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‘We are overfed’
Young evangelicals, globalization, and social justice

Catherine Rivera

Introduction

Generational transmission of religious knowledge and practice is a common way that religions around the world ensure their continuance (Ward 2013). Research by scholars of religion suggests that youth in western countries, where Christianity has historically been predominant, increasingly prefer to identify as either ‘spiritual but not religious,’ or as not having any religion at all (Pratt 2016; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Ward 2013). This seems to indicate that generational transference of religious beliefs is not as effective as in the past.

Amongst those young people who do stay connected with their natal family faith, such as the majority of participants in my research, there are changes taking place that are challenging established religious praxis and theology around a number of issues, in particular those pertaining to social justice.

This chapter focuses on young, Millennial evangelical Christians and why they want to be involved in social justice work, which often takes place on short-term trips (STTs) overseas. The young Christians who take these trips are often encouraged by their leaders to experience ‘God’s global heart’ (Baillie Smith et al. 2013), and have their worldview expanded from the local to the global through becoming ‘world-changers’ (Hancock 2014).

Evangelical world engagement throughout the 20th century emphasized conversion and ‘saving souls,’ often combined with charity work (Bebbington 1989; Bielo 2011; Elisha 2011, Ryan 2013). Yet amongst Millennial evangelicals, who are globally engaged and technologically savvy, interest in trying to convert others is fading and there is a rise of interest in social justice (Bielo 2009; Jian Lee 2015; Markham 2010). The internet, especially social media, is a driving factor for this change through connecting people on an unprecedented scale. This topic has relevance because the change in emphasis from conversion to social justice is already causing a shift where evangelical groups spend their money, of which they have a lot, often millions of dollars (Elisha 2011; Hoffstadedter 2011; Swanson n.d.).

Evangelicalism is a movement within Christianity, mainly amongst Protestants, and is an ‘international, trans-denominational community with complicated infrastructures of institutions
and persons’ (Marsden 1984, p. ix). It crosses many denominations and is intertwined with Pentecostalism, Christian Fundamentalism, and the Charismatic movement (see Armstrong 2000; Coleman 2006; Coleman and Hackett 2015). The most common definition of Evangelicalism comes from historian David Bebbington and includes four main defining characteristics. These are: a strong focus on reading the Bible, an emphasis on Jesus’s death on the cross as atonement for sin, converting non-Christians through evangelism and mission work, and helping others through action (Bebbington 1989).

Evangelicalism is rooted in 17th-century German Lutheran Pietism, which emphasized action-based Christianity, and a ‘transformed heart’ (McGrath 2005). The focus on being active was framed as taking God’s love to the poor and downtrodden (Dormor et al. 2003; Olsen 2007). Many evangelicals in 18th- and 19th-century Britain and the USA did this by starting social movement campaigns including outlawing the slave trade, the temperance movement, campaigning against child labour, and for union rights and penal reform (Armstrong 2000; Luhrmann 2012; Wallis 2008).

In the early 20th century some Protestants formed the Christian Fundamentalist movement, partly as a reaction against evangelical social movements, complaining that they distracted the Church from its most important goal; learning the Bible and getting people’s souls saved so they could go to heaven (Armstrong 2000; Luhrmann 2012). Fundamentalism gained traction in evangelical Churches and much of the social justice work they had undertaken previously stopped (Armstrong 2000; Noll 1994).

In the 1960s there was a push to get back to ‘action-based’ Christianity through the Charismatic movement, a group of Protestants who had been influenced by Pentecostalism (Coleman 2006; Stetzer 2013; Yong 2015). The Pentecostal movement started in California in 1901 and emphasizes supernatural experiences such as healing, prophecy, and experiencing the Holy Spirit (Yong 2015). During the 1970s, the countercultural ‘Jesus People’ movement, also situated in California, combined Pentecostalism with a more modern and contemporary form of charismatic Christianity based around catchy and upbeat praise and worship music. Influential evangelical denominations such as Calvary Chapel and The Vineyard grew out of this period (Butler Bass 2012; Luhrmann 2012; Ward 2013).

