
The Cosmic Battle at the Street Corner *Studying A Religious Narrative of Violent Crime in Croydon*¹

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This article addresses the role of religion in Croydon in conceptualising and responding to the growing problem of knife crime in London. Croydon saw the fastest growth in the rate of knife crime between 2016 and 2017 for any London borough. Focusing on the West Croydon Baptist Church, situated in the ward of Broad Green, this article seeks to explore the relationship between how a religious institution understands the theological *problem of evil* (Kelly 1989) and how they respond to the social problems which they find themselves faced with at the street corner. While much of the previous literature has focused exclusively on religious institutions who make formal interventions, premised on a notion of *free will* as the origin of evil, this article will attempt to showcase an instance of a religious institution whose notions of evil lie in *privation* and *dualism*. Through the voices of pastors and parishioners (along with field notes) this article hopes to elucidate the importance of underlying theological beliefs (rather than merely ritual) in informing the response of religious institutions to collective problems.

Keywords: London, crime, religion, violence.

Introduction

On a Monday morning in the Smooth Bean Café, down the Road from East Croydon train station, I sat down with the community organiser and local poet, Shaniqua, to discuss the problems of knife crime in Croydon. Our conversation turned quickly to the role of religious institutions in tackling the problem of knife crime with Shaniqua saying:

‘I’m a church goer myself ... I always go to church. Everyone does different things, like my church will do a soup kitchen every Tuesday. But there’s other ones that do a lot more to engage with young people. But I think yeah, faith is a really strong thing that is around. I wish that my church was doing a bit more and getting involved more in the community. Like I want them to do more. But faith is key, it’s at the centre of what I do. It makes you want to be a better person, a more loving person. It’s what gives me hope.’

What Shaniqua implicitly recognised in her comments, was that whilst religion and faith are key parts of the story of how and why religious communities respond to the growing problems of violence in London, the effects are not the same for all. Clearly, religion can provide the impetus for action over knife crime, but it does not do so in a consistent way. In a context where faith groups and religious institutions are increasingly expected to play a central role fighting the rise of knife crime in London it is important to understand what motivates different faith groups, how they respond to the problems of knife crime but also how they conceptualise the problem of knife crime. In the policy documentation from the *Mayor’s Office for Police and Crime*, the importance of religious institutions and faith groups

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has often been seemingly elevated to be equivalent to that of families, schools and medical professionals. The 2017 *London Knife Crime Strategy* explicitly references faith groups throughout and assigns them the role (alongside others) of preventing knife crime (Mayor of London 2017: 63), addressing the trauma which can result from knife crime (Mayor of London 2017: 70) and taking ownership of local solutions (Mayor of London 2017: 67). But no time is really taken to understand within this public policy framework the nature of faith groups and religious institutions. Rather they become yet another bullet point in a long list.

The rise in knife crime is a phenomenon which has emerged in Croydon and London only in recent years. It was the 2016/2017 change in the level of knife crime which brought the issue to the forefront, with London as a whole experiencing a 24% increase in reported knife crime, whilst Croydon saw the highest rise in the rate of knife crime for any borough in London, equating to a 103% rise (Allen and Audickas 2018: 21).

Taking Croydon as the terrain, this article will seek to understand one particular institution; the West Croydon Baptist Church and the narratives of crime that surround it. Through an examination of the pastors who run the church, the congregation and the community (at increasingly peripheral levels), this article will seek to understand at a micro level how a very particular narrative of violence has come to shape their response to knife crime through the lens of religion, and in particular the notion of the '*cosmic battle*'.

Religion, Evil and Salvation

There has been a long and interesting literature from predominantly quantitative sociologists who have sought to understand the causal role of religion in respect to crime. Starting with Hirschi and Stark's 1969 article *Hellfire and Delinquency* along with later publications such as Cochran, Wood and Arneklev's 1994 article 'Is the Religiosity-Delinquency Relationship Spurious? A Test of Arousal and Social Control Theories', and leading to more contemporary work such as that of Sampson's *Great American City* (2011). These works have seen sociologists position themselves almost entirely outside of the communities under study and instead focus on reported quantitative data. Focusing on aggregated results, the scholars who have taken this approach to the problem of criminality and religiosity have tended to play down and even dismiss altogether the notion that religion works to either promote or discourage rates of crime. Although this is by no means a universal result, with works such as Benda's 1995 article 'The Effect of Religion on Adolescent Delinquency Revisited' and Johnson's 2011 article 'The Role of Religious Institutions in Responding to Crime and Delinquency' arguing that there is a negative relationship between church attendance and the crime rate within a community.

