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Aging and the End Times

Evangelical Eschatology and Experiences of Elderhood in the United States and South Africa

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Abstract

Recent trends in aging studies and popular U.S. discourse reformulate elderhood as a valuable, not necessarily negative, experience, and these new models of aging have extended to a consideration of religious practices that can make old age particularly meaningful. Among evangelical Christians, a shared cosmological (and specifically eschatological) narrative structure provides solace and semiotic coherence in the face of challenges characteristic of the “third” and “fourth age.” What remains less clear is the interplay between transnational religious forces like evangelical ideology and local social contexts in which they are enacted, a process illuminated only through cross-cultural comparison. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Kentucky and in South Africa, I argue that rather than viewing evangelical rhetoric as narrowly determinative, anthropologists ought to broaden common understandings of Christians’ end-times ideology as something that may, contingent on socio-historical context, alternatively help older congregants cope with the physical effects of aging or allow for reconciliation amid rapid societal change. U.S. evangelical churches often address existential concerns faced by a growing population of elders while downplaying the significance of race, yet white South African Christians employ a similar religious cosmology to place their actions during the apartheid era in a symbolically legible narrative. Both settings indicate the malleability of evangelical ideas to foreground certain concerns while erasing others, challenging assumptions about the uniform effects of global evangelicalism.

Keywords: *evangelical Christianity; eschatology; successful aging; race; apartheid*

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American popular rhetoric surrounding aging presents it as a crisis: at turns a social change in roles and relationships (Johnson 2005), an economic challenge to U.S. society's ability to provide materially for aging people (Long 2003), or an existential threat to personhood (Kimble 1990). However, how does the meaning of old age transform when it is conceived not as the end but only as the antechamber for the next, transcendent world? Evangelical Christians around the globe share at least some elements of a cosmology that positions the contemporary world along a biblical trajectory from God's creation of the universe to the end days in which the perfection of God's plan will be realized once again. Although conservative Christians face opprobrium for their rejection of the values of liberal secular modernity, anthropologists over the past few decades have begun to direct their attention toward an examination of evangelical lives as semiotically complex systems (Harding 1991, 2000; Bielo 2011). These ideologies may help mitigate anxieties associated not only with the threat of physical decline in old age but also the rapidly changing social worlds elders face. Older evangelicals operate from a model of aging in which the later stages of life demand preparation for eternity and the purposive helping of others in the present world. At the same time, questions of how evangelicals have engaged in self-fashioning in other societies remain to be addressed by ethnographic data, as aging does not mean the same thing everywhere (Lock 1993; Childs 2004).

The academic literature on religion and aging in the United States has burgeoned in the 1990s and early decades of the twenty-first century, with incisive monographs (e.g., Coleman 2011) and even wholly dedicated journals, such as the *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*. Much of this inquiry has centered on the ways in which religious belief and ritual practice improve the health of aging adults (Ai and Ardel 2009; Corwin 2013; Koenig 1994). Despite this extensive focus on the relation between religiosity and health in old age, less explicit attention has been devoted to comparing these experiences across cultural settings and informed by ethnography. Even less consideration has been given to exploring how religious eschatology specifically—that is, discourse concerning the end times and what happens after death—affects subjective experiences of aging (although see Gerkin 1989 and Barclay 2016 for examples from a pastoral perspective). My project constitutes an attempt to introduce evangelical notions of the end times into academic understandings of the aging process through a cross-cultural and anthropological approach.

I present three case studies in this article from the world of evangelical Christianity, drawing on four months of ethnographic research conducted in 2014 and 2017 in northern Kentucky, U.S.A., and the peri-urban neighborhoods of Johannesburg, South Africa, respectively. These linked projects emerged out of an attempt to trace the dynamics of transnational evangelical networks (which include the circulation of common speakers, resources, and theology) as they spread Christianity to differently positioned audiences. First, I draw on ethnographic material from Kentucky, at an independent Baptist congregation and an encroachment, as a means to illustrate how white evangelicals cope with the prospect of death and suffering in the world (i.e., an answer to the theodicy question) while also constructing race as an anti-biblical concept. Next, I extend my ethnographic findings from this field site by turning to textual primary sources consumed within U.S. evangelical networks that address the roles and virtues of old age, putting

my observations in conversation with broader national trends. Finally, I adduce data collected in Johannesburg as an example of evangelical Christianity's role in shaping the life reflections of white South Africans as they reach elderhood.

This article addresses a recurrent theme that appeared in the background of my interlocutors' discussions across national and cultural boundaries: the relation between elderhood and Christianity's role in making sense of the world. Older congregants and church leaders reflected, at times more or less explicitly, on the role of their religious cosmology—especially their notions of eschatology—in constructing a coherent worldview. Rather than viewing evangelical rhetoric as monolithic and determinative, anthropologists ought to broaden common understandings of Christians' end-times ideology as something that can, depending on the salient social context, help older congregants cope with the physical effects of aging or provide a framework for reconciliation, even if it reinforces other dominant ideologies, such as narratives about race. In so doing, the dynamics between global religious phenomena and local particularity emerge ever more strongly.