Since the mid-1980s western evangelicalism has been strongly influenced by a group of US Christians called ‘the Moral Majority’ movement, founded by conservative pastor Jerry Falwell (Coleman and Hackett 2015; Harding 2001). Based in Christian Fundamentalism, the movement has been successful in moving many evangelicals worldwide to the political right, and emphasizes ‘moral values,’ epitomized in anti-abortion and anti-homosexuality campaigns (Bielo 2014; O’Neill 2014; Whitehead and Baker 2012). Just how politically right-wing US evangelicalism has become was highlighted in the 2016 US election as over 80% of white evangelicals voted for Republican candidate Donald Trump (Smith and Martinez 2016), arguably the most ‘un-Christian’ candidate to ever run for US President.

In response to conservative evangelicalism there has been a rise in progressive evangelical activism, particularly in the USA (Bruinius 2017; Lovett 2018). Movements like Rev. Jim Wallis’s ‘Sojourners,’ are drawing on evangelicalism’s past engagement with social movements to challenge evangelicals to take a stand against the politically conservative Christianity that has come to define evangelicalism in the eyes of many (Wallis 2008). Other popular Christian progressive activists, authors, and teachers include Shane Claiborne of the ‘Simple Way’ Monastic Community, Rev. Nadia Boltz-Webber from the Evangelical Lutheran Church, author Rachel Held-Evans, and Franciscan friar Richard Rohr who founded the New Mexico based ‘Centre for Action and Contemplation.’ Numerically there are currently more conservative Evangelicals than progressive ones. This is mainly due to
demographics, as most conservatives are concentrated amongst the Boomer generation (Jones and Cox 2016; Wuthnow 2012). However, through the use of blogs, podcasts, social media, books, and conferences, liberal progressivism is growing amongst evangelicals under the age of forty (Bruinius 2017; Gasaway 2014).

From conversion to social justice
As well as being an academic and a researcher, I have spent a considerable part of my life involved in evangelical churches in New Zealand. My father and grandfather were pastors and charismatic, evangelical church culture was my ‘norm’ growing up. My background has given me first-hand knowledge of this particular religious setting, which was useful when conducting research on young evangelical Christians and social justice.

Often evangelical engagement with those outside church circles, especially on an international scale, has entailed missionary work. This meant ‘proclaiming the gospel,’ usually through preaching or trying to engage others in conversations about God. Charity work was also encouraged, but missionaries were not meant to be aid workers. Unlike mainline Protestant denominations such as Anglicans or post Vatican II Catholics, who are more comfortable challenging structural injustices, for evangelicals the emphasis has been on individual salvation, getting to heaven when you die, and taking as many people as possible with you (Choi-Fitzpatrick 2014; Coleman 2014; Mostert 2014).

Knowing evangelicalism’s strong emphasis on ‘saving souls,’ I was curious to hear a young leader in a church service in 2011 declare to the congregation that he felt he didn’t have the right to go overseas and tell people what they should believe. Instead, he encouraged church members to get involved with ‘justice-based’ projects, such as building houses with Habitat for Humanity. I then heard that an evangelical organization I had previous contact with now had a training school based on Christianity and social justice issues. Students would learn about trade aid, human and sex trafficking, child soldiers, and the role of economic policies in global inequalities.

I began to wonder about this change in emphasis from evangelism based on verbal proclamations to social justice work. STTs with a focus on service work are becoming more popular amongst Christian youth. If the Christians going on these trips are not keen on converting others, what are they doing instead? Why the shift in focus? Has there been a change in theology? Or is it something else? Could it be that the cultural ‘flows’ of globalization have more power to reshape evangelicals and their institutions than they realize?

Globalized Millennials and social justice
Millennials are generally considered to be the generation born between the early to mid-1980s up to end of the 1990s (Strauss and Howe 2000). Sometimes maligned as narcissistic, inward focused, and addicted to technology (Milkman 2017; Twenge and Campbell 2012), other research suggests that Millennials are in fact more civically engaged than their predecessors from Generation X, and more likely to be progressively liberal in their political and social worldview (Eagan et al. 2015; Milkman 2017; Smith 2013). Evangelical Millennials, although generally more conservative than their peers, have considerably more liberal attitudes towards gay marriage, LGBTQ rights, and climate change than evangelicals from the Boomer generation (Diamant and Alper 2017; Dillon 2015; Harper and Kennely 2009).