However, this aggregated approach does not yield the full picture as regards the relationship between religion and crime. As Wuthnow argued in his 1988 article *Religious Discourse as Public Rhetoric*, one cannot have a full picture of religion and how beliefs and discourses come to shape action in the public space through a purely survey based, quantitative approach. By no means did Wuthnow reject the valuable contribution of those who rely on the survey approach, but rather he argues that it cannot answer legitimate

questions about how particular religious institutions both conceptualise and set out to tackle perceived public problems.

The issue of conceptualising the problem of violence in the public space is not one which should be rushed over because it strikes at the heart of a theological problem for many religions, namely the problem of evil. This is to say that religion for the most part seeks to explain to some extent the existence of suffering in a world which pre-supposes a coherent creation, which in the Abrahamic tradition includes a single all power creator who in certain traditions is often also characterised as being an omnibenevolent God (Dombrowski 2016). Public violence which sees the death of innocent individuals can certainly be included within this problem of evil.

Responding to the problem of evil is in part a question of dividing the world into the *sacred* and the *profane* as Durkheim suggested (1995 [1912]). This problem can in part be interpreted in essence as having the functional purpose of promoting desirable behaviours whilst prohibiting undesirable behaviours. But more than that it is about crafting narratives which work to explain and frame social problems. Within the Western Christian tradition there can be seen to be three formal responses to the problem of evil. The first is that of *privation*, namely that evil occurs when there is an absence of God, a view which was dominant in the early Catholic church (Kelly 1989: 45). The second, which is strongly associated with the theodicy of St. Augustine, is the notion that evil is the result of free will, that is, God having given people the freedom to do what they want cannot be held accountable if they do evil (Kelly 1989: 41). The final explanation, which tends to be associated with the *asceticism* and deterministic theology of Calvin, is that of *natural evil*. This is essentially the idea that given there is an omnibenevolent God it follows that evil must be a part of his wider scheme for the cosmos and therefore will ultimately turn out to be a form of hidden good (Kelly 1989: 92). There is a fourth explanation, which has not been a central part of the Western Christian tradition (but which will prove important for this study) which is *dualism* (Kelly 1989: 2). Namely, the idea that there exist two unseen forces (one good and one evil) fighting for dominance and that this evil force creates concrete manifestations in the world. It is worth mentioning here that the British Union of Baptists, of which the West Croydon Baptist Church is a part, does not have a clear doctrinal position on this question instead choosing to respect the primacy of local pastors (Fiddes et al. 1996). Evil in essence, is not a universally agreed upon notion but rather it is a constructed and contested notion which, as Jeffery Alexander argued, is used by individuals and institutions to explain the ills to be found in both society and nature, but also at times as a tool in the pursuit of a perceived good (Alexander 2003).

As Max Weber noted, it is from this construction of evil that comes the power of religion to act in the social world, namely through salvation (Weber 1965 [1920]: 44-45). The capacity of religion to act as a salvific power in contexts of violence has been most broadly studied (in the UK) in the context of those who are or who have been in prison. This perhaps makes sense given the high number of conversions which take place in incarceration (Hallett and McCoy 2015). Robinson-Edwards and Kewley's work, which centred on the religious interventions of a single volunteer (Joanna) with the Christian organisation Mothers' Union,

tried to argue that those making religious interventions often taken on multiple roles within the context of a prison, simultaneously acting councillor, preacher, quasi-confessional priest and the person who can ultimately grant forgiveness (Robinson-Edwards and Kewley 2018). The work of Kerley, Leary and Rigsby by contrast, which focuses on the US context, emphasises more the experience of prisoners and those leaving prison in how the salvific power of religion is something experienced not only by those who exercise it (that is, religious volunteers) but also by those on the receiving end (that is, prisoners) in developing a *Faith-Worldview* (Leary 2018) in which religion works to reconstruct the narrative of prisoners lives (Kerley 2013; Leary 2015, 2018; Rigsby 2015).

