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Marginality, Media, and Mutations of Religious Authority in the History of Christianity

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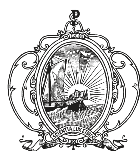

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2019

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XII. PRAYERS AND STORIES AS MEDIA AND MATERIALITY: CHANGING SOURCES OF AUTHORITY IN THE EMERGING CHURCH MOVEMENT

Sebastian Schüler

In 2010, when I was a visiting researcher at the Department of Anthropology at the University of California in San Diego (UCSD), I was still in the beginning of my research on a small evangelical prayer movement called '24-7Prayer' that had originated in the South of England. My mentor at UCSD, Joel Robbins, mentioned that there was a Christian prayer room on the campus of UCSD and so – as an anthropologist of religion – I decided to go have a look. When I entered the room, I was astonished by the fact that it looked so similar to all the 24-7Prayer-movement prayer rooms I had visited so far. There were big paper sheets on the walls on which to draw and write prayers and poems. There were cushions on the floor to sit or lie down on, instruments in the corner, and a bunch of utensils with which to express your prayers in an individualistic and artistic manner. I was curious how these similarities could be explained.

After asking my way around for a while, I found one of the initiators of this prayer room. At that time, he was a student and an active member of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a popular evangelical campus ministry organisation.[1] I asked what gave him the idea for setting up this prayer room and he mentioned a book that he had read and which had inspired him, Pete Greig's *Red Moon Rising*. At that moment, I realised that the 24-7Prayer-movement was not as marginal and subversive as it sometimes presents itself: Pete Greig could be regarded as the founder of this movement. His book has made its way into mainstream evangelicalism.

As this short anecdote about the 24-7Prayer-movement demonstrates, it is sometimes difficult to define who is at the margins and who is at the

[1] P.A. Bramadat, *The Church on the World's Turf: An Evangelical Christian Group at a Secular University* (Oxford, 2000).

centre, as it is a matter of perspective. In this contribution, I will therefore explore the anecdote's subject further, and move on to analyse the role and place of the 24-7Prayer-movement within the context of contemporary evangelicalism in order to discuss the functions of media and materiality in the discourse on marginality and its influence on authority in the movement. My research is based on several field studies with participatory observations and interviews I have conducted in Great Britain, Germany, Spain, and Macedonia from 2009 to the present.

The 24-7Prayer-movement can be understood as a typical expression of the broader so-called Emerging Church Movement (ECM), a conglomeration of different local churches, loose networks, and smaller movements that all together have produced a discourse on the role of Christianity in a postmodern era.[2] This discourse can be characterised by its emphasis on creative spirituality, post-modernity, and criticism of institutional religion. At the same time, it usually differentiates itself from mainstream Evangelicalism with its seeker-driven mega-churches, consumer oriented products, and rigid political and moral opinions. 'Emerging evangelicalism is best defined as a movement of cultural critique grounded in a desire for change.'[3] In addition, this new generation of evangelical Christians is looking for new ways to express and experience their faith in a more artistic, simplistic, and holistic manner.[4] But there is more to it than a bohemian attitude: Not only do they participate in an intellectual discourse on

[2] For an academic analysis of the Emerging Church Movement see: M. Guest and S. Taylor, 'The Post-Evangelical Emerging Church: Innovations in New Zealand and the UK', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6/1 (2006) 49-64; S. Bader-Saye, 'Improvising Church: An Introduction to the Emerging Church Conversation', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6/1 (2006) 12-23; J.S. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York, 2011); J. Packard, *The Emerging Church: Religion at the Margins* (Boulder, 2012); M. Freudenberg, 'The Emerging Church as a Critical Response to the Neoliberalization of the American Religious Landscape', *Politics and Religion* 2/9 (2015) 297-319. Some of the main religious contributions to the discourse about the Emerging Church Movement are: D. Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, 2003); B. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, 2004); R.S. Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church* (Wheaton, 2005); E. Gibbs and R. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Culture* (Grand Rapids, 2005); D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, 2005).

[3] J.S. Bielo, '"FORMED": Emerging Evangelicals Navigate Two Transformations', in B. Steensland and P. Goff (eds.), *The New Evangelical Social Engagement* (Oxford, 2014) 31-49 at 32.

[4] S. Schüler, 'Establishing a 'Culture of Prayer': Holistic spirituality and the social transformation of contemporary Evangelicalism', *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion* 4 (2013) 263-80.

postmodernity, they also engage in activities fostering social justice,[5] live a communal life (New Monasticism),[6] and create and perform their own narratives of marginality.[7]

In my analysis of this evangelical movement, I aim to demonstrate that the concept of 'believing without belonging', as it was introduced by British sociologist Grace Davie,[8] can serve as an apt starting point for understanding some of the religious and social changes in contemporary Evangelicalism, but that it also needs some re-evaluation to make more sense of recent developments. In doing so, I will focus on the role of media culture and materiality to show how concepts and sources of authority have changed in the ECM compared to mainstream Evangelicalism – or at least offer some framings of how the intentions and performances of the ECM to renew Christianity from the margins can be explained. With this analysis, I will also demonstrate a new emphasis in the media culture of the ECM that can be best characterised as a shift from 'mediatisation' in terms of the influence of modern (mass) media on religion to 'intermediality' in terms of the use of shifting forms of media and their entwinement with material culture to foster a shared sense of (a marginalised) reality.

Before I turn to the case study of the 24-7Prayer-movement, I will briefly introduce some central aspects of the discourse surrounding the ECM by taking a closer look at some of their main protagonists.

From Modernity to Postmodernity: Believing and Belonging in the Emerging Church

Depending on the observer's perspective, evangelical Christianity can be considered as anti-modern, reactionary, and rigid on the one hand, and on the other as modern, conservative, and culturally adaptive. To a certain extent both perspectives are correct. Many mainstream (not to be confused with mainline[9]) evangelicals are politically and morally conservative,

[5] B. Steensland and P. Goff (eds.), *The New Evangelical Social Engagement* (Oxford, 2014).