Preliminaries: The Multi-Sited Ethnography of Evangelical Christianity and the Construction of an Alternative Temporality

Before a consideration of each case study in turn, I will provide a brief methodological comment on the study of evangelical Christianity from a transnational perspective. One of the defining characteristics of Christianity has been its demonstrated ability to take root in diverse cultural environments. Whether perceived as threat or panacea, the global spread of conservative Christianity in particular has introduced a recognizable cosmology into what appear in other respects to be vastly different social groups. Indeed, it is this universalism, especially in its boldest proselytizing forms, that has powered its ascent into one of the world's most pervasive religious frameworks (e.g., Landau 2013).

Anthropologists have focused on the hopeful character of Christian rhetoric, as well as its malleability, as keys to its international sway (Keane 2007; Robbins 2004). On the one hand, this missionization and conversion engenders a seemingly shared experience for people otherwise separated by geographic and cultural distance, thus creating a population that, at least in certain ways, can be meaningfully studied as a social unit. At the same time, however, it must be analyzed in ways that do not flatten its diverse local manifestations, a task I undertake by drawing examples from different national contexts. Comparative ethnography, if conducted long enough to develop a proper snapshot of quotidian life, highlights the features of a social group that are unique to a local cultural setting while acknowledging how they are continually shaped by broader, even global forces (Comaroff and Comaroff 2016; Lock 1993). While relying on multiple field sites risks producing superficial cultural understanding, the conclusions drawn here use the parallels among evangelical cultures as an advantage to gain a semblance of the complex forms that evangelical theology can take and the effects it can have across the life cycle.

To explore the role of religion in constructing the experience of old age across otherwise disparate societies, I adopt what might be labelled a "multi-sited" approach (Marcus 1995). My research follows the movement of conservative interpretations of the Bible in order to ask how those ideas shape people's lives and how people in turn channel them into unique forms of Christian practice. At its most basic level, conservatism refers to an ideological posture of valuing traditional authority (variously conceived) over contemporary social change. While conservatism often overlaps in its cultural, economic, and philosophical varieties (Zumbrunnen and Gangl 2008), Christian conservatism specifically refers to a clearly-articulated resistance to any hermeneutics that depart from a literalist reading of the Bible; in other words, the theological perspectives of early Reformation figures like John Calvin are privileged over reinterpretations

in the light of contemporary social norms (e.g., on shifting gender roles) or even scientific developments (e.g., on the time depth of cosmic history). Even within a single national context, conservative evangelicals do not constitute a single congregational, or even denominational, unit. The Christians who come under the heading of “evangelical” or “fundamentalist” in the United States are heterogeneous, with contrasting theological beliefs and religious practices, to say nothing of their differences along other social dimensions (Harris 1998).

Complicating this image are the multiple terms used to describe these Christians in North America and South Africa. Nonetheless, in analyzing how evangelical ideas have spread, I take these communities to exhibit “family resemblances” in the Wittgensteinian sense of not sharing a single set of criteria yet being similar enough to elicit recognition as part of a group (see Saler 2000[1993] for an application of family resemblances to the study of religion). Shared evangelical beliefs center on the role of Jesus Christ as exclusive savior and God’s absolute authority in the text of the Bible. They prioritize an individual’s need to be “born again” in accepting Christ, whom they understand as having died to absolve all people of their sins. This personal relation with Christ, along with a conservative, literal reading of the biblical text as the sole source of religious authority, marks off evangelicals from relatively more liberal Protestant and Catholic sects (Harding 2000). Here I use the term “evangelicals” to describe Christians who privilege a born-again experience and understand the present world as a sin-filled prelude to an apocalyptic second coming. Within this common framework, however, evangelicals’ eschatologies differ in terms of the minutiae regulating the sequencing of Christ’s return, whether it happens before or after the prophesied tribulation and whether God’s people will have been “raptured” away before it commences.

To understand this cosmology and its effects on aging, it is helpful to think of it as an alternative model to secular temporalities. Evangelicals emplot (cf. Mattingly 1994) everyday life onto a cosmic narrative that begins with God’s creation of a perfect world as described in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis. With the disobedience of Adam and Eve and humanity’s subsequent fall into sin, people suffered an estrangement from God and found themselves in a world plagued by death, pain, and evil. The messianic figure of Christ offers the potential for rebirth and redemption from this world in a prophesied future. In simplified form, notwithstanding the minor disagreements in eschatological sequencing mentioned above, evangelicals share an understanding of time as divided into the phases of a perfected creation, the corrupted period in which we are now living, and the promise of a utopian future once Christ has returned (Guyer 2007; cf. McGovern 2012, 250-4). These transitions are abrupt, so that “evangelical thought is dispensationalist, in which the entire working of the world changes from age to age according to the nature of God’s presence in it” (Guyer 2007, 414). While the periods themselves are abrupt and total divisions, evangelicals’ notions of the distant future inflect their enactment of the same overarching narratives in the present, so much so that Susan Harding (2000, 240) describes them as living in a “future unfolding.” It is this omnipresent specter of Christian eschatology in the present that has significant implications for how old age becomes discussed and lived within evangelical communities in the United States and South Africa alike, albeit in distinct, structurally mediated ways.

Death and Aging in Kentucky

“The matter of greatest concern to the biblical writers was not aging as such but the telos toward which the aging process leads: mortality. A biblical perspective on growing old will cause us to focus on death as the end toward which we move—and yet as the last enemy confronted by God’s redemptive power” (Hays and Hays 2003, 4).

