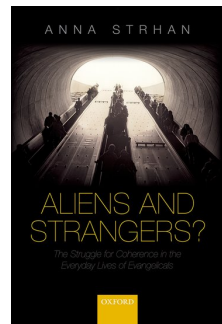


Aliens and Strangers? The Struggle for Coherence in the Everyday Lives of Evangelicals, by Anna Strhan

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Anna Strhan makes a vital contribution to the contemporary anthropology of religion, the study of Evangelicalism, and the study of religion in the contemporary urban environment. Engaging with a broad range of scholars, most notably Georg Simmel's foundational work in urban sociology, and a range of contemporary anthropologists of Christianity, the book reveals the complexities of the religious lives of a group of largely affluent, white professionals in a conservative Evangelical Anglican church in contemporary London. While not necessarily applicable to cities in the most rapidly developing regions of the world which we might most closely associate with urban religion, especially in the context of the global spread of Evangelicalism in a charismatic form Strhan's chosen church critiques, this is a very important book for understanding religion in secularizing and increasingly diversifying urban contexts.



Entirely conceivable as an independent city-state, London is too diverse for an ethnography of any one church to be representative, or perhaps even relatable. Strhan settled on a church that is primarily white and affluent, populated by students and elite university graduates, many of whom commute to the more centrally located church from suburbs some distance away (11–17, 23–27). The church may not be representative of contemporary London or Britain, but practically any other church the author could have settled on would likely also be unrepresentative, in one way or another, not least a church that actually did manage to somehow approximate the city's demographics. The choice of church is nevertheless significant as it raises questions about the nature of Christianity in the contemporary urban sphere. The privileged status of this congregation stands in contrast to Evangelical ideas of the city as a “hard,” “tough,” or “troubled” location that shall be won for Christ precisely because of its wretchedness (33). The city may be “spoiled,” but not necessarily in the same sense that the Evangelicals think. Further, as the author notes through citing the invaluable research of Peter Brierley, London has weathered Britain's decline of conventional religiosity much better than other parts of the country. The metropolis is home to a disproportionately high number of, in particular, Pentecostals and younger churchgoers (38–41), but this is less a consequence of Evangelicals coming down from Oxbridge, as a significant number of the study's participants did (26–27), and more a consequence of immigration from developing countries.

In the first chapter, Strhan begins by framing Evangelical engagement in the city with Simmel's metaphor of bridges and doors (29–32). There is nothing uniquely urban about this, it applied to all human interactions for Simmel, and a similar metaphor (bridges and fortresses) was previously used without reference to Simmel by Paul Bramadat to explain Canadian Evangelical university students' engagements with their peers, suggesting Simmel's metaphor got lost somewhere in the urban jungle of social theory. Strhan pays very close attention to Simmel's work from the turn of the nineteenth century, however. The experience of urban modernity is depicted as more bewildering and alienating than more contemporary scholars conceive of it, as is made quite clear in an overview of Richard Sennett's work on the contemporary passivity of urban life (50–53). However, because Simmel was part of early sociology's more intimate concern with defining modernity, he remains foundational in this field, and necessary to work through in addressing what the book recognizes as the historical neglect of the urban as a specific subject in social scientific studies of religion.

Strhan's findings underline the significance of the fact that social scientific studies of religion have neglected explicit engagement with urban life. The experiences of her Evangelical research participants are actually far closer to Simmel's century-old descriptions than one might initially expect (105–8), at least when they analyze them through a specifically Evangelical experiential framework. One continually gets the sense that, however the conversations have been framed, the idea of urban life as some disorientating dystopia, in which God is the only refuge, fits perfectly well within an Evangelical worldview. With the exception of studies of secularization—in which everything hinges on whether urbanization is present alongside the other social changes the secularization thesis is predicated upon—sociological studies have often lacked a sense of locatedness; in hindsight it does seem to be the case that one rarely knows exactly where they are being metaphorically written from, while anthropological studies traditionally and more obviously avoided urban field sites. Focusing in the second chapter (55–82) on contemporary anthropological studies of Christianity, which those leading the field such as Joel Robbins note has been late in developing as a distinct subdiscipline, this book will do much to address this lack as the field develops.

Following these two theory chapters, four chapters draw out the “messiness” (61) of the lives of Evangelical Londoners, with their religion revealed to be something which “both does and does not make their lives easier” (171). Strhan's fieldwork shows that despite the clear process of internalizing Evangelical beliefs, the ways in which these internalized beliefs are then embodied and enacted is not always consistent or coherent. Much of this derives from the fact that the cultural context of the study is not consistent or coherent, underlining the importance of Simmel's basic, century-old observations about urban life. For example, the desire to “de-privatize” religion (88) and emphasize verbal evangelism and outreach meets with the reluctance of many church members to do just that. Strhan suggests the fact that the church established a ten-week course to teach people how to evangelize, and that people prefer to invite their friends to church events and only directly proselytize to people outside their immediate networks—for the participants in this study, that means doorknocking on working class and underclass housing estates—demonstrates the internalization of secular ideas of religion as a private affair (92–99). This can be seen to underline Simmel's emphasis on the ability of the urban environment to influence individuals in subtle ways. The importance of Simmel's work, on religion as well as the city, is also fundamental to Strhan's explanation of the inner lives of her research

participants. She describes these lives as an experience of “ongoing struggle” between “contradictory forces at work in the self and society,” understood through a “morally polarizing logic of sin/devotion” (161). This appears to be a process which spirals, at least for some of the participants, who become increasingly convicted of their own failure to live up to God’s subjective demands, the more they absorb sermons and pastoral advice that emphasizes God’s coherence, and the more they experience the basic fragmentation of modern urban life (152–68).

Contemporary Evangelicalism is well enough known and studied that much of what comes through from the fieldwork is familiar, in particular the emphasis on Evangelicalism as a personal relationship, and the pleasures that come from what passes for religious persecution at the hands of atheistic liberals. Far more than discourse analysis or most survey-based research, though, the book does very well to emphasize the ambiguities in Evangelical lives. Although I do not think that it is unusual to encounter descriptions and discussions of doubt in studies of Evangelicalism, and nor do I think there is anything wrong, sociologically speaking, in describing conservative Evangelicals (of all people) as “religious fundamentalists” (172), the final substantive chapter’s focus on doubt and comparative indifference to what was once an Evangelical preoccupation, apocalypticism, presents these important ideas very clearly. In fact, in engaging with a form of quite traditionally “fundamentalist” conservative Evangelicalism that emphasizes its own rationality, the book is particularly noteworthy at a time when studies of charismatic churches have become increasingly common in the study of Evangelicalism. In short, Strhan makes a major contribution to the social scientific study of religion. Like the personality of God discussed in chapters 3, 4, and 5, the overall cohesion of this book becomes clear with deeper engagement, making it difficult to divide up by chapters for assigning as undergraduate class reading, but this book will certainly become a feature of graduate courses in the sociology and anthropology of religion, and an important foundation for scholars in these fields to build upon.

Ibrahim Abraham
Australian National University