way that you view your own faith?
>
> **Evan:** That probably has a lot to do with a number of the things I said to start with about not believing that necessarily my faith was the only path up the mountain.
>
> **Me:** Do you ever have conversations with your friend about faith?
>
> **Evan:** We have a little bit. He knows what I believe, and that I respect his beliefs. You know, there's one story that he probably told me 20 years ago and it still sticks out in my mind. His family had some Christian neighbours that started visiting them, having dinner at their house and vice versa. He told me, "I thought we were becoming really, really good friends, and then they started inviting us to church," maybe not worship but some other church activity. And he said he declined and said, "No, we're Muslim and we don't go to church." He said he never saw the Christian family again. The first time they declined an invitation to church, the Christian family never wanted to see them again.
>
> **Me:** So, it was the Christian family that cut them off? [Evan nods yes] Really? What did he have to say about that? What did he think?
>
> **Evan:** [he laughs] He did not think it was the way to be a friend….At all.
>
> **Me:** So, he thinks that they were only being friends with him in order to try to invite him to church?
>
> **Evan:** Absolutely.
>
> **Me:** Does that happen often do you think?

> **Evan:** I do think it happens often, yeah. I think maybe the reason a lot of Christians would befriend someone of a different faith was to convert them.

He remembers that story from over 20 years ago, seeming to linger in his mind like a constant reminder of the how evangelistic intentions can affect relationships, and with potentially dramatic consequences. He explained that he worries about being perceived by his Muslim friend as someone who is just interested in softening him up, waiting to get just close enough until revealing the underlying purpose of their relationship. For Evan, that story affected the way he perceives of different methods of evangelism and how it can condition a relationship in undesired ways, similar to Nancy's conscious avoidance of pressure. That being said, he does not want to withhold his beliefs if he is asked about them:

> **Me:** So, in the relationships that you have now, how do you know when it's the right time to talk about your faith? Is it something that you think will never come up for the sake of the relationship, or…?
>
> **Evan:** Definitely if they were to ask me. If they were to ask me why I do what I do…ahead of that… [5-second pause] …uhm…maybe never. I'm very heavy on the acting and doing. I think actions speak louder than words.

4.3 Rebecca: "Am I trying to convert them? No. Should I? I don't know"

I first met Rebecca at an interfaith dinner of which she was the host and to which she had invited several members of the Raven Hill congregation. In addition to being an outspoken proponent of outreach to Muslims, she leads development-focused mission trips the successes of which had recently been praised the church's annual activities bulletin. We met for coffee one morning near the evangelical Christian university where she lectures in the education department. She was in her early 30s and had spent most of her adult life so far working as an English teacher to immigrant youth in the city's public schools as well as doing mission work overseas. She grew up the daughter of a fundamentalist preacher, but was now an outspoken and socially engaged progressive Christian. Throughout our conversation, she hammered at the ignorance of her conservative upbringing as she recalled stories from her childhood with what

seemed like a cathartic cynicism. A member of Raven Hill for over a decade, she was originally attracted to the church's involvement in community outreach and overseas missions, and was looking for something with a better balance than the "inward-focusing church" she grew up in:

> **Rebecca:** I didn't want to be part of a church that only interacted with people if they agreed to be a Christian, which is what I observed growing up. My parents would ask, "How many people have you saved, and if you haven't saved them, leave them behind!". I never wanted to be like that because from what I read in the gospels, Jesus wasn't like that.

She has participated in several interfaith activities and had recently made a new friend who is Muslim and with whom she is becoming close. When it comes to evangelism, she adamantly rejects the idea that she should try to convert non-Christians, but at the same time she is unsure about whether or not it is alright that she feels that way:

> **Me:** For you, how do you decide when is and isn't a good time to talk to non-Christians about your faith?
>
> **Rebecca:** That's something I've actually struggled with forever because what my parents believe and taught me versus what I…like…so, my parents view of religion is very black and white and they take the Bible very literally. I don't want to ever read the gospels and put myself in Jesus's standpoint because that's not who I am, but we are to emulate what he does. He's accepting of others, he seeks out others, and by that I'm using the "us versus them" language intentionally. And he *does* say "I am the son of God," right? If I go out of my way to be kind to somebody, my dad would argue that you should say to that person "Jesus is good to me, so I'm good to you." But I feel really uncomfortable with that because I think that other people are also really uncomfortable with that. It's not in our culture. In our society—and maybe I'm just talking about my white middle-class culture—but in our society…that's really in-your-face and kind of offensive. I teach lessons on American culture to immigrants in my English classes and that's one of the things that we talk about, that you just don't talk about religion. In America, you might live really religiously, but you just don't say it all the time. And I can't decide if that's spiritual poverty or if it's just living the way a Christian should every day. Do I need to always preach about it 24/7?
>
> **Me:** So, do you feel like you're intentionally repressing a part of your identity by not talking about your faith regularly with non-Christians?
>
> **Rebecca:** I feel that in conversations that I have with family or friends, we do talk about our spirituality and our religion pretty often, but I don't think it's appropriate to walk up to a stranger.
>
> **Me:** But what about with your friends who are not Christian?

> **Rebecca:** I would not put them in a position where I'm like, "You need to be saved." Which is not what my parents taught me, which was, "If you have non-Christian friends, you shouldn't be friends with them unless you've invited them to become a Christian, and they've said yes."
>
> **Me:** Do you wish that your non-Christian friends would one day become Christian?
>
> **Rebecca:** [she took a long, 4-second pause as her eyes looked past me and then down at the table] …Well, again, I'm also torn on that because I don't know…again, for me personally, I don't know if…—I was taught that the Church of Christ is the only way into heaven. I remember asking my parents, "What about Mother Teresa?" and they said, "She's going to hell!" I had a Baptist boyfriend in high school and they said, "You can't go to church with him, he's going to hell!" So, for me…I appreciate other views on God. I'm Church of Christ because I was born into it, and I was taught not to study other religions or other faiths because that would protect me. But who's to say Church of Christ is the way to God? There are so many religions…and so, even for me, in talking to my Muslims friends, for example, am I trying to convert them? No…Should I? I don't know.

Her long hesitations indicate that although she is confident about how she does *not* want to act, she is unsure about how she should. She has strong views about the social and spiritual shortcomings of fundamentalism, and, similar to Evan, she humours the idea that her religious worldview might not be the "most right" one. She described how she regularly challenges her family, bringing her father books about Islam that he refuses to even look at. She told a story about one evening when she was visiting her parents' house and she slipped in a translation of a Muslim prayer when saying grace before dinner. She waited for everybody at the table to comment on how beautiful the prayer was before revealing that it was from the Quran, stunning them all and causing an uproar. Although her upbringing still weighs heavily on her and she is insecure about some of her doubts, Rebecca is similar to Evan in her reimagining of spirituality as something in a constant state of development and change, and she thinks that that has a direct effect on her social behaviour:

> **Me:** Do you believe in a universal spiritual truth that all religions sort of lead to or is there still a uniqueness for you in Christianity?
>
> **Rebecca:** Um… [5 second pause] …I really don't know because everything that I read in the Bible I believe to be truth…so part of that truth is that you have to

> be a follower of Jesus, you have to be a Christian…so I don't really know because I…have been exposed to the Bible my whole life, so I believe it in a certain way, whereas if I hadn't been exposed to the Bible until this time in the life, would I believe it? Would I feel so convicted? I don't know.

Rebecca believes in heaven and hell, but does not claim to know what either of those "look like". She is also unsure about how to conceive of the exclusive nature of Christian salvation. She seems to have difficulty squaring the biblical teachings that she closely values with her desire to accept others regardless of their religion. One way that she attempts to resolve the dissonance is by reimagining non-Christians broadly through the lens of familiar concepts such as original sin, instead of seeing them as condemned. In this way, non-Christians, like her and all humans, are inherently flawed, and she hopes that God will see their non-belief as just one of many other flaws and will recognize the other qualities that make them worthy of salvation:

> **Me:** When you think about heaven, who's admitted?
>
> **Rebecca:** Well…the Bible tells us that those who believe in Jesus and are saved, but…what about all those that don't know the Bible? And that's where my upbringing and my parents would argue, "It's your responsibility to tell them, they're all going to hell because of you." That's what I was taught and I don't necessarily believe that. Part of me believes that if we are in relationship with God and he knows our hearts and he knows our intents then…we will be admitted to heaven. We're human, we're designed to be at fault for everything, right, but if we're always doing our best to overcome that and we fail along the way, but we're doing everything with our best intentions—or not even with best intentions because intentions are weak currency—but always trying to live a life of faith whatever that faith may be. But part of me that has been conditioned and trained says that that's not the truth, so…I don't know. I've tried to do a lot of reading and study on my own and I still don't have the answers.

Throughout my conversation with Rebecca, she was in constant dialogue with the beliefs and practices of her upbringing. She acknowledged her doubts about certain core beliefs and seemed proud at the changes she has made over time in regards to how she interacts with religious others. She finds that the community at Raven Hill is very supportive and that the leadership there embraces the challenges of "being a Christian today":

> **Rebecca:** [In the sermons at Raven Hill] there's always a challenge. And the challenge is not "Go out and convert as many people as you can today". It's like, "You need to focus on yourself and really find yourself before you go drag others into this."

4.4 Callie: “It doesn’t feel right, it doesn’t feel like what we’re asked to do”

Callie is in her mid-30’s and she works at a public health research institute in Nashville. She is on the mission organizing committee at Raven Hill and says that her faith plays a very important role in her life. She recalled that when she was in graduate school, many of her peers talked about getting jobs in the private sector and seemed mostly concerned with promotions and high salaries. For Callie, her work had to have a greater purpose, and she said that her faith guides her professional choices: “Making somebody else money or making myself money doesn’t get me excited to do anything. I’m here to do something, to help other people, to bring the kingdom of God into the world as much as I can,” she explained. Like Rebecca, she feels that her beliefs and behaviours have changed significantly since her upbringing, and memories from that time, both good and bad, still weigh on her conscience. She recalled feeling pressured to adhere to strict social norms and to evangelize whenever the opportunity presented itself. Although she now distances herself from the religious conservatism of her upbringing, she still feels a nostalgic warmness for it:

> **Callie:** Ever since grad school I’ve been going to basically more and more progressive, liberal—whatever label you want to put on it—churches, and there aren’t really those where I grew up, so if I were to move back there I would have a hard time staying in that tradition. But at the same time leaving the Churches of Christ would be very painful for me because that’s my people, I grew up in that and there’s a lot that I love about it.

When it comes to evangelism, like Nancy, Evan and Rebecca, Callie is uncomfortable with the implication that the objective is ultimately to convert others. I first met Callie at an interfaith event in which about a half dozen other Raven Hill members sat down for dinner with a group of Muslims. It was her first time participating in such an activity and she remained silent, listening intently for most of the two hours until a tour of the table made its way around to her chair. Her number one concern about interacting with Muslims, she said, was saying the wrong thing. For Callie, conditioning relationships with evangelistic intentions prevents genuine connection. When we met for the interview, she explained further:

> **Me:** If you think about people of other faiths, or about the idea of welcoming people of other faiths, is it important to you that evangelism be a part of that welcoming? That those people are encouraged to become Christian?
>
> **Callie:** Not really. My high school youth-group self would probably be surprised to hear me say that [she chuckled]. It was always the emphasis on bringing your friends to church and saving them. I was never very good at that. I'm an introvert, so the idea of asking someone if they want to come to church is terrifying. I was never into it really. Now, if you develop an actual relationship with people, and, you know, you have conversations with them and they're interested in where I got to church or whatever, that's great. But I didn't go to the interfaith dinner that night thinking "I'm going to make friends with a Muslim and then convert them" [she laughed]. I don't think that's a good strategy if you're trying to do that. I don't think it's a way to form genuine relationships with people.
>
> **Me:** What is it about that intent to evangelize that hurts that authenticity or keeps it from getting to that point?
>
> **Callie:** I mean I think in a lot of cases it makes the Other, whoever the Other is, just feel like, "Oh, I'm just a number, I'm just here so you can check one off", or something like that. It doesn't lend itself to an actual relationship because there's always an agenda there.
>
> **Me:** Is there a tension in the church about that? I've heard people speak of "watering down the message" or "losing track of the objective".
>
> **Callie:** Yeah, I think that's very true. Growing up, when we went on a mission trip, part of the point was to convert people. We were serving them so we could tell them about Jesus. You know, it's like we're doing this one thing so that we can really do the other. For me personally, I don't think it's effective, it doesn't feel right, it doesn't feel like what we're asked to do, and I don't have any interest in that. I have interest in connecting with people and understanding people, and hopefully that also results in them understanding my perspective, you know, but…if that doesn't get them into church 3 times a week that's fine [she chuckled].

Again, she seems to pit evangelistic intent against genuineness. However she does not want to completely put it aside. When we began to talk more about the theological underpinnings of evangelism, her hesitations and sighs got longer and the double bind became more salient:

> **Me:** When it comes to your views about other religions, do you believe in the kind of "different paths up the same mountain" approach or do you more…

> **Callie:** Oh, now you're getting into *really* hard questions! I mean…yes and no, I guess…I…—like, if I talked to a Buddhist, I think they have very true things to say, I don't want to be somebody who immediately shuts off somebody who follows a different tradition or a different faith and says they have nothing of value because I believe they absolutely do. At the same time, I do believe that Jesus is how God revealed himself to us, and so that kind of differentiates in a pretty big way Christianity from everything else. So, if I had to pick one, I'd go with that [she chuckled]. But…and I know this is a very wishy-washy answer to your question, but I…kind of a yes and no. I think that God uses all kinds of things to point us to him, and I think that Jesus is the primary way he did that, but that doesn't mean that all these other traditions don't also that things of value.
>
> **Me:** The way you feel now, has it changed since—
>
> **Callie:** Oh yeah!
>
> **Me:** What do you attribute that change to?
>
> **Callie:** Well, growing up—and I'm someone who likes structure, answers, clarity, and the Church of Christ is very good at clarity [she chuckled]—depending on what church you go to, there can be a party line, which is kind of how I grew up. Not super authoritarian, but like "we don't use instruments because of this verse, we don't use women as deacons because of this verse". I went to undergrad near home, but when I moved away for grad school, it was a very formative experience for me.