[6] W. Samson, 'The New Monasticism', in Steensland and Goff, *The New Evangelical Social Engagement*, 94-108.

[7] Packard, *The Emerging Church*.

[8] G. Davie, 'Believing without Belonging: Is this the Future of Religion in Britain?', *Social Compass* 37/4 (1990) 455-69.

[9] In the USA, the term mainline Protestant church refers to denominations such as the United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and others, which usually stand for a moderate, liberal theology and who were a majority of Protestant Christianity until mid 20th century. Today's mainstream Protestant churches in the USA are evangelical, fundamentalist, and charismatic denominations.

anti-evolutionist, anti-gay, and anti-abortion.[10] Yet, they engage modern technology, modern lifestyles, and even popular culture. Especially the generation born between the mid-sixties and mid-eighties grew up in churches and congregations with bands playing pop and rock music for worship,[11] with multi-media-technology such as lightshows and video projections, and with cool pastors who preached in shorts and T-shirts rather than in suits. In the US, these evangelicals usually voted Republican since the relationship between evangelicals and the GOP became well cemented during the era of the Moral Majority and Focus on the Family campaigns from the 1960s to 1980s.[12]

By calling these kinds of evangelicals 'mainstream', I start from the observation that they have become one of the most influential and widespread forms or versions of global Evangelicalism today,[13] even though the term Evangelicalism itself is still more problematic and complex.[14] However, there are different aspects and theories about why mainstream Evangelicalism became successful. According to Miller,[15] it was the Evangelicals' ability to adapt to modern (pop-) culture that made them successful and helped them to become a global mainstream Protestant movement. Another reason for their success could be found in the ways Evangelicals have made use of modern media such a radio, television, or the internet.[16]

Certainly, many variations of Evangelicalism exist today and recent anthropological research[17] has shown that also classical distinctions between Evangelicals, Charismatics, and Pentecostals no longer count for many of the younger, mostly non-denominational churches.[18] Still, for instance, one of the most widespread – and therefore mainstream – theologies within Evangelicalism today is the so-called prosperity Gospel, also known as the

[10] R. Balmer, *Evangelicalism in America* (Waco, 2016). B. Hankins, *American Evangelicals: A Contemporary History of a Mainstream Religious Movement* (Lanham, 2008).

[11] D.W. Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil: Christian Pop Music and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill, 2013).

[12] Hankins, *American Evangelicals.*

[13] M. El-Faizy, *God and Country: How Evangelicals Have Become America's New Mainstream* (New York, 2006). S.P. Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born Again Years* (Oxford, 2014).

[14] S. Coleman and R.I.J. Hackett (eds.), *The Anthropology of Global Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism* (New York, 2015). R. Balmer, *Evangelicalism in America* (Waco, 2016).

[15] Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism*.

[16] S.M. Hoover and N. Kaneva (eds.), *Fundamentalisms and the Media* (London, New York, 2009).

[17] Coleman and Hackett, *The Anthropology.*

[18] M. Clawson and A. Stace (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries, Redefining Faith: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Emerging Church Movement* (Eugene, 2016).

'health and wealth' Gospel, which entails the belief that financial blessing and physical well-being is always the will of God and comes automatically as the result of a strong faith in God.[19] In addition, the rise of mega-churches around the globe went hand in hand with the distribution of this kind of theology. Despite global, mainstream Evangelicalism being conservative and prosperity driven, there are also some marginal movements within it that not only demonstrate the great variety of Evangelicalism but also have a considerable impact on the global Evangelical discourse and on local practices of authority.

One of these movements that most clearly challenges religious authority in contemporary Evangelicalism is the so-called Emerging Church Movement (ECM), a marginal movement within global Evangelicalism despite having gained some momentum in recent years. I use the term ECM as an umbrella term that includes some of the main characteristics coming from this field (and to which I will turn in a moment). However, the ECM is not a homogenous movement and not all individuals, movements, or networks that share characteristics and attitudes found in the ECM identify themselves as part of the ECM, even though they sometimes sympathise with it. In addition – and to make it even more confusing – there are several movements and networks with names such as the Missional Church Movement, the Simple Church Movement, the Organic Church Movement, the 24-7Prayer Movement, the Refresh Movement or the Fresh Expressions Movement – just to name a few, all of which express ideas that are also central to the ECM and which I therefore subsume within the term ECM.

The term ECM is thus problematic as an academic category since it is hard to define exactly what it is and who belongs to it.[20] Insiders as well as scholarly outsiders of these movements have used different terms to describe and characterise the ECM, such as 'progressive Evangelicalism,' 'postmodern Christianity,' 'New Evangelicals,' 'Post-Protestants,' 'Post-Evangelicals,' or the 'Evangelical Left.' But what are all these labels about? Well, most of these churches, movements and networks share a common vision of a postmodern church that critically reflects on the ties between Evangelicalism and modernity, including modern ideologies such as materialism, stable institutional growth, and consumerism. They aim for a conversational approach that transcends labels of Evangelicalism such as conservative and liberal, fundamentalist and modernist. On a practical level, they are unified

[19] K. Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (Oxford, 2013).

[20] G. Ganiel and G. Marti, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (New York, 2014).

in the idea of a simple church with very few structures; this also allows for new, experimental ways of doing worship, evangelism, and building communities.

Most of these movements originated in so-called Western societies, especially the USA, Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. And most initiators and supporters of these movements, usually between twenty and forty years old, have had access to higher education and follow a bohemian or alternative lifestyle. Representing this milieu, Dan Kimball, in his book *They like Jesus but not the Church*,[21] has criticised Evangelical Christians for having created their own subculture within society. He argued that especially younger Christians are 'too busy inside the church to know those outside of the church'.[22] For him and other authors within the ECM, this is the result of the proclaimed culture wars in the USA.[23] Kimball and others summarised the situation for Evangelicals in the 1990s and 2000s accordingly: Evangelical Christians, on the one hand, became absorbed in their own subculture and became afraid of secular culture as the realm of the devil. Non-Christians on the other hand, perceived Evangelicals as anti-modern, narrow-minded fundamentalists. However, evangelical authors and pastors such as Dan Kimball, Rob Bell, Shane Claiborne, and Mark Driscoll observed this split between Evangelicalism and secular culture with regret, and envisioned instead a change in Evangelicalism, leading to what has become the ECM.