Another attribute of many western Millennials is that they are more likely than the generations before them to show awareness that they are not only citizens of a nation state...
but also of a global community (Pew Research Centre 2014). The move from a local to more globalized identity can be explored through the concept of global citizenship. Global citizenship is a contested term (Jorgenson and Shultz 2012); however, it generally refers to the rights and responsibilities one has that go beyond the borders of a political state to an imagined global community (Bailie Smith et al. 2013; Oxley and Morris 2013). A ‘good’ global citizen is one who is empathic to other cultures (Brunell 2013), acknowledges different worldviews (Oxley and Morris 2013), embraces cultural diversity (Reysen and Katzarska-Miller 2013), and is aware of social justice and human rights issues (Fanghanel and Cousin 2012; Propst 2014).

The ‘social justice’ aspect of being a global citizen refers to the idea that some groups and individuals have gained societal advantages at the expense of others, and that this needs to be corrected (Miller 1999). It is about providing fair distribution of rights, resources, and opportunities (Cramme and Diamond 2009). Whilst social justice has most often been associated with the nation state through welfare programmes, the concept is now being tied to mitigating the effects of globalization on the world’s poor. Principles of social justice, such as those outlined in the 1948 UN Declaration on Human Rights, are taken to be applicable universally (Banai et al. 2011).

**The shaping of Christian Millennials**

Globalization is an intrinsic part of our planetary makeup in the early 21st century, which affects economies, the environment, immigration patterns, and communication technology amongst other things. Globalization is not new. Many historical empires, including the Romans and the Spanish Conquistadors, have increased contact between different parts of the world.

However, the current version of globalization that started after World War II has connected the world on a scale unprecedented in history (Rhoads and Szelenyi 2011). As such, the Millennial generation in many societies lives a type of life unthinkable for their great-grandparents. The interplay of global and local is intertwined throughout a single day; chatting on Messenger with a friend in London, a video conference at work with the Sydney office, and home in the evening to a debate on US politics on Twitter. What are the effects of this explosion of global ‘flows’ on Millennials? Does it make them more open to diversity, more accepting of others, or more inclined to consider themselves ‘global’ as opposed to ‘local’ citizens? What happens when religious beliefs are mixed into this bricolage?

To investigate these questions, I set off to conduct anthropological research in 2015 amongst a group of young people taking part in a Christian social justice training school in New Zealand, which I will refer to as ‘The Course.’ The Course was run by an international Christian organization and consisted of three months of lectures and a two-month trip to Southeast Asia where the students put into practice the ideas and principles they had learned. At the end of the practicum period, the students returned to New Zealand for a short debriefing and then flew home to their own countries.

At The Course I sat in on two units of the course lectures, and generally ‘hung out’ with the students and staff. I also recorded interviews with thirteen females and one male, aged between 17 and 34. Questions and topics covered in the interviews centred on why the participants were interested in social justice, and how their faith shaped their views on world engagement. There were two participants from Denmark, six from the USA, and one each from Singapore, Germany, Switzerland, England, India, and Canada; surprisingly there were...
no New Zealand students. The international makeup of The Course made it a great place to observe globalized evangelicalism up close in one physical location.

My research participants were interested in global issues and felt that actions of social justice were a way to address inequality and injustice. They were also Christians, mostly with evangelical leanings. The religious/faith aspect of their identities formed a specific type of global citizen that negotiated continually between an inner world of experiencing God through spiritual practices such as prayer, and then taking his love out into a ‘broken’ world through actions of social justice such as helping human trafficking victims or advocating for orphaned children. They interacted with these types of social justice issues through the internet, and people they met on STTs.

Digital technology and the internet

In the early 21st century, the internet is changing institutional Christianity in a number of ways. Digital technology can be a ‘threat to offline authority’ (Campbell 2013, p. 6), since it allows people to browse and in essence ‘pick and choose’ between different sources of spirituality. These sources are outside of conventional religious supervision, such as a pastor or priest (Campbell 2013; Lewis 2016). Although Christian institutions and churches are increasingly involved in social media, there are still attempts to keep control of the medium by censoring what goes on their social media platforms, or removing divisive material (Lawrence 2015). Nevertheless, social media such as Facebook and Twitter are very hard to restrict, and enable the bypassing of traditional religious ‘gatekeepers’ by taking opinions and information directly to the computer screens of Christian Millennials. Although the students I interviewed were not trying deliberately to get around their church leaders, they had moved to online sources to learn about human trafficking and other social justice issues that were not discussed in their churches. The amount of material that is available to Christian Millennials through the internet has the effect of making local church pastors or leaders redundant as sources of information or authority on these topics.

