“It’s Not Macho, Is It?”: Contemporary British Christian Men’s Constructions of Masculinity

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Abstract
Religion is a key site for constructions of masculinity, and visions of a gender equal society must include religious men. This study examines how a group of British white, heterosexual, middle-class, lay Anglican men construct masculinities via discourses on church-going, worship styles, and godly submission. The interviewed men express a hybrid form of masculinity, informed by religious faith, that embraces typically “feminine” characteristics such as love, humility, and vulnerability. At the same time, they articulate ideals of heteronormativity and essentialized gender differences that support hegemonic masculinity. The participants engage simultaneously in a selective, “discursive distancing” from, and a discursive alignment with, hegemonic masculinity norms, thus revealing tensions between competing masculinity norms.

Keywords
Christianity, discursive distancing, hegemonic masculinity, hybrid masculinity, religion

Religion is a key site for constructions of masculinity, and visions of a gender equal society must include religious men. Research on religion and gender has, however, centered on how women variously accommodate or challenge gendered structures, beliefs, and practices. Research on religious men and masculinity is scarce (Aune, 2006; Avishai, 2016; Krondorfer & Hunt, 2012), and existing studies have largely focused on evangelical Christian men in the United States. This study explores how

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British Christian men construct masculinities in relation to church-going, worship, and godly submission. The focus is on lay church-going men who constitute the majority of men in churches (in contrast to ordained clergy, such as bishops and priests); specifically, on a relatively privileged group of White, middle-class, heterosexual, Anglican men. The article argues that the interviewed men’s discourse on faith, religious practice, and masculinity involves a complex and situated negotiation between different and competing masculinity norms that are informed by religious faith, church practices, and broader societal masculinity norms.

Christianity is the dominant religion in Britain, but the proportion of the population who identify as Christian in England and Wales has decreased from seventy-two percent in the 2001 Census to fifty-nine percent in the 2011 Census (ONS, 2012). Recent figures from the British Social Attitudes Survey suggest that, in 2018, of those who identified as Christian, only twelve percent identified as Church of England/Anglican—down from forty percent in 1983 (Curtice et al., 2019, p. 21). Attendance in the Anglican Church (the official Church of the state and the main Christian church in England and Wales) is declining (Church of England, 2017, p. 3), and the Church is failing to recruit young people (Davie, 2015, p. 48). Woodhead (2016) has suggested that the failure to attract young people lies partly in the Church’s reluctance to accept same-sex relationships and marriage. Indeed, the Anglican Church in the UK, and also the global Anglican communion, have struggled since the 1990s to accommodate queer identities and sexualities within their overall heteronormative theology and church life (Brittain & McKinnon, 2018; Nixon, 2008).

Encompassing Evangelical, Anglo-Catholic and traditional (“middle of the road”) congregations (Village, 2005, p. 246), the Anglican Church in the UK is a “messy” church in terms of its theological and ideological cleavages (Brown & Woodhead, 2016), including those along issues of gender and sexuality. Although women have been ordained as priest in the Anglican church since 1994 and as bishops since 2014, the issue of women’s ordination remains contested (Percy, 2017) and the male-dominated church hierarchy presents structural and cultural barriers to ordained women’s influence (Bagilhole, 2003).

This study is also placed within the context of an overall gender gap in religiosity and church attendance in Britain, with higher proportions of women than men reporting religious beliefs and women outnumbering men in congregational pews (Aune, 2004; Day, 2017; Trzebiatowska & Bruce, 2012). Having faced difficulties in recruiting men since the 18th century, women came to dominate the Anglican Church pews (Brown, 2009, p. 227) and this gender imbalance remains unabated (Day, 2017; Trzebiatowska & Bruce, 2012). A picture not unique to Britain, a majority of Christian denominations in the USA are also dominated by women (Lummis, 2004, p. 404). Scholars have suggested a multiplicity of factors to explain such gender variations, including women and men’s varying attachments to the labor market, gender ideologies, and socialization, personality differences, and risk aversion (see Francis & Penny, 2014).

A paradox of feminized congregations within patriarchal church structures raises questions about the construction and negotiation of masculinity in churches, both at
the institutional level and in everyday congregational life. While Day (2017, p. 206) has found that older lay women in the Anglican church enjoy “female power within a masculine-dominated structure,” my research examines how churchgoing, lay Anglican men experience their feminized congregations. In turn, this study of religion and masculinities contributes to broader theoretical and empirical debates about gender and social change. As argued by Avishai, “[what] makes religion cases so powerful gender studies, is that they are ripe with contradictions and tensions that can teach us how gender regimes are produced, reproduced, challenged, and dislocated” (Avishai, 2016, pp. 273–274).