She continued on to describe how much things changed for her when she went to university in a nearby state and was for the first time exposed not just to a diversity of other Christians, but also of other religions, languages, sexual orientations and social norms such as unmarried friends who lived with their boyfriends. "What is happening in my world, this is just crazy!", she remembers thinking to herself. For Callie, it has been contact with otherness that has had the greatest effect on her changes in belief and behaviour:

> **Callie:** Even having friends who have a similar background as me but through various life circumstances of their own have talked to me about how Buddhism has some good things to say. It's like, "Oh yeah that could be true *too*." It's just been kind of a gradual process as I've been willing to listen and to talk to other people it's just changed my perspective I think. And I've had the opportunity to do that, whereas if I had stayed where I grew up in my suburb I probably wouldn't have.
>
> **Me:** Does it make you feel less Christian?

> **Callie:** That's a hard question. I mean, no, it doesn't make me feel less Christian. I think if you talk to the people at the church where I grew up, they might have a different perspective on that. But they already think that Raven Hill is not Church of Christ, so I'm kind of already lost to a certain group.

When she thinks about actually applying her freshly changed and continually evolving perspectives on evangelism and other core elements of her faith, she is pulled in opposing directions at once:

> **Me:** If you had a Muslim friend, would it worry you that they weren't Christian because of the salvation issue? Would it worry you that somebody close to you might face negative consequences if you didn't try? Is that a space that you've been in before?
>
> **Callie:** [long sigh] It's definitely a space I've been in before. Growing up I was told to make friends with the non-Christians at my school so I could save them. Best case scenario, it is done out of love, but it's not always the best-case scenario. It can definitely be done with good intentions…but at this point…I feel a certainty about a lot of aspects of my faith, but…I don't believe it's my job to convert people, that is the spirit's job, it is not my job. And so, I think all I would do is try to share my life with them and listen to their life and if that, you know, results in any changes for them, great, and if it results in changes for me, then gre—I mean I don't anticipate converting to Islam—but you know it's…if it's a concern…[longer hesitation] …I don't know, it's so funny because growing up the way I did, it almost makes me feel like a bad Christian to say that I'm not that worried about it, but I just…after having…watched a lot of those conversion efforts and met a lot of people who have been the object of those conversion efforts I just feel like if God is going to get us—that's a poor phrase—not get us like capture us [she chuckled], but if he's after a relationship with us then he's going to work in whatever way he wants to work, and if we as a people are going to be receptive to that then we're going to be receptive to that. I'm just not that worried about the logistics of it. So yeah, I mean, the 15-year-old part of me that's still in youth group is kind of worried about it, but at the same time I don't feel like it's my responsibility to convert everybody that I meet. I don't think that would drive a relationship.

Like Nancy, Callie tries to relieve herself of the eschatological burden by putting the spiritual responsibility on divine intervention, and thus enabling herself to navigate social spaces in a way that allows her to focus on her conception of genuineness. That freedom, however, remains checked by the worry that her peers might view her as "a bad Christian". Most of my informants shared this theological and behavioural move. In the next and final vignette of this section, I

will present the views of one of the leaders of Raven Hill's local outreach team. His role as a programme coordinator and educator lends itself to a more formal description of the key concepts behind the reimagining of evangelical social engagement and the theological changes that seem to accompany those changes.

4.5 James: "I just refuse to worry that there's some endgame"

James was the coordinator of Raven Hill's local outreach to refugees before their partner organization closed in the wake of President Trump's executive order on immigration and refugee resettlement several months prior to our conversation. In addition to his involvement in service-focused ministry, James has also participated in interfaith dialogue activities with Muslims. He is in his 40s and recalls growing up in a very conservative church whose evangelism methods he has since come to see as self-serving and ineffective. In lieu of evangelism, he speaks of "missional discipleship", a trending term among so-called emerging or progressive evangelicals. It describes a form of action-focused engagement with the other that attempts to reimagine the evangelist's role as one defined by a quest for mutuality and relationship instead of a "one-dimensional" and "transactional" pursuit of personal conversion. He occupies a teaching role in the church, and so his approach to evangelism reflects a more formal explanation than the church laity when it comes to the management of intentions and motivations in relationships with religious others:

> **Me:** What are some of the things that you teach the church members about avoiding the one-directional aspect of evangelism? What can they receive from the people that they're interacting with?
>
> **James:** I think what we can teach them is that it isn't a transactional sort of process, that we're not going to give…provide something I should say, that it's not a one-way provision in that there is a relationship that can be established and that we believe that Christ lives in both parties and can teach from both vantage points and there's more mutuality involved.

Although James is primarily involved in service-focused engagement, he said that for him, interfaith dialogue functions on the same criteria. By imagining himself in a position to receive from religious others instead of just impart his own religious knowledge upon them, he is

seeking a mutuality that softens the assumed power relations of the evangelist. For James, it is not just about the presence or absence of talk about religion, but instead an acknowledgment of the evangelist's position as one that is not as inherently positive (or even neutral) as traditional evangelical approaches might assume:

> **Me:** When you say "evangelism in a traditional sense" as something you want to move away from, do you mean ministry by word rather than by deed, for example?
>
> **James:** No, it's more of evangelism in the sense of the exercise of imparting knowledge, imparting word and then completing the transaction of someone "giving their life to Christ." And so, sort of this exchange of information and this expectation that someone is then going to respond in X, Y or Z way.
>
> **Me:** One of the things that I think is interesting is this idea of building relationships with people. I spoke with someone before who told me that they want to form relationships and that, naturally, that would include them talking about their faith. But also, given the way that they feel evangelism is viewed and the history of how it has been practised, it pushes people away and can prevent the relationship from happening in the first place. He said that maybe he would never talk about his faith because of the damage it could potentially do to the authenticity of that friendship if the other person came to think that it was conditioned all along. Where do you stand on that, how do you feel about that?
>
> **James:** I think I just have come to refuse to…worry about it in the sense that there's some endgame. I just don't see that there's an endgame other than love, loving people. I just put the results or what actually happens long-term into Christ's hands. I think we all as Christians tend to put too much pressure on ourselves to change people or to bring about transformation or "share the gospel" or "share our faith". And not that I don't think that we should be intentional, but…I would be OK with having a friendship for…indefinitely, and I'm OK with there never being what I view as results. I just think that we're called to be a certain type of people and I believe that we can trust God to work in that relationship as he chooses. It might mean this person comes to faith, it might not, and I'm not in charge of that outcome.
>
> **Me:** Do your beliefs about eschatology influence that?
>
> **James:** Um…[he began to fiddle with his empty cardboard cup and look past me for about 5-seconds]…I think that…that we're…—kind of at the root of this discussion is just our position in the kingdom and…I in the past have tended to see my role as much more important than it actually is, much larger than it actually is, so I don't want to invalidate the role of the disciple, of God's people, because it can be very powerful, especially collectively…but I guess to feel the personal weight of another person's salvation is a dangerous thing.

Me: What do you mean by that?

James: To feel this immense sense of obligation to see that person make what we believe is a move towards the kingdom of God is a little bit presumptuous and a little bit egotistical maybe. So, I tend to believe that if God wants to bring a person to faith, he's going to use me whether I want to or not. Now, he certainly loves people who are willing—or I should say he loves *it* when his people are willing and partner with him, but even the scriptures say "even if we don't sing his praises, the rocks will cry out," so I'm just not convinced that he needs us to do this or that. Now, he loves *it* when we are willing and when we are a vessel, but it's still up to him. I think faith is granted by God's spirit working in a heart and so I just think at some basic childlike faith level you just have to commit those relationships and friendships to the Lord, and you love and you share hospitality and you answer questions as they come up. And that doesn't mean that there won't come a day when God convicts you in that moment with that person to share more deeply about some particular of your faith. But I just feel like if we're listening and we're discerning…and we're partnering with God that those relationships can evolve organically, and naturally, in time and with patience, so I just don't think that it's healthy to live under the pressure that we have to follow some game plan with those relationships because, yes, in the end, if they find out that there was an end game, they can feel very exploited, and trust is on shaky ground at that point.

When we began talking more specifically about his beliefs regarding the afterlife and salvation, James strained as he avoided any terms or expressions that would imply exclusion or judgment:

Me: What are your beliefs about the afterlife?

James: I think…as a church—and I would say personally—I think that we believe that God's kingdom has been initiated with the resurrection, that the church has been endowed with the spirit, that he will return, that…all things are being made anew, that there will be a new heaven and a new earth. The Lord's prayer is very foundational to our belief on end times, that we're praying for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, so there's this redemptive movement that we're all a part of, that we're ultimately…we will receive new bodies, that the physical earth will be made new and he'll reign, he'll walk with his people again.

Me: When that does happen, who will be admitted into the new earth and heaven?

James: [he continued to fiddle with the cup, starting to tear at the rim while he took another long, 5-second pause] …Whoever he says [he chuckled lightly]

Me: Does he have criteria? [I chuckled]

> **James:** I think as a general rule we look to Matthew 25 and this notion of sheep and goats and this very basic instruction of…the ones that are the sheep are the ones that recognize the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, the stranger, and they did something about it, they expressed that love and care and compassion for anybody who's being marginalized, anybody that's on the fringe, anybody that's not been invited to the table. It's a very inclusive invitation. I think as a general rule we believe that our faith has a…a necessary fruit. I think the ones that are invited are anybody and everybody that was willing to…stick their neck out for the least of those.
>
> **Me:** And those people would be Christians?
>
> **James:** You know that word is full, too. I think it's the ones that did what Jesus asked. He's the master and so for those that obey his words, those are the ones that will be counted as sheep.

James did not make eye contact with me during any of the last bit of conversation and looked past me over my shoulder. As my questions became more precise in regards to his specific beliefs about salvation, he started to slowly tear up the paper coffee cup. By the end of the interview, he had turned the cup into a pile of shreds on the table. When it comes to evangelism, James does not deny his desire for his actions to bring about spiritual transformation. However his approach embraces a kind of patience that allows him to engage the other differently from the evangelistic urgency that is common among the Churches of Christ. Although he says he "refuses to worry about the endgame," he tenses up and seems very much to have it in mind. In any case, he expressed how his patience accords him a freedom in social engagement that can more successfully reflect the key aspects of relational authenticity, namely a mutuality-centred view of the encounter and a respect of religious difference:

> **James:** I think Raven Hill diverges [from other Churches of Christ] where evangelism in the traditional sense isn't always the top priority. In other words, we don't necessarily attempt to control the disciple-making process. We're willing to devote ourselves to more organic, slow, long-term holistic community building and believe deep down that that will lead to those coming to faith, or deeper discipleship themselves. But we've grown less concerned about…converting people.

4.6 Variation in the Double Bind Spectrum

The vignettes of Nancy, Evan, Rebecca, Callie and James reveal a variety of ways in which the quest for relational authenticity affects their perspectives on social engagement and evangelism. They seem to actively regulate and balance their interactions against similar rubrics of relational authenticity, and they all recall making conscious choices to change their beliefs and social behaviour. In many cases, those changes can lead to personal doubts and to criticism from their peers. It is revealing of the opposing injunctions that frame their social behaviour and contribute to a double bind in which the mutuality and openness of "genuine" relationships compete with the desire to guide the relationship towards a specific outcome. All of my informants alluded to how changes in some of their core beliefs have enabled them to resolve the dissonance and be more successful in their pursuit of relational authenticity. Other church members that I interviewed expressed similar perspectives. Jefferson, an overseas mission coordinator in his 40s, had not yet engaged with Muslims locally, but had travelled extensively in Muslim-majority countries and is intrigued by the church's involvement in interfaith activities at home. He said that in his encounters with non-Christians overseas he consciously tries to avoid giving people the impression that he "has them in his crosshairs" or "has made them his project." For him, too, it is all about relationships and working towards a mutual understanding of each person's otherness. He repeatedly stated that he did not find conversion to be a priority, but was quick to qualify his statement with an affirmation that he would he be very pleased if it happened anyway:

> **Jefferson:** This may be counter to what our faith tradition says, but I don't think that our biggest need is for us to evangelize, and that may be hypocritical, that may be wrong. I feel like…—Now, if that were to happen, that's great if that came out of it, I just wouldn't approach it as "I'm going in to evangelize the other person." If that's something that happened, that'd be great, but I just would approach it that way. I think the biggest need would be to…to understand and to be understood and for that bridge to be there, and if something more can from that, that would be great.

Lynn, a woman of retirement age who had been teaching English to Muslim immigrants for a couple of years, is similar to Evan in her curiosity about other worldviews and she enjoys engaging in philosophical conversations:

> **Lynn:** I love having conversations about faith with others, but I've got to say that I haven't been in a lot of relationships closely enough and long enough that it has come up a lot. Because we don't do that in the context of our classes, that's just a real service. But what I do hope, that's part of what I want, that in that connection between the two communities that friendships will develop that foster those kinds of discussions…so, yeah.
>
> **Me:** Why do you think it's important to get to that point of talking about your faith? Is it just because in a friendship that would naturally be something that you would talk about with somebody?
>
> **Lynn:** Yeah, I mean I would not want to do it if people were not interested, but with my [non-Christian] friend that I have been friends with for 10 or 12 years and he's just an amazingly good, admirable person, you know we do share a little bit about how we each perceive things and um…you know, I suppose that it would be true to say that all of us wish that everyone saw the world like we do [she chuckled], and so, yeah, I will admit to that. I'd love it if that happened! But my goal really is to be honest and real to each other, and whatever comes out of that is also real.

Some of my informants, however, were less inclined to embrace a posture of ambivalence in regards to both core convictions and to evangelism. Cindy, a close friend of Lynn, is a spirited lady of retirement age who had also been teaching English to young Muslim women for a year or so when he met for an interview. She teaches the upper-level classes that are meant to prepare students for attending college in English. She defined the boundaries of appropriate evangelism more narrowly than the five key informants described above. For example, although she says that she never wants to force or pressure anyone, she intentionally takes advantage of moments when her students display signs of emotional vulnerability. She seemed to describe things in a way that appeals to the quest for relational authenticity, but her behaviour reflected a significant gap between her words and her actions. As she described her views on evangelism and how she behaves in her interactions with the Muslim women, she contradicted herself on several levels:

> **Cindy:** Evangelism is very important to me, but I guess the way I evangelize is to show people I care about them. I'm not a "Bible-banger" so-to-speak, it's not like I go out and say, "you're wrong, let me tell you about my faith". With the Muslims, we visit in their homes, we take them gifts, we ask them to come to our home. Even though we have never mentioned necessarily God or religion—and I've only been there a year—I feel that in doing so, in time perhaps we can teach them. But we're never judgmental of their beliefs.

