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Abstract

This article explores understandings and practices of marriage in a congregation from the growing British evangelical Christian movement New Frontiers International (NFI). It investigates how those who subscribe to evangelical religion interact with the gendered ideas and behaviour of the more 'secular' society they inhabit. The data for this research are drawn from participant observation and interviews with members of the congregation. These are situated in the context of the official discourse of NFI and of contemporary debates about the move to 'individualized' partnership. It is argued that though these evangelicals claim to shape their marriages according to 'biblical' patterns, they in fact reflect the partnership practices of their less religious peers. Building on work by Stacey and McRobbie, patterns of marriage and heterosexual partnership in contemporary Britain are conceptualized as 'postfeminist'; the article locates within this framework NFI's declared – and undeclared – marriage practices. It finds that while they are somewhat more conservative than their 'secular' peers, NFI evangelicals are indeed practising postfeminist partnership. Observations are also offered on the impact of religion on people's ability to live out individualized partnerships.

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Introduction

This article is concerned with the marriage and partnership practices of evangelical Christians, a group that has shown surprising resilience in the face of declining church attendance in the UK. While churchgoing in general fell 22% between 1989 and 1998, evangelical church attendance declined by only 3%. As a percentage of all church attendees, evangelicals increased their share in this period from 30% to 37%; they now

constitute the largest theological grouping among churchgoers (Brierley 2000: 51-52). In recent years evangelicals have attracted more attention in relation to homosexuality than to their gender or family practices (Bates 2004), and the relation between evangelicals' gender practices and those of contemporary Britain has been neglected as a focus of study. And while a sizeable literature documents changes in partnership and marriage, most notably the (debated) move to 'individualized' partnership, how far religion may impact individualizing possibilities for partnership has not been considered either. Based on qualitative research among British evangelicals, this article tackles the first question; it also makes some preliminary observations concerning the second. Principally, it asks: in relation to marriage and partnership, how do those who subscribe to evangelical religion interact with the gendered ideas and behaviour of the more 'secular' environments they inhabit? Some passing observations are also offered on the impact of religion on people's abilities to live out individualized partnerships.

The individualized partnership thesis that has arisen alongside theories of 'reflexive modernization' (Beck et al. 1994) is disputed in regards to gender. Taking this on board I adopt a framework of understanding contemporary marriage and partnership transformations based around the notion that we live in a 'postfeminist' society in which feminism is both embraced and rejected and partnerships are both newly egalitarian *and* structured according to an older gender order.

In the last two decades research on contemporary evangelicals and gender has increased in the US, with key qualitative studies describing evangelicals' gendered interactions. Such studies give primary attention to marriage and family life. Marriage and family, many argue, are central to evangelical identity. They signify social order; they socialise children. Through them evangelicals assert a distinctive religious identity amongst and against multiplying family and relational arrangements. Evangelicals, assert some researchers, hold fast to an ideal of heterosexual gender complementarity, positioning men as leaders in marriage and women as subservient and exalting this pattern as the biblical blueprint for all times and cultures. Various historical studies (Bendroth 1993; DeBerg 1990; Davidoff & Hall 1987) have argued this. More sociological research has also, at least partly, made this claim (Ammerman 1987; Brasher 1998; Griffith 1997; Bartkowski 2001; Gallagher 2003).

But this is not the whole story. As marriage has declined in the west evangelicals have not only tried to assert it more vociferously to protect it from the perceived ravages of egalitarian modernity, but they have also adapted – if you like 'secularized' – their marriages in ways that align them with those of their non-religious counterparts. Secular and feminist reforms have permeated evangelicalism, and evangelicals are embracing conservative and egalitarian ideas and practices, sometimes simultaneously (Bartkowski 2001; Brasher 1998; Stacey 1998). Gallagher (2003) has further contended that evangelicals' more egalitarian practices are not concessions to secular modernity but in fact represent one of two theological strands that have existed within it since conservative Protestantism's inception.[1] For her, evangelicalism is neither inherently conservative nor inherently egalitarian; evangelicals select their gendered beliefs and actions from the two 'cultural tool kits' – today represented by conservative evangelicalism and evangelical feminism – available to them.

Notwithstanding Gallagher's argument, I am convinced of the importance of the contemporary social (more than the historical theological) context in framing evangelicals' gendered lives, especially in Britain where evangelicals are fewer and less able to shield themselves from non-evangelicals. Evangelicals neither live in a vacuum nor interpret their biblical texts within one. Although they may claim their gender ideals derive directly from the Bible, these 'biblical' ideals are mediated through their cultural understandings.

Existing research on British evangelicals relates primarily to the position of women (Franks 2001; Baillie 2002; Porter 2002)[2] and addresses the somewhat reductive question of whether women are 'imprisoned or empowered' (Baillie 2002), rather than marriage and partnership. Filling this gap, this article arises from a research project on understandings and practices of gender in the growing British charismatic evangelical movement New Frontiers International (NFI) (described further below). Fifteen months participant observation from 2000 to 2001 of a NFI congregation I call Westside,[3] interviews with twenty church members and analysis of NFI's wider public events and publications formed the subject of this research, which was conducted using a feminist grounded theoretical approach.