Researching Christian Men and Masculinities

Hegemonic masculinity norms support a gender hierarchy characterized by men’s domination over women (Connell, 1995, 2016) and by heteronormativity, or the idealization and institutionalization of heterosexuality as “normative sexuality” and a way of life (Jackson, 2006, p. 117). Hegemonic masculinity is constituted in material and embodied practices as well as in cultural norms and discourses (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 842), and this article examines discursive patterns of reproduction of, and resistance to, societal hegemonic masculinity norms among a group of Christian men in Britain. These men are situated within broader church and societal discourses about masculinity which include conflicting representations of men as caring, emotionally sensitive, and oriented toward gender equality or as (re)-asserting male dominance via sexism and homophobia (Baker & Levon, 2016; Brown & Woodhead, 2016).

Contemporary hegemonic masculinity norms are historically situated and “constantly under construction, renovation, and contestation” (Connell, 2016, p. 314). A discursive negotiation that both reinforces and resists such norms suggests a plurality of masculinity norms and also the potential for more egalitarian or “democratizing gender relations” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 853). While the Christian church itself has a history of male and heteronormative hierarchies, it has also offered men a plurality of competing masculinity norms, some of which include feminized elements (Brown, 2009; Delap & Morgan, 2013). In order to understand how contemporary Christian men grapple with competing and changing masculinity norms, we need context-sensitive studies of different groups of men.

I argue that because religion crosses the boundaries of the private and public spheres, it is particularly conducive to the articulation of hybrid masculinity norms, through the mixing of “diverse elements from various masculinities” (Demetriou, 2001, p. 348), including elements from hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995, 2016) and “elements associated with marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities” (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 246). I contend that by embracing expressive qualities such as love, humility, vulnerability, and submission—qualities that hegemonic masculinity teaches men to suppress and deny—Christian men demonstrate tensions within hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995, 2016) via a hybrid form of masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) rooted in religious faith. The article also
explores whether this hybrid form of masculinity is temporally and spatially confined to church worship, and if it has the potential to threaten “the institutional position of power that men still enjoy” (Messner, 1993, p. 732, ital. in orig.) within churches and broader society.

Through a selective “discursive distancing” of themselves from hegemonic masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, 2018), however, the participants in my study are also homogenizing “other men” (outside the church) as “macho,” and thereby tacitly reproducing hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, their articulation of heteronormative ideals and constructions of essentialized gender differences (e.g., men as action-oriented; women as emotion-oriented), aligns with and reproduces hegemonic masculinity. Knowledge of these tensions in lay church-going men’s constructions of masculinity helps us to further understand the role of religion in men’s lives and how religious men negotiate complex and competing masculinity norms.

Although an under-researched topic, the relationship between religion, men, and masculinities is gaining scholarly attention, especially in the USA where research has mainly focused on Christian evangelicals (e.g., Burke & Hudec, 2015; Gallagher & Smith, 1999; Gerber, 2015; McDowell, 2017). Studies of the evangelical Promise Keepers movement have found that its male leaders and adherents support varying gender ideologies, ranging from conservative-traditional to progressive-egalitarian (Heath, 2003; Lockhart, 2000). Bartkowski (2000), for example, found that some Promise Keepers’ leaders embraced an “instrumentalist masculinity” which distinguished between “aggression, strength, and rationality” as masculine and “responsiveness, sensitivity, and emotionalism” as feminine qualities (Bartkowski, 2000, p. 35). Other leaders, however, articulated an “expressive masculinity” that embodied typically “feminine” qualities such as compassion and emotional ties, but these were framed as universal and therefore relevant to men (Bartkowski, 2000, p. 37). On the ground, among Promise Keepers members, these highly divergent forms of masculinity were “negotiated into a melange masculinity that is at once inclusive and exclusive, egalitarian and authority-minded, strong and sensitive” (Bartkowski, 2000, p. 50, emph. added), suggesting a complex negotiation of competing masculinity norms.

In another study of the evangelical Promise Keepers, Heath (2003) observed that the men’s “collective identity was bound by practices that reaffirm hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality through references to essential gender differences [and] a focus on heterosexual family relationships” (p. 440). Gerber (2015, p. 27), on the other hand, who studied the evangelical “ex-gay” movement in the USA, argued that it endorses “a godly masculinity” that “appropriates some aspects of hegemonic masculinity while criticizing others.” Although this godly masculinity endorses “a binary and hierarchical gender system” (Gerber, 2015, p. 29), Gerber suggested that it differs from hegemonic masculinity because it downplays the importance of heterosexual conquest, promotes an inclusive vision of “acceptable masculinities,” and permits homo-social bonds and intimacy (Gerber, 2015, p. 31; see also Anderson, 2009). As such, Gerber (2015, p. 45) argued, this godly masculinity has the potential to change and subvert hegemonic masculinity.
Research on contemporary Christian men and masculinities in Britain is scarce, but a recent study by Aune and Guest (2019) of students at UK universities suggests that young Christian men and women mobilize religion to support competing views on gender, such as equality versus hierarchy in the church. In an earlier study, Aune (2009) found that a group of charismatic evangelical men in Britain articulated hegemonic masculinity norms and emphasized male strength, leadership and heterosexuality as innate and God-given male characteristics. Their view of homosexuality as an inferior form of masculinity resonates with both broader Christian and societal debates, as argued by Aune (2009) (see also Brown & Woodhead, 2016).