Studies that have explored the salvific power of religion outside of the prison context, have often focused on the creation of *sacred sites* (Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson 2016, Holligan and McLean 2018) within the community, which work to provide a space in which individuals involved in criminality can come to receive some form of salvation. There exist some striking similarities between the literature both in and out of the prison context. Holligan and McLean's work, which examines young criminals in the West of Scotland, chimes with much of the in-prison work in its emphasis on *criminal dissidence* (Holligan and McLean 2018) and autobiographical reconstruction. Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson, through their work with a Pentecostal Church in East London, emphasize more the power of religion through structured interactions to reframe a life as a choice between *street* and *community* (Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson 2016: 33).

The focus, thus far, has very much been on the impact of these interventions, but there exists at least some recognition that narratives of salvation themselves rely on particular understandings of the problem of evil and tend to privilege an understanding of evil based on free will. For example, Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson reflect (albeit briefly) on the irony that the Pentecostalist Church, who have more historically subscribed to a theory of natural evil, turn towards a narrative of evil founded in human free will when delivering these interventions in the lives of young offenders (Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson 2016: 19). The issue is that by focusing on the situations where religious institutions make formal interventions, it gives a somewhat one-sided view of how religions characterize and explain crime because those groups who work directly on this issue tend to adopt a narrative of free will, if criminals cannot choose to act differently there would be no point in working with them. But there exist many religious institutions who neither make these formal interventions nor subscribe to a view that evil is rooted in free will (McRoberts 2005, Sampson 2011). So, if faith groups and religious institutions are going to play this key role in fighting London knife crime (Mayor of London 2017), it is important to develop an understanding of the groups who do not adopt this narrative of free will and how they come to explain the problems of violent crime and more particularly knife crime.

A Snapshot of Croydon

If one takes the train from London Victoria going towards Brighton, in about 30 minutes, one comes to East Croydon train station. This puts one right at the heart of the Croydon community. As one walks out of the train station facing south, one sees London's only tram

line running from east to west and the honey-combe like tower block known as Croydon No.1. This is one of London's most southern boroughs located right on the edge of the city. Further south and one will have left London altogether entering either Surrey or Kent.

As one walks to the north-west, one enters into Broad Green, an area increasingly characterised by being dense, young and impoverished. Looking at the Index of Multiple Deprivations (IMD) — which considers income, employment, health, education, housing, crime and the living environment (Fallon 2015: 8) — one finds almost the entire Broad Green community in the top 10% to 20% of nationally most deprived communities, with certain streets falling into the band of being in the top 5% for most deprived communities (Flowers 2017: 19). The community is also defined by its youthfulness with most streets having between 28.4% and 35.8% of 0 to 17-year olds amongst its residents, while no street has more than 10.9% of persons aged 65 and over amongst its residents (Flowers 2017: 13). In the north east of Broad Green one finds some of Croydon's most densely populated streets, with 136 to 180 people per hectare depending on the specific locality, this compared with Croydon's 2015 average of 43.8 people per hectare (Flowers 2017: 20).

In the north-east of the borough, one finds Thornton Heath. Thornton Heath lacks some of the more extreme poverty that can be found in Broad Green, but many of the streets still find themselves in the top 10% to 20% of deprivation nationally and a few in the south west are even in the top 10% to 5% (Flowers 2017: 19). Again, although in Thornton Heath there are not pockets of extremity when it comes to population density, much of the ward still faces a comparatively high level of population density, between 92 and 135 people per hectare depending on the precise locality (Flowers 2017: 20).

But it would be wrong to say that Croydon's social deprivation is isolated to the north of the borough. In New Addington — an estate connected to Croydon only by one road and one tram line, which lies far to the south of East Croydon station — one again finds a community riddled with deprivation. Like Broad Green, it is largely in the top 10% to 20% for most deprived areas, with pockets in the top 10% to 5% and in the top 5% (Flowers: 19). The old Fieldway, which is now New Addington North, actually has the youngest population anywhere in Croydon with 34% of the residents being under the age of 18 (Flowers: 28). Near the tram stops in New Addington North the proportion of residents under 18 years of age is even higher, between 35.9% to 43.5% depending on the street. Population density is mixed, but around the King Henry's and Fieldway tram stops population density is as high as in the north east of Broad Green.