The internet was the first place my research participants went to learn about faith and social justice issues, participate in activism, and how they found out about The Course in New Zealand. Rose said, ‘I look at the internet and read blogs and stuff. I don’t really read books. I like to research stuff, so if I hear about something I’ll google it and I’ll skim through.’ Similarly, Brooke followed many of her favourite social justice organizations through Facebook and other social media: ‘I’ve got a ton of different organizations I follow, probably about 60 different organizations; their postings, blogs.’ Social media did not just inform the students, they also used it as a way to make their family and friends aware of global issues. Rae mused that ‘I would say a lot of what I know comes through social media, that’s a really big tool that people use. It’s the one I use when I want to get the word out about something.’ During lectures the students were given website addresses to learn more about social justice issues like child soldiers and fair trade, and were reminded to share them on their social media accounts to raise awareness.

The majority found The Course through its website after searching for keywords such as ‘Christian social justice.’ Brooke said, ‘I found it online. I just googled it and it was one of the first ones that came up. New Zealand, that’s awesome.’ April had a similar story, ‘I just typed in “justice” and looked up all the locations that came up.’ The fact that April is Swiss and Brooke is American, and that The Course was in New Zealand, was not a problem. It didn’t matter where in the world they had to go to learn about social justice, travelling
made it even more interesting, evidenced by Adele’s observation that ‘I wanted to go to New Zealand because it looked so beautiful, and I really wanted to learn about justice.’

Another point to note about religion and digital technology is the way religious groups present themselves on the internet and are influenced by the visual emphasis of digital communication. Gauthier and Uhl (2012) note that religious websites, like all other websites, are competing for attention in a crowded digital landscape, which means that relevant graphics, music, and moving visuals are important. When examining the website of the Vatican they observed that the emphasis is on the Pope himself, instilling ‘a personalised rapport between the individual and the Pope, while Jesus and God . . . are virtually absent’ (Gauthier and Uhl 2012, p. 58). Similarly, I found during my research that some of the most popular Christian websites used by the students to learn about the social justice issues they were interested in concentrated on connecting the viewer with the issue rather than Jesus or God.

An example of this is the website of ‘A21 Campaign,’ the organization most often mentioned by the students I interviewed. A21 is a non-profit organization that campaigns against human trafficking. It is run by evangelical Christians and its founder is a former pastor from an Australian evangelical mega-church. Students such as April and Brooke had learnt about human trafficking through this website. When examining A21’s website, one would be hard pressed to identify them as specifically Christian. There are no Christian symbols, such as crosses, and the language used is more akin to the human rights movement. As Gauthier and Uhl found when examining the Vatican’s website, there is an emphasis on visual experience to learn about human trafficking, rather than the Christian beliefs of the A21 staff.

Experiencing vivid depictions of the injustices going on in the world through the internet can make ‘over there’ seem much closer to home, and in a sense de-territorialize issues of social justice. It is at this point that many Millennials, like my participants, want to get out and ‘do something.’

**Interactions with ‘the other’ in a transnational world**

Many Christian organizations send large numbers of young people on STTs overseas (Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009). Participants take part in activities such as working with children, painting or building structures, teaching English, or working with local churches. It is estimated that by 2006, 1.6 million Christian Americans annually were taking part in STTs (Priest et al. 2006), and numbers have continued to increase (Hancock 2014, Howell 2009). As Robert Priest et al. (2006, p. 434) point out, ‘American pastors and their congregations are amongst the most “overlooked globalizers” of our world.’ These trips are often the first time young western Christians visit a developing country and it makes a lasting impression, spurring people to want to change the poverty that has so shocked them.

