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**Surfing and Spirituality: Sociological Interpretations of
Spirituality in the Christian Surfing Subculture in the United
Kingdom**

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Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate sociological interpretations of spirituality in the Christian surfing subculture of the United Kingdom. This research was done through participant observation undertaken at the National Gathering of Christian Surfers UK as well as semi-structured interviews with three Christian surfers.

Following the data collection process and analysis, five principle themes emerged. Firstly, surfing subculture was examined, exploring the perceptual differences between how the surfing subculture is stereotyped and its reality. Secondly, The Primitive, and how these notions manifest a surfer's naturalistic spiritual pathway. Thirdly, The Search, a concept driven by a self-perpetuating need for adventure and novel surfing experiences and how this interacts with a Christian surfer's spirituality. Fourthly, surfing was examined as a form of play, exploring concepts of liminal and sacred spaces and their influence on religious groups. Finally, semiotic interpretations of postmodern Christian spiritual practice were examined through the interrelatedness of ecclesiastical and surfing symbolism. These five themes are interspersed with self-reflexive data providing further perspectives on the spiritual implications of these factors.

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1. Introduction

Preston-Whyte (2004, p.353) stated that “beaches are generally perceived to present a smiling face to humanity”. The lives of some people are so strongly influenced by the beach that it has led Lencek & Bosker (1999, p.xix) to comment that “there are three phases of life: birth, beach and death”. This is definitely a notion with which I empathise, having spent many days roaming the sandy, tropical beaches of Sénégal, West Africa, where I grew up playing and wrestling with friends in the Atlantic waters. However, my favourite beach activity was body surfing.

The challenge of catching a ride on these rough, temperamental and turbulent waves often led to what my father termed being ‘sandpapered’; a by-product of bodysurfing in waves that are breaking abruptly onto a steeply shelving beach, causing the bodysurfer to be dragged along the coarse sand until the energy of the wave runs out. Despite ending each day bruised and raw, the thrill of the ride and being exposed to the elemental force of the waves was intoxicating.

My family have since moved back to England, where our holidays often took us to the beaches in Cornwall. There I first encountered stand up surfing, and while I never had the opportunity to try it, surfing had captivated my thoughts and imagination. It was in my second year of university that I bought my first surfboard, in time for a family holiday in North Wales, near Porth Neigwl/Devils Mouth, a renowned surfing beach.

As a beginner, I spent hours floundering around in the water getting very cold and achieving very little. I quickly realised that learning to surf was going to be significantly more challenging than I had anticipated. To me it felt as though I was performing a completely different sport when I compared myself to the graceful, relaxed, elegant surfers who I followed almost religiously on social media. Despite repeatedly failing to 'pop-up'¹, the satisfaction and elation I felt when I did actually catch a wave, albeit only for a few seconds, was entirely worth enduring the frustration and the frigid waters. While my skill at surfing has not significantly progressed, the same draw of being engaged in the ferocity of the breaking waves still entices me. I would later come to the realisation that what I was experiencing was what Canniford & Karababa (2013) describe as 'The Primitive', which will be explored throughout this paper.

To non-surfers, surfing seems like a simple pastime that is a beautiful, flowing and at times dangerous act. In this way surfing is esoteric, for while its aesthetic appeal can be appreciated by anyone, only to those who dedicate time to surfing does it become more than simply a sport or pastime, or even a complex challenge; what it truly represents to certain individuals is a separate way of living, a continual search for thrill, adventure and the next perfect wave (Smith, 2010). Rip Curl² describe this as 'The Search', a concept that will be discussed in chapter 4.

¹ Surfing argot referring to the process of mounting a surfboard and achieving an upright stance

² Rip Curl is a major Australian designer, manufacturer, and retailer of surfing sportswear and accompanying products

My parents were Christian missionaries in Sénégal, and the cultivation of my spirituality was of significant importance during my adolescence. Whilst living in Sénégal I was exposed to many different spiritual and religious practices, from Muslims ritually fasting during the month of Ramadan to the Animist practice of wearing 'gris-gris' charm amulets to provide protection from evil spirits. These experiences imparted a fascination with expressions of spirituality and their semiotic interpretations as experienced in different cultures. However, on a personal level, despite having grown up in a Christian environment I have never felt a sense of belonging in structured, traditional church environments and thus I am seeking to understand how I locate my own spiritual identity within other expressions of the Christian faith. In this study I will apply a spiritual lens to surfing in the UK, seeking to gain specifically Christian perspectives on this unique subculture.

Therefore, my objectives for this research are:

1. To investigate and identify spiritual perspectives present in the Christian surfing³ subculture in the UK.
2. To assess the significance of concepts of The Primitive and The Search and how they relate to the UK Christian surfing subculture.
3. To gain a deeper understanding of the connection between my spirituality and my identity as a Christian and a surfer.

³ Throughout this research the term 'Christian surfers' refers to Christians who are surfers but do not belong to the organisation Christian Surfers (CS), whilst CS refers to the Christian surfers who are part of said organisation

2. Literature Review

2.1 History of surfing

“Surfing is the art of standing and riding on a board propelled by breaking waves” (Shields, 2004, p.45). Surfing is an ancient activity whose exact origins are obscured (Ford & Brown, 2006). This is due in part to the number of different types of surfing, and the impossible task of isolating the first time someone actually rode a wave simply for the pleasure of doing so. For example, there have been reports of people riding waves all over the world, from Fiji to Peru and West Africa (Finney & Houston, 1996). Furthermore, the type of surfing that is to be explored is important, as there are multiple types of wave riding that are ascribed as surfing, such as bodysurfing and kite-surfing. In this study when surfing is stated, it refers to stand up board surfing. All that can be said for certain, as to the origins of surfing, is that the act of harnessing the energy of a wave in order to ride it originated thousands of years ago, and has since been enjoyed by humans in its many different forms (Smith, 2010).