Overlying these diverse communities are also more general problems of race, health and education. As Croydon transitions from being a predominantly white London borough to a majority ethnic minority London borough, the existing inequalities are becoming more problematic. These inequalities are particularly evident among the youth of the borough as expressed through education attainment. Only 46.6% of black Caribbean students achieved five GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) with grades between A* and C, as compared to 60.4% of white British students and 71.3% of Indian students (Elahi 2017: 9). Now those figures are not wildly out of line with national results; with 46.5% of black

Caribbean student achieving five GCSEs with grades between A* and C, 56.8% of white British students and 71.3% of Indian students (Elahi 2017: 9).

Amongst the wider social problems of Croydon, there is the very particular problem of knife crime, which has grown so much in prominence over the last few years. However, as we will see in the next section, this problem is centred around a few identifiable locations.

Methodology and Choices

What is clear from even a preliminary glance at Croydon is that not all of Croydon is the same. Therefore, the work itself started by identifying where the fieldwork would take place. This was achieved through an analysis for ten months of data collection on violent and sexual crime, between May 2017 and February 2018, on a sample of 639 localities² in and around Croydon that had experienced at least one violent or sexual crime in May 2017. It should be said that there is a technical limitation to this data, in so far as the open source data does not allow for a disentanglement of knife crime from other forms of violent crime at the street level. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) estimates that in 2017 around 21% of violent and sexual crimes involved some form of weapon. However, this method points us to an area where there is a significant level of Serious Youth Violence, which, according to other MOPAC (Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime) data, is strongly correlated with knife crime (The Association of Directors of Children's Services 2019).

Given that each street only had ten data points, corresponding with ten months of analysis, it became necessary to use a system that would be able to determine the confidence intervals for each locality, without the need for large data sets, leading to the decision to use the Student distribution, sometimes also known as t-distribution. At first this was run with a 95% confidence interval; localities that did not have at least a lower bound of one were eliminated, leaving 18 localities.

Given the level of work required to analyse and choose from 18 localities it was then decided that it would be prudent to still further eliminate the potential localities of study. Thus, a 99% confidence interval was used, leaving only 11 localities (having applied the same rule as before).

What was then important was to identify amongst those 11 localities those that would be studied. The approach was to find multiple localities which could be grouped together on the basis of proximity. When one looks at it on a map, two groups of localities become evident. There is one group of localities around the Broad Green community and a second around the Thornton Heath community. Given that this article is to focus almost exclusively on the work done in Broad Green (where the West Croydon Baptist Church is situated), the article will not provide further data on localities around Thornton Heath.

In the ward of Broad Green four localities appear; on or near the Hospital (Croydon University Hospital), on or near St James's Road, on or near Wellington Road and on or near Hartley Road. The three streets that are in that group directly interconnect with one another.

² For a full list see <https://www.police.uk/metropolitan/00AH01T/crime/2017-05/violent-crime/+P0mSCU/locations/> .

The Croydon University Hospital is a little further up the London Road, but ultimately only 500 meters away from the opening of St. James's Road onto London Road. At the centre of this cluster is the West Croydon Baptist Church which sits on the crossroad between St. James's Road and Whitehorse Road. It was this crossroad that would become the focus of the ensuing work. According to data from *London Landscape* project developed by MOPAC,³ Broad Green reported the second highest rate of Serious Youth Violence for any London ward in 2016 and third highest in 2017 (only pushed down in the ranking because of the rise in youth violence in another Croydon ward directly south of Broad Green, Fairfield). So, while it is difficult to evaluate how much of what the Metropolitan Police data is capturing is Serious Youth Violence, one can state with confidence that it is pointing towards an area where Serious Youth Violence is high by the standards of London.