> **Me:** If you think about evangelism, for example, in the relationships that you're building with these women, how do you know, personally, when the right time is to mention certain things about religion? How do you evaluate when is the right time for something like that and when isn't?
>
> **Cindy:** I have talked a bit in class…they will tell me at times how serious their situation is. Some of the women are from Syria and they will come in very tearful depending on what's happening over there at the time and their families are over there and they're so concerned about their family. And so, they will be quite teary, upset about the situation, so I would tell them "I'm going to pray for you and every day I'm going to pray for your family" and then I'll talk to them this way: I'll say, "Do you believe in Jesus? Do you know who Jesus is?" I don't say God because their God is Allah, but I will say Jesus. So, I don't ask them as much as they tell me their sad stories and I mention it. That's all I've done this year, but knowing them now, I probably could go further.

Cindy had tried to learn a bit about Islam and she admires the devotion and discipline that her students show by adhering to the hijab and by praying five times a day. Despite her curiosity and timid appreciation for certain elements of their religious practice, she has the impression that the women "don't really understand their own religion" and that "they've just learned what to do." For example, she has asked about the meaning behind certain religious holidays and has not been satisfied with the answers. She finds that their faith is more a product of rote learning than of personal spirituality, and so it would not be inappropriate for her to proselytize:

> **Cindy:** In their religion, they don't have an individual relationship with God like we do. So, I'm thinking that if they don't know much about their own religion, they must not have a very close relationship with their faith other than that they know they better do it, that it's wrong if they don't.

She said that she is only referring to the Muslims that she knows and that she cannot speak for others. However her statement is revealing of a profound interreligious misunderstanding that serves to justify her actions. She continued to say that she would be uncomfortable supporting her students by directing them towards spiritual resources in the Muslim community instead of proselytizing:

> **Me:** Would it make you uncomfortable at all if in a situation like when your students are having a rough time to direct them towards, I don't know, a mosque or an imam or someone in the Muslim community that might be able to help them with spiritual things?

> **Cindy:** Yeah, that would be weird. If they were having problems like that it would be hard for me to lead them to a mosque or to someone in their faith. I would want to help them from the knowledge that I have about my faith.

Unlike Nancy, Callie or James, who are perhaps more patient, Cindy's strong desire to evangelize is not tempered by the same social sensitivity either for emotional pressure or for the power relations inherent to her position as a service provider, a teacher and an elder to the young Muslim women. James spoke of "waiting for opportunities", while both Nancy and Cindy spoke in terms of "looking for opportunities". However, Cindy was considerably more forward, perceiving flaws in her students' spirituality that justified her taking action and searching more broadly in a way reminiscent of what Nancy described as "notching numbers". In addition to her Muslim students, Cindy lives next door to a Muslim couple. She said she has tried to invite them over for dinner and her husband has offered to mow their lawn and collect their mail. For Cindy, these are intentional acts of kindness that are meant "to show them how Christ loves them". Although her approach to evangelism is decidedly more direct than most of the people I spoke with, compared to her friends at church, she feels quite progressive. For her, even just being willing to interact with Muslims at all is a significant step:

> **Cindy:** I had a church group in my home not too long ago, and they said, "Cindy, you live next door to a Muslim?! Aren't you afraid? You should move!". For them, they're afraid of them and so they don't care for them.

Diane, a long-time Raven Hill member in her 50s, was going through a transition in her professional life when he met at a coffee shop that doubles as a church and faith-based charity organization. She had recently quit her job and was looking to branch outward and to get closer to people she felt were in need of spiritual rejuvenation. She hoped to do this by working at a public school in a district of the city with a large immigrant and refugee population. She gets the feeling that she is more conservative than the rest of the Raven Hill congregation and she was disappointed when in a recent sermon, the pastor had called into question the validity of the concept of Rapture, something that is very important to her own understanding of Christian theology: "I felt like, 'Aww, I kind of like that idea'", she recalled. Diane's insistence on building relationships and her explanations about avoiding moral pressure and guilt were similar to the other informants. However she articulated the relationships in a utilitarian sense that served very directly the objective of evangelism over recognition or dialogue. She did not know

any Muslims personally, but had become interested in interfaith dialogue activities after hearing the murmurings at church:

> **Me:** If you think about having a friendship with a Muslim person, for example, when do spiritual needs become important for you in that relationship? Is it more at the front for you or…?
>
> **Diane:** No, I wouldn't be that kind of person. Relationship would have to come first…and hopefully…just awareness from me of what Jesus has done in my life. I do talk about that pretty openly with anyone, whether they believe the same or not, because it's what I believe. But I don't like force them to…study the Bible. I don't know. Like I said, I'm pretty intentional and would let relationship develop and just pray for God to show me if there's a place where I need to say something or not. I feel like my responsibility is to love them, and everybody needs that.

However, if she imagines what a friendship with a Muslim would be like, she said that it would be very difficult for her to continue in that friendship if they did not develop an interest in Christianity. For Diane, not being Christian or not expressing interest in becoming Christian would be a significant hindrance to a relationship:

> **Me:** Do you believe that there's sort of a spiritual truth that all religions have the access to, or…
>
> **Diane:** I probably haven't talked enough to somebody else enough to know how they feel, but I do know that salvation is in Jesus, in confession of faith in Jesus Christ. That would be the one thing—and I would feel sad to be involved with other people who refused that. That would make me sad.
>
> **Me:** Have you had experiences like that before?
>
> **Diane:** No.
>
> **Me:** But the idea of it is something that—?
>
> **Diane:** It means so much to me and…I know it's important to God, he wants to be in relationship. So, for me, believing that that happens through Jesus, if somebody else rejected that I would feel sad.

If contradictions or tensions affect all of my informants to varying degrees, Cindy and Diane are perhaps examples from the fringes of the spectrum. In other words, they are more comfortable than the others in resolving those tensions with confident theological assertions or

recourse to certain social behaviours that fall squarely within the norms of traditional evangelical social engagement. For them, to be their authentic self is to be firmer about certain non-negotiables in regards to the spiritual and social importance of evangelism, despite the risk of hindering what their peers might consider to be important aspects of relational authenticity. These examples help to illustrate by contrast just how much second-guessing, doubt and reflexivity characterize the double bind situation of the five key informants described earlier. They seem to be more clearly caught between opposing injunctions and are not fully comfortable with any of the available recourse for action.

4.7 A Conversation with the Pastor

The quote at the top of this chapter from Adam, the head pastor at Raven Hill, was meant not just to foreshadow the paradox that my informants would express in the interview excerpts, but also the awareness of it that plays a key role in the double bind. The concept of the double bind takes what are the ages-old tensions and contradictions of Christian religious life, situates them in a particular context and presents them in a way that allows the people living with them to be seen as more than simply stubborn, hypocritical or as clever persuaders. My interview questions were intended to bring out those contradictions, however, not with the objective of revealing fault or making my informants vulnerable to judgment by catching them in a logical slip. Instead, I aimed to get at the underlying value or ethic that guides their actions in the social world. Religious doctrine and ideological imperatives *do* matter to my informants and they have a significant influence on their behaviour. At the same time, it was apparent to me that some were also dedicated to applying a rubric of relational authenticity to their spirituality and sociability, and in a way in which both were simultaneously put at risk, revealing the nature of the expectations of religious pluralism in their broader environment. The transition from evangelist to friend raises fundamental questions for my informants. I asked Adam if his relationships with non-Christians are necessarily different from relationships with Christians because of the importance that he places on evangelism. That single question opened up a conversation about a number of major points accounted for in this chapter, from reflections of

the role of evangelism in out-group sociability to changes in core beliefs and the social and spiritual tensions caused by those changes:

> **Adam:** I've got a bunch of friends that don't identify as Christian. I don't treat them any differently than I do—and maybe I should [he laughed], meaning maybe I should step up my game and love them more than I love my Christian friends—I just don't even…I just don't think about it. I'm aware of what their convictions are, but I just don't…I'm struggling because I'm trying to answer it autobiographically, but also think about how some other people approach it.
>
> **Me:** Well, whatever your experience is with it.
>
> **Adam:** Yeah, I just think… [he sighs] … I've just been so committed to the people that we're friends with in trying to be good and good for them and let them know I'm in their corner, I'm advocating—because my thing is that I think…the bottom line is I think that Jesus is most compelling human who's ever lived. That's a faith claim. *And* I think he, in a compelling way, helps us to learn how to be human. And that to me is the essence of the kingdom of God, of Christianity, that's the centre. So, I want my friendships to help other friends become the best human they can be. And we get bogged down in religious language and theology, but—so I think if you ask my friends who are non-Christian and they had a prior knowledge of who I am with my Christian friends, I don't know, I would like to think I treat them better than I do my Christian friends, with *zero* expectation because again, I don't feel the pressure. This whole thing was God's idea…the whole thing! He's on the hook, I'm not on the hook! [he chuckles] I got to answer for the best I've tried to do, which some days is really good and other days is shitty. That's what I have to answer for. But man, God's got a lot more to answer for than I do, if he or she every actually does ever answer [he laughed as he stretched out his legs]
>
> **Me:** How do you communicate that confidence to people that come to you for counselling?
>
> **Adam:** I say it just like I did. I say it that directly. I think that people are *hungry* to for people to speak as directly as they can. And then what I have to do is help them square that with the Bible because we come out of a conservative tradition where—you know, a lot of traditions in different religions recognize experience, reason, text, and interpretation of that text for meaning. We come out of a tradition that kind of denies experience—which is ironic because experience drives everything—and claims to say we come to the arrival of meaning just based on the text, which is a classic fundamentalist mistake. So, I try to help people to show them that what I just said is actually a core part of the Bible. So, I'm actually trying to get them to take the Bible more seriously, not less seriously.
>
> **Me:** Does that lead people to change their eschatology?

Adam: Oh yeah, they loosen up a little bit. That's one of the great lies and really mental sicknesses of fundamentalist Islam and Christianity is that the fate of the world is up to you. First of all, that is really arrogant. Second of all, it's bat-shit crazy. There's seven billion people on the earth right now, just right now, not even mentioning all the brilliant people that lived before you and will live after you. Ok, so this is one of the great surprising things to me, is that the closer you look at really strict fundamentalism, it's the most humanistic, in the way that we use that word, of all the expressions.

Me: What do you mean?

Adam: "It's all dependent on me. It's what I do for God." I thought this was a gift, I thought we all just glad to be here and that all life is sacred and a gift.

Me: Is what you're talking about now, people "loosening up", for example, because you said in the sermon last week—

Adam: Ahh have you been coming?

Me: Yeah, I came last week and you were talking about the tension between gospel and culture and managing that tension in the context of Nashville as a city that "has its own story", and I'm wondering, of the many things that it could mean, is one of those things rising diversity in the city—

Adam: Oh sure, sure.

Me: So, is loosening their eschatology or becoming more comfortable with that tension, is that part of that managing, is that what you're talking about?

Adam: Yes, yeah. And I'm glad you reminded me because you said you were going to listen to some of my sermons. I'd be fascinated to know from your perspective how the music and—because we say crazy stuff, it's one of the great things about my personality—there are certain deficits—but one of the really good things about my personality is that I'm able to differentiate what's happening in different moments, and there's not a Sunday that goes by that I don't think, "Are people listening, we believe some crazy stuff" and we sing it loudly and passionately [laughter]. The songs, the theology.

Me: When you say crazy, what do you mean?

Adam: Crazy meaning no one could ever come close to proving any of this is true.

Me: Well isn't that what your faith is about?

> **Adam:** Sure, but we still live in a *really* smart world now and we're as educated as we've ever been in America—in some ways, in some ways we're dumber than we've ever been—but let me get back to what you were asking. Yes, and it's shades or degrees of change. So, one degree of change might be someone's heart going from "I hope all Muslims go to hell, I know they are and I want them to," as a matter of will and desire, to "Well, I think they're going to hell, but I don't want all of them to." That's a…*very* significant, but *very* small shift. And then the next is "I don't want any of them to. Will they? Are they?" and the next one is people start rethinking, "Well, what are the options for hell, what is hell?"

For Adam, the ability to sustain an open and inquisitive posture is helpful to him in his attempts to reach out to the Muslim community in a way that he finds more productive than if proselytizing was the primary concern, even if he still openly maintains his desire for others to become Christian:

> **Me:** What's your eschatology?
>
> **Adam:** Yeah…um…in a lot of ways when it comes to eschatology I feel agnostic…because I don't think the New Testament or experience definitively or even wants to make that like a top three fascinations. I think we get little glimpses. You know, if I'm really honest, I think it's possible that a lot of our eschatology is just a blanket to help us sleep at night. It's very possible that that's what it is. Gun to my head—metaphorically of course—I think the resurrection is the central compelling thing to me about Christianity, and I think—and this is good Jewish theology, not good Christian theology—I think there's something about the example of Jesus that can provoke a belief that God isn't done with planet earth yet, that there's some kind of resurrection for planet earth, too, not just the body. But, I also can see that we all just get one shot and you get 60 or 80 years and when you die that's it and then someone else takes your place.
>
> **Me:** Does your agnostic view about that help you in the way you approach interfaith?
>
> **Adam:** Oh yeah, because as much as I love theology, I'm very rarely trying to prove it to somebody else.