Specific studies of Anglican men and masculinities have also emerged, focusing in particular on the clergy level, which show support for a traditional gender hierarchy. For example, in a study of White, middle-class conservative Anglican clergy, Fry (2019) found that these men used Biblically-inspired notions of male headship and female submission to object to women’s ordination and to bolster their own privileged status. Page (2017), who studied White, mainly middle class, non-ordained male clergy spouses of Anglican women priests, observed that the men articulated a traditional form of masculinity emphasizing their breadwinning and provider roles. Moreover, although lacking in formal theological training, their close proximity to the priest enabled them to enact spiritual leadership within their parish. Page argues that these male clergy spouses quietly undermined the position of their clergy wives due to taken-for-granted linkages between religious authority and masculinity.

In a historical study of mid-20th century middle-class Anglican men’s groups, Delap found a “complex co-presence of a variety of scripts for Anglican masculinity,” where both laymen and clerics tried to combine “ideas of Christian love and service with robust, active forms of masculinity” (Delap, 2013, p. 120). Delap argues that “the majority [of Anglican men’s groups] were invested in reconciling masculinity with qualities of love, compassion and service, which often led to reciprocity with femininities” (Delap, 2013, p. 139). Although they were entangled in “potentially transgressive” homosocial bonds via men’s groups (as were Gerber’s participants from the “ex-gay” movement), the type of masculinity that dominated among these Anglican men supported “gender hierarchy along conservative lines based on the heterosexual family and male breadwinner” (Delap, 2013, p. 137). My own research explores how contemporary White, middle-class, heterosexual lay Anglican men negotiate masculinity in ways that are informed by their religious faith, local church practices and the wider British society.

Research Context and Methods

The analysis herein emerges from data collected for a study that examines how Christian men in the East Midlands region of Britain construct their identities within the nexus of religion, gender and citizenship (Nyhagen, 2018). The study is based on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with twenty-one White, heterosexual, middle-class men who identify as Christian and regularly attend church services. All are or have been married. They are aged from 35 to 73, with 53 years of age as the sample
average, reflecting the Church’s difficulty in recruiting younger congregants. A majority of them hold university degrees, and all are or have been in paid work (eight are retired). Occupations include teacher, solicitor, accountant, author, engineer, doctor, and business owner.

All interviewees had close ties to the Anglican Church; sixteen were raised as Anglican, and five who were raised in other Christian churches had turned to Anglican churches as adults. At the time of the interviews, all but one of the men regularly attended worship in broadly evangelical Anglican congregations located in the middle-class suburban area in which they lived. Often found in middle-class urban areas (Guest, 2007, p. 83), evangelical-leaning churches are characterized by conversionism, biblicism, activism, and crucicentrism (humanity’s redemption through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross) (Bebbington, 1989). Notably, evangelicalism can attract individuals who hold different views on gender relations (Lockhart, 2000), ranging from support for, and opposition to, gender hierarchy within the family, the church and society (see Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2016).

Most of the participants were long-standing members of their local Anglican churches, with a few having joined over the past 3 years. Several also attended services at independent charismatic and evangelical churches in the broader urban area. The men were actively involved in Anglican congregational life through volunteer roles (e.g., membership of parish church council, church committee or church leadership team; church rota participation (cleaning, lawn-moving, welcoming team), church band or choir; youth work; men’s groups), and about half of them did volunteer work outside the church. All of the interviewees supported women’s ordination as priests and bishops.

The participants lived in an affluent suburban area. They were recruited via the widely used method of snowball sampling, which draws on social networks between individuals (Browne, 2003). A local priest who is part of the researcher’s personal network was a gate keeper for participant recruitment. The first interviewees then suggested other participants from their own personal networks, which spanned several Anglican churches in the suburban area. None of the participants were previously known to the researcher. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the participants’ anonymity. The interviews, conducted in the period November 2015 to July 2016, were structured around discussions of religious faith, church-going, identity, citizenship, and gender. The interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. Themes and patterns in the data were identified through a thematic analysis informed by the initial research questions and the data themselves (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The research context (church pews dominated by women), the interview topic (religion and masculinity) and the interview setting (a White heterosexual woman raised as Christian, interviewing White heterosexual Christian men) were imbued with gendered meanings which shaped the interview conversations. For example, when using the word “macho,” the men in the study took it for granted that the researcher knew what “type of man” they were referring to, which illustrates their positioning within broader, shared socio-cultural patterns of “collective sense-making and understanding” (Wetherell & Edley, 1999, p. 338) about what it means to be “a macho man.” The
presence of a female researcher can have influenced the participants’ discursive distancing from the macho male stereotype due to social desirability bias (Williams & Heikes, 1993). However, their discourse also aligned with hegemonic masculinity norms in surprising ways, as when specific worship practices were labeled as “feminine” and unappealing to men. This suggests that the researcher achieved a rapport with the participants which enabled them to comfortably mobilize discursive accounts of both resistance and compliance to hegemonic masculinity norms within the interview context.