It is worth taking the time to be clear that this is far from being a perfect method to identify precisely where violence takes place. Like all methods which attempt to map out where crime takes place it has to rely on the assumption that the underlying data is reliable (i.e. that the location of the crime is correctly reported) which is by no means a certainty (Harries 1999). However, given that there is a consistently high level of reporting around the West Croydon Baptist Church, it seems reasonable to assert that it finds itself situated within an area which is a centre of violent crime, even if those who commit the crimes do not necessarily come from that area (Borrion et al. 2019).

Having identified the terrain in which to work, this article will follow an essentially ethnographic method of participant observation combined with in depth interviews. Ethnography is a broad and diverse method. Unlike other methodologies which have come to define the study of urban environments through their physical characteristics, ethnography works to explore (primarily through observation) the ways in which individuals organise themselves, how individuals explain their own actions and the emotion which lies behind action (Pardo et al. 2018). However, as Murchison and Coats have elucidated in their recent work, ethnographies of religion have in the past placed the emphasis in different places with some focusing more on the particularised study of religion purely as a social practice through rituals within *sacred sites*, whilst others have emphasized the emotional and spiritual elements of religious life (Murchison and Coats 2015). This work will give some consideration to ritual but will for the most part focus on the subjective experience of participants through the voices of those involved in and connected to the West Croydon Baptist Church to understand how they conceptualise the problem of violence (and more specifically knife crime) and how that conceptualisation informs their actions.

To this end, around 150 hours was spent on participant observation in the field. It is worth noting that this article is one part of a wider work and therefore not all of the 150 hours was spent at the crossroads between St James's Road and Whitehorse Road. This article is going to focus mostly on what was observed within the West Croydon Baptist Church itself, events which the pastors of the West Croydon Baptist Church took part in, as well as the way

³ For the full dataset go to <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/mayors-office-policing-and-crime-mopac/data-and-statistics/london-landscape>

in which peripheral members of the church used religion as a lens through which to see violent crime. It is worth saying that even though I lived in Croydon for eighteen years (between January 1999 and January 2017), just a half an hour walk from the West Croydon Baptist Church, I had stayed away from Croydon before starting my fieldwork here in May 2017. So, it is possible some cultural gap may have opened up during this period (Madden 2010).

In order to try and take account for the fact that in the practice of ethnographic observation misinterpretation can take place, I also conducted six long semi-structured interviews to inform the wider ethnographic work. Individuals were recruited for these interviews through snowball sampling (Browne 2005); that is, the first individual introduced the next and so on. Each interview took around two hours to conduct. This included community activists, residents, landlords and others. The interviews themselves were divided into two parts. The first, was an exploration of general themes with similar questions being asked as in the survey work. The second section was made up of commentary on field notes from the observation phase of the study and results from the survey. So, the interviewee would be presented with an observation, then a discussion would take place as to the significance of that initial prompt. Again, this work took place in the context of a wider study so not every interview is relevant to this article, but I have tried to take what is pertinent.

We Know God and They Do Not

The West Croydon Baptist Church finds itself located in the middle of a cluster of roads with some of the highest reported levels of violence in Croydon. Directly around the West Croydon Baptist Church (on St James's Road) there are an average of 3.6 violent and sexual crimes committed every month (ranging between 2.2 and 5.0 violent and sexual crimes per month in a 95% confidence interval) making it the fourth most violent locality in the sample. The roads which interconnect with St James's Road equally display a high level of reported violence; with Wellington Road having an average of 2.7 violent and sexual crimes committed every month (ranging between 1.8 and 3.6 violent and sexual crimes per month in a 95% confidence interval) and Hartley Road having an average of 2.7 violent and sexual crimes committed every month (ranging between 2.0 and 3.7 violent and sexual crimes per month in a 95% confidence interval) making them the eleventh and twelfth most violent localities in the sample respectively.