Kimball has, for example, stated that 'I probably wouldn't like Christians if I weren't one,' and [elsewhere] pointed out: 'We don't realise how Christians have come across to people over the past 20 years or so. There are a lot of negative stereotypes that people outside the church have of us, and we need to pay attention.'[24] Hence, the ECM is characterised as critical of institutionalised Christianity[25] and of right wing, conservative Evangelicalism with its aggressive missionary engagement. Most of ECM Christians see themselves as a generation of Christians who are embarrassed about what Evangelicalism has become. Many have voiced critique against tight church structures with authoritarian pastors whose predominant goal is to bring more people to church. In fact, the rise of mega-churches around the globe

[21] D. Kimball, *They like Jesus but not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids, 2007).

[22] Kimball, *They like Jesus*, 13.

[23] J.D. Hunter, *The Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York, 1991).

[24] http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2009/november-online-only/q3.html.

[25] Packard, *The Emerging Church*.

has become one of the dominant institutional organisations in Evangelicalism known for their authoritarian character.[26]

Anthropologist Miranda Klaver, working on styles of authority in Pentecostal Megachurches, has put it this way: 'Pentecostal megachurches in different parts of the world, because of their size and success and presence in the online world, operate as authoritative centres of divine blessing, inspiration and even God's presence.'[27] Accordingly, many ECM members criticise this development and the styles of worship typical for megachurches because they aim at arousing emotions rather than contemplating Jesus. Another critical aspect they point to is the segregation of the church community through specialised programs especially in mega-churches (for instance programs for teenagers, for engaged couples, for prayer, for mission, for social work, and so on).

This demonstrates that there is an observable shift of authority at the margins of contemporary Evangelicalism that perhaps is now also entering the mainstream. For example, in their recently published 'Evangelicals and Sources of Authority', the editors Klaver, Paas, and van Staalduine-Sulman observe a more general shift of authority in Dutch Evangelicalism: 'In the past two decades, however, a shift from traditional interpretations of the Bible to an emphasis on individual experiences and emotions has been discernible, with varying implications. It is time to acknowledge that the evangelical movement is no longer stuck in conservatism, but is willing to enter new debates with changing sources of authority.'[28]

The intriguing question here is why and how some evangelicals aim for new sources of authority. Most evangelical Christians would agree that their main sources of authority are Jesus, God, and the Bible, and this is also true for the ECM. However, within Evangelicalism we find different forms of media culture (see this volume's introduction) that have been established over the last two or three decades, and which also serve as sources of authority. The consumption of particular media, such as megachurch services, Christian self-help books, Christian fiction, and Christian music does not replace these main sources of authority but offers guidance in an everyday Christian life, and influences opinions on ethical and moral

[26] S. Ellingson, *The Megachurch and the Mainline: Remaking Religious Tradition in the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago and London, 2007). T. Kern and U. Schimank, 'Megakirchen als religiöse Organisationen: Ein dritter Gemeindetyp jenseits von Sekte und Kirche?', *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 65 (2013) 285-309.

[27] M. Klaver, 'Pentecostal pastorpreneurs and the global circulation of authoritative aesthetic styles', *Culture and Religion* 16/2 (2015) 146-59 at 146.

[28] M. Klaver *et al.* (eds.), *Evangelicals and Sources of Authority* (Amsterdam, 2016).

questions. As such, these media cultures function as important sources of authority within global Evangelicalism.

Movements such as the ECM have begun to challenge the media culture of mainstream Evangelicalism both by criticising institutionalised religion such as mega-churches with their 'sensational devotions',[29] and by introducing alternative media cultures that bring forth specific aspects of materiality and spirituality as new (ancient) sources of authority. The ECM's aim to resist institutionalisation calls to mind the phrase 'believing without belonging', coined by sociologist Grace Davie in 1990.[30] Based on surveys of church membership and personal belief in Britain, Davie argued, contrary to common secularisation theory, that many people in Britain (and in Europe) still hold religious beliefs even though they no longer are church members or do not join in church activities. These findings support Davie's theory of religious individualisation. In 2011, sociologist Abby Day presented a more qualitative study. In her book *Believing in Belonging* she argued that people's belief in 'something' usually results in creating social relationships.[31] Belief is thus not only an individual matter but also a social one. As we will see in the following, in the case of the ECM and especially the 24-7Prayer-movement the attitude of believing without belonging has also lead to a believing in belonging by means of shifting sources of authority moving towards the religious self and personal relationships. Even though the religious landscapes in the USA and Europe were and are still quite different, the ECM emerged in both continents almost simultaneously at the end of the 1990s, and it may thus be said to stand for a common critique against common forms of institutionalised religion, and particular media cultures, in contemporary evangelicalism.

Summing up this section on the ECM, we can say that this movement – although it is very heterogeneous – represents a typical reform movement, which aims at social and spiritual changes in contemporary Evangelicalism. One of the most intriguing aspects of this movement is therefore that it cannot be characterised as just another 'Great Awakening', where religious experience is usually mediated through highly emotional arousals and in which the religious authority is seen and represented in so-called manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Rather, similar to what we can find in contemporary esotericism and spirituality, individuals in the ECM are engaged in

[29] J. Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First-Century America* (Ann Arbor, 2013).

[30] Davie, 'Believing without Belonging'.

[31] A. Day, *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford, 2011).

a constant work on the religious self. Accordingly, the religious self becomes authoritative in and of itself through different kinds of media usage such as contemplative prayer, mystic experiences, artistic expressions, social engagement, or storytelling. In the following I will show how this is put into practice by taking a closer look at one of the ECM movements, the 24-7Prayer-movement.