Findings

Tensions Between Competing Masculinity Norms

The analytical themes discussed below include church-going as a feminine activity, the church as a feminine domain, and the centrality of vulnerability and submission—both qualities that hegemonic masculinity norms reject—to Christian men’s religious faith.

Church-going as “feminine” and “fluffy.” All participants recognized that Christianity, including the Anglican Church, is in general decline in Britain. They had all observed more women than men in their own congregational pews, and many saw the gender gap as a problem. When asked about reasons for the decline and gender imbalance, many participants discussed gendered norms and practices relating to work, home, and leisure. Emphasizing the centrality of paid work to Christian men’s lives and identities, Ethan suggested that “in a feminized congregation or feminized church” it is less obvious to people running the church that paid work is “where the real deal is” for men. He asked: “as a working Christian man [. . .], what does the church have to say about your life [. . .] outside the Sunday, what is it really saying to you about that?” Similarly, William asserted that for men, “what it means to be a Christian in the workplace, and what being a Christian means for one’s work” is very important, and that the church must do more to address men’s work. While work and the provider role were seen as central to Christian men’s lives and thus connected them to broader hegemonic masculinity norms (Connell, 1995; see also Boyd, 1993), the interviewed men also separated themselves from certain aspects of hegemonic masculinity via a “discursive distancing” (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) from men who do not go to church. The latter were typically portrayed in traditional and stereotypical ways, resonating with dominant conceptualizations of masculinity as centered on “manly” activities, a tough exterior, and little interest in emotions (De Boise & Hearn, 2017). Adrian, for example, suggested that men are not interested in church: “a lot of men think it’s naff to go to church, they think it’s the wife’s hobby.” Participants spoke about other men as being “too busy” to go to church as they are occupied with paid jobs during the week and leisure activities and domestic tasks at the weekend. Tom asserted that “a lot of men define themselves by what they do,” referring to men’s identities as tied to paid work. He observed that men are generally just not interested in church: “they are much more likely to feel comfortable going into a betting shop or into a lady’s lingerie store than
they are going through the doors of a church.” Joseph suggested that religious faith and church are not “macho” enough for men who “play football and fight and drink and, you know, go out and. . . It’s not macho, is it, it’s not masculine.” Similarly, Leo stated that men would claim that “they can’t make it to church” because they are busy doing other things, “like washing the car, mowing the lawn, making something in the garage.” These observations suggest that the interviewees construct men who don’t go to church as a homogenous group complicit in the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity norms, whilst portraying themselves, as male church goers, as distant from such norms (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This discursive distancing, I argue, signals that masculinity norms are malleable and open to change, rather than fixed and unchanging (see also Delap, 2013, p. 39).

In their discourse on religion and church-going, many participants articulated a notion of gender differences where women are more suited to and feel more at home in the church than men. Samuel, for example, said that women are “more in touch with their inner selves than men and more comfortable about thinking and contemplating,” which in his view makes women more open to religious faith. Daniel saw women’s biological nature as having more affinity with the church: “I think that women are more relational, and I think that church is a way of relating to one another, and I think that they’re better asking for help and I think God provides that help for them.” Ryan spoke about women as caring and engaging in social interaction, and as sharing with others. He suggested that these are things “that women inherently do better than men” and that men are “inherently less trustful of other people, more determined to do their own thing,” as “a biological genetic thing.” For Ryan, men are less community oriented, and more selfish and individualistically oriented, than are women. Joseph asserted that men have “a tendency toward aggression and competitiveness,” while women have a desire to nurture, are driven by emotion, and display empathy and care for people. Joseph also observed that while some “masculine elements,” such as anger, are viewed as “undesirable” within faith contexts, others are seen as desirable: “righteous indignation, the fight for what is right, the standing up for things in the face of adversity, energy, and drive toward a Christian life and toward evangelism or good works or self-improvement.” This discourse of essentialized gender differences illustrates the participants’ complicity with the reproduction and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity norms (Connell, 1995) and suggests that masculinity is understood as a fixed male attribute.

At the same time, however, Ryan also emphasized that men “are conscious beings and we are able to work to ameliorate any adverse effects of the differences.” Although they are expected to behave in “macho” ways, Ryan observed that “men don’t have to go out fighting and competing and whatever the whole time, we can become caring, loving people.” Daniel also noted that gendered behaviors are not set in stone: “There are typical behaviors that might be common to men and typical behaviors that might be more common to women, but they are not mutually exclusive and they are certainly not, ‘one way is right and the other way is wrong.’” Therefore, while the participants’ discourse at times reinforced dominant masculinity norms, it also represented masculine characteristics as malleable.
Indeed, participants suggested that Christianity itself allows men to embrace a hybrid form of masculinity that incorporates expressive characteristics commonly associated with femininity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Owen, for example, referred to the Bible and noted that “there are men who are leaders, who go off and do stuff, like fighting in wars, going into tough places” while also pointing to Jesus as a man who cried and showed emotions. In Owen’s view, both sets of traits are “acceptable” for men. The Christian faith is thus constructed as permitting and encouraging men to show both instrumental (“masculine”) and expressive (“feminine”) characteristics, resonating with hybrid masculinity norms (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Leo, moreover, stated that men want “the same values as women”; values typically associated with femininity, including love, compassion and care. Leo has practiced these values through his role as primary carer for his children, the nursing of his father until his passing, and the caring of his mother until she moved into a care home. In his view, these values are not necessarily feminine; instead, they are universal, Christian values (see also Bartkowski, 2000). Leo’s example shows that individual Christian men may embrace and perform a hybrid form of masculinity beyond the context of the church; in Leo’s case, within the family.