As I thought the conversation was winding down, Adam took the occasion to ask me a question in return. He wanted to know what my religious identity was and the way he asked shows the caution with which he approaches such questions. The conversation into turned to one of the most interesting moments of my encounters with him as he explained what he perceived as the steadily increasing agnosticism and even atheism in the church. This linked the uncertainties

and tensions that my other informants expressed to a more concrete social reality that is being experienced by members of Raven Hill, and, according to Adam, to conservative Christians more broadly:

> **Adam:** So, can I ask you a question?
>
> **Me:** Yeah, sure.
>
> **Adam:** What is your current faith commitment—and the only reason I'm asking that is that I'm just curious as to, you know —as you get deeper and deeper into this conversation, I'm just curious where you're coming from.
>
> **Me:** I don't identify with a religion. I grew up in a—my dad is Jewish and my mom grew up Presbyterian. We never really had religion in the house, we never really talked about it. So, it was interesting growing up here [in Nashville]. I remember having interactions with people in elementary school—and the way that kids interpret…well anything, whether it's politics or religion or the traditions of their family [Adam: Sure, yeah], it can come out in funny ways. I remember a kid once asked me, "Do you believe in God?" and I had never really been asked that question before and so I sort of responded like "I don't think so, no," and man did he get so mad at me. And I had multiple experiences like that growing up here. I felt like it was a typical representation of Christians—and particularly evangelicals—that there's always this hard line. And so, that stuck on me for a while and it wasn't until recently that I tried to be more okay with interacting with Christians in a way that I could talk about the fact that I don't have religious beliefs and I didn't have to feel like I was offending somebody. But it's still a dance, you know?
>
> **Adam:** Absolutely!
>
> **Me:** So, for me, I do consider myself a secular person, and so it's kind of weird for me when I'm interacting with Christians sometimes—and I just talked about these past experiences, and I don't hold anything against that kid anymore [I chuckled], or the others, I'm not going to blame them for anything, but I do think it is an issue.
>
> **Adam:** Yeah and at the same time that's your experience.
>
> **Me:** Yeah, it was part of my experience and then we all live in our bubbles in a certain way and so most of my friends identify as atheists—some of them more strongly so—I don't identify as much with the term because I don't like the public figures of atheism—
>
> **Adam:** Yeah, it does get wrapped up in a…

> **Me:** Yeah, it gets wrapped up into a whole thing. I don't like battling. I really like talking and getting at those knots. But—
>
> **Adam:** Yeah, all of those categories just don't—
>
> **Me:** Yeah, I just don't like how [some public figures of atheism] communicate things.
>
> **Adam:** That's really interesting. So, you definitely identify more in the atheist camp then you would then in the agnostic camp?
>
> **Me:** Yeah, I've been thinking about that because…since I've been doing these interviews with Christians like this when religion is one of the topics, the question for me is "how do I communicate my own identity?" And I say somewhere between atheist and agnostic.
>
> **Adam:** It's a continuum, they're not hard boxes.
>
> **Me:** I think what I don't like about the term atheism is that it communicates to some people that I don't have *any* beliefs of any kind [Adam laughs] or that I have no anchor in any type of morality, and so that can be problematic.
>
> **Adam:** That's a cheap shot Christians take at atheists. Well, thanks for sharing that. My only motive was just…if you're going to take on such an important but complicated thing, I was curious to hear what story or what narrative you were bringing in. I don't know if this will be interesting to you or not, but one thing that I've observed since I've been here [at Raven Hill], and even just in the South, I have multiple conversations every month with people—mostly men—but people in their 20's and 30's who are still attending church but they think they're definitely leaning towards an agnostic…I'll call it a posture. It's not like a "definitely," but it's just like "if I'm being honest about my experiences versus what these different stories claim, I'm probably in the more agnostic or atheism camp." But the church has such a strong social hold on people—in all the best and worst ways of what that could look like. It's really interesting for me to "council," people through that when they come in and say, "Is it okay for me to keeping coming to this church?" I'm like, "Yes. I don't get to decide who's in and who's out. This is an open community." But then the guilt that people feel. Like, "I'm coming here and I'm part of a faith community that's making claims that I don't necessarily—that's not where I am, that's not in my heart is" and so, then have guilt over that. It gets really messy for people. But the whole reason I brought it up is because it has definitely increased here.

The creeping agnosticism in the church is an important element of the double bind, as it shows the risks, real and perceived, associated with contact and interaction with otherness. Adam's

sensitivity for and avoidance of any exclusionary rhetoric is evident in his response to these changes in the church as "not necessarily a bad thing." As many of my other informants expressed, in the context of a very conservative tradition (the Churches of Christ), people were raised in very strict social worlds with very well-defined lines of what was in and what was out, of what constituted being a good Christian and what did not. It is statements like Adam's here that reveal the paradoxical nature of his openness as one of inclusive exclusivity whose interest is not just in affecting out-group social relations in a positive way but also in a way that attracts outsiders to the in-group and preserves those who are already part of it. The conversation continued:

> **Me:** Why do you think that is?
>
> **Adam:** I think it's generally part of America slowly becoming more and more secular…and that affects religious people just as much as it does other people. And to me, it's not necessarily a good or a bad thing, it's probably both, but we're all caught up in our stuff that we're not able to understand the full implications of it. And generally speaking, in a place like Nashville people are becoming more educated, they're travelling the world more. When they're in Tibet or anyplace, they get introduced to stuff that they didn't know about in high school, and anytime your horizons are broadened, you're going to rethink—if you're an honest person—rethink the stories you base your life upon. Again, I'm not saying it's a bad thing, it's just a very interesting shift for me people who do my kind of work. It used to be like "Well, I'm Catholic and my wife's Presbyterian, do you think we can be at this church?" We still have some of that, but people are asking much more interesting questions now [he laughs].
>
> **Me:** Do you think that's mostly because of the exposure to different views or is it the contrast with having grown up in a more homogenous environment?
>
> **Adam:** I think it's probably both. And for people that come out of a conservative Protestant tradition which has said pretty rigid things about salvation and judgment and then you travel the world and realize there are all these amazing and beautiful and great people who because they can't write down the same doctrine that you would on an index card that they're going to be in hell? Or that they're going to cease to exist or whatever your view of eschatology is? And so, they're trying to say "Woah, how does all of this fit", but it's like, "You have the guts to say you believe in a gracious, loving god except if you don't believe that god is gracious then he's not gracious, and so is he really gracious?" So, you know, that whole mind trip. I just think the more people become exposed and opened up to the world they're having to rethink, and one of the results of that process is a lot of people drift towards being agnostic or atheist.

Me: Interesting. I wonder how that will affect how people will interact with each other. Because what I was saying before about the kid who was angry with me for not having a religious position when I was like 12 years old, it's not only because of interactions like that that I wouldn't have become a Christian, for example, but I just sort of explored things myself and came to certain understandings through…secular philosophy or resources from my family and bits and pieces of stuff…

Adam: Yeah, it's what makes sense to you.

Me: But I've talked to a few Christians already who consider themselves to be very devout, but they're…I don't know if ashamed is the right word, but they're afraid maybe to evangelize because the very act of doing that is sort of butting heads with the acceptance—or what they feel is the acceptance—of these other people and other traditions, but they still want to share what they have, and it sort of seems like this tough thing for them.

Adam: And if it's true that we are in a postmodern timeframe, evangelism in that traditional sense of the word is the antithesis of postmodern [he laughs], so you're caught in this weird no-man's-land. Because evangelism *is* infringement. Whether one agrees with this or not, evangelism at its core does say that some stories are better than other stories. And I think the whole premise of postmodernism is that *that* view is how we got into this mess into the first place, that's how we got the Third Reich, you know, that's how we got the Holocaust, it's like the poet said, "Two thousand years of Christian mass and now we have the poison gas". That's how we got to these places. So yeah, it's a beast that we have to continue to wrestle with for folks in my chair, people of Christian faith.

Conclusion

My conversation with Adam revealed some important aspects about how he perceives of his role as a spiritual leader. It is almost as if he is actively inducing the double bind among willing members of the church as part of his strategy to deal with a variety of issues that the "postmodern timeframe" poses to evangelicals, including the social and cultural conditions of rising diversity. For him, it is apparent that the tensions that it creates are productive intellectually, spiritually and also socially in that it allows him to pursue the common objectives that he has set out to accomplish both in his mission as a citizen actor in Nashville *and* as a Christian in a transcendent, worldwide community of believers. So far, my selection of

interview excerpts has described the theological perspectives of my informants. However I have not described the ideological underpinnings of the opposing injunction in the double bind: the recognition of religious pluralism as a fundamental element of the broader social context in which they are engaging. While the interviews in this chapter dealt with interpersonal relationships (or the prospect thereof), in the next section I return to some of the conversations I had with informants in which we discussed the ways in which they differentiate between different contexts of sociability. More specifically, different contexts in regards to the values of their in-group and the perceived values of the broader social world around them. For my informants, imagining an interpersonal type of relationship with religious others is no light subject, and, as I hope to convey in the next and final chapter of this thesis, it is a key element to opening up reflections about sociability in a pluralist public space.

Chapter 5: Can Evangelicals Be Pluralist?

> *Parler du pluralisme – ce discours normatif multiforme qui prend la pluralité comme objet et comme objectif – fait appel à un autre registre de pensée, un registre qui n'est pas aussi primordial ou universel que ses porte-paroles aimeraient le faire croire*[32]
>
> Bob White (forthcoming)

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I talked about my informants' struggle to reconcile certain perceived ideological and social closures with a genuineness that is expressed primarily through the lack of compulsion to convert but also an openness to religious difference (in varying degrees). While this research does not seek to engage in discussions of a theological nature, the theological perspectives of my informants have been an essential part of the tension that I have been describing between evangelical exclusivism and openness to diversity. So far, though, when it comes to the other opposing injunction of the double bind, I have spoken of "openness", "recognition" and "acceptance" of diversity in rather vague terms. In this chapter, I will engage once again with my informants' perspectives. However this time on the specific topic of religious pluralism. The polarization of American Christians along ideological (and subsequently political) lines has created a context in which American pluralism is imagined in dramatically different terms. On one extreme is the fundamentalist rejection of pluralism and its portrayal as a threat (or a tragedy), and thus as something to be overcome through evangelism. On the other extreme is the liberal embrace of a type of pluralism that emphasizes commonalities and proposes that seemingly disparate religious worldviews are in fact relative in their spiritual significance. Regardless of whether or not one agrees with either of these positions, both are an appeal to their own type of universalism. As with any dichotomy, each camp attracts its share

[32] Translation: "To talk of pluralism—this normative and multifaceted discourse that takes diversity as both its object and objective—appeals to another way of thinking, a way that is not quite as primordial or universal as its advocates would have us believe."

of supporters, however many people also strive for a middle ground, a grey zone or a third option, and my informants seem to do just that. This third option, however, comes with the uncertainties and discomforts that my informants expressed in Chapter 4.

Oftentimes lacking in definitive answers and clear pathways to resolving friction or discord between groups, this posture of looking for the "in-between" can seem elusive. However, inspired by the work of the anthropologist Bob White, I will ask what constitutes the pluralist subject according to a more operational definition of pluralism that is grounded in the systemic perspective that I have used throughout this thesis. According to this definition, pluralism is at once the recognition of the diversity of human society as a sociological reality, the recognition that minority groups have political and cultural rights, and the commitment to create the conditions for the political participation of all members of the society (White, forthcoming, Anthropology and Society). This definition of pluralism does not intend to avoid or to deny either its normative implications as a framework for social relations or its embeddedness in western notions of citizenship. To the contrary, this perspective views pluralism as another system of thought or political ideology that has its own norms, codes and traditions[33]. In this way, it cannot be considered as somehow outside of or above other positions, but instead as one position among others and one that possesses its own internal complexity and contradictions. As White and other scholars underscore in their work on the politics of pluralism, this recognition can be elusive because of the tendency to view pluralism as a universal value that possesses a sort of inherent benevolence. This can result in policies and public institutions that do not adequately account for the ways in which they are normative and even potentially exclusionary in different cultural and political contexts (White & Emongo, 2014; White, forthcoming, Anthropology and Society). My use of this definition is intended to avoid a discussion about pluralism on a level in which the overarching concern is that participation in a pluralist society requires an ideological embrace of a cosmopolitan affinity for and celebration of diversity. I will suggest that this cosmopolitan concern can result in a misunderstanding of the ways in which social actors negotiate between different levels of sociability.

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[33] This perspective is grounded in a hermeneutic philosophy (Gadamer, 1960) that sees all actors in a given social interaction as bearers of traditions that require at least a minimum of explanation to the other, including those claiming an identity as "pluralist".

This is a potentially sensitive turn, and so it is important that I reassure the reader that my use of this definition of pluralism is not to excuse or to give a pass for racism, xenophobia or other forms of prejudice. To the contrary, this discussion attempts to imagine a space in which the ideological differences between disparate groups can be bridged dialogically through a view of pluralism in which social engagement in shared or common spaces can be continually negotiated. My point here is to challenge the assumed universality of certain cosmopolitan ethical positions. The attention I give to cosmopolitanism in this chapter was in part inspired by the popularity of the concept of "cosmopolitan sociability" (Glick Schiller, Darieva, & Gruner-Domic, 2011) in the literature on transnational migration, immigrant integration and the social dynamics of cohabitation in culturally diverse contexts. More specifically, I will reflect on the ways in which some research using this concept seems to emphasize an embrace of cosmopolitan pluralist ideology as necessary for creating the conditions for social inclusion, and in so doing overlook important contextual elements of some emerging sociabilities. I suggest that this concern with certain cosmopolitan ethical positions can limit our understanding of the social processes at work in the intercultural/interreligious encounter.

As I will attempt to convey in the following pages, my informants' double bind does not seem to emerge from the recognition of a fundamental contradiction between a fundamental ideological closure (in this case, evangelical religious exclusivism) and some universal form of cosmopolitan openness, as my informants do not make such a distinction. Instead, and in keeping with the systemic approach, I will suggest that it emerges from the recognition that the competing value systems of religious exclusivism and religious pluralism correspond to different levels (or contexts) of sociability. In other words, my informants are universalist in regards to the values of their religious group, however they seem to espouse pluralist values in regards to the social and political environment outside of that group. The recognition of these different contexts or value worlds seems to allow them to envision spaces in which different values are to guide their sociability in different contexts.