Westside was a small congregation, with only twenty-five members at the end of my fifteen-month fieldwork period. Participants were almost entirely white and middle

class, predominantly female and in their twenties and early thirties. The congregation was selected for several reasons. The first was its proximity to my home; this enabled me to become more intimately involved in the life of the church (including its social events) than would have been possible had I had to travel further. When another NFI leader whose church I was visiting introduced me to Chris, Westside's leader, Chris was enthusiastic about my research and, before I had the chance to ask, invited me to study his church. Additionally, I judged the small size of the congregation to be an advantage because it was more manageable; it enabled most features of the church's life to be examined. Choosing a small church made possible closer interaction with its leaders than would have occurred within a larger congregation. Finally, selecting a small congregation enabled me to interview almost all the attendees and thus assess the full spectrum of attitudes and practices.

This article draws mostly on interviews with church members and on NFI's publications and audiotaped sermons. I include some material from participant observation at church meetings and social events, but since I did not physically reside with those I was doing research among, opportunities to observe the more private aspects of partnership were rare. As Daly and Dienhart (1998) remark, the continued notion of family as a private space makes conducting ethnographic family research difficult. Additionally, my single, childless status hindered my ability to communicate on the basis of shared experience with Westside members who were married and had children.

Defining postfeminism

Since the demise of a visible feminist movement in Britain, the rise of postindustrial reflexive modernity and the deconstruction of the subject of feminism 'postfeminism' has moved to prominence within feminist and poststructuralist theory. Theorised in a variety of interlinking ways, postfeminism is best used, I believe, to discuss the contemporary tension in gender relations. Building on work by Judith Stacey and Angela McRobbie (see below), among others (Sonnet 1999; Lotz 2001; Projansky 2001; Moseley & Read 2002), this article employs postfeminism as a framing concept to describe contemporary British gender ideas and practices. Stacey and McRobbie

conceptualize postfeminism as the simultaneous avowal of feminist ideals and nostalgia for the modern (non-feminist) gender order that is accompanying postindustrialization. Stacey places more emphasis on postfeminism as the material outcome of postindustrialization, while McRobbie is more concerned with ideas and beliefs within the cultural sphere. Like them, I use 'postfeminism' to signify gender practices that have come after feminism and refer back to it in both endorsement and rejection. Postfeminist manifestations of gender display a tension between, on one side, separate spheres, traditionalist, gender-differentiated notions that originated at modernity and were stressed from the late 1970s in the UK as part of a New Right backlash against feminism. The other side of the postfeminist tension represents feminist and egalitarian notions of gender. Late modernity exhibits this postfeminist combination.

Ethnographic research on among evangelicals was the starting point for one of the most influential formulations of postfeminism, Judith Stacey's (1987, 1998; Rosenfelt & Stacey 1987; Stacey & Gerard 1990). Stacey first encountered what she called postfeminism during ethnographic fieldwork at an evangelical Christian mission in Silicon Valley, California in the mid 1980s. She was intrigued to meet women who had been involved with the 1960s and 1970s counter-cultural and women's movements and had subsequently converted to evangelicalism. While such conversions might engender rejection of feminist ideals, Stacey encountered a mix of conservative and feminist attitudes. The women felt their feminist commitments had failed them in their desire for happy, communicative marriages to sensitive men. Evangelicalism, however, succeeded in transforming their men's priorities, stressing male spiritual leadership alongside men's responsibility to nurture and support their wives emotionally. While the women felt feminism had not solved their problems, they nevertheless endorsed, and had gained from, many of its emphases. Stacey named this attitude postfeminist.

Stacey (1987) further contends that postfeminism parallels the transition to a postindustrial society and the 'unmaking' of separate spheres. As industrial societies provided the impetus for feminist movements, so postindustrial conditions pave the way for postfeminism. Postindustrialization involves 'the unmaking of a gender order rooted in the modern nuclear family system,' Stacey argues (1987: 8). She regards postfeminism as the amalgam of feminism (or feminist ideals depoliticised) and nostalgia for the nuclear family that has arisen amidst new forms of work, increasing

instability in family life and the decline of separate spheres. As 'feminised' occupations (information-based and service industries) and flexible working patterns replace traditionally masculine full-time work like manufacturing, work is increasingly occupied by women *and* an arena for their exploitation as cheap and flexible labourers. Postfeminism exists in this new situation.