Tensions between hegemonic and hybrid masculinity norms were also articulated in the participants’ discourse on church activities. Many interviewees emphasized that men in general, including themselves, are more interested in performing “masculine” tasks rather than participating in a “fluffy” church. They suggested that churches should encourage male bonding and friendship-building through action-filled homosocial events (Bird, 1996). Reflecting that “there is very little to attract men in church,” Oliver observed that Carl Beech, leader of the British organization Christian Vision for Men, brings men together for events “where they blow things up, they make a mess, they make a noise, they do stuff together and through activities whether it be having a curry or going out cycling, that’s when men build the relationships and then they bring them into church after that.” William recounted his church’s hill-walking weekend for men, and plans for visiting a cycle velodrome. In William’s view, such activities make church more attractive and relevant to men: “Also I think men may feel more included or welcomed if something moderately energetic and macho is organized as part of the social side of church, the fellowship side of church.” For him, the church’s message is not wrong, but the way the church tries to attract men needs to change. Similarly, Owen noted that his church offers men opportunities to do things together: “it’s not just a fluffy church, it is a case about teaching but then also doing stuff as well. And again, that’s something about the man, you know, we’re back into the typical man psyche here, we’re much happier doing something and then sharing rather than just going and having a chat.” This discourse about men as “doers” and “macho,” which Boyd (1993, p. 328) has linked to masculine socialization, demonstrates the participants’ complicity in reproducing hegemonic masculinity norms within church contexts.

In contrast, Nicholas observed that, while he understands why someone might say that the church is not macho or masculine enough, for him, the church provides an important space for relationships and belonging: “It’s a bit, if I can use the word, sissy
to go to church, but the people who go to church don’t think that. I think that for some men, their church is the village pub and there is a community there’ [my emphasis]. Nicholas thus articulates a more hybrid form of masculinity which emphasizes social relationships and belonging in a community setting (see also Campbell, 2009).

Church as feminine: Singing, candles, love, and mercy. The research participants articulated a gendered analysis of church worship. A “traditional” worship style with hymn singing and lit candles was described as “boring” and “feminine” and therefore as “off-putting” to men. In contrast, charismatic-evangelical styles, with musical bands and concerts, were portrayed as “vibrant,” “passionate” and attractive to men. Austin, for example, stated that “the candles, the singing, whatever, I can understand why men might find it not necessarily a masculine place.” Jack, who sings and plays in a church music group, said “the whole piece around worship and singing, men don’t seem to really very much enjoy singing in church, whereas the women do.” Benjamin noted that the Sunday services in his church “tend to be quite feminine focused, not so much in who is leading them but in the style of worship,” and recounted that “one day I was thinking about the words of the songs that we were singing and I find that quite; it’s not very masculine. Which is why it can be a switch-off to guys.” Ethan also thought that men will find traditional church services too feminine: “quite a lot of what goes on in a church, in a standard church service, singing stuff, praying stuff, the participation that the congregation contributes, some of that is quite girly.” Ethan suggested that it is harder for church-going men to sing along to “emotional” songs, and that “a lot of men assess the music as feminine rather than masculine, both in terms of the words and in terms of the composition. It can also just be sung too high.” In comparison with the “more emotional” hymns of today, Ethan felt that the “hymns of one hundred years ago” had a “greater sense of muscular Christianity” and were better suited to men.

Muscular Christianity was an (overall unsuccessful) attempt to re-insert men in the 1840s and 50s Britain into “the domain of piety” (Brown, 2009, pp. 88–89) through an emphasis on “manly qualities” such as courage and strength in combination with the idea that “feminine qualities” such as sympathy and compassion were compatible with manliness (Brown, 2009, pp. 92–93; see also Delap & Morgan, 2013). Echoing the tensions within muscular Christianity, the participants in my study are grappling with perceived clashes between competing gender norms available to them as Christians. Benjamin, for example, found some worship songs “unhelpful” as they are more about the “love-mercy” aspect of worship, than about “worshipping a God who is powerful and kind of [an] omnipotent God.” Whilst noting the importance of a God of love and mercy and the theological concept of grace, Benjamin nevertheless wanted the idea of “a God who is immensely more powerful than we can ever imagine” to feature more in church worship. “I’ve struggled sometimes with some of the worship that feels quite feminine,” he said. Benjamin’s embracement of a masculine God as powerful and as loving and merciful, resonates with McDowell’s (2017) finding that evangelical Christian hardcore punk men in the USA articulate a hybrid masculinity which is both aggressive and loving.
Reflecting on why fewer men than women attend church, Oliver again referred to Carl Beech, the leader of *Christian Vision for Men*, and his ideas on how to entice the entire (heterosexual) family to church—"child, father and mother":

he is saying, how do we get men into church? Well, we make the church more manly: we stop singing feminine Christian songs, slow songs and slow ballads about love, and we start singing about war and battle and the fight and Christ the warrior and songs in a deep key.