While surfing’s different forms have been practised in many different places around the world, it is the Pacific Islanders (predominantly the Hawai’ians) who refined it, and it is this style of stand up board surfing that is practiced most commonly today (Smith, 2010). In pre-colonial Hawai’i, surfing had much greater importance than simply being a pastime. Hawai’ian surfing and the various rituals that accompanied it was so integral to the culture that it drew more parallels with a religion than a sport (Nendel,

2009; Finney and Houston, 1996). Surfing involved more than just catching a wave, it was a process that began with a priest, or *kahuna*, picking the tree from which to carve a board; an extended process that incorporated various rituals and which reached its transcendent conclusion when the surfer danced with the waves, a flowing act of union between surfer and wave (Ford & Brown, 2006).

The choice of wood, as well as the length of the board, was an indication of the social status of the surfer, with longer boards made of the best woods indicating a higher social standing (Finney and Houston, 1996). Despite these social restrictions, surfing was practiced throughout the Hawai'ian population, young and old, male and female. Therefore, surfing was an area of Hawai'ian society in which freedom of expression, sexual equality and a relative impartiality between social standings existed (Smith, 2010). It was so important that often when the wave conditions were favourable people would stop their work and head out into the water simply to enjoy their national pastime. Furthermore, various festivals existed that focused on surfing and an appreciation of the gifts that the ocean was giving them, the emphasis being on a harmonious existence within their environment, not seeking to control/conquer the land and sea around them (ibid.).

This central element of the Hawai'ian lifestyle was a shocking encounter for European explorers who discovered Hawai'i in 1778 (Finney & Houston, 1996). The resulting influx of Protestant Calvinist missionaries has been described as the 'greatest historical enemy of surfing ever' (Smith, 2010, p.10). The lack of constraints with

which the Hawai'ians practised their sexuality (adultery, nudity, polyandry and polygamy were common place in Hawai'ian culture) was of particular concern to the strict missionaries who immediately set about righting what they saw as an abomination (Finney & Houston, 1996). The missionaries perceived further error in the work ethic that the natives lived by. Surfing was seen as part of this problem, it being both a central part of the culture that they despised, as well as it being a hedonistic practice that drew people away from 'meaningful' work (Smith, 2010). This cultural reform brought about by the Calvinist missionaries was so brutal that Smith (2010, p.10) refers to it as a "fully-fledged culture war". Due to their efforts to 'civilise' the Hawai'ians by reforming virtually every element of Hawai'ian culture, the missionaries came close to eradicating the practice of surfing. In addition to its cultural importance, surfing was seen as a threat due to its place within the polytheistic religious practices of the Hawai'ians, which was another part of the Hawai'ian culture that missionaries despised (Green & Merlin, 2014).

2.2 The Rebirth of Surfing

It was in 1898 that the Hawai'ian Islands were formally annexed by the United States in a violent removal of the native Hawai'ian government (Kinzer, 2006). At this point the practice of surfing was still essentially stamped out, with only a handful of Hawai'ians still surfing in secret. In fact, it would be a separate group of western settlers who would be the driving force in the renaissance of surfing at the centre of Hawai'ian culture (Smith, 2010).

Surfing was reborn, however, with neither the hedonistic nor spiritual purpose with which the ancient Hawai'ians had practiced it; instead the generation of economic profit was the goal. The flawless environment and ideal climate led to the introduction of tourism to the islands, with surfing being used as a tool to entice affluent adventure-seeking individuals (Smith, 2010). By utilising notions of "adventure, exoticism, unspoilt geography, magic, timelessness, tradition, a return to human origins and free expression uninhibited by workaday realities", the pioneering western settlers were able to create an extremely attractive image of the islands of Hawai'i (Canniford & Karababa, 2013, p.120). The tourists came to have what was a partly primitive experience; a domesticated experience of a 'primitive' culture and its wild sport – surfing (Belk & Costa, 1998).

The people of Hawai'i were also used to entertain the tourists, with young men being employed as 'Beach Boys' and the young women performing hula dances away from the traditional ceremonial contexts in which they had previously been undertaken. The most famous of these Beach Boys was called Duke Kahanmoku, who is often referred to as the father of modern surfing (Ford & Brown, 2006). He was a world record holding swimming champion who toured the world and gave surfing exhibitions, eventually catching the eye of Hollywood where he was given numerous film roles. This brought surfing into the spotlight of the western world. Despite the capitalistic motivations behind the western exploitation of Hawai'i, surfing was once again a widely practiced sport on the Hawai'ian Islands (Smith, 2010).

2.3 Kahanmoku, Huntington, Freeth and Blake: Bringing surfing to the West

With Duke Kahanmoku giving the world a glimpse of this exciting new sport it wasn't long before surfing left the picturesque beaches of Hawai'i and reached other shores. It was there that surfing met capitalism, with George Freeth, a talented Hawai'ian surfer being invited to perform surfing exhibitions in front of Henry Huntington's hotel in Southern California (Verge, 2001). Huntington's ploy was so successful that Huntington Beach is to this day a renowned surf location, and is even a venue on the World Surf League (WSL) tour (WSL, 2017). This clever marketing technique was so successful that it took off in other areas that had access to favourable surf, such as Florida and even Australia (Smith, 2010). Surfing had transitioned from being practiced by a few Hawai'ians to being a global phenomenon (*ibid.*).

Surfing in the era before World War II was still only undertaken by a small, albeit devoted, contingent of surfers. This era gave rise to another influential figure in the history of surfing, a Wisconsin born champion swimmer by the name of Tom Blake (Taylor, 2007). After seeing one of Duke Kahanmoku's films about surfing, Blake moved to Hawai'i where he took to surfing naturally. However, it was not so much his ability in the water that made him influential; he was also well known as an inventor (Smith, 2010). He revolutionised a number of different parts of surf life, inventing various devices to make surfing and other water sports less dangerous as well as cameras specifically designed to take pictures underwater. He also reinvented the ways in which surf boards were made, beginning an era of innovation into the shapes and materials used in the design of boards. While these were all important

contributions to surfing, it was his return to the USA that would have the most impact on surf culture. He brought back from Hawai'i parts of the Polynesian culture that revolved around surfing, and when he moved to California he quickly became a central component to the Californian surf culture.