5.1 Christian or American?

My informants' social hesitations and spiritual tensions seem to indicate that their posture towards the core notion of evangelism is changing. However, it is changing in a way that is not necessarily analogous to a theological shift to mainline/liberal Protestant views in which evangelism is disassociated from the pursuit of personal conversion and is perceived primarily in its more abstract ethical notions of positive social engagement and good works (see Chapter 2). That dedication to a perception of evangelism that keeps the desire and prospect of conversion very much alive is an important factor that would seem to maintain what historian Ted Ownby described as evangelicals' "defensive estrangement from the broader American culture" in relation to the widespread influence of mainline Protestants (Ownby, 2005: 32). I think that taking account not only of their changing perceptions of evangelism in an abstract sense but also their conservation of the core elements of evangelistic mission in social engagement provokes very interesting questions about the prevailing norms and expectations of religious pluralism, namely the defining characteristics of the pluralist subject. Is the pluralist subject defined by a sort of cosmopolitan embrace of an ideology of diversity or by a commitment to a negotiated form of sociability in the context of de facto diversity? I explored these questions with my informants by asking them to reflect on two different identities: on the one hand their religious identity as Christians and, on the other hand, their national identity as Americans. I also asked them about their willingness to support the rights of Muslims in Nashville to practise their religion and, moreover, to support the flourishing of Muslim communities. I wanted to understand whether or not and in which ways they differentiated between levels of sociability in regards to the exclusivism of their in-group and the diversity of their broader social context. In other words, the ways in which competing sets of abstract values informed their reflections about concrete action in the social world.

I met Parker, a management professional in his early 30s, at an interfaith dinner that was organized by several members of Raven Hill and at which I also first met Rebecca and Callie (two informants whose vignettes were central in Chapter 4). We had arranged to meet and talk further one evening at a casual bistro near his work. Parker grew up his entire life at Raven Hill and he described himself as "a Christian with very liberal beliefs", saying that he had only emerged from the "bubble" of his conservative upbringing within the past few years. He explained that among a variety of political issues which he had trouble reconciling with his own

beliefs, he could no longer justify the anti-Muslim rhetoric that had become so commonplace in his family and broader religious community:

> **Parker:** I asked myself, "Wait, why aren't we talking to Muslims, why aren't we asking them questions, getting to know them", because they're people like us too. They live in our town. And for me that's where, honestly, it was a stopping point. This was common decency. You can't just treat another human being like they're nobody, like they're nonexistent. And that's why I love [pastor] Adam because he pushes people to go outside of their comfort zone.

The freshness of his ideological shift seemed evident in his repeated insistence that he was now much more "liberal" or "open" than before. The double bind was palpable in his long pauses and hesitations as the interview turned towards thicker questions regarding theology and his views on rising diversity. He feels like it is difficult to have "more liberal beliefs" in the evangelical social world, and that people are often quick to condemn views that do not conform:

> **Me:** Do you separate between your identity as an American and as a Christian or do those things get intertwined?
>
> **Parker:** … (6-second pause) …That's a tough question… (10-second pause as he looked past me and took a bite of his sandwich) …No. I…I'm pretty open about how I… (another 10-second pause as his eyes scanned the empty space on the table and then behind me as he chewed his last bite) …I was raised Republican and I slowly turned and became a liberal thinker, now I'm a very open-minded, liberal thinker, and so.... Ask the question again, I want to make sure I…
>
> **Me:** Yeah, sure. So, if you think about who you are as a Christian and who you are as an American, is there a big difference to you or are they kind of the same thing? Are there times when you think, you know, "in my opinion about this or that, it's about American values", which might be different from your values as a Christian where you might think something different?
>
> **Parker:** Originally, it would've been no different because growing up in the South, you're an American, you're a Christian and that's how it was. But now, I think it's become so much harder to be a Christian and an American in the world we're living in, especially in Nashville and in the South because…if you think freely and speak your voice, you can be critiqued on anything, especially if it touches the tip of the iceberg and has a relationship with anything Christianity-based. Whether it relates to abortion rights, gun control—because for some reason people relate gun control back to Christianity—it happens, I've seen it. So…I try to separate the two as much as I can because my family gets so worked up and I'm a peacemaker.

Me: So, for your family, you'd say that those are still kind of the same thing for them?

Parker: Oh my gosh yes, absolutely! My brother-in-law and sister are so meshed in that, I can't like…election night (2016), for example, my parents invited me to watch—and I had to go over there, but I had to keep my mouth shut. I wasn't like enraged, but everything that was happening inside me was in turmoil. It was hard for me to be an American and support my family and also see them as being Christians as well. Because how can…it was, I don't know, it was hard for me. So, I try to separate that as much as I can…and I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

Me: So, when it comes to interfaith stuff and supporting other communities—more than just interacting with people to learn about them—would you support other religious communities in their sort of…flourishing I guess you could say. I mean, the Muslim population is pretty large in Nashville compared to other places in the region—huge Kurdish population that's been here for a while…If you think about them and the new Muslims that are coming… the idea of supporting them, does that come into conflict at all with your identity as a Christian?

Parker: No. Internally, I might initially have a little conflict just because of my history and how I was raised. But… I think that it's important to embrace our communities and support them because like what I said earlier, you can't just treat someone like they're not human because we're all dealing with stuff. We don't own Nashville, we don't own this place. Everyone has a piece of this world equally. So, I think it's just hard for me to understand, like if I did support them, whatever culture it is, Kurdish, Muslim, Hispanic, African American, if my family said to me, "why are you doing that?!", I would lash out against that and say, "why *aren't* you doing this?!"

Parker explained that the interfaith dinner where we met was his first intentional interaction with Muslims. Although it was a very valuable experience for him, he described it as highly uncomfortable. He, like Callie in the previous chapter, was worried that he would ask the wrong questions and offend someone. Also, he could not but dwell on what his family would think if they knew he had been there:

Parker: I come from a white background where people don't normally have these conversations or interact with these people (Muslims). I'm there in the back of my mind thinking my goodness if my parents knew that I was at this table with these people and having this conversation, they would be *so* uncomfortable. I really did want to lay low and just soak it in. I thought I was going to have to put a wall up, but the height of that wall, if you will, is slowly coming down lower

> and lower because it's becoming easier and easier to have those conversations, and I'm becoming opener [sic], you know.

He might not know exactly what he is supposed to do—and seems to be pulled in opposing directions by the values of his in-group and his perception of a different set of values that say he should acknowledge different religions—but he seemed to be trying to imagine a public or shared space where a different type of sociability is called for:

> **Parker:** We're getting so many new people here. I think original Nashvillians don't know what to do with the new additions, but they also have to be the ones who are going to affect change to make the communities more inclusive because they're the ones who really make the influence from within. Unless that change happens from within, the new people are going to continue pushing those lines. It's hard moving forward because of the history here. There are still people in [the wealthy suburbs] who have black servants. This is a thing in Nashville that we still deal with. Racism exists. The country club doesn't even allow African American members still.

I met Jefferson (the overseas mission coordinator I mentioned towards the end of the previous chapter) at the same coffee shop slash church slash charity organization in which I had met several other participants. The organization is closely affiliated with Raven Hill and Jefferson is a key coordinator of its aid and development missions around the world. After all, Raven Hill serves the coffee shop's brew in the lobby every Sunday morning. He was curious, sharp and although his penchant for rationality at times openly contested his own convictions, he was seemingly un-phased by such contradictions, engaging them head-on and even just accepting them at face value. He leaned in and bobbed his head as we talked. I asked him whether or not he distinguished between his identity as a Christian and an American and, if so, what the most important differences were:

> **Jefferson:** My identity is first in being a part of the worldwide church of Christians, of people trying to follow Jesus. As Americans, we tend to often find our identity in our nationality—not always, but it's a very patriotic country. But there's also a line between patriotism and nationalism. Patriotism is "I'm of my heritage and where I'm from and the things that make my country unique and beautiful and a wonderful experiment in freedom despite its many pitfalls that we've messed up." Nationalism is "I'm better because I was born here or because I'm an American." I don't know if I was ever a nationalist, so to speak, but I may have treaded [sic] that line and it may have been simply from hearing it, and this unholy alliance of being Christian and yoking yourself to a political party or

> making sure that we have Christianity way up through the government. That's a dangerous line. I've been challenged by people at Raven Hill to first find my identity as a member of God's kingdom, in this church that transcends all boundaries, and to say I want to be a good citizen, I want to be patriotic and thankful for my country and our people, but that the two are definitely separate. My identity is not being an American, my identity is being a child of God along with all these other people who share this commonality.

Jefferson was acutely aware of the challenges involved in reconciling his transcendent Christian identity with the specificity of the American national context, especially in regards to the ideal of religious freedom:

> **Jefferson:** For Christians, especially in this melting pot age, there is some irony in this. Some of the places where I see this coming to a head is if Christians are insisting—just to give an example—on prayer in schools. They're going to have to be comfortable with Islamic prayer in schools, they're going to have to be comfortable with…in a country with freedom of religion you can't just mean *Christian* prayer. If you've got a certain percentage of the population that ends up being Muslim, you can't really have it both ways. So, from the more conservative American side, I think there's this…potential inconsistency of wanting a religious society, but then when you talk about that being something other than Christian they get real nervous.

I asked him to think specifically about Nashville and how his views on evangelism relate to the idea of supporting the local Muslim population. This question about a specific social context led him to rethink his previous statement about being Christian first and American second:

> **Me:** If you think about the development and flourishing of Muslim communities here in Nashville, would you be able to support the growing, even, of those communities as part of Nashville or would that be too much in tension with your desire to ultimately see them evangelized?
>
> **Jefferson:** You know…I…I just spent so much time talking about how we're Christians first and then Americans second, but when you talk about that kind of thing, there is an element where I say, well as *Americans* who are Christians…I think we need to be consistent in saying that this is a place where you can worship freely, even if you don't worship what I worship. We need to be consistent and you need to feel like this is your home. What does that look like in the public square? I don't necessarily know, again, those are difficult things. But I think, first and foremost, we need to say, "you are welcome here." Now, if you start saying that the law of the land doesn't apply because your roots are different, then we all have something to grapple with. But first and foremost, we need to say "you are welcome here," and build bridges where they can be built. And then if something else happens on an evangelism front, then that's great, but I don't

> know that that's the most helpful way to approach it when society is grappling with these issues so mightily. To me, that would be putting the cart before the horse.

Jefferson's reflections demonstrate how complex it can be to manage and navigate different contexts of sociability in which different value systems take the lead in informing action. Despite his view that Christianity is itself all-inclusive, he seemed to recognize its exclusivist nature when he situated his identity in the context of American religious pluralism. He does not claim to definitively know how to act, but he all-the-while recognizes a "public square" in which sociability is to be different from that of his in-group and where evangelism is more complicated.

Callie, the statistician and mission committee member from the previous chapter, was similarly caught between the value commitments of her religious community and the pluralist social environment outside of it:

> **Me:** Do you see a difference between your identity as an American and your identity as a Christian? Do those things ever cross each other or compete with each other in your mind?
>
> **Callie:** Yeah, all the time. For me, I view those as very different. I get frustrated when I see people who view them as one and the same. And I say this as someone who very much appreciates a lot about this country, it's not that this isn't a great country, but it's not what my allegiance is to ultimately. It's not what should drive actions. My faith is what should drive my actions and my beliefs. So yeah, it's really frustrating to see those conflated so often as you do. I just…it doesn't make sense and the only way that I can understand it is that fear, that desire for stability and security and the fact that "we" have been in power for so long and "if the white Christians aren't in power then what's going to happen", you know, that kind of thing.

Despite her ultimate allegiance to her universalist Christian identity and her assertion that her American identity should not drive her actions, the pluralist elements of that abstract American social space do enter into her consideration. She said that she would also be committed to supporting other religious groups, however, that is not to say that she would be always comfortable with rising diversity:

> **Me:** Do you feel any pressure there? Like would you support the Muslim community here if they, for example, wanted to build a mosque? If you were to support them, would that being going against any part of you, would that cause

any tension with your identity as a Christian by supporting, or accepting, another religious view?

Callie: Yeah, I have a lot of answers to that. Yes, if over the next ten years, the Muslim population grew to like 20 or 25%, then yeah, I would feel some tension about that, but that's because it would be so different from how I grew up. It would be very different for me. But when I'm in situations like that it makes me think about the way it is for other people every day (in reference to minority populations). It does make me uncomfortable, but if I step back and look at it, if I truly believe that the Muslims that I know are good people, then I have nothing to be afraid of, it's just different. And that's kind of a power struggle, right? Because in the Bible Belt, we're so used to the white Christians being in charge that if anything happens to threaten that, then some people are going to feel threatened. So, I guess I would feel some tension, but not necessarily like… a conflict with my religious beliefs. I feel like if *I* want freedom of religion then everyone should get freedom of religion. If that means that they can do the Muslim version of whatever Christians to, that makes total sense to me. Logically, it's fine. But it *is* uncomfortable.

For James, the local outreach minister from Chapter 4, respecting religious diversity is part and parcel of his Christian identity, even if he maintains the conviction that others would benefit in a uniquely positive way from converting. His desire to see others evangelized does not seem to prevent him from imagining his social engagement with religious others in a way that respects their rights and privileges in shared social spaces:

James: I think there is fear in a person's mind, there is a fear that can be driven by propaganda that "those people" are going to interrupt or change our make-up or change our culture or give us more diversity than we want, so to speak. Not only does our American practice say otherwise in terms of how we vet and admit refugees[34], I think it's silly when you hold the whole conversation up against how America has operated for centuries, the melting pot that we live in, the diversity that already exists in Nashville—well, maybe not in our immediate pockets of "Caucasianville" [he chuckled].

Me: So, when it comes to local outreach and the idea of working for the flourishing of the broader community that you live in, for you, if that community includes Muslims or Buddhists or other non-Christians, does that include their flourishing as well?

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[34] This is a reference to earlier in the conversation and to the fact that American refugee policy favours religiously persecuted groups, and the result is that most refugees from Muslim majority countries are Christians, contrary to the common conservative media perception that that "Muslims are flooding in" under the guise of as refugee status

James: Yeah, absolutely. I think to espouse anything but that is un-Christian.

Me: Does that not at the same time make it more difficult for you to want them to become Christian?

James: No, I think for us, we would start with the root notion that all men and women are made in the image of God and as they bear that image, God would want them to do well and live well and proper.

Me: Even if they weren't Christians?

James: Yes, I think so. And I think of…the notion in scripture that "he does hope that all men will find him, will seek out and find him" …and so I'm open to how he will do that, I'm open to how he will bring that about in their life, but I know that he wants the best for them because they're his.