In the summer of 2014 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in northern Kentucky with evangelical Baptists, several of whom were affiliated with the nearby interdenominational apologetics organization Answers in Genesis (AiG), which aims to defend a young-earth view of creation in opposition to all evolutionist interpretations of the distant past. This project traced creationists' integration of scientific and religious rhetoric, as well as how this discourse becomes implemented in everyday life. In August 2014, I attended a workshop hosted by AiG to equip a Christian audience to defend the faith through the topic of origins. I listened to and asked questions during presentations designed to foreground the creation/evolution debate's relevance to spreading the Christian message more broadly. Various speakers, most of whom focused on a single topic or area of inquiry like geology or biology, taught that all the suffering in the world could be traced to the origin of human sin in the Garden of Eden.

Dr. Georgia Purdom,ⁱ a molecular biologist and creation evangelist, argued in one such speech that the genetic mutations that lead to diseases like cancer occur only because of the current state of life governed by "fallen," corrupted physical laws. In explaining "the reason that there is pain and suffering and death in this world," she narrated the difficulties she and her husband faced in conceiving a child; it was only when she "understood the history in Genesis" that this predicament became less senseless and more bearable. When she turned to scripture, she realized the inability to have biological children "wasn't God's fault; it was man's fault, right? And it all started back in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve chose to disobey God; they sinned, and because of my sin through Adam, everything is affected, right? Everything is cursed, including my body, my husband's body, it's all affected as a result of that." This curse of sin has produced a physically degraded world into which pain and suffering intrude.

At the same time, as Purdom and her husband started considering adoption from a foreign country, she was forced to consider her existing *prejudicial* ills. She admits that growing up in a homogeneous midwestern town, "I was raised in a Christian home, and I would not have considered myself a racist, but in reality I was." Later, she encountered AiG teachings and began to see the same biblical "curse" as having not only brought biological degradation into the world but also segmented the human race into artificial social divisions that today form the basis for different "races." In a parallel argument to one made by anthropologists (cf. Boas 1949[1931]; American Anthropological Association 1998), she emphasized the lack of a biological basis for race. Instead of drawing this conclusion from race's social construction, however, she considered racism a consequence of humanity's sinful nature in destroying the perfect unity designed by God in the world's original state. As Ken Ham, the CEO of AiG, said during the same conference, Purdom's material on the biological fiction of race was sorely needed in Ferguson, Missouri, which at the time was the site of anti-racist protests in the wake of Michael Brown's death at the hands of a police officer. Ham's suggestion that there would be no need to protest if the protesters only realized we were all "one race" (i.e., the human race) exemplifies an attempted erasure of the ongoing structural significance of U.S. racism (Alim and Smitherman 2012). I return to the politics of this implicit non-racialism later in this essay; for now, however, the relevant point is the elaboration of a cosmology in which contemporary social and physical ills, including physiological decline and social inequality, are attributed to the introduction of sin into God's creation.

Dr. Tommy Mitchell, a clinical physician with years of experience advising patients with terminal diagnoses, addressed most directly the anxieties over mortality people face specifically as they grow older. When confronted with the question of how God can allow so much death to impede on human life, he encouraged Christians who want to spread the Gospel to distinguish "eternal" from "physical" life, a rhetorical strategy in line with evangelicals' extension of temporality beyond the single life course. He acknowledged the bodily suffering that often comes with old age in the physical world, but these pains, he said, ought to be faced alongside God's promise of salvation through the repentance of sins. He called for recognition of a "strength in trials": the fortitude to endure a world corrupted by sin with the hope of

redemption around the corner. Mitchell came to terms with the loss of his own mother by understanding her death as part of an unfolding narrative of sinful corruption that does not end with individuals' lives but will be overcome at an unspecified future time. The eschatological narrative he enacted in this presentation offers a way to reinterpret old age not as the terminal stage of life but instead as a natural step along the path toward escaping this world and reuniting with God after death.

While Mitchell's eschatology motivated his own attitude toward death and suffering, it is only through participant observation with older Christians that the everyday effects of hearing these claims become perceptible. During time spent attending services and interviewing participants at an independent Baptist church near AiG's headquarters, I met Milton, who exemplifies some of the ways in which an evangelical orientation to the world can provide comfort with and greater acceptance of the physical challenges of old age. Milton was a white married man in his seventies who attended church services regularly (typically thrice per week) with his wife, Dolores. Always with an infectious smile, he walked around the chapel and the attached annex with the help of a tennis-ball-footed walker and the steady, loving hand of his wife. Dolores, although only a few years his junior, was more mobile and with fewer pressing health concerns than her husband. Besides church services, he and I joined a gender-segregated evening prayer session each week and attended Sunday school together. As he insisted, it is never too late in life to continue learning more about Christ, and in fact there were more adults than children at these Sunday classes.

An important component of Milton's story, and one that surprised me when I first started talking to him, is that he had not been a Christian for very long. It was only a few years prior to 2014 that he was "saved" and committed his life to Christ. Dolores had been a devoted member of the church before that, and their difference in religiosity led to Milton staying home each Sunday as she attended services. When Milton started experiencing health concerns, especially those involving his back and his ability to walk unassisted, he started looking for answers not just in the medical realm but in the religious narratives his wife would share with him in an effort for him to be born again in Christ. At some point, Milton described the realization of God's message as something that "hit" him like an epiphany, and he started attending services with his wife. Since he was relatively new to evangelical worship, he was eager to attend the adult Sunday school lessons at which most congregation members sat in. Although an elder in the physical sense, he considered himself only a child in faith, someone still growing in his understanding of the Bible and of Christ.