From Vision to Visualisation: Media and Materiality in the 24-7Prayer-Movement

Pete Greig, mentioned above, is a British pastor who founded the 24-7Prayer-movement in 1999. Back then, Greig was a youth pastor at Evangelical Revelation Church in Chichester, South England. The founding myth of that movement, as told by Pete Greig in his first book[32] entitled *Red Moon Rising*, goes as follows: Young surfer Pete Greig was hitchhiking through Europe. One night, when he slept in his tent on a Portuguese beach, he received a vision from God: He writes: 'My eyes were opened and I could "see" with absolute clarity before me the different countries laid out like an atlas. And from each of these nations I watched as young people arose out of the pages, crowds of them in every nation, a mysterious, faceless army silently awaiting orders.'[33]

Following this miraculous vision, Pete continued his journey until he arrived in Herrnhut, east of Dresden in Germany, where he discovered the origins of the Moravian Movement founded by Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf in the eighteenth century. He also learned about a nonstop prayer chain that Zinzendorf had initiated in 1727 that ran for 100 years. With this in mind, Pete returned to his church in Chichester and started an experiment. He asked his congregation to create a prayer room in the church building where prayer could be expressed in a creative and personal way, and where the church community should try to pray nonstop for an entire month. The church organised a prayer schedule with slots of one or two hours for each one to pray before someone else took over, making sure that the prayer chain ran continuously for one whole month. They indeed prayed for two months, during which the word of this 'miracle' spread across the country, and inspired others to do the same and to join the prayer chain. A first website was put up in order to organise that prayer

[32] P. Greig and D. Roberts, *Red Moon Rising: How 24-7 Prayer is Awakening a Generation* (Lake Mary, 2003).

[33] Greig and Roberts, *Red Moon Rising*, 33.

chain, and thus 24-7Prayer was born. The experiment 'accidentally' – as Pete Greig continually emphasises – initiated a global nonstop prayer movement.

Shortly after, Pete Greig published the book *Red Moon Rising* telling this story and thus contributing to the success of the movement. In addition to the prayer chain, local groups were founded and called 'Boiler Rooms,' intended as places where people could live together or meet on a daily basis in order to join in prayer or for meals. While the prayer chain seemed to have run automatically and got somewhat 'out of control', the movement itself concentrated on these Boiler Rooms, making sure that they did not become another church institution but would instead function as a hub for creativity, prayer, and social justice. As a result, Andy Freeman, another protagonist of the 24-7Prayer-movement, wrote a book together with Pete Greig in 2007 called *Punk Monk: New Monasticism and the Ancient Art of Breathing*,[34] in which they elaborate on the idea of Boiler Rooms and the intended shift from institutions to communities. The idea of communities as places of prayer inspired by the (Celtic) monastic tradition is quite common in the ECM.[35]

Along with these and additional other books by Pete Greig and other pioneers of the movement, several short online videos were also produced that propagated the idea that Christian everyday life should be embedded in and emerge out of prayer. Accordingly, the titles of these videos are, to name a few: 'prayer as a movement', 'prayer as community', 'prayer as creativity', 'prayer as justice', and 'prayer as mission'. In this way, prayer became the source of authority for all kinds of everyday activity, and it was visualised through online tutorials and videos.

Because Pete Greig founded the movement, one would expect him to be its leader. However, he usually avoids being identified as the head of the movement. Instead he emphasises the momentariness and messiness of the movement by often stating that the movement is not a brand made to last. In his view, it is more important to stay flexible and dynamic rather than to become just another religious institution. This idea of flexibility and being a movement that keeps on moving and changing represents a core attitude[36] that also says much about the place and role of religious authority in

[34] A. Freeman and P. Greig, *Punk Monk: New Monasticism and the Ancient Art of Breathing* (Ventura, 2007).

[35] Samson, *The New Monasticism*.

[36] See also the video 'prayer as a movement' in which people move their bodies and are asked to characterize the movement in three words: https://24-7prayer.com/video/prayer-as-a-movement# (last access on May 11th, 2017).

the movement. Authority is moved away from structures and institutions and given to the creativity of the individual who aims at sustaining a permanently unsettled life.[37]

However, when authority is not stably located in doctrinal teachings and hierarchies, the establishment of religious authority is a complicated process that needs to be mediated and materialised in the believers' everyday life. Accordingly, stories and prayers have become the central vehicles of authority in the movement. The movement's most recent video (2017), for instance, visualises a poem called 'The Vision' written by Pete Greig in the first prayer room in 1999. The poem begins like this:

> So this guy comes up to me and says, 'What's the vision?
> What's the big idea?'
> I open my mouth and words come out like this…
> The vision?
> The vision is JESUS – obsessively, dangerously, undeniably Jesus.
> The vision is an army of young people.
> You see bones? I see an army. And they are FREE from materialism.
> They laugh at 9-5 little prisons. They could eat caviar on Monday and
> crusts on Tuesday. They wouldn't even notice. They know the
> meaning of the Matrix, the way the west was won.
> They are mobile like the wind, they belong to the nations. They need
> no passport. People write their addresses in pencil and wonder at their
> strange existence.
> They are free yet they are slaves of the hurting and
> dirty and dying (…).

In his poem, Greig highlights the idea of marginality as a powerful source of Christian identity. His initial question about 'the vision' and the 'big idea' – asked by a stranger – already indicates a certain scepticism towards life in general and maybe towards Christianity in particular. The answer to this question then somehow mysteriously flows out of his mouth, as if God himself is speaking through Greig. However, the message is both simple and radical: It is simple, because it lacks any theological or denominational context by stating that the vision is Jesus. Yet, this simplicity is communicated as something radical for the followers' personal identity. It laims that Christians (or indeed merely followers of Jesus?) are free from modern materialism and stereotyped lifestyles, and that they are free and committed to serve the poor and invalid.

[37] Packard, *The Emerging Church*, 61.