Stephen is a decision-maker on the Raven Hill Church leadership council and a professor at a local Christian university that is affiliated with the Churches of Christ denomination. During our interview in his office on campus, he expressed similar reflections to my other informants in regards to his perceived dual commitments—on one hand to Christian evangelism and, on the other hand, to American religious freedom—and the different levels or contexts in which he acts upon those commitments. I asked Stephen how he separates his identities as a Christian and as an American. "Very carefully, and it's very important to do so", he replied intently. I told him that I had previously spoken with a pastor from another Church of Christ who explained to me that, for him, authentic Christianity is necessarily countercultural and that today many churches are not holding up their side of the bargain by taking seemingly favourable positions in regards to diversity and collaboration with people of other religions. Stephen said that he is very familiar with such perspectives within the Churches of Christ and that he finds them to be woefully mistaken:

Stephen: I really dislike anyone who uses the language of "we should be countercultural." What does that mean? You're going to not speak English? You're not going to listen to the radio? You're not going to drive on the right side of the road? What does that mean? It's just entirely unhelpful I think. The better question is how do we practise selective discernment with regard to any given particular practice that we find in our cultural context. That is a much more fruitful question in my mind. And so, there are certain things about being an American that Christians can rightly celebrate. We can rightly celebrate, for example, the notion of a free press because a free press is analogous to the rule

> of Paul in Corinthians where he says, “Let everybody have their say, listen to what they have to say”. We can celebrate freedom of religion because that is an analogue to adult believer baptism, which says, “Let an adult decide if this is what they’re going to be and this is what they’re going to do.” We should, on the other hand, reject the practice of violence and the practice of war-making because that stands in stark contrast to the teachings of Jesus and to the claim that the church is supposed to be a community of peace. So, it’s always about taking particular questions. So, we’re not anti-American as such, just like we’re not anti-culture as such—and the same way with Muslims. There are certain things that Christians can rightly celebrate and partner with the Muslim community on and there are some things where we say, “Eh, we can’t go there.” That seems to be a much more helpful posture.

When it comes to the idea of religious pluralism specifically, Stephen explained that he does not want to celebrate religious diversity because, for him, to imagine life without Christianity is deeply saddening. All the while, he said, that does not prevent him from committing to defend the religious freedoms of others:

> **Me:** Do you find that you can accept religious pluralism and want to defend it? Because you said religious freedom before, so do you see a difference between those two things?
>
> **Stephen:** As I hear your question, if it’s true that Christian faith and practice entail a sort of radical freedom extended to the others—and to “the Other”, even to the enemy in the call to practise love to enemies—I think when Christians really take seriously this radical call to freedom and love that…that necessarily leads to…an acceptance of religious pluralism or all sorts of pluralisms. That doesn’t mean we thereby are called to celebrate all of that might come of that, but that we’re called to honour other people’s personhood and their experience and their understanding of what’s true and beautiful and try to live in some sort of possible flourishing community in that regard.

My conservations with Parker, Jefferson, Callie, James and Stephen offer a window into the ways in which my informants navigate different values systems in which they perceive the need for different forms of sociability. In a move that might seem small, but is in fact very significant, they do recognize that there are different contexts for different types of sociability. This contrasts with conservative evangelical and fundamentalist postures in which out-group sociability must necessarily reflect in-group values, and with specific norms for behaviour regarding evangelism/proselytism (see the last section of Chapter 3). Although this recognition causes a variety of discomforts and uncertainties (see Chapter 4), their exclusivist religious

ideology does not in and of itself inhibit them from doing so, nor does it necessarily inhibit their willingness to imagine participation in shared social endeavours with others. By viewing pluralism as a socio-political space where subjectivities can come to negotiate aspects of communal life, I am able to see my informants' recognition of a context exterior to their in-group in which sociability is informed by a different (and in some essential ways, contradictory) set of values. I will distinguish this perspective from the tendency of some cosmopolitan discourses to carry certain ideological expectations into such social spaces and how it can limit our understanding of pluralist sociabilities.

5.2 Pluralist Ideology and Pluralist Sociability

In the previous section, I described a systemic interactionist perspective on pluralism as more suitable for analyzing what I observed in the field because of its focus on differentiating between different levels of sociability. While I compared and contrasted my informants' double bind in a sort of continuum or spectrum, the analysis paid attention to the underlying codes and values that are specific to evangelicals and common to all of my informants. I have chosen to contrast this analysis with a cosmopolitan perspective on pluralism[35] that currently plays an important role in what is a large and active social science literature on the subject. Cosmopolitanism is a term that has been used by philosophers and social scientists in a wide variety of ways. Since its origins in Greek antiquity, its popularization in 18th century western Europe by Emmanuel Kant and through the revitalization of the concept in recent decades, its multiple meanings and usages have continued to evolve. It has described a utopic vision of a world united by a shared value of human connectedness, a political aspiration for a single-state world of "global citizens" and, more recently, a general term for describing a universal human capacity not just to acknowledge but also to appreciate diversity and favour inclusiveness (Skrbis, Kendall, & Woodward, 2004).

[35] Or more specifically, the cosmopolitan perspective on social dynamics in the context of cultural diversity

Critiques of cosmopolitanism have helped to steer scholars towards more nuanced positions and self-awareness about what were previously overlooked assumptions about the role of class and economic privilege in nurturing that appreciation of diversity[36]. However, cosmopolitanism as a view of pluralism sometimes struggles when it encounters the topic of religion, and that is where its application to this research became problematic. Sociologist José Casanova suggests that many cosmopolitan perspectives have thoroughly integrated some of the main assumptions of what have now become the highly contested theories of secularization[37] (2011). In this way, religion is considered to ultimately be a form of closure and exclusion against which cosmopolitan openness, with its secularist[38] approach to religion, is to be compared. What can be lost in this move is the recognition that cosmopolitanism, viewed as a universal form of openness, is in fact itself a particular way of imagining pluralism that carries both normative implications for actions in the social world (vague notions of inclusiveness/acceptance[39]) and subjective ones (affinity/appreciation/celebration of diversity). For example, within a single analysis, cosmopolitanism has been referred to at once as a subjective "disposition of intellectual and aesthetic openness to people, places and experiences" *and* as an "innate" and "subconscious" capacity (Noble, 2013: 167, 169, 172). In a study by anthropologist Greg Noble, he observed convivial interactions at a highly diverse primary school in Australia as potentially being the result of "cosmopolitan habits". The centre piece of the ethnography is a school performance in which children of multiple non-white ethnic backgrounds re-enact scenes from a popular television show. Noble suggests that in certain moments such as the parents' collective exuberance after the performance, the innate capacity for the cosmopolitan disposition is activated and exhibited in "twin emphases on global

[36] Anthropologist Jonathan Friedman (1997) and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1998) have levied some of the most biting critical responses to scholarship on cosmopolitanism. They noted that many researchers had ignored some of the essential power relations and inequities that enable highly educated and mobile people from the West to lay claim to "global citizenship". Pnina Werbner (2006) and Tariq Modood (Werbner & Modood, 2015) have also taken to more critical perspectives regarding the class issues around mobility and "global consciousness"

[37] See (Asad, 2003; Bangstad, 2009; Berger, 1997; Cannell, 2010)

[38] "Secularist" here is to be distinguished from "secular", as the former describes a more specific ideological position rather than simply the opposite of "sacred" or "religious".

[39] I do not intend to imply that inclusiveness as a social aspiration is a bad thing. Instead, it is just to point out that inclusiveness can mean a wide variety of things and some notions of it can themselves lead to forms of exclusion. Cosmopolitanism generally speaks of inclusiveness in such vague terms that its meaning can be lost, and thus not very operational as a concept.

consciousness beyond the nation and the appreciation of otherness" (Noble, 2013: 172). The study then suggests that researchers must find better ways to identify and describe the nature of these cosmopolitan habits.

In regards to cosmopolitan perspectives in studies on religion in particular, this paradoxical assumption of universalism that is at once self-aware and unaware—that cosmopolitanism "is something that happens to people" instead of "something that people do"[40] (B. W. White, 2002: 681)— can limit the researcher's perspective to one whose conclusions can tend towards contradictory moral judgments of other universalisms (i.e. religious ones) as fundamentally hampered in their capacity to contribute to the conditions of inclusive shared social spaces and endeavours[41]. However, and perhaps most importantly for this thesis, from an analytical point of view, this universalism can leave less room to consider other important elements of the historical, cultural and social contexts that contribute to the actions and behaviours of those we observe in the field. In short, it is a perspective whose own paradoxical universalism can limit opportunities for dialogical analyses across levels, which is fundamental to the concept of the double bind.

An example of this can be seen in an analysis by anthropologist Nina Glick Schiller in her study of immigrant integration in two small-scale cities, one in the American northeast and another in eastern Germany (2006, 2009). In these cities that were inhabited mostly by white Americans and Germans respectively, she focused on the discourses of fundamentalist churches whose congregations were comprised primarily of recent immigrants from a diverse range of ethno-cultural and national backgrounds. Their claims to inclusion were grounded in this very diversity and its link to a global, transnational community of Christians. Glick Schiller explains, however, that despite an openness to diversity that was not reflected in other predominantly white local churches, their evangelistic fervour led them to maintain and actively reproduce a

[40] In his text on Congolese Rumba, Bob White speaks to this issue of assumed universalism in the cosmopolitan perspective and the literature's tendency to describe cosmopolitanism as a process akin to modernity or globalization

[41] In fact, some scholars on the subject have pointed out the philosophical affinities (and origins) between cosmopolitanism's own reach for universalism and that of the major Abrahamic religions (Ramadan, 2015), and particular of Christianity (Appiah, 1997). This is not surprising given cosmopolitanism's roots in Greek antiquity and flourishing in western Europe. It is however surprising that cosmopolitanism would consider the ideologies of the Abrahamic religions to be fundamental forms of "rootedness" in the sense of "closure"

very rigid distinction between themselves and non-believers, and in ways that seemed counterproductive to their incorporation into the broader host society. Leaders and members of the churches spoke of “taking over the city for God” and rejecting local government in favour of divine ordinance. Such language conveyed an aggressive and even subversive posture towards the rest of the society[42] (Glick Schiller, 2009: 134). However, Glick Schiller did not describe this closure on the level of sociability as much as she did on the level of root ideology. In this way, Christian universality itself was described as the ultimate impediment to their openness. She concluded that despite the churches’ various forms of socially inclusive rhetoric, they “did not celebrate cultural difference” or other beliefs, and were thus not cosmopolitan:

> The members of [the religious organizations studied] were neither open to difference in beliefs and practices of non-Christians nor able to embrace others on the basis of a common human condition. Members of the religious organizations and their networks described [here] should not be considered cosmopolitan (Glick Schiller 2008b[43]). We lose important political and conceptual distinctions if we conflate Christian anti-racism and a positive stance towards immigration with cosmopolitanism. Whatever it merits, Christian universality is not a form of human openness (Glick Schiller, 2009: 143).

I agree that not all discourses on inclusiveness can be considered cosmopolitan. However, such conclusions seem to imply that cosmopolitan perceptions of diversity are ethically superior to others. Moreover, the weight of the cosmopolitan literature and its openly avowed moral/ethical aspirations (i.e. making the world a better place, inclusion of all people, etc.) suggest that such conclusions are moral judgments, and this ends up dominating the analysis[44]. In this specific example, the assumed universality of cosmopolitanism led to an analysis in which “Christian stances” and “Christian universality” in very broad terms became the focal point instead of the sociability of the groups studied and their respective contexts[45] (i.e. historical, social, cultural).

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[42] While such postures are similar to the fundamentalists whom I encountered in Nashville, they are quite different from my core informants at Raven Hill

[43] This is an internal reference by the original author

[44] This is implied in the quote above in which Christian universality, and not exclusionary forms of sociability, is ranked below cosmopolitanism. Her informants’ openness is said to be limited to a Christian vision of the human condition instead of a “common” (i.e. cosmopolitan, global, universal) vision of the human condition

[45] In a more recent publication, Glick Schiller and Çağlar call on researchers to distinguish more carefully between “sociability” and “sociality”, the former of which is concerned more with everyday actions (i.e. how one acts) while the latter describes a wider “matrix of social relationships with others”. In the context of cultural/religious diversity, they state that sociability is more “acting like everyone is equal” whereas sociality is a more “embedded” sense of accepting diversity, an “ethos of mixing” (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2016)

While Glick Schiller's study is not necessarily a discussion about pluralism, it is helpful as a point of reference here because its conclusion reveals the potential for cosmopolitan perspectives to affect analyses in ways that leave important elements unanswered for. Other studies using cosmopolitan concepts of sociability end similarly with conclusions that religious groups, despite various forms of openness, maintain or continue to reproduce forms of closure, as if any form of differentiation is not cosmopolitan:

> Christian sociability continues to create community by imposing a dividing line between believers and those who have not taken Jesus into their lives […] Some forms of openness, such as those constituted by religious discourses, may ultimately depend on developing rhetorics and practices of difference that create new forms of closure (Glick Schiller, Darieva, & Gruner-Domic, 2011: 411-412, in reference to Hüwelmeier and Halemba, same issue, respectively).

Studies on multiple religious communities (including evangelical Protestant churches) in the city of Montreal (Quebec's super-diverse metropolis) by anthropologists Géraldine Mossière and Deirdre Meintel have taken the concept of cosmopolitan sociability into the field and come back with conclusions that embrace the idea that "rootedness and openness coexist at the level of sociability" (Meintel & Mossière, 2013: 63). However, they do not seem to then jump levels to a normative ideological stance on diversity, instead leaving room for the recognition of different contexts of sociability in which religious belief systems interact more dialogically with their surroundings. They propose that "several theological concepts hold a certain cosmopolitan potential, a likelihood of generating contexts where cultural or religious others are recognized and validated" (ibid 63). While some of the language of cosmopolitanism is employed in such studies, the researchers' focus on the specific ways in which religious groups interact constructively with the social environment around them seems to show a hesitation to fully embrace some of the cosmopolitan assumptions of universality that I have described in this chapter.