McRobbie (2004) is concerned with the current process of 'undoing' feminism that she calls postfeminist. More negative than Stacey in her assessment of the degree to which postfeminism includes continued support for feminism, McRobbie (2004: 255) argues that 'post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed.' McRobbie (2002, 2003) situates postfeminism within the political context of New Labour, who take feminism into account, claiming to champion equality and diversity, yet reject it as a discourse. McRobbie (2003: 130) believes the contemporary situation represents a 'double entanglement' she calls 'postfeminist':

> the co-existence of neo-liberal with liberal values in relation to families and sexuality, and the co-existence of feminism as that which is reviled or, as I would put it, 'almost hated', and feminism as a political force which has achieved the status of Gramscian common sense, something that is now 'taken into account.'

Postfeminist partnership

With this in mind, what then constitute postfeminist marriage and couple relations? As Stacey (1987) argues, postfeminism involves the postindustrial 'unmaking' of the modern family order, the (at least partial) disintegration of the male breadwinner family. In the UK, marriage trends confirm the decline of this family form. In 1971 71% of men and 65% of women were married; in 2000 54% of men and 52% of women were. Since 1970-71, the number of first marriages has halved, and the average age at first marriage has risen by five years.[4] The reduced stigma and changes in divorce laws have made divorce easier and more frequent. Since the 1969 Divorce Reform Act divorce has more than tripled, though after a 1993 peak it declined somewhat. Greater acceptance of cohabitation has reduced the number of marriages. Household

composition is moving away from the nuclear family type. In 2002 only 29% of households contained a couple and their children (ONS 2003: 42-47). Marriage has become one among many 'postmodern' family forms (Stacey 1998) – cohabitation, serial monogamy, lone parenthood, step-parenthood, lesbian and gay relationships and the single-person household, among others; what is newly prominent in the family arena is heterogeneity (Coontz 2004).

Marriage itself has not only become more 'companionate', shifting from 'institution' to 'relationship,' but has also become individualized (Amato 2004; Cherlin 2004). In the early 1970s Young and Willmott (1973) described what they called the 'symmetrical family', a new, egalitarian partnership transforming family life. If this was the first major transition, the second was the individualization of marriage, the shift to a focus on self-development and personal choice (Cherlin 2004). As Cherlin (2004) argues, the symbolic significance of marriage remains high even though its gendered behavioural requirements have lessened as women's involvement in paid labour has increased in line with economic shifts towards dual-earner families (see also Coontz 1997: 51-75). Giddens (1992) depicts a 'pure relationship' of 'confluent love' in which partnerships are increasingly intimate and are entered for both partners' satisfaction; they incorporate 'plastic sexuality' concerned with pleasure rather than procreation and are unencumbered by older notions of duty, structure and gender-based roles. However, some criticise the pure relationship and individualization theories for ignoring the continued gender inequalities in heterosexual partnerships (Jamieson 1998, 1999).

Jamieson (1998) paints a contradictory picture of personal relationships in contemporary Britain. A discourse of relationships sustained by deep emotional sharing sits alongside 'moral right' notions that only marriages are 'proper' relationships and alongside an older discourse casting men as sexually driven. Kiernan (2004) has likewise identified a tension in both policy and lived experience in the context of Europe between promotion of older institutionalised marriage and newer forms of individualized partnership. Partnership is not completely or straightforwardly individualized. Less linear notions of family change may be needed (Smart & Shipman 2004). Preserving kinship ties and traditions also continue to motivate many from particular ethnic and religious groups (Smart & Shipman 2004). 'The' family is 'the new relationship of tension' (Beck-Gernsheim 2002: xi). Beck-Gernsheim believes the

family is facing a tension between an enduring rhetoric of 'family values' and the breakdown of gender-differentiated roles in an economic context that ties people to state institutions that increasingly address them as individuals, not families. We are caught between nostalgia for 'traditional' marriage and support of non-marital family forms. The resultant proliferating family forms constitute what Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 10) calls the 'post-familial family.' This 'post-familial' family is in my terms postfeminist because it combines 'separate spheres' and feminist versions in a context influenced by processes of reflexive modernization which reduce the dominance of the 'old' nineteenth-century gender patterns, though do not erase them.

Introducing NFI

While evangelicalism in Britain is in (very minor) decline, some evangelical movements are growing. Since the 1970s the charismatic evangelical churches formerly known collectively as the House Church or Restorationist movement, now called New Churches (Walker 2002), have been heralded Protestantism's success story (Walker 1998; Cotton 1995). Although New Church growth slowed from the mid 1980s (Walker 1998: 301-372), one of its networks, New Frontiers International (NFI), has continued growing. With 28,000 members in over 200 churches in the UK, NFI is the largest surviving New Church network.

The New Church movement began in the 1970s as small groups meeting in homes and grew rapidly through the 1980s. Its theological roots lie in the nineteenth-century Brethren movement and Catholic Apostolic Church, and in twentieth-century Classical Pentecostalism. Like earlier Pentecostalists, NFI consider being 'born again' essential and practise believers' baptism in water and 'of the Holy Spirit' and spiritual gifts such as tongues-speaking, a feature they share with the charismatic movement.