His hybrid lifestyle incorporated elements of Hawai'ian culture into that of western mentality (Taylor, 2007). This, as well as his image of being muscular with long sun bleached hair and baggy clothes, became the stereotypical Californian surfer. Thus, Blake is arguably the most influential, from a sociological perspective, surfer of his era because he "bridged the gap between the ancient world of surfing and what eventually became modern surfing". Through the amalgamation of indigenous Hawai'ian and Western culture he therefore formed what is now regarded as "Surf Culture" (Smith, 2010, p.13; Lawler, 2010, p.70-74).

2.4 *On the Water or in the Water: European and Polynesian Perspectives on Dominance*

In the past traditional, colonial Christianity was averse to the *other*, an example being the pre-colonial Hawai'ian culture which, to the Europeans, embodied the notions of the primitive (Canniford & Karababa, 2013). A demonstration of the colonial mentality is found in the metaphor of their ships; vessels with which they dominated the ocean and which provided a superior detachment from the water. On the contrary, surfing was a way in which the pre-colonial Hawai'ians existed in unison with the ocean, as a

demonstration of their deep intimacy with the water. The European colonial mentality was to move *on* the ocean, while the Hawai'ians moved *in* the ocean.

2.5 Culture, Subculture and Lifestyle

While the word 'culture' has many different meanings and definitions throughout the literature, in this study culture will refer to the shared values, customs, beliefs and way of life exercised by a certain group of people (Oyserman, 2017; Storey, 2015). Furthermore, the notion of a surfing subculture has gained particular traction, in this study the concept of subculture denotes a group who exhibit behaviours comprising some of the principal features of the dominant culture, while also integrating their own exclusive customs and values that are not reproduced by other sections of society (Stranger, 2010; Butts, 2001; Reed, 1999).

For many surfers who belong to this subculture surfing is more than just a sport, it is a lifestyle (Wheaton, 2014). Lifestyle sports are a sociological phenomenon, often labelled as 'alternative', 'action-sports' or 'extreme', and while these monikers may be accurate in some cases, for the most part they are too wide-ranging and misleading (Anderson, 2014; Wheaton, 2004). Moreover, Stranger (1999) proposes that these activities be conceptualised less as sports, but more fittingly as forms of play. Participation in these lifestyle sports typically takes place in local areas, predominantly inhabited by those adhering subculture (Wheaton & Doidge, 2015). Usually, these spaces are liminal, and are often unregulated and uncontrolled, with the lifestyle

sports frequently being performed in a manner that defies and condemns regulation from institutions and commercialisation (Shields, 1992).

2.6 Surfing Spirituality and Soul Surfing

Warshaw (2003 p552) defines 'soul surfing' as the "durable, if overused, expression generally used to describe the type of [wave] riding practiced by non-commercial, non-competitive surfer; the soul surfer is often thought of as the 'pure' surfer... the man upon his board who shuts out the world and it's clamour." Furthermore, Heywood & Montgomery (2008, p.153) describe soul surfing as "an embodied lifestyle practice that is at once normative and transformative", and permeating their beliefs is an eco-centric attitude towards the environment in which they surf (Heywood & Montgomery, 2008).

To soul surfers, the practice of surfing is thought to be deeply meaningful, part of the product of which are various "physical, psychological and spiritual benefits" (Taylor, 2007, p.923). The environment is paramount and is viewed as potent, transformative, restorative and deserving of protection and reverence (*ibid.*). Anderson (2013) argues that surfing is not only a sport which incorporates elements of danger and a thrill seeking hedonism, but it is also a way in which individuals are able to encounter a transcendent spirituality. Spirituality is defined by Schneider (2011, p.16) as the basic human ability to experience transcendence, and also as a mindful way of existing

which strives to achieve “the horizon of ultimate value one perceives”. Schneider (2011, p.21) further elaborates, stating that:

Spirituality as lived experience takes place only in time and space, within particular cultural contexts, in interaction with the other persons and forces operative in the same context, and influenced by what and who has preceded it.

Taylor (2007, p.923) contends that the surfers to whom this applies view surfing as having “assumed a religious character”. Religion refers to the existence of non-observable entities and agencies, is the facet of human existence associated with sacred norms and is what compels the upholding of transcendent tenets of “truth, beauty, goodness and wisdom” (Ward, 2011, p.121; Taylor, 2007; Boyer, 1994). It grants humans the opportunity to add a further unique dimension of depth and meaning to their lives (Ward, 2011, p.118).

Taylor (2007) continues, claiming that these soul surfers belong to what should be understood as a hybridised new world religion, which he terms the Aquatic Nature Religion. The sensual, religious performance of surfing forms the hallowed core of this religion, and the resultant experiences led them to form the belief that nature is sacred. Kampion (2003, p.125), an open supporter of soul surfing, consolidates this argument of the sanctity of nature, stating that:

Without the wild, we are asleep in our lives... the search for pin wheeling waves and deserted beaches, the search for a primal engagement with the wild. Indeed, surfing as a phenomenon (as well as a philosophy), feeds a freedom born out of real, actual, day-to-day interaction with the wild.

Furthermore, Heywood & Montgomery (2008) highlight that there is a spectrum that exists, with soul surfers at one extreme, who participate in surfing for the intrinsic value it offers, and at the other extreme, highly competitive, regulated surfers for whom surfing is a career.

2.7 The Concept of The Primitive'

As Canniford & Karababa (2013, p.120) elucidate, the primitive refers to an alternative way of living in which an individual seeks out "adventure, exoticism, unspoilt geography, magic, timelessness, tradition, a return to human origins and free expression uninhibited by workaday realities". Augustin (1998) augments this description by adding concepts such as imagination, spontaneity and freedom as well as the appeal of eluding institutional controls. Notions of the primitive give rise to spaces in which alternative patterns of identity, culture and status can develop in order to counter the "ugliness" of everyday life, which Irwin (1973, p.138) explains is viewed as being too "mechanized", "routinized" and "tame". This is a counter-cultural response to the dominant hegemonic culture (Canniford & Karababa, 2013). One way in which these primitive tropes are manifested is through the ocean and its beaches, which can be primeval, secluded and unrefined (Ponting, 2008). Beaches exist as liminal spaces at the threshold of civilisation where the otherness and difference that is inherent in alternative lifestyles is established. Canniford & Karababa (2013, p.120) explain that through primitive discourse cultural origins can be emphasised and

individuals are able to “sidestep some of the fragmented and ambiguous pitfalls of modern, urban life”.