The poem clearly taps into a typical idea of marginality that can be observed already at the beginnings of Christian history[38] with Jesus himself serving as a role model of a social outlaw. By addressing the '9-5 little prisons,' Greig criticises the ideal of a modern working ethos that aims for material and monetary safeguard and opposes this ideal with the fluidity of postmodern lifestyles, which are also stylised as anti-material in nature. The poem thus draws an ideal picture of Christian believers as unbound from all kinds of institutional structures, religious theologies, and social habits. It offers the idea of a Christian maverick who is not religiously deviant, but socially, culturally, and religiously (self-)marginalised and that from this (perceived) marginal position a new (self-)empowerment to induce social change will arise. The representation of marginality as a core concept of Christian identity in this poem thereby also reframes classical Evangelical ideas of authority such as empowerment through charismatic worship by authorising the religious *Self*. I will return to this below.

The poem itself became a story of success after it went viral on a number of social media shortly after it was written in 1999. Pete Greig later stated: 'It wasn't a big deal, just a very personal thing – trying to work out the call on my life and why I was awake at 3am praying when others were tucked up in bed!' … I didn't realise any of this (the poem going viral, S.S.) until someone in Canada emailed my own poem to me saying they had come across it and thought I might like it.'[39] Shortly after this took place, Pete Greig wrote a book called *The Vision and the Vow: A Call to Discipleship*.[40] In his book he tells the story of his poem going viral and about the importance of story-telling in our age. Now, almost seventeen years after it was written, a short video about the poem was produced and released online (2017).[41] The production was crowd-funded through the movement's website and newsletter. The video begins with the words: 'September 1999, Graffiti appears on the walls of a warehouse in southern England. It's a call to arms that comes to be known to millions simply as… The Vision'. Here, the video not only presents and visualises the poem but also highlights its success of reception as a story of its own.

In the video, we see mostly young and energetic people in everyday activities such as doing sports, walking the streets, or walking in the forest. The pictures are often shot in slow motion with close-ups of the faces,

[38] J.N. Bremmer, 'Symbols of Marginality from Early Pythagoreans to Late Antique Monks', *Greece and Rome* 39/2 (1992) 205-14.

[39] See: https://www.24-7prayer.com/thevisionpoem (last access on May 11th, 2017).

[40] P. Greig, *The Vision and the Vow: A Call to Discipleship* (Lake Mary, 2004).

[41] See: https://www.24-7prayer.com/thevisionfilm (last access on May 31st, 2017).

which increases the impression that the people shown in this video are in a state of contemplation. The poem is presented as a rap-song and the music starts off slowly while getting more pulsatile toward the end of the video. What is striking is the discrepancy between the martial words of the poem and the pictures of young, cool, and hip people.

The poem talks about an army of believers and propagates an anti-materialist, anti-mainstream attitude to society whereas at the same time the pictures show ordinary young people doing arts, playing music, or doing sports. This, to some extent, represents the ways in which the 24-7Prayer movement aims at transforming evangelicalism as well as secular society from within through propagating a particular religious lifestyle that is characterised by a contemplative spirituality that imparts authenticity to the believers. Bielo[42] also emphasised how emerging Evangelicals attempt to undertake the establishment of an authentic lifestyle through community-living and so-called 'missional' engagement. The term 'missional' is common in the ECM and is thus distinguished from 'mission' in as much that 'missional' is understood as a more holistic approach to reaching out to people in everyday activities rather than mission understood as bringing people to church for proselytism.[43]

In the 24-7Prayer-movement, prayer is understood as a practice for contemplating and reflecting on one's own identity and the role of spirituality in culture and society. Indeed, the video uses only a few religious symbols and concentrates mostly on people praying and worshipping without any clear indication of religious or denominational affiliations (except for a rabbi who appears twice in the video). The movement thus fits the 'spiritual but not religious'-discourse[44] in contemporary western society that can usually be found in the esoteric milieu but also appears more and more often in nondenominational Christianity.

In the video, 24-7Prayer portrays itself as a movement of cool social and religious misfits who live at the margins of mainstream Christianity and who claim a sort of post-traditional or postmodern reflexivity for themselves that serves as a resource of authority. This self-marginalisation also results in a turn toward welfare for the socially deprived. Topics of social justice and practices of social engagement in local communities and neighbourhoods can be found among many emerging Evangelicals who turn

[42] Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*.

[43] Schüler, 'Culture of Prayer'.

[44] R.C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but not Religious – Understanding Unchurched America* (New York, 2001); R. Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers. How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, 2007).

their backs to mega-church organisations and their prosperity gospel. This is nicely depicted in the title of religious author Diana Butler Buss: *Christianity for the Rest of US: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith*.[45]

The poem functions as a medium for this idea of self-marginalisation and becomes materialised in the video, which – again – is a medium for telling stories. This concept of story-telling, also known as narrative theology, plays an important role in the ECM. In fact, the sheer practice of story-telling and the constant emphasis on the idea that every individual Christian carries an important story has become a sort of meta-narrative within the movement. The production of online videos reinforces the role of narratives as sources of personal authority and identity-formation. The movement continuously creates a story about itself as the manifestation of the story of God with his people. Thus, this meta-narrative functions as an important source of authority for the believers, who get the feeling that they participate in an 'ongoing story of God with his people'.

As mentioned before, the idea of prayer-rooms where prayers can be expressed creatively is itself a story of success. Churches all over the world from Europe to Brazil and from the USA to China have adopted this idea. 24-7Prayer not only initiated this international and interdenominational network of prayer, but also established a certain aesthetic for the creation and decoration of such prayer rooms. In 2009, Greig published his book *The 24-7Prayer Manual: Anyone, Anywhere Can Learn to Pray like Never Before*,[46] including a step-by-step description of how to put up and decorate a prayer room with paper sheets on the wall on which one can creatively draw and write down prayers. This idea of experimenting with prayers indicates a shift from the authority of standardised prayers or typical charismatic prayer styles to more individualised and temporary or shifting styles of prayer that can take over the role of authority in the lives of the believers. The 24-7Prayer rooms all around the world create and evoke a sense of the religious self as a source for authority by highlighting creativity and the arts as forms of prayer. In addition, the decorated prayer rooms serve as materialised prayers themselves. One who enters such a room can contemplate and gaze at the artistic expressions others have left there. This also demonstrates a shift from textual and institutionalised forms of

[45] D. Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of US: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (New York, 2006).