Three features distinguish them from their Pentecostal forerunners. First, they believe denominations should not exist and should be replaced by the Church or 'kingdom', in which life is lived in obedience to God's order and rules. The second feature is their ecclesiology. They aim to 'restore the church' to what they perceive as the New Testament pattern for church life. This led Walker to name them 'Restorationists.' Their literal interpretation of the Bible shares similarities with

fundamentalism. In their leadership structure men known as apostles, around whom house churches gathered, oversee networks of churches, which are led by elders. The third is the (often criticised) doctrine of discipleship or 'shepherding', in which Christians submit themselves to leaders' guidance and authority (Walker 1998).

Wider study of the construction of gender in NFI demonstrates that NFI display a conservative version of attitudes and practices of gender that are common in contemporary Britain. Despite their claim to derive their gender beliefs and actions from the Bible they in fact reflect very strongly the ideas of non- or less religious British society. They interpret the Bible through the gendered lenses of their culture, holding particularly to that culture's most conservative aspects and rejecting most that are overtly feminist. Elsewhere (Aune 2004), I argue that NFI are postfeminist, but that, partly because NFI emerged in the 1970s in explicit opposition to second-wave feminism, they are particularly aligned with the conservative, backlash aspect of postfeminism.

Postfeminist marriage in NFI

What is the relationship between NFI's marriage practices and those of postfeminist Britain? In order to answer this question, public NFI discourse and the local congregational setting will be examined.

Marriage in public NFI discourse

In public NFI discourse nineteenth-century 'separate spheres' views of husbands as household heads and wives as submissive helpers abound. Books, articles and sermons by Terry Virgo, founder and leader of NFI, and his wife Wendy, now in their sixties, put forward the view that British society is crumbling because 'the family' has collapsed. The Virgos call for a restoration of the 'God-given order' of male-headed households, compliant wives and obedient children and argue that this is 'an expression of God's kingdom' (T. Virgo 1985: 78-80). Marital equality is notionally present in their portrayals, and Terry Virgo stresses that 'a loving and mutually respectful attitude

between husband and wife is the key to good family life', but men's authority is emphasised more.

In another book Virgo discusses 'principles of the kingdom of God' which, he says, 'provide answers to all nations' needs.' For example:

> [God] has taught us that security and peace are the results of a marriage where a wife honours and recognizes her husband's headship and where the husband unselfishly loves and honours his wife. This generation has been duped by cries of 'Liberation for women!' only to find itself more entangled and confused than before. (T. Virgo 1987: 59)

In a 1998 talk Wendy Virgo advocates male authority ('headship') and female submission:

> I don't go back to the Victorian age because I am applying the principle of male headship. I go back to creation and it's a long way and I'm proud of that. There's stability that comes, there's that sense of inheritance. I am part of a chain that goes from creation right up to the end, till we get to glory and there's a new heaven and a new earth, and I am perpetuating something that God started and God is continuing and God will finish. And so male headship is not something to avoid in my view, or something to avoid and be frightened of; it's something to declare and stand in with dignity and pride. I am part of a creation ordinance that God has declared and I am happy to embrace it and tuck under it. And I am happy to embrace and tuck under my particular covering [a reference to her husband], in case you were wondering [laughs].

Here she evokes the Genesis 2 creation story as the foundation for marital gender differentiation. She denies Victorian influence, yet her application of the term 'covering' dovetails with the Victorian legal view of marriage as an institution in which wives become subsumed under their husbands' 'cover' (authority and protection) (Perkin 1989: 2).

'Headship', a word so little used in the context of marriage that this connotation does not appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is more or less peculiar to evangelicalism. Within evangelicalism it is the crucial doctrine governing gender relations (Ingersoll 2001) and an intriguing example of what Storkey calls 'build[ing] a theology on a metaphor' (Storkey & Hebblethwaite 1999: 143), creating a doctrine out of a term which is absent from the Bible evangelicals claim as their source of authority.

Ingersoll describes four headship practices in evangelical marriages. In the first, husbands are the leaders and main decision-makers. Ingersoll uses Stacey's (1998) phrase 'patriarchy in the last resort' for the second. In this model, husbands theoretically possess ultimate responsibility and should have the final say, yet they consult their wives fully so decisions are actually made jointly. Stacey argues that evangelicals reinterpret headship as service; as heads, men are expected to behave sacrificially towards their wives. Headship also means husbands should, where there are disputes over important decisions, make the final decision – this is the meaning of 'patriarchy in the last resort' or 'last instance' (Stacey & Gerard 1990: 116). Yet the last instance 'never comes' (Stacey 1998: 59); no one Stacey interviewed could give an account of this happening in their own marriage. Stacey also encountered the view that if dispute necessitated a husband taking the final decision, this would be evidence of his *failure* to lead his family lovingly. Ingersoll's third headship practice applies it also to society and church, where only men can lead. Evangelical feminists supply the fourth interpretation, arguing for partners' 'mutual submission'. It is debateable whether this last interpretation should be called 'headship', since evangelical feminists often eschew the term. Evangelical feminists claim that conservative evangelicals have misread the Greek term for head (*kephalē*) in 1 Corinthians 11:3 ('The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God') as 'authority', when it actually denotes source or origin and refers to the Genesis 1-2 creation accounts without any implication of male leadership (Mickelsen 1986; Hull 1989).