Most of The Course students had already travelled outside their home countries. Some of this travel was on STTs, other travel was personal or through their employment. April had spent a year in the USA as an exchange student, Cathy had been to China on an STT, and Dora had backpacked through a number of countries. Other participants had been to Mexico, Vietnam, Laos, South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana. Vicky was raised in Singapore, went to university in Scotland, and then worked for the UN in 27 different locations as a doctor. Often it was through travel that the students had come face to face with victims of injustice. Mary was deeply affected by her experiences in Mexico:
I got to see first-hand what human trafficking looked like and got to walk through and talk with some of the prostitutes. That just wrecked me completely, I was sixteen or seventeen at the time and for me I’ve always lived my happy little life. Here I was standing in the middle of a Mexican street and it was happening right there.

Educational institutions, such as universities, were another place where students had interacted with people and ideas that contributed to a globalized worldview. Adele made friends with Middle-Eastern refugees at her European university:

My heart really broke for those people and the injustices they deal with. We are living in a good country. We have welfare and money enough to protect them and are still saying no and making their lives horrible and they live in fear of what is going to happen next. It changes everything when they become your good friends.

Kim studied law and international politics at her US university, which led her to travel to three African countries for research on the effects of AIDS on family formation. Spending this time overseas had made her aware of many global issues such as corruption, western imperialism in aid work, and the downside of orphanages.

Changes in belief and practice

Digital engagement, overseas travel, doing The Course, and home country contact with ‘the other’ contributed to changes in religious beliefs and practices that the students had learnt in their churches and families, especially since most of them were brought up in the faith. One of those who had changed their views was Greg who told me that when he was growing up ‘we used to be really afraid of this thing called the “social gospel” . . . for the society that I’m from they think if you start thinking about people’s physical needs you’ll forget about the spiritual needs.’ However, doing The Course had changed his viewpoint:

[n]ow I’m starting to think ‘oh yeah, Jesus wants us to make a difference in the world’ and it’s good to feed people and to set them free from human trafficking, it’s not an unspiritual thing to do, it’s really good . . . it’s actually what Jesus wants.

Acquiring more knowledge on social justice issues had made some of the students frustrated with the lack of teaching about social justice and a continuing emphasis on conservative morality in their churches. Rose said, ‘I was always asking “why aren’t we talking about social justice issues in the church?” . . . Some churches are still super conservative, like if you mentioned the word “homosexuality” they’re like “arghh, blasphemy.”’ In a similar vein, Greg said, ‘in my church we teach about how to deal with abortion and all that stuff but there’s not a lot of focus on justice, or doing justice.’ Cathy forcefully pointed out:

[It]hat is my gripe with the church. I explained to them there are twenty-seven million trafficking victims around the world and we are Christians sitting right here. They keep talking about Christ dying on the cross, they keep talking about salvation. It’s important but I think we are overfed with that.

Other students such as Dora and Alice said they felt that many of their Christian friends lived in a church ‘bubble’ and didn’t know much about social justice. Their comments
indicate that whilst awareness of social justice is growing in evangelical churches, these students still feel that they are in the minority. It is through attending training like The Course, or going to large events organized by evangelical youth-orientated organizations, that young evangelicals are able to interact with other Christians interested in social justice issues. April had been to one of these events in the USA, ‘Passion Conference,’ along with 35,000 others, where three million dollars was raised for anti-human trafficking organizations (Malhotra, n.d.).

‘Right’ beliefs vs ‘right’ action

Thinking critically about world issues that are right before their eyes had made many of the students more comfortable with uncertainty regarding what were ‘correct’ beliefs. Mary reflected that ‘this course has made me think a lot more, I feel that I have less certainty … I don’t know everything, I’ll never know everything.’ It has been noted that younger Christians interested in social justice are more ambiguous regarding the importance of ‘right beliefs,’ but more strident as to ‘right actions’ (Butler Bass 2015; Markham 2010). Proper theology was not as important as the right and correct actions that God wanted them to take to stop injustices.

Rather than only listening to sermons and discussing theology, the students were interested in acting on social justice issues and helping others through practical action such as the biblical command to ‘feed the hungry and clothe the naked’ outlined in Matthew 25. Cathy told me during our discussion:

The Bible says God defends the cause of the fatherless, the widow; he loves the foreigner residing amongst you and he gives them food and clothing. God does that, and we have God in us, are we doing that? Are we?