2.8 The Search

“Surfers tend to be searchers. They travel the world searching for the ultimate ride” (Ford, 2015, p.73). Rip Curl, a popular surf brand, have taken primitive notions that surfers stereotypically favour, and have shaped them into the concept of ‘The Search’. Rip Curl have made this concept tangible by organising surf trips for professional surfers. Providing equipment and sponsorship, Rip Curl offers surfers access to remote, striking and often exotic locations. On these trips, the surfers discover idyllic waves, diverse cultures and adventure because “the need to satisfy this addiction leads to a search for the best surfing spaces” (Preston-Whyte, 2004, p.354). The concept of The Search is centred on what Canniford & Karababa (2013, p.120) perceive to be notions of the primitive, such as “adventure, exoticism, unspoilt geography, magic, timelessness, tradition, a return to human origins and free expression uninhibited by workaday realities”. Damian Hardman (2017), a two time World Champion surfer and Rip Curl advocate explains that in the beginning these trips were rugged and disorganised without any schedule, often based only on legends of waves. He clarified that it was not the outcome of the trips that was important, instead it was the “insane adventures” that were key. The founder of Rip Curl, Doug Warbrick (2017), summarises that The Search embodies the authentic spirit of surfers and what they take pleasure in.

2.9 Christian Spirituality and its Context Within Sport

Ford (2015) claims that despite engaging in similar bodily actions, such as the act of riding a wave, different individuals can have different perceptions of transcendence, dependent upon their individual beliefs. Therefore, Christian surfers may experience a different version of transcendence when surfing compared to soul surfers. In order to understand this, it is necessary to appreciate the perspective of Christian spirituality.

McGrath (1999) states that Christian spirituality centres on the goal of living an authentic Christian experience by focusing on the fundamental tenets of Christianity. Schneider (2011) expounds, stating that it is a belief and trust in Jesus Christ, which is fundamental to the Christian faith. Every Christian is connected to Christ through the Holy Spirit, rendering them as children of God.

In the UK, sport and Christianity are connected through the way in which Protestantism affected the growth of sport in the last 200 years (Parker & Weir, 2012). The early 19th century evangelical Protestant church viewed sport as contrary to an effective Protestant work ethic, and thus sporting interests were expected to be set aside. A later example of this is C.T. Studd (1860-1931) who felt it necessary to give up a career as an international cricket player in order to pursue his work as an evangelical Protestant missionary in China, India and Africa (Grubb, 1933). However, contemporary attitudes have altered, and today the Church in the UK uses sport as a method of spreading the gospel. There is a growing number of people engaging with

Christian sporting organisations in the UK, such as Christians in Sport, Ambassadors in Sport and Christian Surfers UK. A noteworthy progression in contemporary church attitudes has been the increasing acknowledgement of the evangelistic opportunity that major sporting events present for sharing the gospel with the competitors and spectators (Parker & Weir, 2012), for example the Jesus Surf Classic organised by Christian Surfers UK

2.10 Christian Perspectives: A Gap in the Research

Surfing is a relatively well investigated phenomenon, with many of its various different aspects having been covered in the literature, from concepts such as tourism (Canniford & Karababa, 2013; Augustin, 1998), identity (Mueller Worster, 2006), environmental protest (Hales *et al.*, 2017) and surfing psychology (Butts, 2001) to surfing being conceptualised as a core spiritual practice of a new world religion (Taylor, 2007). Furthermore, research regarding surfing in the UK has been undertaken by Roy & Caudwell (2014) who examined gender and surfing spaces in Newquay, White *et al.* (2016) who focused on the health benefits of surfing, Ormrod (2007) who reviewed British surfing magazines and Ford & Brown (2006) who took a broad, sociological view of surfing in Britain.

Spirituality is also a well documented phenomenon, appearing in many of different disciplines, such as psychology (Paloutzian & Park, 2014), nursing (O'Brien, 2017) and higher education (Chickering *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, surfing and spirituality is also an

area of the literature that is well reported, with various researchers alluding to surfing being a spiritual act (Anderson, 2013; Taylor, 2007; Stranger, 1999).

The body of literature concerning Christianity is comprehensive and has been widely researched. However, a gap in the research exists; the association between Christian spirituality and surfing has been largely overlooked. Furthermore, this gap widens when considering research about Christian surfers living and surfing in the UK. Only one study addresses this area, Ford (2015) who examines bodily experiences and transcendence in Christian surfers in Cornwall. Hence, in order to fill this void, my study will address some of the social nuances present in the UK surfing subculture. It will propose unique perspectives on the mentality Christian surfers demonstrate towards concepts such as The Primitive and The Search, while placing these concepts in the context of Christian spirituality.

3. Methodology

3.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research seeks to bring to light to elements of the human experience that are not yet understood by utilising various techniques which originate from different research communities and varied research practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Walsh & Koelsch, 2012). Also, qualitative research is often thought of as a stark contrast to quantitative research. This is typified by Avis (2005) who suggests that part of what makes establishing a definition of qualitative research so difficult is the frequency with which the techniques used by qualitative researchers are compared and contrasted to those used by quantitative researchers, instead of being examined as their own entities. While there is no doubt that there are differences, often the similarities between these two forms of research are overlooked (Henwood, 2014; Avis, 2005).

In order to understand qualitative research Sparkes & Smith (2014) state that two key concepts of qualitative research must be acknowledged. First, in order to undertake qualitative research it is important to examine the philosophical suppositions that are made about the area to be studied. The second is a review of the investigative techniques necessary for the researchers to perform their investigations. Therefore, in order to attempt to tie down a definition of qualitative research, within this study the definition proposed by King *et al.* (1994) will be used. They suggested that any research which is typically associated with a wide-ranging description of an experience

or an entity, utilises discursive methods and does not employ numerical research techniques can be considered to be qualitative research.