Cosmopolitanism is a significant force in the literature on diversity (particularly on the subject of immigration), and so I initially considered its application here. However, its universalism, epitomized in Glick Schiller's statement that Christian universality is not a form of *human* openness, ended up leaving me without some of the necessary analytical tools in order to account for the double bind. If I applied a similar analytical rubric to my informants in Nashville, they would also not be cosmopolitan because they actively reproduce a distinction

from non-Christians[46] and expressed various degrees of discomfort in regards to diversity. But what would that really tell me about them and about their situation? If all ideologies (religious and otherwise) distinguish at some level between believers and non-believers, adherents and non-adherents, cosmopolitanism's overarching concern for this fact and its emphasis on vague but normative notions regarding the celebration of diversity does not offer an analytical advantage to the phenomenon I observed in Nashville. To arrive at a similar conclusion would not only make the double bind less interesting, but it would also not adequately acknowledge the specific contextual conditions that create the double bind in the first place.

The double bind is interesting not because my informants are caught between abstract ideals of fundamental closure and absolute openness, but because they are caught between very specific forms of closure and openness, both of which are defined by the particular historical, cultural and social conditions in which they are living. Essential to the double bind framework is the recognition of competing value systems, one of which is a kind of religious pluralism in the public sphere that is anchored in American political notions of religious freedom, which are themselves highly contested. That pluralism, or "openness", is not, as some cosmopolitan discourses suggest, universal or innate but is in fact the product of specific cultural and social histories. My informants' double bind is itself revelatory of what the contours of that pluralism look like in Nashville. While I cannot offer a definitive description of that pluralism, if it is to be the subject of my research, it is essential that I recognize its particularities and not just contrast it against what has the tendency to be an imprecise rubric of universal openness. For example, while evangelicals there constitute the majority group in the host society, their own feeling of estrangement and trepidation in regards to the values of American pluralism create a very particular situation in which the host society feels itself to be other within the broader national context (with its shared histories and political philosophies) (see Chapter 2). That particularity is incredibly important and it is essential for understanding the ways in which pluralism is imagined and lived by my informants.

The relatively rapid introduction of Muslims to Nashville in recent years has been a shock to their system, even if this new religious group's impact on the social landscape is

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[46] In a way that is actually quite the opposite of cosmopolitanism, it was in my informants' reflections on their American identity (which as a national identity is considered "rooted" or "local" in cosmopolitan terms) that they expressed the need for forms of sociability that acknowledge and are accepting of diversity.

exaggerated to extreme proportions by the intensity of the anti-Muslim rhetoric. The evangelicals with whom I spoke seem to recognize not just the existence of the Muslims in their midst but also their right to be there. This is a minor but very significant shift in perspective that seems to allow them to envision the development of common social objectives in which many evangelical groups still refuse to engage. Free from the crutch of cosmopolitan universalism, I am able to explore the notion of pluralism in a way that recognizes a wider variety of actions and dispositions that could count as pluralist. I can then entertain the idea that my informants are in fact pluralist, however uncomfortable they may be, and begin to look at the ways in which their religious convictions are mobilized and brought into arenas of sociability that are recognized as pluralist. My informants' discomfort reveals that pluralism is not, as the anthropologist Bob White suggests, as primordial as we might think, but it is instead hard work within the specific contexts in which it has become a common societal project. Arriving at this type of conclusion is neither a defence of my informants' views nor a form of apologetics that would imply that the researcher is over-sympathizing or "going native". Instead, it is an attempt to push our ideas of pluralism a little bit further by recognizing that there can be a variety of ways in which it is imagined and lived, and part of that involves recognizing that cosmopolitanism is but one among the rest.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed how my informants' recognition of different levels of sociability—on one hand evangelical exclusivism and other the other hand religious pluralism—plays a role in how they navigate the competing value systems of their in-group and the social environment around them. I found that it was most effective to describe this through an analytical perspective that views pluralism as a space for negotiating context-specific actions in the presence of cultural/religious diversity. In the case of this research, were I to approach my informants discourse on inter-religious relations with a cosmopolitan perspective, I would break with the systemic perspective that allows the double bind to function as a framework for understanding their situation. My use of these cosmopolitanism studies here is meant to reveal

certain blind spots or analytical biases that have the tendency to lead to conclusions that are not always fruitful in deepening our understanding of the social dynamics of cohabitation[47].

Perhaps part of this emanates from the fact that in many cosmopolitanism studies focusing on Christianity, it is not only conservative and fundamentalist communities that receive the most attention, but also those communities tend to be minority groups in the societal contexts in which they are observed. It is one thing to conclude that in every society there are some individuals and groups whose ideologies put them at odds with the broader, diverse social context around them. It would be quite another to conclude that the majority group of the host society is fundamentally ideologically incapable of adapting to the conditions of an increasingly diverse social environment. Such would be the case in Nashville where evangelicals constitute the majority and most influential group in the host society itself. This contextual difference is very important when it comes to the conclusions (albeit tentative ones) of our research. By trying to avoid the assumption that certain dispositions that are favourable to pluralist sociability emanate from a universal ethic of desiring/celebrating diversity, I hoped to offer a different perspective on the ways in which groups imagine their adaptation to increasing diversity and their engagement in common social endeavours.

In the next and concluding section of the thesis, I will discuss some of the limitations of this research and also how the analytical perspective used here could be carried into future research about evangelical sociability in the interreligious encounter.

[47] A recent collection of essays edited by Nina Glick Schiller and Andrew Irving address a changing tone in the cosmopolitan literature that "rejects its universalizing narratives" in favour of "a stance towards human openness that is processual, socially situated, aspirational, self-problematizing and aware of the incomplete and contested nature of any cosmopolitanism" (Glick Schiller & Irving, 2015: 5). Their studies remain largely concerned with questions of mobility and transnational social networks, but the call to focus on cosmopolitanism as "processes of situated mutualities that arise within specific locations and points of time" is a significant move (ibid 116). While still grounded in certain cosmopolitan notions, this could indicate a shifting perspective in the ways in which researchers take account of different levels of analysis in the study intercultural/inter-religious social dynamics.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have described a religious community that is going through significant ideological and social changes in regards to how they engage with the society around them. My informants' pursuit of relational authenticity with Muslims is revealing of the social reality that they are experiencing as diversity in Nashville increases (or at least their recognition of it on multiple levels). In each of the interviews, they expressed the hope that their actions—if those actions were indeed "authentic"—would not just help to expand their social networks and to address issues of prejudice in the society but would also lead to an occasion upon which they could offer an "invitation" to the other. "Why are you are doing this?" or "What makes you want to do this?" are questions that they yearn for the other to ask them. Such questions open up an opportunity for a more familiar type of evangelism, and for a sociability that is rooted in more classical forms of authenticity (i.e. appeal to religious authority and ascent to certain beliefs). It was their hope for such occasions—viewed perhaps as the opening up of moments when values from one world can more smoothly reach into another—and the ways in which they described the conditions under which it would come that motivated me to take a step back. Why does it matter to them that the other asks first and what makes that concern an expression of authenticity? How could I approach this emerging ethic of relational authenticity and attempt to understand it from their perspective?

Through an ethnography of their views on inter-religious relations, a portrait emerged in which my informants' overarching concern with pressure and compulsion was not only reflective of personal in-group experiences of intellectual and spiritual tension with the hard lines and prohibitions of religious conservatism, but also with the values and expectations of the social world outside of their group. Their quest for relational authenticity is one of the ways in which they were trying to accomplish what they saw as valuable, and in this context, that was "to be good neighbours". As other scholars have observed and as I supported in Chapter 2, relational authenticity is grounded in the social validation by others of certain actions and dispositions (Bielo, 2011b; Gauthier, 2012; Keane, 2002; Meintel, forthcoming). This has led me to suggest, in conclusion, that for my informants, relational authenticity in the interreligious encounter has become important because of the recognition of multiple contexts of sociability

in which different sets of values inform their actions. They strive be validated not only amongst their in-group but also in the diverse social environment around them, an environment in which the values of pluralism come into friction with the desire to evangelize. Paradoxically, my informants' pursuit of relational authenticity serves seemingly opposing purposes in each value world at once; purposes that if viewed through the other world's lens would be contradictory: in one world, their relational authenticity is a means for rendering evangelism more effective and in another it is a means for living with and accepting difference.

Perhaps a theologian or a philosopher would be better equipped to analyze the ways in which the evangelical Christian ethos uses the conceptual tools at its disposition for enabling the kinds of postures that my informants described. In my relatively short exposure to the evangelical worldview through my participation in Sunday services, interfaith dinners and one-on-one conversations, the idea of sacrificial love was the most recurring theme. For example, this was evident in my informants' efforts to "love" their Muslim neighbours (see Chapter 4). This notion is, of course, one of the core concepts of Christianity and it was interesting to see how it translated into perspectives on social engagement[48]. It was as if the tensions, doubts and anxieties of the double bind were seen as evidence of authentic spirituality as they replicated the righteous suffering that is integral to the story of their god. To imagine oneself as courageously engaging in a "radical freedom" that risks being self-threatening (or threatening to the divine) and to then respond to that risk with "humility" and "grace" are all driving elements of Christian sociability that pull from concepts that are deeply embedded in the evangelical worldview. In this way, it was as if living double-bound by "loving thy Muslim neighbour" was one of many ways in which they strive to bear witness to the unconditional benevolence of the divine.

While some of my informants found the double bind to be spiritually and intellectually stimulating, it led others to have rather destabilizing doubts. And yet, others remained less conflicted, choosing to remain firmly anchored in conceptions of evangelism whose authenticity emanated from more classical forms such as the adherence to specific beliefs and the appeal to the authority of absolute truth claims. There was no uniform way in which my informants

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[48] For another perspective about the tensions and paradoxes of evangelical social engagement, see Omri Elisha's fascinating ethnography of a church in Knoxville, Tennessee (Elisha, 2011). While my research is interested in a paradox among progressive evangelicals, Elisha's focuses on a conservative group and the encounter between their Christian values and American political conservative values (compassion vs personal accountability)

experienced the double bind, but similarities between their experiences gave shape to the contours of the value worlds between which they were negotiating their actions. As I tried to account for in Chapter 4, some informants that were on the fringes of the double bind spectrum did consciously take advantage of emotional vulnerability in order to proselytize and their convictions seemed at times to be an impediment to overcoming profound interreligious misunderstandings. However, this could not be said of the others. In order to capture the complexity of their social and spiritual dilemma as more than a simple contradiction and that would allow for the possibility that they were more than just stubborn hypocrites or clever deceivers, I accounted for the particularities of each value world through a systemic perspective. I could have described their seemingly contradictory statements and positions as a strained effort to break free from an inherently closed ideology and tap into some sort of universal human openness that is detached from such "local" limitations. However, applying the prevailing cosmopolitan definitions of that supposedly universal openness did not help me to learn something new about my informants. In Chapter 5, I suggested that cosmopolitanism is a particular cultural expression of the human social response to otherness that is often employed in research as if it is a universal to which all other forms attach their cultural roots. I argued that this presumption of universality and thus confusion of levels of analysis often leads to the same place: that other responses to otherness, similar as they may be in some regards, are limited/closed/"local". When applied to discussions about pluralism, such conclusions do not seem to sufficiently turn the mirror back onto themselves, and thus feel incomplete.

My exploratory interviews and observations showed me that my informants at Raven Hill were part of a larger picture of evangelicals in Nashville who were all similarly living double bound. I met with two social service coordinators from the refugee resettlement agency with which Raven Hill had partnered and our conversations followed similar patterns. One worker, a man in his early 30s, was experiencing a relatively uncertain time in his "faith journey". He was not settled in a particular church and had been frequenting the chapel at the divinity school of a local university. He recounted his emergence from the conservatism of his Church of Christ upbringing and his attempts to broaden his horizons. He first did so by moving briefly to New York City and living in a Hassidic Jewish neighbourhood where "everyone seemed so religious but I didn't understand why they weren't trying to convert me". He then taught English in Nashville's only Islamic private school before taking a job as an employment

case worker at the refugee resettlement agency. Throughout our conversation, he avoided making affirmations of his religion's truth claims, but was visibly strained as he described the anxiety he feels when a non-Christian friend reaches a milestone or is having a hard time. In those moments, he wants to share the resources from his faith that are so important to him but worries that any talk of it with "push them away" and make them think that all along he was just waiting for the right moment to reel them in. When it comes to his work with refugees, he says that he is not interested in converting people and that he just wants to be "the hands and feet of Jesus." He is pulled back in the other direction, though, when he doubts himself: "Maybe, I do need to give proper attribution to my acts of kindness, but I don't want to undercut the gesture."

The other worker was a woman in her mid-20's who had recently completed a graduate program in business management. She is a member at one of several new nondenominational megachurches that have been rapidly growing in the city in the past several years. She was firm in asserting that although she works for a faith-based agency, she is aware of the social context of impartial service delivery and her primary concern when she is at work is to help her clients to get a job:

> If somebody asks me about my faith, I'll be happy to answer them, but I'm not going to initiate that conversation because there's a power dynamic, right? If you are providing services for someone there's a certain difference in power dynamic, and so, whether real or imagined, I would never want to give anyone the perception that they need to believe what I believe in order to receive the services.

In the past year, she had befriended a Muslim woman that she met in her class and they go on hikes almost every weekend. She said that although she has learned a lot about Islam and has come to respect elements of it, "it feels like it's a lot about rules and obeying, where Christianity is about what God has already done for you." She still feels that Christianity is more morally upright than Islam, but that trying to convert people, even through relationships, is "disingenuous and wrong". When I asked her to reflect on her beliefs about salvation and the afterlife, she sighed, chuckled awkwardly and her pauses began to drag out longer:

> Yeah, so…I think that… [she hesitated for 10 seconds, looking past me, her eyes glazed over with a thin layer of tears] …heaven is tricky. I would say…yes, only Christians go, but I'm also not like opposed to the idea that I be wrong.

These interviews as well as two others I conducted with people from different service agencies and community development programs (both professions that involve intentional and, in some

cases intimate, out-group social engagement) echoed a similar recognition—strained and uncomfortable as it may be—of multiple contexts in which the values of religious exclusivism and pluralism called for different forms of sociability.