The students on The Course were told they needed to have practical skills to offer people experiencing injustice; good intentions were not enough. The emphasis is on what Jesus did, and said to do, rather than on theological intricacies that didn’t have much ‘real-world’ application. As progressive Christian author Brian McLaren states: ‘actions speak volumes about God that could never be captured in a text or a sermon’ (McLaren 2006, p. 171).

Conclusion: a new reformation? What the future could look like

Encounters overseas contribute to the formation of what a good Christian global citizen should look like and can reinforce the understanding that God is global, international, and supra-cultural; that ‘the gospel and the message that binds us together transcends culture’ (Baillie Smith et al. 2013, p. 129). Brooke echoed this sentiment during her interview: ‘that’s why I love The Course, because you’re with so many people from so many different cultures, different minds, different hearts, you can come together.’ These Millennials interacted with a world that extended far beyond their hometowns.

There are a number of areas where globalized, evangelical Millennials could potentially change institutional Christianity. Firstly, the way that knowledge is formed and interacted with, especially on social justice issues, has moved its locus away from local church congregations and their leadership. It was noticeable during the research process that it was not the influence of local church congregations that were forming the student’s ideas on social justice, but rather influences from outside their faith communities. These ‘struggles for control of mediation’
'We are overfed'

(Cannell 2006, p. 17) between the ‘world’ and the Church are nothing new but are being exponentially heightened by new technologies such as the internet and social media. Rather than using their churches as a source to learn about social justice, young Christians are using a different knowledge ‘grid.’ For the students in my research this grid consisted of a combination of ideas from social humanitarianism learned at university and on the internet, and personal, emotional connections with marginalized victims of injustice at home and during STTs overseas. These experiences with people from different ethnic groups and religions extend beyond national borders and can lead Christians who see themselves as global citizens to question theology that emphasizes ‘hard truth,’ and beliefs.

Secondly, having a focus on action rather than ‘saving people from their sins’ has the potential to challenge one of Bebbington’s core traits of evangelicalism: evangelization. Many younger Christians already take a dim view of traditional missionary work, associating it with colonialism and promoting westernized cultural values (Hartz 2018; McLaren 2006). The god the students wanted to take out into the world was not a wrathful being who smites sinners; the emphasis was on a god that is broken hearted over injustices and wants people to have a good life now, rather than waiting for heaven. Emphasizing God’s goodness has led some evangelicals to focus on ‘prosperity’ teaching; that God will give personal health and material wealth to Christians who believe and have enough faith. However, my participants talked more about holistic, community wellbeing than about economic wealth for individuals. Salvation encompassed the whole of a person and their society, and not just one’s individual, eternal soul.

This indicates a change in an important theological concept, which is where God’s kingdom dwells. Rather than trying to save people for the kingdom hereafter, emphasis moves to helping others experience God’s good life here on earth. During my interviews there was hardly any mention of heaven or hell, a trend also noted by Markham in his research on young evangelicals interested in social justice (Markham 2010). For them, being God’s ‘hands and feet’ (Butler Bass 2015; Hancock 2014) and helping the global poor becomes the main emphasis for how they engage with the world, rather than trying to convert people.

In conclusion, the students involved in my research felt strongly that it is not enough anymore to wait for heaven for the exploited to get the justice they deserve; there are tools available in the here and now to remedy social justice issues. Through using social media, they could raise awareness of social justice issues. They can also jump on a plane and go to places where these things are happening, such as Cambodia or Thailand, where human and sex trafficking is perceived to be rife, and try to stop these practices. After all, if one is a global citizen, then the whole world is God’s.

There is evidence, including my own research, which indicates social justice practices are growing amongst young evangelicals. Further research is required to ascertain how widespread the phenomenon of young evangelicals and their interest in social justice actually is, and whether evangelical social justice engagement is not just ‘charity’ or evangelization under a more fashionable name. Evangelicalism is a widespread and global phenomenon. As such, researchers need to take into account cultural, ethnic, and denominational differences when trying to define what constitutes evangelical social justice.

What is clear is that not all evangelicals are conservative, and there is a change of direction that is moving younger evangelicals in a more politically progressive direction in western countries. As generational change takes place, Millennial evangelicals have the potential to reengage institutional evangelicalism with practices of social justice that they lost at the beginning of the 20th century. Then a new reformation will indeed be on the cards for this branch of Christianity.
References