Swinton & Mowat (2006) state that in order to gather data which is both reliable and valid, and to therefore have a profound impact on the body of knowledge surrounding the area of investigation, it is vital to use investigative techniques that are insightful and comprehensive. Therefore, in order to access the participant's thoughts and feelings pertaining to the subject matter, qualitative research was used as it promotes the use of creative research techniques. This was a vital part of the data collection process. If quantitative research methods had been employed the unquantifiable nature of the data, language and the people's thoughts, would have made this impossible. One cannot put a number on an individual's expressions of spirituality for instance. Additionally, so as to engage with the participants in order to better understand the dynamics between surfing and Christianity, the use of interviews and participant observation facilitated the gathering of language and reflections as data (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

3.2 Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy related to the ways in which knowledge is defined, from which sources it is acquired and its associated limitations (Crotty, 1998). This research makes the underlying epistemological assumption that Christian surfers are continually in a process of sense making, through which they attribute meaning to

the world in which they live which includes the key aspects to this research, surfing and spirituality. A constructivist view will be employed, which makes the assumption that the Christian surfer subculture within which surfing and the expression of spirituality are found, is a socially constructed phenomenon that arises through social forces (Chase, 2005). Another assumption that my research makes is that language constitutes data. The language used by the participants to express their experiences of surfing and spirituality is therefore used for gathering insights into their discourse, providing information on surfing and spirituality that would otherwise have remained concealed (Newton, 2010).

3.3 Participant Criteria

The criteria I used for participants were: to have regularly surfed in UK waters for at least 2 years, to consider themselves to be Christians and to live in or around London. London was chosen as the target location due to previous connections which I had formed with members of the CS London group. Furthermore, while London is not geographically a typical surfing location, there is a relatively large and active group of Christian surfers living there. However, despite these being identified as the ideal criteria, it became apparent that I would need to make an exception to the locational aspect as this became too restrictive. Due to unforeseen circumstances the typically monthly CS London meetings became extremely irregular and thus it was difficult to initiate and maintain contact with certain members of CS London.

I decided to use social media to contact potential candidates because this is the main pathway through which the group communicate, thus making it a more convenient way for me to find participants. While I got responses from various potential participants, it proved difficult to ascertain and confirm specific times and dates on which to do the interviews. Some candidates did not respond at all. Furthermore, while I corresponded with several over a period of time it became clear that one did not match the criteria (they had only surfed once in the last two years) and although the others were amenable to having an interview, setting a specific time again proved unsuccessful. Therefore, three participants remained who met the criteria were interviewed.

3.4 The Participants

The participants were David, Jenny and Jack. David lives in Kent, Jenny lives in Devon and Jack lives in London. David has been surfing for many years and is heavily involved in the leadership of CS UK. He had a key role in the organisation and running of the National Gathering which was the location of my participant observation. Jenny moved to Devon from London and has been surfing regularly at her local breaks⁴ and has become a trustee for CS UK. Jack recently ceased being the leader of CS London due to personal commitments. David and Jenny attended the National Gathering, but Jack did not as his wedding was held over the same weekend. All of the participants met the criteria in that they have been surfing regularly in the UK for at least 2 years

⁴ Surfing argot for a location where surfable waves can be found

and consider themselves to be Christians. Furthermore, they all live, or have lived in or around London recently; all gave their informed consent (see appendix A) and are part of the Christian surfer subculture that is the focus of this study.

3.5 Sampling Methodology

It would have been beyond the scope of my study to sample all of the Christian Surfers who lived in London, instead I realised that it would be necessary to keep my sample small because I wanted to personally gather in-depth data from each interview which is a time consuming process. My sample was a convenience sample because I deliberately chose people who I thought would fit the criteria based on acquaintances and contacts I had made having been to three CS London meetings (Punch & Oancea, 2014).

3.6 Pilot Study

In September 2016 I conducted a pilot study by attending a surf competition that was run by CS in order to better understand the demands of participant observation research. Furthermore, I conducted a pilot interview using the first draft of questions. This was done in order to help formulate and refine the questions which I would be asking in the actual interviews. Having reflected on this interview I decided that there was a measure of overlap between the questions and that they were not comprehensive enough for me to cover all of the elements that I wished to research.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Ethical factors are always paramount when undertaking interviews and participant observation and therefore, throughout this study I have adhered to a strict ethical framework comprising the following elements. Firstly, I clearly explained the parameters of the semi-structured methodology that I would be utilising to each participant and then ensured that each of the participants gave their informed consent to be part of the study. I also made sure that they were aware that at any point during the process they were free to refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the study entirely. Secondly, the participants were informed that any data gathered from the research would be anonymised, which was done by giving each participant a pseudonym. Thirdly, they were informed that the data would be stored in a safe, secure manner. Furthermore, I gained permission from the university ethics board to undertake the research. Finally, I became an official member of CS, both out of a desire to be a part of the group but also as it would give me a legitimate reason to attend their meetings and events and would help me to better identify with the group.

3.8 Data Collection

3.8.1 Data Collection Process

The data collection process began at the Jesus Surf Classic (September 2016) competition when I undertook the pilot study. Here I was able to meet a number of CS members and begin formulating ideas for interview questions as well as getting an

experience of participant observation. Next, I shaped and refined the interview questions while gathering potential interviewees, and in April/May I identified the interviewees who matched the criteria and then undertook the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were done prior to attending the National Gathering, which took place in June.

3.8.2 Participant Observation

Participant observation is the social, corporeal and/or emotional engagement of a researcher in the culture and lives of the participants (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Willis (2014, p.1) states:

The sheer surprise of a living culture is a slap to reverie. Real, bustling, startling cultures move. They exist. They are something in the world. They suddenly leave behind – empty, exposed, ugly – ideas of poverty, deprivation, existence and culture. Real events can save us much philosophy.