It is in this network of violent localities that one falls across the West Croydon Baptist Church. Within what one might call the *sacred site* of the West Croydon Baptist Church members meet twice a week to listen to the pastors of the West Croydon Baptist Church preach. The West Croydon Baptist Church has a skeleton of structure to its services (in that a general order is pre-established and who is going to speak is pre-decided) but it tends towards a style of worship that can be characterized as charismatic worship, which leaves a great deal of freedom to the preacher. This more fluid style of worship can lead to spontaneous singing from those at the front or sermons that often contain large portions in which the preacher appears largely to improvise. None of the services that I attended during the three months ever ended on time and individuals who left early were often publicly called out for their lack of

devotion to God, in front of the congregation. But fluidity and improvisation does not imply a random message. Within the narrative expressed by the pastors was always a key explanation of evil as *privation* (Kelly 1989). Whether it be in praying for those in illness or preaching on social ills, the pastors of the West Croydon Baptist Church explain these ills as caused by the absence of God. God is not strictly speaking omnipresent for the West Croydon Baptist Church, he exists only through the presence of true believers. On my first visit to the West Croydon Baptist Church a pastor who had recently visited the United States would preach on this very subject.

03/06/2018: 09:50 – ‘We enter the West Croydon Baptist Church and are greeted by an elderly gentleman who offers us coffee. ... After some time, the singing ends and he begins to give his sermon on the Book of Exodus, which apparently part of a series of lectures. At a certain point the gentleman starts to talk about how at larger congregations the spirit of God would come and touch the congregation if their faith so sufficiently devout. He goes onto say “Are you ready for God to come here”, about three people in the audience say very quietly “Yes”, the gentleman giving the sermon responds with “We are not ready” whilst shaking his head.’

Crucial to understanding how the West Croydon Baptist Church conceptualizes and responds to the problems of knife crime, is realizing that for them *privation* frames every issue and becomes central both to the construction of a notion of evil (Alexander 2003) and a wider *moral universe*. It is easy to believe that those who are in the grip of this belief system separate their esoteric beliefs about the nature of God and evil from their more temporal concerns, namely the violence that, at least according to the data, seems to surround their *sacred site*. But in fact, the narrative of *privation* becomes co-opted directly into how they understand (and subsequently how they seek to respond to) the problem of violent crime and more specifically knife crime. This is a realization that crystalized at a meeting of local Baptist pastors to which I was invited, and which was called specifically to address the issue of knife crime.

06/06/2018: 21:15 – ‘I was invited to a meeting of church leaders by the pastor for the West Croydon Baptist (Reuben Martin). The meeting occurred in Trinity Baptist Church. The meeting began at 9:15 and ended at 11:30 ... Mark Nicholson started the meeting by talking about Prayer Marches against knife crime. The first one, which has taken place in April, saw around 2000 people in the centre of Croydon. He had been encouraged by the way churches set aside their own agenda and came together (it reminded him of when David brought the Ark back to Jerusalem — that as the church prayed and worshipped they were carrying God’s presence into Croydon). “We are bringing the presence of God into the community”.

Sitting around, I asked pastors at my table how their community was dealing with knife crime. The two black pastors at the table said that their church was having to deal with the effects, the white pastors said theirs were not immediately

connected. One of the white pastors remarked ‘I feel disempowered. Prayer is the only thing I feel like I can contribute’. The black pastors said that everyone in the community is well informed when an attack occurs, and that they had good consistent contact with the police.

One of the pastors who speaks recommends the pastors to “adopt” a local mosque, enter the mosque to say hello and congratulate them on the Eid festival, and also to proselytize. “There are far fewer mosques than churches, so there is no competition” however “they are not shy to tell us of their religion, so we as Christians should not hesitate to tell them the good word”

One of the other pastors agrees, because “We know God and they do not”

In this meeting what came out clearly was the interconnection between how the pastors see the problem of knife crime and how they choose to respond to it. For this group of pastors the origin of knife crime lies in an absence of God in the community, which only they can end. There exists in their sentiments a strong element that they exclusively are the bringers of God, as perhaps best demonstrated by their reference of the Biblical character of David (who brought back the Arc back to Jerusalem and defeated numerous enemies because he was God’s elect). From this comprehension of knife crime as being caused by *privation*, they come to clear conclusions that the solution lies in prayer and proselytizing. The kind of active and structured interventions that have been described in some of the literature (Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson 2016, Holligan and McLean 2018) are simply not within the frame of reference for these pastors, who openly admit that they feel ‘disempowered’ to act on knife crime. Indeed, the two identifiable solutions that do come out, prayer (often in the form of prayer marches) and proselytizing, echo far more a repertoire of action to be found in the work of scholars such as DeHanas in his study of religion and politics in East London (DeHanas 2016). At the heart of these solutions are a recognition that only through the divine presence of God can social unrest be resolved and God can only be present when numerically large numbers of people believe in him. However much such a view may conflict with widely accepted and positivistic understandings of knife crime in London, it forms a coherent train of logic from the point of view of the pastors.