Since aging in the church was not the explicit focus of my research, the following analysis of his newfound salvation and his experience of aging is based principally on observational data rather than interviews or questionnaires. Nevertheless, his declaration of faith in later life points toward the work that evangelical narratives did to help him give meaning to his life's trajectory. It was only after his health started to decline and he needed to retire from a rewarding career that he acceded to his wife's attempts to pull him into the fold of the church. What his faith gave him was a way to make sense of his shifting physical capabilities within a different narrative from that of a perpetually active body associated with U.S. successful aging discourse (cf. Rowe and Kahn 1998; Katz 2000; Lamb 2017).

The fruits borne by his faith were most publicly visible in the weekly prayer sessions we attended together. During these quiet meetings before Sunday evening services, the pastor and men of the church congregated in an office to invoke before God specific problems facing themselves and loved ones. The pastor would usually ask about Milton's health and his frequent medical appointments and call on God, if He willed it, to help the doctors find a palatable solution to ease his pain in walking. Milton thanked the others for keeping him in their prayers, and his comfort may have come at least in part from being within a communal setting (see Koenig 1994 on the health benefits of religious communities). At the same time,

however, he would observe that he was approaching the end of his life and was looking with anticipation toward the final judgment. He openly confided that he was not as frightened of the prospect of death as he was before he was saved and that he knew he could trust in Christ to bring him and his wife everlasting life and force the world back to perfection after a period of trials and tribulations.

These patterned, ritualized prayer meetings offered Milton both comfort in the moment (i.e., knowing he was part of a caring community) and reassurance that his physical pains in this world would not last forever but would give way to a transcendent, utopian existence at the end point of a teleological evangelical narrative. A focus here on Milton's experiences, while not representative of all U.S. evangelicals, is also not idiosyncratic. An ongoing concern voiced in after-church discussions was the noticeable aging of the congregation as a whole. In other words, the average age of the congregants was rising, with fewer young people of childbearing age taking part in regular services. This anxiety is felt not only at this setting but among conservative Christians more broadly (e.g., Ham, Beemer, and Hillard 2009), who sense a crisis of social reproduction in an age in which secular temptations threaten to draw youth away from the church. As the "graying" of conservative churches continues, they may become sites at which people make sense of old age surrounded by compatriots facing similar struggles; what the long-term effects such a change may have among future generations of evangelicals remains uncertain.

Evangelical Transcendence in the United States

*"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.
A time to be born, and a time to die"*
(Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, King James Version)

This theme of eschatology's impact on elderhood can be placed in its theological and social context through a turn to popular evangelical literature in the United States. While conservative Christians imbue several valuable and transcendent qualities into later life stages, nowhere is rhetoric directed more explicitly toward the demands of aging than in famed evangelist Billy Graham's (2011) book on the topic, *Nearing Home*. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, Graham, who died in early 2018, was a Southern Baptist preacher and a leading figure in the spread of evangelical Christianity through large-scale public events, or "crusades." In this section I offer a close reading of several critical passages of his memoir that contextualize some of the findings that emerged during field observations in Kentucky.

Graham describes how older people can search for a renewed sense of purpose without falling into isolation from family and friends or complete disengagement from worldly pursuits.ⁱⁱ For him, this sense of purpose is motivated by a conviction that, even as elders age and often face growing physical challenges, God has kept them here for a reason, which they must take an active role to fulfill. Challenging dominant cultural attitudes toward old age, Graham writes, "While [U.S.] society may not believe that growing old is a respectable phase of life, my prayer is that believers in Jesus Christ will walk the last mile of the way triumphantly, as Moses did when he died at age 120" (*ibid.*, 15). Here he takes the biblical figure of Moses as a positive role model for fulfilling God's purpose, even—indeed, especially—in later life, in contrast to the less "respectable" attitude he sees circulating within American society. Such a stance positions evangelical approaches to aging as embracing unique God-given virtues of older men and women.

Among these virtues, Graham emphasizes the importance of helping others in the community turn to God. With their increased wisdom and life experiences, elders have a role to play in fostering younger Christians' spiritual commitments, especially as they now, in a post-retirement age, have more time to devote to ecclesiastical matters. In turn, their integration into congregational communities will help them cope with the deaths of peers and loved ones and to prepare for their own deaths (*ibid.*, 104-5). Religious

leaders like Graham insist that, even in the face of growing physical challenges, older adults ought to focus on these important evangelistic roles they can now play, roles that parallel the careers of earlier generations of Christians who suffered to promote the Gospel.

As Graham (*ibid.*, 40) exhorts his followers, “Some of us may be bedridden or confined to a wheelchair, but we still have important work to do.” One response to physical decline in older age would be to mourn the loss of the youthful person, but Graham calls for an *embrace* of the suffering in old age as an obstacle to be overcome in the overall evangelistic process. He draws parallels between the narratives of those Christians who have suffered to save souls and elders who continue to fight to do their “important work” on earth.ⁱⁱⁱ In this way, his model of older Christians positions people like Milton as fulfilling a key purpose in the life of the evangelist whose lives are, therefore, inherently valuable, not a mere imitation of youth.