By taking an insider role, as I am already situated inside CS, when I went to the National Gathering I was engaging in complete participant observation (Costley *et al.*, 2010). Willis (1984, p.90) explains that the advantage of participant observation is that it allows the researcher to gain understanding of concepts that were not anticipated from the standpoint of their particular paradigm. Moreover, while it is required to disclose one's overall theoretical perspective, it is also vital that the researcher remains flexible and open minded (Tsoukas, 2009). Through this technique I was able to obtain vital insider observations and experiences which aided in my identification

with the group of surfers, thus giving insights that would not have been possible through other methods.

Furthermore, through complete participant observation I was able to gain perceptive reflexive data. This refers to the way in which a researcher “turns back on oneself” and undertakes a “process of self-reference” by using their experiences as data (Davies, 2008, p.4). Through this technique data which would otherwise have been lost, such as the sensual impact that the vivid descriptions of surfers’ experiences on waves has on the individual, can be used to further paint a picture of the social and spiritual situation which is under scrutiny.

Due to ethical issues that are associated with conducting covert participant observation, when undertaking my research I did not attempt to hide my motives for being at the National Gathering. While this may have altered the way in which the participants interacted with me it was deemed to be of less importance than maintaining my transparency and integrity as a researcher. A similar issue arose during the semi-structured interviews, as it was essential that each participant gave informed consent, and thus it was ultimately inevitable that the participants would discover why I was at the National Gathering.

3.8.3 Interviews

Qualitative interviews are essentially a conversation with an objective (Holloway, 1997). The interviewer uses the conversation as a way to get an insight into the mind-sets, perspectives and thoughts of the participant. This is further elaborated upon by Sparkes & Smith (2014) who state that interviews are a vehicle through which people participate in embodied discussion, their interaction constructing knowledge of themselves as well as their cultural/social situation.

Semi-structured interviews were the chosen method in this study. Searle & Filmer (1998) explain that semi-structured interviews do not necessarily abide by a specific sequence or particular wording of the questions. While allowing the participants to have freedom to respond however they chose, the interviewer often follows a pre-planned series of questions to ensure that all necessary topics are involved in the discussion. This ensured that the key topics would be covered while not constraining the participants and allowing them to elaborate on anything that they felt was interesting, thus allowing for factors that I had not considered to emerge throughout the interviews.

Despite the reduction of control that semi-structured interviews grant to the interviewer it bestows more control to the participant giving a, potentially, more profound insight into the issues being discussed than would have been possible from the more inhibited, formal nature of structured interviews. Conversely, being less structured made the analysis of the interviews more complex as the answers that the participants gave were not already set in pre-specified topic areas. Additional

difficulties arose from the necessity to do the interviews over the phone. This made it more difficult to build rapport with the participants, and while being time-efficient and inexpensive it may have led to loss of valuable data through the inability to make non-verbal observations.

3.8.4 Additional Evidence

In addition to the interviews and data I gathered through participant observation I was also given various leaflets and a Surfers Bible while attending the National Gathering. These were distributed at the start to anyone who was interested, specifically targeting the newer members of CS in order to help familiarise them with goals of CS, as well as to assist in the exploration of their spirituality. This data will be useful in providing background information on the organisation and to offer further insights into the perspectives and experiences taken from the interviews and participant observation.

3.9 Issues with Data Gathering

A number of problems occurred during the data gathering element of this study. One of my early ideas was to attend the 'Jesus Longboard Pro', which is a longboard (type of surfing) event that CS organise. This event would have provided an excellent location for participant observation research as well as giving me the opportunity to get to know more of the CS 'crew'. Unfortunately, this event was cancelled due to the

forecast which predicted waves that were deemed too dangerous to run the competition.

I was disappointed with this outcome, as my plans had to be cancelled multiple times and it made it significantly more difficult to collect data. However, in hindsight, this was a step into the life of a surfer. With the ocean being the milieu for the sport of surfing there is a certain amount of unpredictability, especially with the capricious nature of waves along the coast UK. This helped me to reconcile my disappointment as it gave me a taste of the frustrations that UK surfers experience from time to time.

As a researcher, I experienced another concern. The monthly London CS meet ups were infrequent, and often cancelled, leading to my inability to attend any. This was problematic as I had planned to attend them regularly and had hoped that they would be a significant aspect of my data collection. When I became aware of this problem I was concerned that I would struggle to find any occasions where I could undertake the participant observation side of the research. In my desperation, I considered travelling to an event on the north coast of Scotland which would have been costly and time consuming. Fortunately, I then heard about the possibility of going to the National Gathering which was not only an ideal location to gather participant observation research, but also reduced the cost and travel time. The National Gathering is an annual assembly of members of CS UK usually held at Tubestation, a surf church in Cornwall, at which the different sections of the CS community are informed about projects that are taking place in other areas as well as larger CS events that are being

held throughout the world. It also allows fellowship with other Christian surfers from different areas.

3.10 Data Analysis

Analysing qualitative research is a creative, systematic process from which the implications of gathered data can be surmised (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Within this practice are various techniques such as being mindful of the reflexive aspects of the data, transcription of interviews, deep engagement with the data so as to grasp its subject and structure as well as examining any emergent themes that surfaced. This allowed the data to be unpacked in a thorough, systematic manner.

When looking to manage and express the gathered data, thematic analysis was used. Braun & Clarke (2014) explain that this is a technique which comprises uncovering, interpreting and giving meaning to the themes which were recognized from the data. Thematic analysis is useful as it is a direct, yet somewhat flexible, technique through which qualitative data can be analysed. This aids in the formation of connections between similarities and differences that may have been found during the course of the analysis (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Nevertheless, while thematic analysis is useful it is important to understand that due to the reduction and simplification of the volume of data the potential exists that some nuances and discrepancies within the data may go unnoticed throughout this progression.