Asked what he thought about Beech’s strategy, Oliver replied:

Well, I think it is right. I see so many women in church with no man, the husband is at home because church is irrelevant for them. We preach sermons of, not in my church now, but I’ve heard sermons that are so, too intellectual, too waffley, too irrelevant, too feminine, church is very feminine, and Carl Beech and his movement talks about how feminine churches are, and it’s a problem because they’re not attractive to men.

These men’s association of war, battle, omnipotence, muscles and power with manliness align clearly with hegemonic masculinity norms. In contrast, emotions, love, forgiveness, and mercy—qualities that hegemonic masculinity norms instruct men to suppress and deny (Connell, 1995, 2016)—were associated with femininity. Oliver’s reflection also noted the centrality of heterosexual, married couples to church life; this was echoed by other participants including Tom, who stated that “God wants couples to come to Christ and to come together for Christ.” Tom’s church focuses explicitly on “the fifty-four men who are missing from church”—equaling the number of women who attend church unaccompanied by their husbands.

Protestant faith conceptualizes a direct, intimate personal relationship between the individual believer and God. For some of the participants, this intimate relationship represented challenges to their masculinity. Gavin, for example, observed that it is “easier for women to be in church than it is for men” and suggested that this is partly because of “certain songs that become more intimate in their language”; songs that “talk about our relationship with God in a more intimate way.” Gavin mentioned “Blessed be your name,” and “Light of the world,” as “intimate songs” that contrast with “Wesleyan and standard Anglican hymns” which “have a powerful message behind them” about God’s omnipotence. For Gavin, as for Daniel, masculinity is linked to heterosexuality: “I think there’s something in masculinity that says actually, if I have to say to another bloke I love you, and again it’s this one word, love. . . .” He also thought that it is easier for women to say that they love God, as they are “not thinking in marital sexual terms.” Although saying “I love you” to God “does not imply physical love making,” “this is where male understanding probably breaks down a little bit,” noted Gavin, and suggested that men might be asking themselves “What? I have got to say I love this man?” Similarly, Jonathan observed that “I think it’s easy to openly admit that you love your wife, because that’s socially accepted, that you love your children, that you love your football team, but that you love your
God, oh, that’s a different thing.” Within a heteronormative understanding of (sexual) intimacy (Jackson, 2006) which forms part of hegemonic masculinity norms, it can be challenging for Christian men to declare love for a God who has been constructed as male. An understanding of God as male has been found to inform and legitimize conservative gender ideologies that promote hegemonic masculinity norms (Whitehead, 2012). Notably, Ian and Daniel, two of the men in my study, problematized the notion of God as male and suggested that the Christian God should “transcend gender” or become “ungendered.” This minority discourse, which aligns with feminist theology (King, 1993), allows for a radical rethinking of Christian theology and everyday church practices and has the potential to disrupt and transform hegemonic masculinity norms.

“It is masculine to cry”: Accepting vulnerability and submission. Participants noted that men receive mixed messages about masculinity from wider society and Christianity. Ethan, for example, observed that men generally like to be in control and find it difficult “to be weak.” In his view, British men are reluctant to say they are Christian, because popular culture links religion with “weakness.” Ethan observed that, in contrast, “a fundamental of Christian belief and the teaching of the Bible [. . .] is that you have to be weak to be strong. So, there is a fundamental call as a Christian to recognize one’s weakness.” In Ethan’s view, men’s difficulty with showing weakness is the main reason why there are fewer men in church. Similarly, Jack suggested that men may not feel at home in a church where they are expected to show emotion: “if it’s true that the male stereotype is reserved, you know, never admit you’re wrong, be in the lead, you know, never say you are sorry and never show emotion, if that’s the stereotype, if that’s what maleness is all about, [then] church is the kind of the anti-man really.”