[46] P. Greig, *The 24-7Prayer Manual: Anyone, Anywhere Can Learn to Pray like Never Before* (Colorado Springs, 2009).

authority to performative and aesthetic dimensions of authority. The performance of this media culture must therefore be understood in a broad sense; on the one hand, it refers to the practice of prayer and the discourse about it that works as the main identity marker of the movement. It also refers to the materiality of the prayer rooms that have been created and distributed on a global level. The very aesthetic of these prayer rooms also functions as an identity marker of the movement. On the other hand, the term media refers to the online resources such as websites and videos, which visualise and therefore propagate the idea of marginality via the Internet.

The use of prayers and stories as a form of media within the 24-7Prayer-movement can also be characterised as a shift from mediatisation within mainstream Evangelicalism to practices of intermediality within the ECM. Unfortunately, the term mediatisation has been used very differently so far[47] but usually refers to the role and influence of postmodern media such as radio, television, or the Internet in society in general and in religion in particular. An early definition, given by Jay Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh, is that mediatisation is 'the media moving toward the center of the social process'.[48] This means that late modern religious practices are often understood to be dominated by technological and digital media that were supposed to support religious communication but ended up in becoming itself part of the religious practice and thereby imposed a sort of media logic on religion.[49] Even though the influence of media on religion can be tracked down throughout religious history[50] one could argue that the invention of digital media in late modernity has significantly speeded up this process of mediatisation (not only) in the realm of religion.

Mainstream Evangelicalism is a good example of this process where the professional use of media technology, such as light shows and huge display screens in mega-churches but also the facilities to process services and information via Television, Internet, and social media, come to impact religious transformations. However, not all modern Evangelicalism can be reduced to Televangelism and other forms of mediatised religion. Still, mediatisation is a central feature for the public perception of modern Evangelicalism. The ECM and other postmodern Evangelicals have reacted to

[47] D. Morgan, 'Mediation or mediatisation: The history of media in the study of religion', *Culture and Religion* 12/2 (2011) 137-52.

[48] J.G. Blumler and D. Kavanagh, 'The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features', *Political Communication* 16 (1999) 209-30 at 211.

[49] Morgan, 'Mediation or mediatisation'.

[50] Morgan, 'Mediation or mediatisation', 150.

modern media culture and criticised this aspect of mainstream Evangelicalism[51], and – as a remedy – they have stressed other forms of media and mediation such as creativity in prayer, material objects in prayer-rooms, personal story-telling, and contemplative spirituality. Nevertheless, they also take part in the mediatisation process by professionally running their website, producing online videos, and using other forms of social media. However, what is crucial for the ECM is its intermediality of communication which they use actively in order to produce a sense of a marginal identity and to reframe authority.

Intermediality – as understood here – refers to the use of various media and their entwinement with material culture and objects. The poem of Pete Greig, for example, was first written on a wall in a prayer-room, then it went viral on different social media, whereupon it fused with the story of going viral and was printed in a book covering that story, and finally was transferred into and produced as an online video. In this way, the poem was not only distributed via different media forms but also connects media and materiality in an intermediate way that reframes the use of media and materiality within the 24-7Prayer-movement in an attempt to transform authority.

Whereas authority in mainstream Evangelicalism is produced and communicated through forms of mediatisation such as Televangelism, charismatic empowerment, and high-tech performances in mega churches, authority in the ECM is produced and communicated through intermediality such as contemplative prayer-rooms, personalised story-telling, the appeal to creativity, and a shared sense of being at the margins of Evangelical Christianity. The indicated shift towards intermediality further points to the self-image of the ECM as construed in contrast to mainstream Evangelical in terms of focussing on 'holistic spirituality,'[52] meaning the integration of the religious domain into other domains of social and cultural life and into everyday-life. Although we can find all sorts of every-day religiosity also in mainstream Evangelicalism, such as devotional fitness[53] or other sub-cultural adaptations, the ECM differs from this in two main aspects. Firstly, they perform their identity as countercultural and therefore marginal vis-à-vis mainstream Evangelicalism, and secondly, their aim is to be more integrative towards secular culture rather than copying secular culture in an evangelical fashion (such as in devotional fitness).

[51] Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*, 15.

[52] Schüler, 'Culture of Prayer'.

[53] M. Radermacher, *Devotional Fitness: an Analysis of Contemporary Christian Dieting and Fitness Programs* (Cham, 2017).

Media and materiality thus go hand in hand with the performance of marginality in the 24-7Prayer-movement: The establishment and spread of prayer rooms as materialised spaces for creative prayers implicate and transport the idea that, first, even though someone perceives him- or herself only as a marginal figure in global Christianity, he or she can contribute to changing the world through prayers. Second, this performance of marginality as something positive also empowers the individual person by means of the idea of (maybe) being an important contributor to a religious movement of social change. The sense of a global, virtual connectedness through prayer rooms thus includes at least two aspects. These are, first, the impression of being only a marginal figure in a global condition and thus remote from any official authority, and, second, the awareness of being a part of a greater whole and thereby a self-based authority who can bring change to the world by rolling up one's sleeves. In this way, the marginality discourse that can be found within the movement functions both as media and materiality: it becomes incorporated through the acts of prayers and telling stories (about marginality), as well as distributed and performed through old and new social media such as paper-books, sheets of paper tacked onto prayer room walls, and well-arranged short internet videos; a media culture that stresses shifting, short-lived, and temporary media forms. Accordingly, '(r)eligious authority does no longer emanate automatically from a stable religious congregation'[54] but can be attributed to the religious self especially in the context of a discourse of religious marginality.

From Subjectivity to Reflexivity: The Authorisation of the Religious Self

The ongoing discourse of marginality and the related change of authority within the 24-7Prayer-movement that has been analysed thus far is an example of a broader shift within contemporary Evangelicalism that I have labelled The Emerging Church Movement. But how does this shift of authority towards the religious self differ from other forms of subjectification within the mainstream evangelical and charismatic movements?