Graham is not alone in finding divine purpose in old age. Charles Pinches (2003), for example, although speaking from a more liberal Protestant perspective, likewise recognizes certain unique virtues in aging. He associates old age with greater simplicity in life, or a tendency for older people to travel lighter on their journeys. This language of leaving behind more complicated ties to the world behind in preparation for the final period of life resonates with a broader literature on the ideal of transcendence. Lars Tornstam (1999), for instance, has written of what he calls “gerotranscendence” as a path to superseding the demands of everyday life and, ultimately, to accept a shifting social role. Within this model, as people move from an emphasis on doing (physical activity and being relied on by others) to being (acceptance for their mere presence), they attain a kind of transcendence that “is a natural and important part of the process of ageing in the fourth age” (MacKinlay 2006, 161).^{iv} For the Christians who adopt transcendence as a virtue of old age, as with the appeals of Graham and other evangelicals, elderhood is a life stage set apart from others by its unique virtues imbued by God.

Uniquely evangelical interpretations of “transcendence” focus particularly on the ongoing, life-long development of the moral self. William Yount (2009, 89), a Southern Baptist, explains that “evangelicals see our development here and now as having eternal consequences for our life there and then. This places far greater importance on spiritual development in senior adults since physical death is not the end—there is an eternal existence to develop *for*” (emphasis added). From this standpoint, later years serve as a time of serious preparation for people’s future “life in the Kingdom of God,” which begins in the corporeal world through the cultivation of devout praise and mindfulness of God (*ibid.*, 102). In this version of transcendence, aging *qua* existential crisis (cf. Rowe and Kahn 1998) is replaced with aging as a time to take stock and shore up spiritual commitments before the afterlife. While this stance may not be unique to evangelicals—recall that the category “evangelical” itself is porous and widely encompassing—it is perhaps most perceptible among them, as they tend by definition to be deeply invested with faith in the world to come. Although they differ on other theological points, these Christians share a concern with reinterpreting aging from an anxiety expressed throughout American culture to something divinely authorized, and therefore spiritually meaningful.

Social Atonement and Transcendence in South Africa

“[Bishop Reteif’s] initial response to the massacre was to heroize the South African police and to demonize the PAC [Pan Africanist Congress] youth as the ‘instruments’ of evil forces. After the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] hearings, the bishop was contrite and conscious of the ‘blindness’ of his evangelical church to the suffering caused by apartheid and to the ways that his congregation had benefited from the suffering of the majority population” (Scheper-Hughes 2007, 219).

In turning from the U.S. context—with its obsessive focus on individual redemption—to South Africa, new concerns emerge with which evangelical communities have been forced to grapple: viz., the rapid, uncomfortable, and ongoing uncertainty in how the nation has transformed since the fall of apartheid in 1994. I began an ethnographic project in Johannesburg in 2017 working with Christians to trace the challenges and effects of globalizing a literalist reading of the Bible through transnational evangelical networks. This fieldwork has entailed attending religious services, listening to conference presentations on church planting efforts across denominational lines, and interviewing church elders to elicit the changes they have observed in the spread of Christianity since the fall of apartheid. By constructing an argument highlighting the contrast between these cultural contexts, I do not wish to imply that South African Christians distance themselves from a concern with individual soteriology; indeed, as in other parts of the world, evangelicals here stress the need for people to accept Jesus as their personal savior, and the overlap in the religious narratives they adopt allows them to draw on similar discursive repertoires as U.S. evangelicals. Nevertheless, conservative Christianity has not been imported “wholesale” into South Africa, a recurring theme in the anthropology of African Christianity (Cooper 2006; Klaitz 2010; Meyer 1998); instead, it has been part of a complex mediation between Africans’ social worlds and the religious and material forces that have circulated throughout the continent.

In the case of South Africa, white evangelicals have placed a global born-again cosmology in the service of speaking to the concerns they face transitioning from a dominant minority to an uncertain status in the “new South Africa.” Writing in the leadup to the fall of apartheid governance, Vincent Crapanzano (1985) illuminated these worries among both English-speaking and Afrikaner whites. Despite cultural differences and mutual suspicions, these two groups shared a “rhetoric of the future” centered around waiting for an unknown fundamental change they were powerless to stop (*ibid.*, 42-46). In response to their unease, many whites turned to religious revival, seeking “to escape through a transcendental language” (*ibid.*, 30). The nervous experience of “waiting” for an indefinite national future was coupled with visions of an impending apocalyptic doom, both for the conservative (and apartheid-affirming) Dutch Reformed Church and for charismatic prophetic teaching (*ibid.*, 93-98, 214).

One of Crapanzano’s informants described religious services as “a rehearsal for the day of reckoning,” affirming his “faith in a transcendent power” that would see the community through tense times (*ibid.*, 45). However, in these hopes of deliverance through transcendence, even whites who ostensibly supported the anti-apartheid movement and rejected any theological basis for racial divisions in the church nevertheless found themselves uncomfortable with the prospect of radical integration (see also Du Toit 1983). Crapanzano thus illustrates the dual role that Christianity served on the one hand to offer hope for a promised utopian future life yet on the other hand to mediate South Africa’s existing racial divisions without erasing them.