While Ethan and Jack’s discourse reinforces hegemonic masculinity norms, it also demonstrates a “discursive distancing” (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 250) from hegemonic masculinity’s suppression or denial of emotions as manly attributes. Also, by being comfortable with showing emotions and admitting weakness within the context of the church, Ethan and Jack articulate a hybrid form of masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

Adrian, moreover, noted that society expects men to be masculine and strong, to make decisions, to be tough, but in his view, “men should be allowed to feel that they’re masculine, but be able to cry or to do that, and that is also masculine.” He observed that if you say to a crying man that he has “got feminine traits,” then “that’s going to prejudice their thoughts no matter what.” For him, it is better to “say that actually it’s masculine to cry, it’s a normal thing.” Adrian also suggested that different characteristics should no longer be attributed to women and men: “let’s stop doing that. It should be asexual, it should be just literally these are characteristics anybody can have [because] you’re a human being.” Adrian’s reflections resonate with broader debates about men, mental health and the “crisis” in masculinity (Jordan, 2019). They also suggest a disruption of hegemonic masculinity norms and the articulation of a hybrid form of masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) which incorporates emotion and empathy—traits stereotypically associated with femininity (De Boise & Hearn, 2017).
Other participants also embraced this hybrid form of masculinity. Oliver suggested that the church can teach men “how to be a man,” meaning “being authentic, being you, being vulnerable at times, being strong at other times, being a blend of everything, and the identity, the foundation of all that, is God.” He observed that in the Old Testament, role models were warriors and in the New Testament they were strong men, “but Jesus was very meek and gentle and empathetic, sensitive, there’s a lot to learn for a man in that.” For Oliver, men should be able to express both vulnerability and strength, suggesting a hybrid masculinity that encompasses expressive and instrumental qualities (Bartkowski, 2000).

Many participants noted how church-going may be a challenge for men because they are expected to submit to an external authority (God’s) and to admit weakness and vulnerability. Christian faith norms were thus portrayed as contrasting with hegemonic masculinity norms. Jack, for example, suggested that there is a “massive tension” between “maleness” and worship: “showing vulnerability, asking forgiveness, being aware of people around you, and not being in control” are central elements of church worship that contrast with “maleness.” In Jack’s view, submitting to God’s authority, instead of relying on yourself, is difficult for men:

You know, because you have to be in a place where you have already submitted to the authority of God, you’ve already seen yourself as a fallible human being, you already know that the only way to salvation and to kind of being forgiven is to ask for that, and it’s not a very male thing.

Similarly, William observed that “a macho male is not going to be very receptive to the idea that you get things wrong, that there’s a higher being that is in charge here.” Oliver also noted tensions between hegemonic masculinity norms and Christian worship:

men desire to be seen as strong, independent, not needy, not emotionally vulnerable, strong, courageous, provider, and when you step into church it’s a place where you say you’ve not got it all together, I’ve not got life sorted, I’m not in control, I need something, I have problems and struggles, and that’s not, that level of vulnerability is something that men have always struggled with, and indeed to be a man that is not in the description, to be a man is to be strong.

The participants are thus constructing “the macho male” as rational and in control, which in turn reinforces essentialist beliefs about women and men. At the same time, they are distancing themselves from hegemonic masculinity norms by endorsing a hybrid masculinity informed by faith. Another example of the latter is Oliver, who noted that his church

is a place for men to admit vulnerabilities and problems and challenges, but also a place where we say it’s okay not to be strong. Whether you admit it or not, that will come, but it’s ok not to be strong. It’s okay to rely on God, in fact there’s something powerful about men worshipping together and men declaring together their [Christian] identity.
Many participants highlighted tensions between hegemonic masculinity norms and religious prescriptions which require acceptance of vulnerability and submitting to God as core to Christianity. Jack stated that demonstrating feelings and vulnerability is unacceptable “for a chap”: “no, the showing of emotion, of uncertainty, of failure, of struggling, it’s just not an acceptable thing in our society at all.” In church, however, men are asked to submit to God and admit failure: “one of the central pieces of Sunday morning worship, which is coming before God and admitting that you’ve done wrong and asking forgiveness, it’s not a very blokey thing to do, is it.” Jack also pointed to the paradox that men should express their “emotions and be emotionally intelligent, and yet a man who shows those things is seen as weak, as ineffective, is kind of broken and somehow not operating as a man.” Jack is thus contributing to the discursive construction of hegemonic masculinity norms, whilst simultaneously also distancing himself from them and embracing faith-informed, hybrid masculinity norms.

Daniel, moreover, portrayed himself as comfortable with expressing emotions, at least with other men in church: “A lot of it is to do with your own frame of reference as to what masculinity and what femininity actually mean. So is it masculine for me to talk about my feelings with other guys at church, for me it is.” Austin expressed a similar view, emphasizing that it can be masculine to show emotions in church. For Daniel and Austin, church provides a legitimate and safe arena for the expression of a hybrid masculinity that has incorporated traditional “feminine” elements (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 246).

Conclusion

This study has shown that the interviewed White, heterosexual, middle-class, church-going Anglican men express a hybrid masculinity, informed by religious faith norms, which embraces typically “feminine” qualities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 251) of love, humility and vulnerability. Although labeled as “feminine,” these values are viewed as central to Christian belief and practice, and therefore as values for Christian men to embrace. The study also showed that the participants engaged in both a strategic “discursive distancing” (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 250) from, and a discursive alignment or complicity with, hegemonic masculinity norms (Connell, 1995). For example, the interviewed men distanced themselves from the notion that men should avoid expressing emotions, and saw men’s acknowledgment of weakness as a (Christian) virtue. Yet, they also articulated ideals of heteronormativity and essentialized gender differences that support hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995, 2016). These findings demonstrate how religion can produce tensions between competing masculinity norms.