Although male authority and female submission have a long ideological history within evangelicalism, NFI emphasised them as part of a backlash against secular feminism. Husbands' authority was regularly asserted as part of a Restorationist backlash against secular feminism. It was again stressed in the backlash against evangelical feminism from the late 1980s evident in the formation of American organisation the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), whose British branch Terry Virgo is patron of (Aune 2004: 119-124).

If men are heads, women's task is to submit. At NFI's summer festival Stoneleigh Bible Week in 2000, Lindsey Pettit, wife of a prominent NFI leader, discussed the importance of female submission. Like Wendy Virgo she repudiated 'images of downtrodden Victorian wives' generated by the term 'submission'. She

described her struggle submitting to her husband but explained that realising submission was God's desire brought joy and freedom. Based in God's created differences between the genders, equal in worth but different in 'roles and functions', submission reflects God's ordered world. As Jesus submitted to God the Father, children should submit to parents, employees to employers and wives to husbands. After Pettit's talk, Wendy Virgo added that submission brings women power: 'We're not submitting to our husbands because we've been told to, or it's a thing they do in Christian circles. It's so that the Word of God is given honour and we find it to have power in our lives.'

The notion of submission bringing power, 'security', 'peace', 'harmony' and 'joy', important in conservative evangelical gender ideology, suggests common ground with feminism's support for women's agency. Submission sometimes helps women create better husbands, Brusco's (1995) work on Columbian evangelicals shows. Submission may represent attempts, albeit with limited resources, to assert some control. In her study of American evangelical women, Griffith (1997: 178-179) explains that submission is not simply about women 'participating in their own victimization.' Rather, it is 'a doctrine with a fluid history' and several interpretations which grant women varying degrees of power and from which women select in mix-and-match fashion. Although a gulf remains between authority/submission and feminist views of partnership, authority and submission can be moulded in a more egalitarian direction.

In NFI discourse a husband's role is not just to take authority; it is also to 'unselfishly love and honour' his wife (T. Virgo 1987: 59). This command to evangelical men is important. It is almost always present within evangelical marriage discourse and operates as a crucial brake upon overly harsh male authority. Stressing that Jesus is the model for 'servant leadership', evangelicals argue that men should 'love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her' (Eph. 5:25; Hosier 1998). The call to 'servant leadership' moderates the meanings held by 'authority' and 'headship' – some evangelicals so stress men's obligation to sacrifice themselves and consult their wives that men's leadership of the marriage is negligible. Sacrificial leadership theology produces men resembling pro-feminist 'new men'.

This seems to be happening even in Terry and Wendy Virgo's marriage. Accounts of decision-making Wendy Virgo (1989: 129-130) provides from their marriage to show that submission works actually show not submission and authority but

partnership and mutuality. The Virgos preach authority and submission, but do not always practise it.

Marriage at Westside

Despite these complex interpretations, the authority/submission dualism shows no sign of being challenged in public NFI discourse. However, participant observation and interview research at the congregation I call Westside demonstrate greater discord. As Brasher (1998: 133) found when studying two American evangelical churches, 'While the patterns of congregational life and the texts in congregational bookstores set out clear, stringent ideals of gender and family life, the actual behaviors of real believers…present a much messier picture.'

Some discussion about marriage occurred during Westside gatherings, but less than NFI ideology would predict. Marriage was instead a taken-for-granted feature of church life. It was celebrated enthusiastically, and on different occasions I was shown (without requesting them) the wedding video and/or photographs of several Westside members. Marriage was regarded as something everyone desires and most will enter, and those who were not married (including myself) were targets for the married members' concern and matchmaking attempts. Marriage signifies adulthood and maturity and brings different requirements for women and men. When NFI women marry, they adopt their husbands' surname and the title 'Mrs'. And when a married couple are referred to the man is listed first. The leading couple, Sarah and Chris (Chris is the leader and Sarah is his wife), were never referred to as 'Sarah and Chris', but always 'Chris and Sarah'. While these practices often remain in contemporary Britain, they are just about uniform within NFI.

'Do you think men and women should have different roles in the family and marriage? (If so, what should the differences be?)' I asked during my interviews with twenty Westside members. Fourteen out of twenty responded affirmatively. Of the remaining six, one responded in the negative, and the other five replied that it depended on the couple. Of the fourteen who favoured marital gender division, twelve located this division primarily in marriage rather than in reproduction. Only two located it in motherhood or fatherhood. This is significant, for while Westside and NFI have much to

say about ideological differences between motherhood and fatherhood, they class the husband-wife relationship as the paramount setting for gender to be displayed. Not only did twelve of the interviewees favour gender division centred on marital 'roles', but there was also a slightly greater emphasis on men's responsibilities.