Examination of the data commenced with the use of a verbatim routine/orthographic method to transcribe the data from the interviews (West, 1996). The next step required engagement with the data, thus facilitating a systematic coding across the complete data set with the goal of producing a comprehensive list detailing the various codes. Costley *et al.* (2010) define codes as concise and methodical labels used by researchers to classify observations from their raw data. This systematic coding involved integrating the extracted data back into the work as concepts and themes (Holton, 2007). Next, the codes were assembled; with all appropriate codes being collated and if/when similar codes arose they were assimilated. Through this collation and assimilation the principal themes from within the codes can be drawn out, eventually leading to a list of frequently occurring, predominant candidate themes. Subsequently, any of the collated data codes that were linked with a candidate theme were examined for any consistent patterns, any of which were noted. So as to name and identify the core elements inherent within each theme, ascertaining that the themes were distinguishable from each other and functioned relative to the rest of the data set was vital. After this, the emerging implications from the data set could be comprehended. Throughout this process distinguishing any sub-themes from the data set aided in categorizing and reducing the complexity of the larger candidate themes.

3.11 Representation of Data

Eisner (2008, p.5) explains that as there are different ways in which knowledge can be created, so too can it be delivered in different forms. Therefore, knowing the perspective that has been taken is a key factor in interpreting the data. This study is

presented as a realist tale, with the data being delivered principally from the perspective of the participants. Tsoukas (1989, p.556) defines realist as being “concerned with the clarification of structures and their associated generative mechanisms, which have been contingently capable of producing the observed phenomena.” This form of expression places the opinions, perceptions and experiential data to the fore (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Through this form of data communication it is possible to present it in a thorough, multidimensional and compelling narrative, exploring the perspectives of the participants dispassionately.

While a realist tale is used to present certain elements of the data, there is also a significant emphasis on the use of reflexive thought. By bringing the disembodied author, who is present in realist tales, into the narrative and including the use of ‘I’ a more personalised style of writing is permitted. Also, reflexivity gives voice to the ‘missing researcher’, thus enriching the narrative and adding a further dimension (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). For that reason, in this study a blend of both tales, participant and researcher, was used in order to provide the reader with unique perspectives on Christian spirituality in the UK surfing subculture.

3.12 Quality of Data

In the quantitative paradigm data gathering techniques are assessed using concepts such as validity and reliability. However, qualitative data gathering techniques, such as semi-structured and unstructured interviews cannot be evaluated using these same

concepts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of these qualitative methods gives a researcher access to the unique experiences and opinions of each individual, a process which does not conform to scientific-positivist principles (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Instead of validity and reliability, Lincoln & Guba (1985) suggest that a new vocabulary must be adopted. Instead, they propose the use of post-positivist concepts, with validity being substituted for credibility and reliability being exchanged for dependability.

Furthermore, instead of these scientific positivist notions, when seeking to establish the quality of qualitative research a 'letting go' standpoint has been adopted (Sparkes, 1998; 2002). This has granted qualitative researchers more freedom in their capacity to infer meaning from data in critical and creative ways by ceasing the search for the 'right answer' (Wolcott, 1994). For example, when undertaking participant observation the researcher's main concern is not with the replicability of the study, nor with its generalisability but with providing profound insights into the specific social situations that are being examined.

When considering qualitative research, a relativist perspective can be employed (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The criteria which are used when taking a relativistic stance are not irrefutable and 'set in stone'. Instead, their interpretation can be fluid contingent upon the context of the research. Smith & Hodkinson (2005) maintain that these criteria are subject to change, with the addition, removal or modification of any item being considered in relation to the subject.

A list of criteria to be used to assess the relative merits of qualitative research was proposed by Tracy (2010). This list of criteria, referred to as 'big tent' criteria, is formed around 8 concepts: ethical considerations, value of the topic, sincerity, thoroughness, resonance, meaningful rationality, credibility and influence. This conceptualisation creates a shared perspective through which qualitative research practices can be viewed and critiqued. Due to the flexible and comprehensive nature offered by these 'big tent' criteria I decided to adopt them when considering my study. Both positives and negatives surfaced when doing this evaluation. I deemed that the 'sincerity' of this study was adequate, due to the self-reflexivity I employed with regard to the subjective values and susceptibilities with which I commenced the research, along with sufficient clarity as to the procedures and difficulties that were experienced throughout the study. However, while I was able to spend four days in the field with members of CS at the National Gathering, I would like to have been able to attend some of the CS London 'meet ups' which normally would have happened every month. Unfortunately these meet ups were not running this year, which reduced the amount of contact that I was able to have with the London branch of CS. This decreased both the data that I was able to gather as a participant observer, as well as making it more difficult to find suitable candidates with whom to conduct the interviews, thus diminishing the potency of the data collection.

4. Findings

4.1 Subculture

A subculture is a collection of people whose behaviours and values reflect those of the dominant culture, while also demonstrating different, exclusive ideologies and customs that are not prevalent within the dominant culture (Brake, 2013). In relation to surfing subcultures, these are often structured around locations at which waves are consistently most appropriate for surfing (Preston-Whyte, 2004). An individual's relationship to the dominant culture, and through this their social identity and the subcultures to which they belong, is constructed from the nexus of social relations and meanings surrounding them and by a process of sense-making through which their position in society is revealed (Brake, 2013). The very existence of subcultures suggests that dominant cultures do not appeal to all members of a society and in the search for social identity individuals subscribe to different subcultures, demonstrating alternative forms of cultural expression which reflects a cultural plurality (Helly, Barsky & Foxen, 2003). The sociological understanding of subculture as a concept offers a greater understanding of surfing culture and, more pertinently, the social location of Christian surfers within UK society (Green, 2001).

4.2 Christian Surfers' Relationships with the Secular Surf Culture

The subculture of Christian surfers exists within the overarching secular surfing culture. Christian surfers may also belong to the secular surf culture; Jenny for

example was part of the London Surfers Club, with whom she went on various surf trips. She said:

I guess because I have been brought up as a non-Christian it's quite normal for me to hang out with lots of other non-Christians. So surfing with the London Surf Club was brilliant 'cause you met people from all sorts of walks of life... actually non-Christian surfers tended to be more open to faith, as surfing is quite a spiritual thing.