As noted above, religion encompasses both the public (collective faith and worship) and the private sphere (individual faith and worship), and as such it may be particularly conducive to the articulation of hybridity (Demetriou, 2001). The hybrid masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) represented by some of the participants embodies at least a temporary, spatially confined disruption of hegemonic masculinity norms
within the context of local Anglican churches. If this hybrid form is limited to individuals’ expressions of religious faith and worship, however, it arguably does not substantially challenge persisting structures of male dominance and power within Christian churches and broader society (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messner, 1993). Moreover, many of the interviewed men engage in the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity norms through discursive constructions of non-church going men as “macho” and as detached from their emotions, and of the church itself as highly “feminized” and catering to “women’s interests.” The findings therefore demonstrate tensions in the men’s lives between wider hegemonic masculinity norms and more context-specific hybrid masculinity norms rooted in religious faith. A possible reason for this tension is that the participants’ construction of masculinities is informed by multiple social structures and identities including their Anglican Christian faith, their status as working or retired middle class professionals, and their identities as heterosexuals and as husbands and fathers; and by broader discursive repertoires about masculinity circulating within Christianity and popular culture. Further research should explore whether and how Christian men from different denominational, class and ethnic backgrounds reproduce or challenge hegemonic masculinity norms within and beyond church contexts.

The interviewed men are privileged in terms of their gender, race, class and sexual orientation; they also adhere to Christianity, which remains the dominant religious faith in Britain. As a privileged group, they are able to selectively co-opt “feminine” qualities into a hybrid form of masculinity whilst also reproducing and consolidating hegemonic masculinity norms. In their theorization, Bridges and Pascoe (2014) argue that “hybrid masculine practices often work in ways that fortify symbolic and social boundaries, perpetuating social hierarchies in new (and “softer”) ways” (p. 255). My own study supports their claim by showing that the interviewed men’s hybrid masculinity fortifies hegemonic masculinity norms through reinforcing the dominance of heterosexual masculinity and perpetuating notions of inherent differences between women and men (e.g., men as instrumental and women as expressive). Most of the participants articulated a heteronormative framing of Christianity, church life, and the relationship between individual believers and God, with God as male and heterosexual couples as central to congregational life. This resonates with Heath’s (2003) study of the U.S.-based evangelical Promise Keepers movement, which found that men partook in “practices that reaffirm hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality through references to essential gender differences [and] a focus on heterosexual family relationships” (p. 440). Yet, I also argue that, although my participants’ discursive distancing from hegemonic masculinity norms may serve to uphold a gender hierarchy, albeit in “softer ways,” it also signals that dominant constructions of masculinity are malleable and open to change.

Notably, some interviewees portrayed gender differences as socially produced, rather than inherent and/or God-given. This finding contrasts with the continued support for a “natural” or God-given gender hierarchy found among other evangelical (Aune, 2009) and Anglican (Fry, 2019; Page, 2017) men in Britain. Moreover, some of my participants noted that both men and women can embody instrumentalist and
expressive characteristics, including leadership, caring for others, and emotional vulnerability. This resonates with Bartkowski’s (2000) finding that some men in the Promise Keepers movement embraced expressive characteristics as universal and therefore applicable to men, and with Delap’s (2013, p. 120) finding that mid-20th century Anglican men in England incorporated “qualities of love, compassion and service” in their construction of masculinity. While embracing expressive characteristics as part of manhood may not fundamentally challenge hegemonic masculinity norms, a more radical potential for change lies in my participants’ struggles with and acceptance of submission to God. The men in my study who embraced “feminine” expressive characteristics related this orientation explicitly to their Christian faith and its emphasis on love for others, humility and submission to God. A minority of the participants also articulated a potentially feminist understanding of God as genderless, thus further threatening hegemonic masculinity norms. Moreover, rather than “fortifying boundaries” (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, 2018) between women and men, the participants who portrayed gendered characteristics as socially constructed also signaled that norms and hierarchies are open to change. Religious faith itself can thus pose a challenge and be a source of alternatives to hegemonic masculinity norms, despite its articulation within male-dominated religious hierarchies.

The observed tensions between hegemonic and hybrid masculinity norms indicate at least a possibility for less hierarchical gender relations. It can also be argued that hybrid masculinity’s incorporation of expressive values is a transitory stage in the dismantling of hegemonic masculinity (Duncanson, 2015). The realization of such emancipatory potentials would, however, require a broader critical engagement by both religious and non-religious men with existing structures of male power and domination within and beyond churches.

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Notes

1. See also Stringer’s (2000) analysis of mid-20th-century Anglo-Catholic worship as “camp.”
2. Brown (2009) argues that music, including choir singing, “was one of the important male connections to religiosity” (p. 138) during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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