Emma was the most conservative. Emma explained that while she would not insist on women staying at home to care for their children full-time, she was convinced differentiated marital roles were important:

> In a marriage… I think that the man should have the ultimate say, and I think that the man should be the head of the household um, and that any decisions, big decisions with regard to the family, that they should be met by the man.

The husband's role is having the last word or 'ultimate say', being 'head of the household' and making 'big decisions' concerning the family. Chris had a similar view, emphasising his 'responsibility' to 'protect', 'look after' and 'provide for' his wife and children:

> I, I feel that ultimately I'm the head of the, the household. But I don't say that in a, in a, in a way that I enjoy kind of lording it over my wife and family. I think, you know, I think it's ultimately it is a male thing to be kind of head of the family and er, and I think I think there is a degree, there is some scriptural basis for that, I think around things like, you know…it talks about submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ and then 'wives submit to your husbands.' But having said that, so I do think there's a, you know, the guy is ultimately the head of the family, but having said that I can't ever think of a situation in my marriage where I've had to say 'this is what I think and you've got to do it' kind of thing but there's been, there's always been enough of a kind of me listening to Sarah and um me valuing her, her opinion and that kind of thing so there's never been a, a, a time where I've almost had to, if you like, pull rank on her, um. Having said that I do, I carry with me the weight, I feel like I carry the weight of responsibility for my family.

His hesitance is considerable. He qualifies his beliefs by stressing his additional commitment to equality, mutual submission and listening to his wife. In his version headship (in other words decision-making that counters his wife's opinions) has never operated in his marriage.

In her interview Sarah described headship as leadership, but added that women should 'speak up' and give their opinions. She started hesitantly, perhaps mindful of

critiques of male-led marriage.[5] She explained that male leadership reduces conflict because it minimises disagreement. However, submission is not passive acquiescence but participation in the decisions her husband has made in consultation with her, she said. Sarah does not consider marriage easy: its success depends upon 'mak[ing] mistakes together' and mutual commitment to communication, respect and taking responsibility.

Many who answered 'yes' to wanting different marital 'roles' then qualified or altered this. Often a kind of battle – certainly a tension – emerged between conservative and egalitarian gender ideals. Interviewees would assert the importance of gender-differentiated marital roles, then deny them, minimise them, render them symbolic rather than practical or suggest practices that reversed the gender order they claimed to advocate. Stacey (1998: 118-119) illustrates this in her conversation with a church leader whose dual views led her to depict him as Bill # 1 and # 2, 'fundamentalist Bill' and his egalitarian 'alter-ego'. Like Stacey's two Bills, Westside had two Marions:

> Marion # 1: I think that the husband has a spiritual authority in terms of the way he leads his wife. So I do agree with the whole thing of women obeying their husbands
> Marion # 2: But I think that you've always got to look at that in the context of God requiring the man to love his wife as Christ loves the church. So if the husband is doing that I think there's a safety for the woman in the way her husband is making decisions um and that in that everything should be discussed and as far as possible both parties should be able to agree…
> Marion # 1: I think that a father has sort of like an overall responsibility for the family's um welfare and for being the provider
> Marion # 2: and although he might not necessarily go out and be the breadwinner for the family…
> Marion # 1: he will have responsibility to see that is performed and done adequately.
> *Interviewer: Right…that's interesting. So the mother could be the breadwinner?*
> Marion # 2: Yeah, but, but as long as that is discussed
> Marion # 1: and the actual, and the father has ultimate, sort of um, responsibility for that.

Marion endorses Emma's focus on the man 'making decisions,' adding that women should 'obey' their husbands. However, she says decisions should be 'discussed' to find a consensus that removes the need for the man to make the decision; at once she affirms and negates headship as an ideal. Furthermore, it is acceptable for the wife to be the

main 'breadwinner' if her husband retains 'ultimate responsibility'. This represents a kind of symbolic headship: the man does not need to do anything to show that he is the head; he possesses 'responsibility' by virtue of his position as head. But Marion's remarks about 'responsibility' could be interpreted more actively, as if the husband is directing his wife to become the breadwinner as he sees will benefit the family. She adds to Emma's three understandings of the husband's role another: the husband should spiritually lead his wife.

Although she appeared unsure, Lara alluded to symbolic headship, considering it important that the man *appeared* to make the decisions, even if his wife made them. The 'I' may indicate that she's referring to her relationship with her boyfriend, who she married shortly after my fieldwork finished. If so, it is possible that this relationship convinced her that headship may not be practically applicable:

> For a Christian I believe they should be different, um, just the whole you know man in authority you know makes the decisions, maybe not but um [laughs] but think like that they're making decisions even though I am, you know [laughs]. So um, I think yeah it's just a much more, especially like with families and things as well, that they should be seen to, although equal in most ways but you know still seen to have some kind of…
> *Interviewer: Kind of difference?*
> Yeah, it's not being totally sure what I'm talking about really, but… [laughs]

Gallagher (2003; Gallagher & Smith 1999) has similarly noted a dichotomy within evangelicalism between the 'symbolic traditionalism' of the vocally embraced concept of headship and the 'pragmatic egalitarianism' visible in believers' everyday lives.

