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**The Arc of the Moral Universe Bends towards Justice:**  
**Evangelical Christians engaging with Social Justice**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Social Anthropology at Massey University, Palmerston North,  
New Zealand.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research explores how young evangelical Christians frame the concept of social justice, in particular relating to human trafficking. In the last fifteen years there has been a considerable increase in the number of Evangelicals who are becoming interested in, and participating with, initiatives that have an emphasis on social justice issues. This is a change from evangelical missionary activity which focuses mainly on proselytising and 'soul winning'. My ethnographic research was conducted amongst a group of young evangelicals who were students at a 'justice based' Christian training school in New Zealand. Fieldwork consisted of participant observation of the course lectures and interviewing fourteen students from eight different countries.

I found the main motivator for the students' interest in social justice were personal experiences they had with God where he 'broke their heart' over issues such as human trafficking. How they then engaged with social justice was mediated by digital technology, especially social media. They were also influenced by changing theology as to the character and nature of God, and what it means to be a Christian in a globalized world. Using Bruno Latour's 'modes of existence' theory and Michael Jackson's Existential phenomenological lens, I argue that social science needs to allow spiritual beings to be 'real' in order to understand the worldview of people like my participants, who order their lives through divine encounters and relationships with God. My findings showed that the literature on evangelicals and human trafficking is insufficient because the experiential nature of evangelical Christianity is not taken into account. Experience, rather than belief, is the primary motivation for interest in social justice for young evangelicals.

Keywords: Evangelicals, social justice, human trafficking, Emergent Christianity, Modes of Existence, Michael Jackson, Bruno Latour, Christianity, Phenomenology.

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## **AN IMPORTANT NOTE FOR THOSE READING THIS THESIS**

### ***The Use of Moving Visuals***

The research participants that I interviewed and observed are part of a very experiential world. Many of these experiences take place at large gatherings of Christians and events that are tied into the use of music and singing. I felt this thesis would be better understood if the reader was able to get a glimpse of these evangelical experiences and worldview through the use of small video clips. As such I have set up a webpage for the reader to have open while they are reading this thesis. When you get to a part in the writing with a number attached, like this [1], it means you are to go to that number on the webpage where a video link will be waiting to be viewed. Keeping all the links on one webpage means that the reader will not have to be typing in endless links, especially if reading this in a hardcopy, rather than a digital copy. It is possible that in the future some of these links won't work, but at the current time of writing, mid 2016, they were all functioning.

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