This research documented some emerging evangelical views on social engagement with Muslims in particular and in the context of their attempts to imagine an environment of inter-religious trust in which they could develop common social objectives. The Raven Hill members' emphasis on developing personal relationships seemed to serve the dual purpose of combating the widespread insecurities that evangelicals have in regards to Muslims as well as the reverse. This element of trust is essential and future research will need to explore and document the emergence, development and loss of mutual trust in specific interreligious friendships and common social endeavours. This will require a closer look at the perspectives of Muslims who are engaged in friendships and social projects with evangelicals. What are their perspectives on authentic relationships? Under what circumstances have they gained or lost trust in their interactions with evangelicals? During my time in Nashville I met several Muslims who were participants at the interfaith activities with members of Raven Hill. As I explained in Chapter 3, due to the severity of the anti-Muslim rhetoric in Tennessee and the escalating incidences of violence and intimidation at the time, the overarching concern was to work towards a basic sense of security. Moreover, the Muslims I spoke with were either so confident in their own religious convictions or viewed evangelical Christianity as so other to their own worldview that evangelism was not even really a concern for them. They expressed their greatest concerns in relation to everyday hostilities (being stared or sneered at) and social/political activism motivated by prejudice that weakened their sense of membership in the society (for example, petitions against Islamic community centres and houses of worship).

While I got some glimpses of this during the fieldwork for the present research, it will need to be the driving focus of a future project. It will also be important to look beyond the confines of Raven Hill and to document the emergence and nature of interreligious friendships between evangelicals and Muslims more broadly. Future research will have to focus more keenly on the emerging evangelical emphasis on mutuality and ask why it has become so important as an element of "authentic" social relations. Statements regarding authenticity and

relationships that "feel right" have an undeniable ethical dimension that needs to be explored[49]. The changes and tensions in both spirituality and sociability that this research only began to describe could suggest their development of an ethic of conviviality in light of increasing diversity at home. What are the contours of this emerging ethic and how does it shape the way that mutuality is invoked in different social situations?

[49] In his theoretical work on the anthropology of morality and ethics, Joel Robbins has referred to precarious situations in which people must manage competing injunctions as "[realms of social life] in which value hierarchies are unsettled and people are unsure which value to realize and what kind of action will best help them do so" (Robbins, 2009: 279)

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Appendix 1: Participant demographic profiles

Although the names used in this thesis were pseudonyms, they have still been omitted in this table in order to maximize the confidentiality of the participants.

LM = lay member; **S** = staff

Raven Hill core participant demographic profile

Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Educational	Professional field	Status at RH
30's	Woman	White	Undergraduate	Humanitarian, university	LM, ministry committee
30's	Woman	White	Graduate	Statistics	LM, ministry committee
30's	Man	White	Undergraduate	Business	LM
40's	Woman	White	Undergraduate	Medical-technical	LM
40's	Man	White	Undergraduate	Information technology, humanitarian	LM, ministry committee
40's	Man	White	Doctorate	University	S, shepherd
40's	Man	White	Doctorate	Pastor, university	S, lead pastor
40's	Man	White	Undergraduate	Minister	S, minister
40's	Man	African American	Undergraduate	Actor, media entrepreneur	LM
50's	Woman	White	Undergraduate	Unemployed	LM
50's	Man	White	Graduate	Information technology	LM
60's	Woman	White	Undergraduate	Retired	LM
60's	Man	White	Graduate	Retired	LM
70's	Woman	White	Undergraduate	Retired	LM

Appendix 2: Interview Guide (general)

The interview guide below is the general outline that was subject to change (additional questions, reformulation questions, omission of questions) throughout the fieldwork.

INTERVIEWEE:
DATE:
DURATION:
WRITTEN CONSENT OBTAINED: YES / NO
AUDIO RECORDING: YES / NO

Personal profile
How would you describe your cultural identity/background?
How would you describe your religious identity?
Can you tell me a bit about your faith background?
    Same tradition now as when you were growing up?
What role does your faith play in your daily life?
How important is your church community for you? Is it more than just a Sunday thing?
How long have you gone to Raven Hill? What attracted you to the community there?
I've heard Raven Hill described as a progressive community? Why do think that is?
Do you identify with the term "evangelical"?
Hospitality and inclusion
    How do you define hospitality?
    Does your faith play a role in your view of hospitality?
    Is being hospitable the same as being inclusive?
    Is a hospitable society different from an inclusive society?
Diversity and pluralism
Do you think that rising diversity in Nashville/Tennessee/US is causing problems?
What do you think some of the biggest challenges are that Christians face in light of this diversity?
    Are there any positive aspects of rising religious diversity?
    Do you think that religious diversity should be protected?
    Do you think that it should be encouraged?
Do you ever think about yourself as a Christian and yourself as an American as being different things?
What are some of the differences?
Do you think that it would be easier for non-Christian newcomers to adapt to life in America if they became Christian?
Do you feel that only newcomers need to change to adapt or does the host community also have to change?
How should newcomers change?
How should the host community change?
Are there any "non-negotiables" for you?

Interfaith activities

Why did you want to participate in the interfaith activities?

Why do you think the Muslims want to participate?

In your opinion, what is the purpose and main goal of the activities?

Do you think the activities can help to improve relations between faith communities in Nashville? How?

Before participating in the activities, did you know anyone from a different faith community than your own?

How often would you say you come into contact with people from other faith communities?

If not, why do you think that people of different faith communities don't often interact?

Did you learn anything new about Muslims?

Did you learn anything new about your own group (Christians)?

What did you enjoy most about the experience?

Sometimes, interacting with people from different cultures can be "awkward" or confusing. Were there any moments when you felt uncomfortable or when you weren't quite sure what to say or do?

If so, can you describe these moments? What did you do to overcome your discomfort or confusion?

In your interaction with non-Christians (Muslims), what have you found that you have in common?

And the differences?

Do you find that there are things that Christianity offers people spiritually that other religions don't or can't offer?

Are there some religious or cultural differences that you find are hard to communicate or talk about with non-Christians (Muslims)?

Interfaith

Do you ever worry that learning about other faiths will lead to you losing your faith?

Do you believe that others faiths have the same spiritual truth as Christianity?

The pastor talks about 2 ways: 1) do not communicate and learn, 2) different paths up the same mountain. He offers a 3rd way, acknowledge difference of belief, respect particularities. Did I get this right? How do you feel about this?

Interfaith friendship

Do you think that your friendships with Christians will always be different/more from your friendships with non-Christians because with non-Christians you will always think at some point that you wish they would become Christian?

Do you feel that your friendships with non-Christians can ever be the same as your friendships with Christians?

Can you have the same type of friendship with a non-Christian as you can with a Christian?

Other religious profile

What are your beliefs about the afterlife?

Do you believe in heaven and hell?

Who is admitted in to heaven?

Did you have an adult conversion experience? Are you "born again"?

How often you attend church?

Do you pray? How often

Appendix 3: Interview Guide (leadership)

The interview guide below is the general outline that was subject to change (additional questions, reformulation questions, omission of questions) throughout the fieldwork.

INTERVIEWEE:
DATE:
DURATION:
WRITTEN CONSENT OBTAINED: YES / NO
AUDIO RECORDING: YES / NO

Personal profile
What is your role at Raven Hill? (teach classes, preaching, mentorship, etc.)
How long have you worked at the Raven Hill?
Role at interfaith organization
    How long have you been involved with the [interfaith organization]?
    What made you want to get involved in the activities?
Terms and labels
What does the term "evangelical" mean to you? Do you identify with this term? Why or why not?
Today in American society in general the political divide between so-called "progressives" and "conservatives" seems especially dramatic. I've noticed that these labels are also sometimes applied to Christians. What does it mean to be a "progressive Christian" or a "progressive evangelical"? In what way are progressives different from conservatives? (theologically, politically, socially, etc.)
I've heard Raven Hill be described as a "progressive community". Does that label ring true to you? Why do you think Raven Hill would be described this way? How would you describe the community at Raven Hill? What about Raven Hill would make it "progressive"?
I've heard you talk in your sermons about being "unapologetically Christian". What do you mean by that? How/why is that stance important to your mission to bridge gaps with other faith communities?
Hospitality and diversity
    How would you define/describe hospitality?
    Why is it important to talk about hospitality in Tennessee today?
You have written a lot about the challenges that Christians face in welcoming neighbors of different cultures and faiths, and it has been the subject of your sermons. Why do think that it is so important that Christians rethink their ideas about hospitality today?
Why do you think so many Christians in Tennessee today are hesitant to welcome neighbors, both new and old, of different cultures and faiths?
How would you define/describe religious diversity? Do you think that it is important to the American national identity? Why or why not?

I’ve heard Raven Hill leaders say that Christianity’s “true test” is in its ability to offer hope for and to do good in the lives of people who do not prescribe to Christianity as true. Can you elaborate more on what you mean by that?

I’ve heard in the sermons about religious diversity that Christians need to find a new way to talk to people of other faiths. You say that Christians need to recognize, for example, that Christians and Muslims do not believe the same things. What lead you to want to find a new way? What are the “old ways” and what wasn’t working?

Why is it important to you that Christians recognize others’ faiths, like Muslims for example?

Why do you think this is difficult for many Christians today?

<u>Role as a pastor/leader/minister</u>

As a leader at a church as big as Raven Hill, you have the opportunity to reach a large audience. What challenges have you faced when you touch on topics of interfaith relations and religious diversity?

In general, how are your sermons on these topics received by the congregation? (positively, negatively)

When you preach/give guidance about these topics, do you ever get negative reactions from the congregation?

If so, what are the typical points of disagreement?

If so, how do you address and respond to disagreement?

Do you get negative reactions from the Christian community in Nashville/in Tennessee at large?

If so, what are the typical points of disagreement that other Christian leaders voice to you or about you?

If so, how do you address and respond to disagreement

Appendix 4: Observation Guide (religious activities)

The observation guide below is the general outline that was subject to change (additional elements, omission of elements) throughout the fieldwork.

LOCATION:
DATE:
TIME AND DURATION:
VERBAL CONSENT OBTAINED: YES / NO

CONTEXT OF THE OBSERVATION
Raven Hill Church is an evangelical church located in a suburb of Nashville. The lead preaching minister is a public proponent of interfaith relations and speaks on the subject in his sermons. Observation at Raven Hill will take place during Sunday worship and liturgical services as well as during the Sunday and/or Wednesday evening classes that are offered by the church leadership and education staff.

PRIMARY THEMES
Physical space
Description (location in the city; neighborhood; main hall; classrooms; décor; layout; ambiance)
People
Pastors and church leadership: number; cultural background; role during the service; role during the classes; social status; age; sex
Parishioners/class attendees: number; cultural background; social status; age; sex
Content of the sermons and classes
For each week's service:
General ambiance/feel of the service
Liturgy
Topics discussed (pay particular attention to allusions to hospitality)
For each week's class:
General ambiance/feel of the class
Course syllabus if available
Teaching style (magisterial, participatory, etc.)
Topics discussed/stories told (pay particular attention to witnessing/recounting of interactions with non-Christians)
Researcher's presence
Did I interject in class discussions? How?
Did I ask questions to the pastor or the other participants?
What questions did I ask?
Did my questions or contributions lead to any particular discussion topics?
GENERAL CHRONOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION

General sequence of events

Appendix 5: Observation Guide (interfaith activities)

The observation guide below is the general outline that was subject to change (additional elements, omission of elements) throughout the fieldwork.

LOCATION:
DATE:
TIME AND DURATION:
VERBAL CONSENT OBTAINED: YES / NO

CONTEXT OF THE OBSERVATION
The *Interfaith Dinner* program is an intercultural and interfaith dinner activity organized through an organization in Nashville. The program aims to bridge gaps between a diversity of cultural and religious groups, counter anti-Muslim rhetoric and stereotyping and to foster positive relations and understanding. The dinners generally take place in the home of the "host", who invites members of their religious community (church, mosque or other place of worship) to meet, converse and eat dinner with members of different religious communities (who are typically recruited by the organization) The organization provides a mediator who attends each dinner. The participants and not given any preparation or support materials and discussions are not guided or required to touch on any topic in particular.

PRIMARY THEMES
Physical space
Description (house, apartment, etc.; location in the city; neighborhood; room; décor; layout; seating arrangement)
People – listen for and identify:
Mediator: mediator's role; introduction; religious identity; cultural background; primary language; social status; experience in intercultural/interfaith activities; voiced motivations for participation
Host(s): number; religious identity; cultural background; primary language; social status; experience in intercultural/interfaith activities; voiced motivations for participation
Participants: number; religious identity; cultural background; primary language; social status; experience in intercultural/interfaith activities; voiced motivations for participation
Facial and body language during critical moments
Topics of conversation
What kinds of questions to members of each group ask each other?
How do members of each group describe each other's differences related to everyday life, children, family life, religious practice, food, language, politics, etc.?
Are common points found between the groups?
What kinds of common points (related to everyday life, children, family life, religious practice, food, language, politics, etc.)?
Social dynamic and communication
If the host is Christian, is there a blessing of the meal?

If so, what is the nature of the blessing? How is the blessing mediated in the presence of non-Christians?
What is the reaction of the non-Christians present?
If the host is Muslim, is there a blessing of the meal?
If so, what is the nature of the blessing? How is the blessing mediated in the presence of non-Muslims?
What is the reaction of the non-Muslims present?
What kind of good?
How is food served (does the host serve, is it buffet style, is it self-service at the table, etc.)?
How is the food sharing negotiated (does the host explain or ask permission, etc.)?
How is conversation about difference initiated?
What topics are suggested? Who suggests topics?
Are questions of cultural and religious difference addressed/asked directly?
Do members of the groups speak/respond to questions for themselves personally or on behalf of their culture or religion?
How are cultural and religious differences explained?
Does the mediator intervene or guide the conversation?
If so, how often and in what way?
Are there "awkward" moments or moments of tension?
If so, how are such moments resolved (Q&A, mediator intervention, etc.)?
What is cause of such moments? What topics are involved?
If the mediator intervenes, what does he/she suggest in order to resolve tension?
When does the conversation shift from questions directed from host to immigrant to immigrant to host?

Researcher's participation

How did I participate?
Did I ask questions to the hosts, the mediator or the other participants?
What questions did I ask?
Did my questions or contributions lead to any particular discussion topics?

GENERAL CHRONOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION

General sequence of events (different periods: pre-meal, meal, post-meal)