Ruth, who was in a non-cohabiting relationship, was in a process of negotiation between what she saw in the biblical texts (male leadership) and what she personally thought (that relationships should be egalitarian):

> I think I'm kind of grappling with the idea of the role of the man and the woman, um. I think the Bible teaches that there is a difference, like the man should be the head of the family um, but I think on the other hand, they've got equal roles to respect, submitting to one another um, so yeah, and I'm still to be honest grappling with what, those kind of relations go. As far as I know there should be a lot of equality but the men should, you know, take the lead um, or the responsibility, I think [laughs].

Rachel answered my question about whether different marital roles were necessary in the affirmative. Partially negating her affirmation, she explained that she believed there was a 'sliding scale' of acceptable attitudes and practices ranging from 'traditional' interpretations of marriage where the wife managed the kitchen and the husband the DIY to 'modern' ideals of equality where 'everyday roles…are dependent on the personalities involved.' She did not mention authority or submission, so I prompted 'what about submission and headship?' She seemed reluctant to discuss these, responding simply that she considered it often appropriate for women to take more of a 'hands-on sort of micro parenthood' role sorting out the 'nitty-gritties' of childcare; conversely, 'I think the role of the man is more to give stability, to give to provide security, to provide um, sort of just… provide stability and an environment where the family is safe and secure'.

Her husband Simon identified headship as a man's greater responsibility for the marriage's success. He felt this towards Rachel. Yet he did not believe Rachel should fulfil a submissive or domestic role. He spoke of 'feeling our way round it', of couples practising marriage as they saw fit. Furthermore, like Marion's and Lara's notions of theoretical male leadership coupled with practical equality or female leadership, Simon admitted that though he carries 'responsibility' for the marriage, Rachel makes more financial and administrative decisions. In conclusion, he thinks they 'run a very equal ship,' contrasting his marriage with that of friends he sees as 'quite weird' because they operate a more 'traditional' division of task. Simon's response, like the others, demonstrates the postfeminist juxtaposition of separate spheres and feminist understandings of marriage.

Jane believed that wives should submit to their husbands' orders, but said headship equated to a husband's loving care for his wife, and that her own husband had only exercised headship once:

> How it works out, you know, this authority of the husband, in my own marriage it just hasn't been an issue. Just like once in eight years Mark's said something like 'you shouldn't go to work today, I'm telling you not to go to work today because you're ill' and in fact what he was doing was something that was immensely loving and in my best interests and that's how I saw it and took it. But at the same time I swallowed hard and thought 'I can't because I promised that I would, um, obey' and so my marriage vows included this submission bit and I thought 'rubber hits the road, I've got to stay at home and pull out'.

> *Interviewer: So that's the main thing?*
> Yeah, that was. How it gets worked out practically, I mean I can see all these biblical arguments but practically what it boils down to, this whole sort of submission of the woman doesn't seem to be an issue for me. I'm not living my life permanently feeling 'oh, what's Mark got to say about this? I've got to do what he says'.

In forming these interpretations Westside often juxtapose what they understand from the Bible (husbands should lead, wives should submit) with attention to its and their own culture in a way that leads to greater egalitarianism. This was also so for Jane's husband Mark. Mark seemed to be minimising the gender subordination in the New International Version of the Bible's 'wives, submit to your husbands' (Eph. 5:24) by rephrasing it 'wives, respect your husbands' and stressing men being sacrificial by rephrasing 'husbands, love your wives' as 'husbands, lay your lives down for your wives':

> *Interviewer: Do you think men and women should have different roles in the family?*
> Yes, yeah well definitely biblically. So you've got particularly the Ephesians passage but it's elsewhere in the New Testament as well. So some of the differences are made clear. Others aren't as clear as we'd hope. So the obvious dichotomy is 'husbands, lay your lives down for your wives' and 'wives, respect your husbands' but I'm sure there's no implication there that husbands aren't supposed to respect their wives and wives aren't prepared to lay their lives down for their husbands. So I think biblically there's a different flavour to the love there. There is an asymmetry but it's – I'm going to hedge with these questions – it's hard to be clear exactly how much of that comes out of fundamental biblical truth and how much is inferred from what was going on then culturally and what's going on now culturally.