To be able to answer this question it is important to note that especially the charismatic and Pentecostal movements are usually characterised by their emphasis on subjective experiences and emotional expressions.[55] The

[54] M. Witte *et al.*, 'Aesthetics of Religious Authority: Introduction', *Culture and Religion* 16/2 (2015) 117-24 at 120.

[55] A. Corten, *Pentecostalism in Brazil: Emotion of the Poor and Theological Romanticism* (New York, 1999); P. Alexander, *Signs and Wonders: Why Pentecostalism is the World's Fastest-Growing Faith* (San Francisco, 2009).

manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the body of the individual believer that is expressed through 'speaking in tongues' and other physical reactions not only count as signs of wonders believed to cause physical and psychological healings. They are also seen as evidence of religious authenticity and social (denominational) affiliation. More traditional Evangelicals have always eyed, often with disgust, these emotional expressions as hyperbolic and theatrical types of behaviour and as theological aberrancies.[56] However, the success of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity in the 20th century has often been explained by their emotionality and easily accessible theological messages (the prosperity gospel). They have therefore been regarded as evidence of a broader change in the religious landscape, indicating a shift from traditional religiosity to modern forms of religiosity emphasising aspects of self-awareness, emotionality, bodily experiences, and healings.[57]

So how does the ECM differ from this kind of religious subjectivity? On the one hand, the kind of subjectivity that has been described above for the ECM can be characterised by its reflexive attitude towards social change and cultural identity in a globalised world. On the other hand, this 'post-traditional' reflexivity is achieved through an emphasis on prayer as a spiritual and contemplative practice that is both private and public at the same time. As we have seen above in the case of The Vision video, contemplation and prayer is illustrated as something private that happens inwardly. At the same time, the practice of prayer and contemplation is performed in public spaces and is embedded in everyday activities. Similarly, the already mentioned Boiler Rooms and the prayer rooms represent places where prayer takes place as something private *and* as a collective activity through the network of prayer chains and through the artistic expressions of the prayers that can be gazed upon by others. Through this performance of prayers, they become connected into a public network that leaves traces at certain intersections and this way gets materialised.

Diana Butler Bass, for instance, a religious scholar and author (who can be related to the ECM) also observed a shift from denominational Christianity to more loose forms of Christian movements and networks that rests on a stronger interest in spirituality. In her book *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, she asks:

[56] M. Scheer, 'Feeling Faith: The Cultural Practice of Religious Emotions in nineteenth-Century German Methodism', in M. Scheer *et al.* (eds.), *Out of the Tower: Essays on Culture and Everyday Life* (Tübingen, 2013) 217-47; B. Hitzer and M. Scheer, 'Unholy Feelings: Questioning Evangelical Emotions in Wilhelmine Germany', *German History* 32/3 (2014) 371-92.

[57] A. Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism* (Cambridge, 2004); Coleman and Hackett, *The Anthropology.*

'Prayer, preaching, Pentecostal gifts, and progressive theology and politics – these were the pathways of past awakenings. What is the way today? How can people participate in the spiritual renewal that is reshaping the world now? What can we do about it?'[58] She argues that spiritual awakenings in Christian history have always been characterised by their public performances such as preaching in theatres or stadiums. Here she identifies the strongest transformation for contemporary emerging evangelical Christianity: 'The difference between performance then and now is obvious: in earlier ages, there existed a more distinct boundary between public and private space (…) This (new, S.S.) awakening is being performed in the networked world, where the border between sacred and secular has eroded and where the love of God and neighbor (…) is being staged far beyond conventional religious communities.'[59]

This does not mean that the online world is the only place where such performances take place. On the contrary, in the ECM we see a strong emphasis on participation, not in church activities, but in everyday activities in the neighbourhood, in local social programs, or through responsible relationships. Bass also makes this observation and – as a religious author herself – reasons: 'To perform awakening means we all must participate – sometimes as actors, sometimes as audience, as directors, writers, stagehands, set designers, ushers – rather like a community theater, all with interchangeable roles.'[60] For Bass the dissolving of such roles and structures, and of public and private spheres, best characterises contemporary Christian spirituality and leads to the emergence of a new spiritual awakening. Her views as an insider therefore coincide with my own observations from the outside about the 24-7Prayer-movement. However, I argue that it is exactly this dissolving of public and private spheres, and the aim to embed contemplative activities into everyday social practices that is characteristic for the ECM and this is what results in a reflexive attitude and the authorisation of the religious self.

The ECM can therefore be understood as a typical example of late modern religious transformations, which 'indicate that Western societies are generally moving towards greater pluralism and personalisation in articulations of religious identity.'[61] As I have demonstrated, this 'experimental-practical

[58] D. Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York, 2012) 255.

[59] Bass, *Christianity after Religion,* 258.

[60] Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 261.

[61] L. Feldt, 'Contemporary fantasy fiction and representations of religion: playing with reality, myth and magic in His Dark Materials and Harry Potter', *Religion* 46/4 (2016) 550-74 at 568.

attitude'[62] can be found not only in new-age religiosity and popular religions but also in Evangelicalism that usually counts as rigid, fundamental, and stable within in its own dynamics of awakenings.

Similarly, anthropologist James Bielo has argued that emerging Evangelicals aim to navigate two transformations at once, the personal self's transformation as well as social or public transformations.[63] According to Bielo, emerging Evangelicals distrust organisations and therefore aim at integrating these two transformations at once in everyday life by highlighting the need for combining spirituality and social engagement. Paraphrasing one of his interview-partners he summarises: 'Meaningful change is only truly possible at the local level and will happen when Christian communities (i.e., house churches) bridge personal and neighborhood transformation.'[64] Similar arguments and examples can also be found in the strong emphasis of the 24-7Prayer-movement on almost holistically integrating prayer, mission, and social engagement.[65]

This way of creating a new religious self-conception that positions the self as source of authority and which is able to react to social and cultural changes by aiming at personal and public transformations I understand to be an expression of what sociologists have called reflexive modernity. Accordingly, what we find in the ECM can maybe best be described as a shift from emotional and charismatic forms of subjectivity to reflexive forms of religious subjectivity. This kind of reflexive religiosity, which still sticks to a particular belief content, is thus integrated into everyday life and thereby adapted to different social domains. This stands in contrast to mainstream Evangelicalism's strategy of copying every aspect of secular popular culture and to interpret it anew from a religious perspective (such as devotional fitness and dieting).[66]