Since the fall of apartheid, hopes for a multiracial country have been tempered with the reality of ongoing poverty and, in some ways, even increasing inequality (Worden 2012, 158). Despite the outward appearance of sizable change, structures of dominance remained in place during the years of apartheid’s decadence (Johnson 1994). In this unique historical moment, whites “are selecting, editing, and borrowing from the cultural resources available to them to reinterpret old selves in the light of new knowledge and possibilities, while yet retaining a sense of personal congruence” (Steyn 2001, xxi-xxii). These “old selves” they feel the need to “reinterpret” were those embedded in apartheid-era social life, as a consequence of which they now face a cognitive dissonance between professed values and the social ties that made them part of the apartheid system. Through the example of struggle figures like Desmond Tutu, the Christian emphasis on mercy permeated the ethos of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, yet critics, including fellow anti-apartheid preacher and ex-member of the Afrikaner Dutch Reformed Church C.F. Beyers Naudé, decried a lack of many leaders’ true repentance and admission of guilt for past sins (Graybill 1995,

126). It is in this context that white evangelicals, especially those who grew up during the height of apartheid and are currently approaching older age, are grappling with the ethics of self-fashioning in a post-apartheid era.

The story of a newly retired, English-speaking pastor indicates poignantly the role taken during elderhood of white Christian atonement for racial injustice that occurred in the past and to which he and others had been blind. Anthony and I sat down before lunch in a quiet, suburban house he and his wife, Sharon, were preparing to leave for an old family home on the coast where they planned to spend their retirement. He was finishing the process of handing over stewardship of a small evangelical church in an upper-middle-class suburb of Johannesburg to a younger pastor. Raised in a Baptist household, he had stayed in the Baptist tradition all his life, attending theological school in the city as a young man who felt a calling for the church. After serving at a handful of different ministries across a fifty-year career, he was now preparing to leave formal leadership roles and transition to the last stage of his life. In the final few weeks of their preparations to leave for retirement, he and Sharon spoke to me about their thoughts on recent changes to Christian life in South Africa. Although my questions related to their sense of contemporary struggles in spreading the Gospel, Anthony shifted our focus toward reflections on what it was like to grow up in a white Baptist household in a racially segregated society:

Up until the time of the change of the new South Africa [in 1994], I was born and brought up in a particularly – in the heart of the apartheid era, very much so. And yet my, I would say that my parents were those who were, in terms of their political point of view, well recognized the dangers of apartheid and so on, and yet there was never a very strong opposition, and so we just embraced that kind of life and lifestyle. And looking back, one regrets perhaps some of the things you sort of almost turned a blind eye to or participated in without really thinking. It was purely a cultural sort of environment.

Following historic efforts at truth and reconciliation as part of the transition to democracy during the 1990s, South African politics was marked by an effort not simply to punish whites who were complicit with racial injustice but to understand how such a system could be perpetuated in the first place (Scheper-Hughes 2007). What Anthony's narrative indicates, however, is how this politico-legal project had also to be undertaken by everyday white South Africans. In this account he positioned himself as guided by positive moral goals—his family “recognized the dangers of apartheid”—but nonetheless they “almost turned a blind eye” to inequalities, something he attributes to a “cultural” phenomenon, something imbued implicitly through habit. At other points in the interview—and in evangelical discourse more broadly—“culture” takes on a negative tone in opposition to “biblical,” thus becoming a kind of epiphenomenon that acts merely as ornamentation over a religious, or godly, substratum (i.e., God created the world; what humans create is “merely” culture). In this framework, apartheid is understood through its ability to be adopted subconsciously, not the result of God's plan but as a *human* corruption of divine morality.

This reckoning of his role in a segregated South Africa is ongoing in the present, a kind of *post facto* attempt to reconcile an individual ethical personhood with the reality of what is internationally remembered as a period of moral darkness. His account echoes what Janet McIntosh (2016), writing about white Kenyans' unawareness of their complicity in societal racism, calls “structural oblivion.” Curiously enough, Anthony was mindful of the oblivion he and other whites lived within, as he made even clearer later in the conversation when we discussed a lack of attention given to race:

We were seeing through a glass very darkly, in a sense, and it was never really drawn to our attention the specifics of that. And, yeah, by the time the new South Africa had come about in '94, yeah, many of us were already on the, moving in that direction, feeling that it

was the right thing to do, but then in hindsight looking back, to realize it's almost come too late, really.

These obscured optics extended from his family to the Baptist churches in which he was brought up, which he claimed were not as politically involved as those of other denominations. Toward the mid-1980s and later, cursory efforts at addressing apartheid were undertaken, but on the whole, Baptist churches "had embraced the cultural/political situation of the day."