The Cosmic Battle

The difficulty of studying the Baptist Church in the United Kingdom is that they have almost no formalized doctrine beyond the three-paragraph *Declaration of Principle*. Although the meaning of the *Declaration of Principle* was elaborated upon by a group of British Baptist Church leaders in the 1996 publication *Something to Declare*, the main conclusion of the work was that local church leadership and congregations should remain free to decide upon doctrinal questions for themselves (Fiddes et al. 1996). Therefore, it is not only pastors and church leadership who define the answers to the problem of evil, although they have a powerful influence from the pulpit; but rather members of the congregation also play a key role in constructing that moral universe. Moreover, members of the church take this moral universe out with them into everyday life, so that characterizations of knife crime, which one finds first emanating from the pastors of the West Croydon Baptist Church, are carried

beyond the *sacred site* by its members. Those who encounter knife crime, both as activists and participants, then are able to contextualize their actions through the lens of their faith.

Shaniqua is one of the more engaged members of the Baptist community in Croydon working on knife crime. She is far from being a peripheral member of the community, with two of her uncles serving as pastors (although not in the West Croydon Baptist Church). She runs a Community Interest Company (CIC) seeking to fight knife crime by encouraging young individuals in Croydon's Afro-Caribbean community to take up poetry as an alternative to violence, which has been part of the European project *Complete Freedom and Truth*. What was interesting when we interviewed her was how she came to characterize the problem of knife crime as being part of a 'cosmic battle' saying:

'There's a cosmic battle happening which I can't see. The supernatural powers and intervention in the world are a key part of everything, everything we're living in. ... For me, we live in a world of sin and the devil is out to get everyone that he can, and those people are vulnerable because they're in a horrible situation anyway. Like, I say we live in a world of sin but you have a choice to make. You have to realize that if you live by the sword you may die by the sword ... Some young people I've seen it looks like they have demons within them, it's like why are you so intent on being angry in the way you are behaving.'

For Shaniqua, this idea of the *cosmic battle* came to define her whole approach to the problem of knife crime. There are of course important differences in her narrative of violence to that of the pastors. She does accord some level of free will in her narrative and accepts that 'God is not a tyrant'. But centrally she still attributes the existence of knife crime to an unseen spiritual dimension of the universe. In many ways her views can be seen as more reflective of *dualism* rather than pure *privation* (Kelly 1989). For Shaniqua, it is not just that there is an absence of God, but also that that space is filled by a demonic presence which influences the actions of individuals. But importantly, she converges with the pastors in a rejection of the kind of formalized and structured interventions in which religious groups have engaged elsewhere (Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson 2016, Holligan and McLean 2018). As she says:

'It's just you've got to think, stop focusing on the knives and start focusing on the people. It's like "Oh we're going to have a knife amnesty", well great but someone can go home to mom's kitchen and get another one out. So often we're not asking what are the core root issues of it.'

It is not only Shaniqua who carries this view with her. In the course of the three months, one group of individuals, who operated in Thornton Heath high street and used a mixture of drug dealing and begging to support their lives, became of particular interest to the study. The four individuals within this group were Summer, Dee, Steve (sometimes known as Stevo) and Chinky. They were more occasional attendees at the West Croydon Baptist Church who took advantage of some of the charitable actions undertaken by the church such as the soup kitchen. Summer was a black woman who had been out on the streets for eight months by that

stage. Dee was a white man who went in and out of homelessness and had just lost his accommodation again. Steve was a black man who, like Dee, came in and out of homelessness. Chinky by contrast to the other three was not in fact homeless but was a schizophrenic living in a hostel who begged for a little extra money. It is worth saying that Chinky never actually said anything but was instead constantly silent. The first thing that emerged when speaking to them was that they shared with the pastors a sense of the power of God to act for them as believers in materially identifiable ways.