The sociological idea of a reflexive modernity hinges on the idea that the late (or second) modernity opposes the first (earlier) modernity and its institutions (from nation states and politics to family and religion), since these institutions seem to fall apart under the impact of cultural and economic globalisation and individualisation.[67] Sociologist Ulrich Beck, for instance,

[62] Feldt, 'Contemporary fantasy', 568.
[63] Bielo, *Formed*.
[64] Bielo, *Formed*, 46.
[65] Schüler, 'Culture of Prayer'.
[66] Radermacher, *Devotional Fitness*.
[67] U. Beck et al., *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Malden, 1994).

sees these developments as a result of what he calls a 'risk society,'[68] a modern society that has to deal with increasing social and individual insecurities caused by modernity itself. While modernity created strong divisions between social groups and milieus, these authors also assume that social progress and change leads to reforms and social re-organisations, which stem from treating modern social developments reflexively. This means that people take advantage of their capacity to alter their place in the social structure. According to this theory, those individuals or groups who do not have access to or interest in making use of this capacity and who show a low level of reflexivity, will be shaped solely by their direct environment rather than adapt to social and cultural changes.

The term reflexive subjectivity is, however, misleading when understood as an intellectual approach to a changing world. In fact, '(r)eflexive modernisation theory is critiqued for its empty and homogeneous view of reflexivity stemming ultimately from the absence of a theory of the subject.'[69] The sociologist David Farrugia argues that reflexivity has too long been understood as a disembodied rationale that now needs to be connected with 'principles of practice theory' in order to build a solid sociological theory of the reflexive subject.

What we find in the example of 24-7Prayer, respectively the ECM, is just that, an attempt to bring together an intellectual discourse about postmodern culture with a social practice (prayer and welfare) that is deeply embedded in everyday activities, everyday media and everyday forms of materiality. In this way, Christian spiritual subjectivity – as we can find it in many awakening movements – gets transformed into and is performed as a reflexive spirituality that gives authorisation to the religious self. The individual believer is thus not only a recipient or vehicle of spiritual awakening who experiences and performs religious and pious subjectivity through emotionality, but the individual believer is also the producer of spiritual awakening in that he or she coordinates personal subjective spirituality in accordance with public movements and activities – thereby being an active actor, audience, and director simultaneously, and also mixing the religious with other domains so that the borders between the religious and the secular seem to vanish, at least in the perception of the believer.

[68] U. Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (New Delhi, 1992).

[69] D. Farrugia, 'The reflexive subject: Towards a theory of reflexivity as practical intelligibility', *Current Sociology* 61/3 (2013) 283-300.

Conclusion

Whether the ECM is on the margins of something is a question of perspective. Within global contemporary Evangelical Christianity and by numbers the ECM is certainly a marginal phenomenon. Yet it has also gained popularity and has been an important influence on the religious discourse in contemporary Evangelicalism.

In addition, its impact on current ideas of religious authority – via the use of old and new media – is evident. The use of online media such as websites, videos, and a weekly newsletter with online links to video messages can explain the success of this movement only in parts. Its success rests as much, if not more, on the subversive attitude concerning the role of religious authority and the centring of the religious self as a source of authority that is independent from institutionalised structures. More importantly, this shift in authority is accomplished through the triggering and embedding of an aesthetic dimension of authority in the believers' everyday lives. The practices of prayer and story-telling become central for deploying the religious self as a source of authority. Prayers create stories, which become materialised in poems, videos, blogs, books and art that serve as material packages for distributing the theological message of the ECM.[70]

This particular message can be characterised as a religious attitude that puts forward spiritual experience as a personal and public affair and embeds religion in everyday activities, not as a clearly separate sacred realm, neither spatially nor temporally. The 24-7Prayer-movement, for example, started with the idea that all religious activities that are supposed to foster social change should start from contemplative prayer and not as rational, missionary, church-based strategies. The central ideologies behind this attitude are thus, on the one hand, a certain organisational messiness through 'sustaining permanently unsettled lives',[71] and on the other hand, a holistic ideology that aims at integrating personal and social transformations.[72]

The phrase 'believing without belonging',[73] coined by sociologist Grace Davie, refers to a mismatch between what people believe and their actual religious affiliations and practices. From this observation Davie and others reasoned against secularisation theory and for an individualisation

[70] P.E. Teusner, 'Imaging Religious Identity: Intertextual Play Among Postmodern Christian Bloggers', *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 4/1 (2010) 111-30.

[71] Packard, *The Emerging Church*, 61.

[72] Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*; Packard, *The Emerging Church*; Schüler, 'Culture of Prayer'.

[73] Davie, 'Believing without Belonging'.

of religious beliefs in the contemporary era. Accordingly, the phrase 'believing without belonging' seems also to fit my own observations of the ECM, or perhaps better: they believe while attempting to rebel against a too rigid form of belonging, and thereby they attempt to create more mobile forms of belonging. Similarly, I have suggested that the process of religious individualisation – at least in contemporary Evangelicalism – first led to an emphasis of emotionality and subjectivity in the charismatic movement, and later resulted in what I have called a reflexive subjectivity in the ECM accompanied by a critique of the modern Protestant forms of subjectivity and performance of emotionality. However, it is also clear that 'believing without belonging' only partially describes the social transformation in the ECM. Rather, we can find a certain need for affiliation, even if not in the form of traditional church organisations, and a longing for a certain conformity of one's personal beliefs with one's religious practices and belonging (what is often termed 'holistic' within the ECM). This has led to new ways of creating a religious identity; an identity not marked by denominational or organisational belonging but by belonging in loose, shifting and temporary networks of like-minded believers, and by affiliation through personal relationships. This practice of a fluid community rests on the ideology of holistically integrating personal and social transformations by means of marginalisation and thereby authorisation of the religious self.