Turning to the contemporary legacy of apartheid, Anthony remarked that the goals of a non-racial paradise are far from being met. While most South African commentators would headily agree with such an assessment, his eschatological framework caused his explanation to map the contours of an evangelical cosmology. In this period prior to Christ's second coming, Anthony insisted that all people and nations continue to be mired by sin, including South Africa's post-apartheid majority-black government:

It's twenty-four years since the transition took over, and I think sadly, and again it may be because I'm a white European saying this, but there really has been an absolute transference of apartheid from the black being suppressed almost to the whites, and now we've almost got the opposite. And we've not integrated as we ought to have.... At the moment there's a real sense in which because the ANC [African National Congress] is basically a black political party, one can understand that most of the positions are filled by black people, but there is at the moment a real sense of it's just been a reversal of the apartheid system, which is very clearly to me an indication of an outworking of the sinfulness of one's own heart, in the sense that sin is at the root of it, and we'll look after our own, in the same way that the apartheid folk looked after their own kind, we're seeing this here, and there's always been corruption under the old government. It just seems to have blossomed very quickly under the new government.

On the one hand, this explanation resembles the discourse of "reverse racism" and the oppressed-becoming-the-oppressors narrative that triggers some whites' anxiety both in South Africa (Hook 2015) and the United States (Norton and Sommers 2011). There is an element of that here, as he himself acknowledged at the start of the quotation; ironically, his continued recourse to the language of white victimhood is a further way in which he is *still* "seeing through a glass very darkly," another layer of structural oblivion. More fundamentally, Anthony's case constitutes an attempt to understand South African life through the lens of *universal* notions of sin. From an evangelical standpoint, no ordinary human being is without sin, so it would make sense that a black-majority government would commit similar sins as a white-dominated one, even though he recognizes that he is especially attuned to its effects on whites "because I'm a white European saying this." What he describes as an "outworking of the sinfulness of one's own heart" is part of a globalized evangelical model to make sense of the inhumanity of racial segregation: as a physical manifestation of human sin against God's creation, with the only solution being repentance and being born again in Christ, who transcends all human divisiveness.

If Anthony's Christianity places blame for South Africa's ongoing struggles at the feet of sin, it also offers the potential for societal redemption, just as it does for individual salvation:

I think the church needs to develop the model where the political parties and the world can look at our local churches and see that radical transformation of oneness and unity and respect for one another, and positions being held in our local churches of leadership irrespective of the color of your skin but in terms of your giftedness and your qualifications and so on.

Such a response echoes the dreams of a post-racial South Africa as embedded in the state metaphor of the “rainbow nation,” a multiracial paradise in which skin color is not a factor in determining success (Gachago and Ngoasheng 2016). Like white Kenyans’ attempts at “linguistic atonement” through their adoption of African languages, these efforts to ameliorate the sins of the past nevertheless “tacitly keep European authority in place,” despite ostensible attempts at reconciliation (McIntosh 2014, 1193). What is unique here is that Anthony adopts a religious justification for his racial/political stance, drawing on church leadership and the biblical principles of “oneness and unity and respect for one another” to influence secular South African society. Despite some progress in his congregation “becoming completely multiracial” in its membership, Anthony held no illusions about the difficulty of the road ahead. While the church could offer a path forward, human fallibility rooted in sin would ensure that, at least in a “fallen” world, perfection is impossible.

Much could be read into Anthony’s explanation of his life history and contemporary South Africa, but the relevant point here is to consider how age factors into his self-reflection. When I met him, he was finishing the process of abdicating leadership responsibilities and finding more free time to reflect back on his experiences traversing the “old” South Africa and the “new.” This additional time, coming at the end of a lengthy career in ministry, served as a juncture at which to think retrospectively through the lens of a cosmology that places human beings in a state of sinfulness. While elderhood is not the exclusive period of self-reflection, evangelicals stress the need to spend this time in moral preparation for the coming age and in discipleship (mentoring/guidance) of younger Christians, as discussed earlier. Although South Africans of all ages deliberate about the legacies of apartheid—to use terms from sociolinguistics, increased racial awareness may be less a *synchronic* change from one age grade to another than a *diachronic* “change in progress” (Bailey 2003; Labov 1966)—it is during older age *at this particular historical juncture* that such concerns arise most clearly. Besides having more time to reflect on the post-apartheid condition (as Anthony had), contemporary South African elders were adults during not just the downfall but the height of the apartheid regime. The dilemma of living in a world fundamentally different from the one in which they grew up permits the current generation of South African elders to reach for a framework with which to explain such a problematic transition; for evangelicals, Christian eschatology offers them a semiotically cohesive answer.

If older white South African evangelicals have a uniquely positioned response to apartheid, the experiences of younger Christians serve as an instructive foil. For today’s youth born after or just before the transition to democracy, while the residues of apartheid continue to be tangibly felt, these men and women are not engaging in the same kind of reflection their elders have been forced to consider. Many of the evangelicals I interviewed were in their twenties or thirties, whose formative education took place in a world of revolt and ripe possibility. While they still enacted evangelical cosmology—identifying the problem of sin at the roots of South Africa’s social crises—they were less preoccupied with explaining apartheid-era erasures and segregation and more directed toward other problems, such as making conservative churches more inviting to young people and to non-whites. Drawing attention to these generational divisions, Els van Dongen (2010, 162) has found that many of the older South African Christians she spoke with have taken refuge in professions of faith as a way to regain a form of “successful aging” on their own terms, defining themselves in opposition to the “impure” behaviors of younger generations.

