CHAPTER 11

English Evangelicals, Equality and the City

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In April 2012, the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson intervened to stop a planned series of posters on London buses that proclaimed: "Not gay! Post-gay, ex-gay and proud! Get over it!" The adverts had been produced by a conservative Christian group, the Core Issues Trust, and were booked to appear on the buses by Anglican Mainstream together with the Core Issues Trust, both organizations teaching that homosexuality is curable through therapy and religious teaching. The posters were part of a campaign responding to the gay rights group Stonewall, which had recently run posters on London buses stating: "Some people are gay. Get over it!" with the Core Issues Trust ads designed in the same red and white colour scheme. Johnson contacted The Guardian newspaper to announce he was banning the adverts within an hour of their contents becoming public, and the story ran on the front page, quoting him as saying: "London is one of the most tolerant cities in the world and intolerant of intolerance. It is clearly offensive to suggest that being gay is an illness that someone recovers from and I am not prepared to have that suggestion driven around London on our buses." Ken Livingstone, his main rival in the mayoral election, said the posters were "damaging for anyone who believes that London is the greatest city in the world because of its tolerance," and a spokesperson for Transport for London said "we do not believe that these specific ads are consistent with TfL’s commitment to a tolerant and inclusive London." The Guardian featured a longer article in addition to the cover story, framing this in terms of an increasing mobilization of conservative Christians in Britain, headlined "Conservative Christians are becoming more confident in the political arena. The anti-gay bus ads are the latest move by Christian groups hoping to replicate U.S. politics, where religion is centre stage."
This incident and responses to it reveal the interweaving in the media of particular contemporary ideals about ‘public’ religion, tolerance, sexuality, difference and equality.\(^4\) Whilst Johnson's comments should be seen in the context of his attempt to appeal to traditionally non-conservative supporting, liberal sections of the electorate, they nevertheless demonstrate a framing of London as a space ‘intolerant’ of religious expressions that are felt as polluting ideals of inclusivity. London here seems to stand as a paradigmatic site of modernity, as the ideal of social tolerance has played an important part of imaginings of cities as complex, pluralist settlements, patterned on an interplay of social distance, proximity and privacy that does not interfere but allows the other to be other.

Evangelicals’ engagements with equal rights in relation to particular sexual identities (i.e. LGBTQ) frequently make headline news in Britain. In March 2013, for example, the gay rights campaigner, Peter Tatchell, wrote an open letter to the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby (who is linked with the prominent charismatic evangelical church Holy Trinity Brompton) on the occasion of his enthronement. This interaction, and Welby’s offering to meet with Tatchell in response, received widespread media coverage.\(^5\) In his letter, Tatchell wrote:

I hope you will use your new authority to guide the church to accept equality and human rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.

Just over a decade ago, you expressed harsh homophobic opinions, condemning gay relationships and the adoption of children by same-sex couples. You may have since revised these views but even now you oppose marriage equality. One of your first public statements, when you were

\(^4\) The Core Issues Trust afterwards sought a judicial review of the ban. The High Court ruled that whilst the process for introducing the ban had been unfair, Transport for London (chaired by Boris Johnson as Mayor) acted lawfully in banning the advert, because it would cause ‘grave offence’ to those who were gay. Core Issues Trust v Transport for London, High Court, 22 March 2013. Accessed 27 March 2013. http://www.judiciary.gov.uk/media/judgments/2013/core-issues-trust-v-tfl.