13/06/2018: 23:51 – ‘[...] Steve leaves us briefly to buy cider for himself and Summer. He returns within a few minutes. Then we start to talk about some luck he had the previous week. He says, “You know the other day £15 just flew out of a woman’s handbag. I could have handed it back, but you know, that’s not stealing, that’s God, you hear what I’m saying.”’

Beyond the recollections of God playing a central role within the economic organization of their lives, Summer also expressed a view that echoed that of Shaniqua in explaining the violence within the community as a form of *dualism* (Kelly 1989).

13/06/2018: 23:21 – ‘[...] As we speak on, Summer talks about how she met Dee. She says: “This man is a God send I tell you, Hallelujah. You see, I met him one day at the station and I had a feeling in my gut, you get me, that he (Dee) was a good one. And ever since then we’ve be tight. We don’t mess with them bad ones, with their knives, we stick to us. There’s all these guys going around saying ‘how much you got’. We don’t do that. We look out for each other.’

During the time spent with this group, it became evident that the way they see and respond to the world is mediated through essentially theological beliefs in which it is the divine that seems to direct events (such as the procurement of money as well as the perpetuation of crime amongst the homeless). What is remarkable in all of this, is that from the centre of religious organization, namely the pastors, one can take a step away and find the same (or comparably similar views about knife crime) expressed by increasingly peripheral figures in religious life. One step away from the pastors, one finds in Shaniqua someone who expressed explicitly the view that the origins of knife crime lay in a ‘cosmic battle’. If one then takes another step out to those who themselves carry knives and who find themselves on the edge of social and religious organization (namely Summer, Dee, Steve and Chinky), even in their explanation for the origins for crime there is an explicitly theological element. Moreover, the view that Summer expressed suggests that actually the only protection that could be provided was one that came directly from God.

In all of this one begins to reconsider the *salvific* power of religion (Weber 1965[1920]). The narrative, which comes particularly strongly through the voice of Summer, is without a doubt one of salvation. But it is not the same salvation that one finds in the literature that addresses those who have gone to prison and who are forced to change their way of life (Kerley 2013; Leary 2015, 2018; Rigsby 2015). This is a narrative of salvation that works to justify an already existing way of being. The conception of evil as coming from *privation* and

to some extent *dualism*, is one that is co-opted into a narrative that there are good people with knives and bad people with knives. Unlike the cases described in the work of Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson (2016), here the division between the *sacred* and the *profane* ceases to be premised upon a choice between a life of violence and a life of peace in the community. Instead, violence is presupposed, and the only answer is to be a good person with a knife rather than a bad person with a knife. There is of course a certain evolution of ideas which takes place between the centre and the periphery of this religious organization, but the fundamental logic remains the same.

Conclusions and Limitations of this Study

In large part, this article hopes to show the evolution of a religious narrative of violent crime within a particular context. From the pastors who emphasised the role of *privation*, to Shaniqua who brought in an element of *dualism*, to Summer and those around her who were actively engaged in the dealing of drugs and to participants in violence who co-opted those same religious narratives to justify their action. From a centre of religious organisation, one can see how the narrative becomes interpreted and reinterpreted through the community. But also, this article hopes to show that the effect of the *salvific* (Weber 1965[1920]) power of religion is heavily dependent on the narrative of salvation and evil which one chooses to adopt. One cannot deny the demonstrated power of religion to transform lives when it is underpinned by a belief in *free will* (Kerley 2013; Leary 2015, 2018; Rigsby 2015; Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson 2016; Holligan and McLean 2018). However, once one takes away that premise, religion can be many different things. In this particular case, one finds in the West Croydon Baptist Church and its congregation a narrative of conflict. Conflict of Islam against Christianity, of God against the Devil and of street gang against street gang, which all form a part of a greater *cosmic battle*. If, as the Mayor of London's office has suggested, faith groups and religious organisations are to be a cornerstone in the strategy against knife crime (Mayor of London 2017), perhaps the moment has arrived to consider in full the nature and heterogeneity of religious groups and the narratives that they adopt towards collective social problems.

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