Paradoxically, however, many, though not all, of the evangelical churches I attended were infused with young people (cf. Coe 2018, 20 on the opposite trend among Ghanaian Presbyterians), in sharp contrast with the anxiety of a “graying” conservative church in the United States. This observation may have multiple explanations, including South Africa’s low life expectancy and demographic leaning toward younger age grades (Cook and Halsall 2012, 72-3) or the fact that older blacks are less likely than their

children to be as fluent in English (Ruden 1999) and therefore less likely to attend English-dominant evangelical services.^v Thus, demographic measures diverge in different evangelical contexts, from America's growing space for elders finding solace and community to South Africa's vanguard of a new, younger evangelical movement.

To return to the material collected in Kentucky, evangelicals across national boundaries seem to adopt at least outwardly similar rhetorical strategies. Through presentations at AiG in the U.S. and testimonies of white South Africans about their past injustices, social problems concerning race are understood as emerging from sin and an alienated relation between people and God. Christian theology is mobilized to construct a non-racial utopia, although tellingly, these visions take on different roles in elders' personal narratives of transcendence. While whites in South Africa have been forced by their recent national history to confront racial prejudice in their personal lives, white evangelicals in North America have not had to grapple with their country's racial animus in such a forthright way as they reflect back on their lives. Instead, people like Milton still find redemptive power in Christian eschatology, but the object of these reflections is more centered on U.S. preoccupations over individual autonomy and physical decline. In this way, although motivated by a similarly articulated cosmology, evangelicalism in South Africa can occupy a different role for elders than it does in the United States.

Conclusions and Further Applications

What meaningful conclusions can be drawn from these three ethnographic and textual vignettes? My argument here has traced the myriad meaning-making functions attributed to older evangelicals as a result of their eschatological ideologies. By considering evangelical culture in transnational perspective, a broader scope of the role religion can play in everyday life—and differentially across the life course—emerges. Spending time with older evangelicals in Kentucky reveals the ways ordinary people adopt broader eschatological narratives to confront the specter of bodily decline; reading widely-circulated accounts by U.S. Christian leaders provides a sense of what cultural resources are available to congregants as they find newly meaningful roles in the third and fourth age; and speaking with South African evangelicals suggests the potential for Christian narratives to inform responses to social inequality even as they reproduce the sinful racial divides they decry.

The possibility for these religious narratives to have a positive impact in the lives of elders is not exhausted by the newfound roles and understandings described above; there are already several problems that disproportionately affect older populations that might be ameliorated within an evangelical framework. As an example, the anxiety over the loss of personhood in dementia could potentially be eased through the adoption of such a religious stance. Western notions of the self as individual cognition are threatened by dementia and its gravest form, Alzheimer's disease, because an assault to the capacity for memory is so closely tied to personhood (Deal and Whitehouse 2000; Taylor 2008). However, as John Swinton (2010) argues, Christian theology offers an alternative to this anxiety over dementia. Swinton (*ibid.*, 253) encourages affected patients and their families to take comfort in the principle that "God remains with us and for us even when we can no longer cognitively be with and for God." By placing the relation with God at the center of a person's being while deemphasizing people as cognitive beings, this more socio-centric (or, rather, "Deo-centric") approach may reduce the tragic loss exacerbated by cognitive notions of personhood.

Despite these wide-ranging potentials, my hope is that the use of ethnographic data here might provoke a movement away from a rigid understanding of existential dilemmas of old age as a universal human experience—even if there are common experiences that, like family resemblances, crop up in one

guise or another across the globe—and inspire a greater attunement to the cultural specificity of how the life course plays out in different settings, especially as it may be affected by religious cosmology in unexpected and locally peculiar ways. Terms like “gerotranscendence,” while useful in their power to call attention to broad patterns, are also liable to erase nuanced cultural responses to shared anxieties. Interviewing a larger sample of elders like Milton and Anthony about their experiences of growing older could help shed light on the dynamic interplay between eschatology and aging, as well as the social environments to which they are made to speak. To what degree is evangelicals’ religious cosmology successful in challenging dominant U.S. models of “successful aging” (Rowe and Kahn 1998; Katz 2000) that take bodily integrity as the *sine qua non* of the idealized older individual? What alternatives exist on the global Christian stage to age differently and accomplish culturally relevant goals? Further observational and interview-based ethnography at churches across different settings is well positioned to address these additional questions. What is clear from the current analysis is that evangelical narratives of spiritual salvation offer alternative models for aging that put elders in a position to challenge extant expectations for older individuals in the present world—and to reflect back on the world of the past—by gazing toward the next.

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Notes

- i. For public apologetics staff whose works are widely available, I have used their real names; all congregants and interviewees I met at the churches in which I conducted research, however, are referred to pseudonymously.
- ii. On this point, note the parallels to successful aging discourse that pushes back against older “disengagement” models of aging (e.g., Rowe and Kahn 1998, 46).
- iii. Note also the curious parallel with Rowe and Kahn’s (1998, 47) emphasis on “giving and receiving social support” as a means of finding fulfillment in older age, albeit a different kind of “support.”
- iv. Anthropologist Anna Corwin (2013) offers the positive experiences of Catholic nuns in letting go of attachments to the physical world as a potential model for how to age as easily as possible. See also Sarah Lamb (2000) for a comparison with a South Asian cultural setting in which transcendence of social attachments in old age is an acknowledged virtue, if problematic to attain.
- v. Even Anthony mentioned language as a factor in keeping white churches separate from, in his case, Xhosa-speaking churches planted during apartheid (and, to an extent, post-1994 as well).

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