Furthermore, a third of Westside dispense with authority and submission, basing any task differences on individuals' 'personalities'. Sometimes their conceptions of 'personality' are based on gender stereotypes or women's childbearing activities so do not equate to egalitarian practices, but at other times stereotypes are absent:

> I think family and marriage is something where you do have to commit to each other and there are certain things that perhaps a male is better at and things a female is better at and I think as a couple you need to work out what your strengths and weaknesses are and play on that. I mean I do feel that, er, a fatherly figure is definitely a, a big must when it comes to children, for security, and perhaps the mother figure is the one who's more sympathetic. I do not feel

that the man should go off and work and the woman should stay in the house. I think that each couple's different and it should be a two-way thing. (Imogen)

I think you can have different roles in a marriage, but I don't think it needs to be generally *a* different role, so I don't think you need to say 'all women should do X' in a marriage and 'all men should do X' in a marriage
Interviewer: So you mean you could be married and you could do the laundry and your husband could do the cooking?
Yeah, or, yeah, because it's stupid if you're both trying to do everything the same. But, but I think they work best, or the ones I've seen work best, when people assume or they find their natural what they like doing best in a marriage. So that could mean, um, that if, if the, um, wife wants to go and work after she's had her baby, then she does while her husband stays at home and I've seen that happen as well. But it could mean the opposite as well. (Dawn)

I think roles should be according to individual preference and appropriateness. (Jenny)

Conclusion

While the majority of these evangelicals still support headship, the meanings of headship range far beyond existing typologies. For some, headship signifies husbands' prerogative in decision-making; others give this privilege only for important decisions, still others only if stalemate is reached. For some, headship requires men to lead the marriage; for others it involves a more amorphous sense of 'responsibility' that does not translate into 'role' differences. Some advocate what Gallagher (2003; Gallagher & Smith 1999) calls 'symbolic traditionalism' that operates alongside 'pragmatic egalitarianism'. A few take this further, allowing what looks like female control as long as men are proclaimed leaders. Others relate headship only to differential parenting activities. Still others advocate a sacrificial headship that negates (or nearly negates) authoritarian aspects; the most egalitarian refer instead to 'mutual submission'. Headship is a flexible concept that is moulded, in postfeminist fashion, to produce simultaneously conservative *and* feminist interpretations.

Along with the emphasis of the more conservative majority, the attitudes of Westside's more egalitarian third demonstrate an ideal of intimate companionship that accompanies negotiation of work and home responsibilities according to 'natural' inclination and personal choice. Although some Westside members are reluctant to

'own up' to believing this, preferring to stress adherence to NFI's public male headship doctrine, support for equality is stronger, more heartfelt, than the ideology of headship they notionally support as biblical. What results in NFI can be labelled postfeminist partnership: in drawing, unconsciously, on historical and contemporary British understandings of gender and partnership NFI present an amalgam of feminism and gender conservatism only a little more conservative than that found in Britain today.

Evangelicals, therefore, are living their partnerships in a more postfeminist and individualized manner than might be expected, or than they are willing to admit. However, some traditional elements remain that separate them from their secular counterparts. First, they identify marriage as the proper setting for this partially-individualized partnership. NFI maintain that sex outside marriage is sinful and although this is proving to be an unattainable ideal that is frequently dispensed with in private (Sharma 2005), publicly acknowledged and legitimated non-married sexual relationships are rare amongst evangelicals. Second, their preference for endogamous marriage (marriage within NFI itself or at least to another evangelical) means that since both partners are often evangelical Christians, it is more likely that they will uphold more traditional concepts of partnership. Third, as the comments made by the more egalitarian Westside members indicate, marriage is still tied to parenthood. Fourth, while divorce does occur it appears to be strongly disapproved of, as illustrated in Gallagher's (2003: 69) survey of US Protestants in which only 13.3% of the 430 who identified as evangelical agreed with the statement 'empty/unfulfilling marriages should be ended in divorce'. Marriages are therefore not simply entered for their own sake but also in the expectation that children will ensue and the couple will remain together despite any incompatibility; they are not 'pure' relationships in Giddens' (1992) sense of the term.

While evangelicals are practising posfeminist partnership, their partnerships are less individualized than those of their less religious peers. Religion is a factor that discourages individualization, as Smart and Simpson (2004) argue in the case of transnational minority ethnic communities, but it is also an arena impacted by postfeminist individualizing processes.

Notes

1 Some scholars, particularly self-identified evangelicals, date evangelicalism from the the sixteenth-century Reformation (in particular the wing associated with Martin Luther) and seventeenth-century Puritanism and Pietism (e.g. Ward 1992). The consensus, however, is that evangelicalism developed from the Great Awakening, the Protestant revivalist movement of the late 1730s and early 1740s. The Great Awakening was associated in North America with Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield and in Britain with Whitefield and John Wesley, whose activist and conversionist emphasis on spreading the gospel, motivated by belief in the authority of the Bible and the centrality of the cross, came to mark out evangelicalism (Bebbington 1989: 20-50).

2 Additionally, Baillie and Porter's work examines the distinctive context of Northern Ireland. Their findings should not be taken as representative of the UK.

3 In order to protect their anonymity I use pseudonyms when referring to the congregation and its members throughout this article.

4 From 25.5 to 30.5 for men, and 22.5 to 28 for women

5 Westside members were aware that I considered myself a feminist. This may have made them more uncomfortable about expressing non- or anti-feminist views.

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