Furthermore, while in conversation with David during the participant observation I discovered that he had helped organise and participated in 'Paddle Round the Pier', a popular secular surf festival. Also, Jack talked about how most of the people with whom he surfs are non-Christian friends from his time at university. While Jack would like to surf more with Christian surfers, he also mentioned that because he often surfs with non-Christians it is an evangelistic opportunity for him to share his faith with them; in fact he stated that, "many of my non-Christian friends are becoming Christians". This element of evangelism was also implied by the other two participants, and was repeatedly mentioned in the talks given by the speakers at the National Gathering during the participant observation. Therefore, whilst they are Christian surfers, surfing with non-Christians brings a different perspective to their surfing, granting them access to spaces within which they are able to share their faith with others in the secular surfing subculture.

Another feature of the subculture is that whilst Christian surfers spend time with non-Christian surfers they exhibit various behaviours and beliefs that distinguish them from their non-Christian peers. This was evident while undertaking the participant

observation as the event took place in a church, a space in which few secular surfers would choose to spend a sunny weekend, especially while the waves were firing⁵. The practice of attending a church is in itself a behaviour that is unique to Christian subcultures, which was further reinforced throughout the weekend as the activities and talks had a spiritual focus (Johnson & Crossing, 2014). Essentially, this demonstrates that the behaviour of church attendance is one of the distinguishing features of the Christian surfer subculture compared to the secular surfer subculture.

What differentiates Christian surfers from just being Christians who surf as a leisure pursuit, is the level of importance that the surfing element assumes in their lives. A phrase that is at the heart of the CS organisation is: "Who better to reach surfers than surfers?" (Christian Surfers UK, 2017) This demonstrates that CS, a community of Christian surfers, feels challenged to share their faith with other surfers. They share some aspects of identity with secular surfers, such as surf-talk, image congruity and surf location destinations, which enables them to find common ground to initiate and develop relationships. Jenny, for instance, reinforces this concept by stating that she is "just trying to be a bit of Jesus in the water... and in the car park." This opens opportunities for conversation during which they are able to share their spirituality. Thus, the specific group with which Jenny and other CS members engage is another distinguishing feature of this subculture. The essence of this subculture, therefore, which combines two life styles - surfing and Christianity - is summed up by David who stated:

⁵ Surfing argot for 'the waves are good'

Surfing is one of my biggest passions, and being a follower of Jesus is I hope my biggest passion... so I think bringing the two together is a really nice marriage for me.

4.3 Reflection: Entry Point and Connection

On a personal level, I appreciated many aspects of the surfing lifestyle, such as its laid back, wild attitude and the effortless flow which surfers exhibit (Ford & Brown, 2006). Upon joining CS the connection immediately felt natural, as though I was now around people who could understand me without the need to explain myself, although they were complete strangers. Similarly to David, the marriage of the two lifestyles fits with my passion for the ocean, as well as affording me people with whom I can explore my spirituality (Mueller Worster, 2006). This was most evident on the journey to the National Gathering where I shared a car with two fellow neophytes to the surfing lifestyle. It was immediately obvious that, while we were strangers, our passions coincided. I had found an entry point into the subculture (Kempson, 2015). As beginner surfers, throughout the 6 hour journey our conversation negotiated our outsider identities, and eventually as the first view of the ocean came over the horizon and Sarah said "I feel at home now", I realised that, despite our inexperience with surfing, subconsciously we had all been looking for this connection.

4.4 Cool, Graceful, Flowing, Sexy: Perceptions of the Surfing Subculture

A phrase that the main speaker at the National Gathering, used frequently was that surfing was only for 'super cool' people. Used ironically, she sought to explain how the image of surfing is often not its reality. This was a sentiment that occurred regularly

throughout the research; the concept that surfing is a 'cool' activity and subculture to belong to. For example, Jack said that surfing is a "cool community" to be a part of, while Jenny explained that part of her first interest in Christianity stemmed from her viewing some Christians who participated in sailing and wind surfing as being "cool" people. It also appeared in conversation during the participant observation with a participant from South Africa, who described how she had wanted to surf from an early age, but because she perceived that she was not part of the 'cool' group she was deterred from participating. The main speaker explained that while social media proliferates a graceful, flowing, sexy image, it is not necessarily the case for the beginner or average surfer. My personal experience, as described in the introduction, is contingent with her position.

In the UK, surfing is not considered to be mainstream 'cool', with the laid back style, the clothes and the language that are typical of surfers not subscribing to the hegemonic norms (Lembo, 2014). Instead of attempting to match the current mainstream style, surfers tend to exercise a more counter-cultural version of being cool where the aim is to be accepted by other surfers (Walker, 2015). Counter-cultural behaviour is any which seeks to behave outside of the dominant cultural norms (Heath & Potter, 2005).

From a phenomenological perspective, a definition of 'cool' is problematic to establish due to the subjectivity of its interpretation by each individual, culture and subculture, nonetheless, what must be recognised is that there are alternative styles to the hegemonic norm (Ferguson, 2011). Skelton & Valentine (2005, p.1) explain that part of

the formula for alternative styles is the “ability to see the flipside” of things, appreciating original, innovative and broad-minded narratives. It interweaves a residual code which, through both “disaffiliation and association” with dominant cultural symbols, has become an emergent code.

While the ‘cool’ image, however, is a significant element within the surfing subculture, and as such is likely to be present in some form within the Christian surfer subculture, there is a profound difference between secular surfers and Christian surfers. As the main speaker elaborated, part of what defines Christian surfers (and as such plays a key role in understanding the CS subculture) is that they do not surf, or even exist for themselves. Instead, as Christians, the question that Jenny raised of “who do you surf for?” is vital in understanding what differentiates Christian surfers within the overarching surfing culture. Jenny elucidates this by explaining how “surfing can be quite a selfish thing, where it’s about your wave, your ride, your own experience”, and that while the cool image and sensual nature of surfing plays a key role in the draw and enjoyment of surfing, the focus of Christian surfers is centred on communicating their spirituality with other surfers, a factor which is communicated by Jenny, who stated that her main aim when surfing is “being a bit of Jesus in the water.”

4.5 Spiritual pathway: Discovering God in Nature

Fundamental to an understanding of postmodern spirituality is that a person’s spirituality can be expressed outside of the traditional settings of churches (Lyon,

2013). A literal example of this was expressed by David, who stated that he felt most connected to God when “on the water... just that sense of being in touch with nature... I see God in all sorts of things really, nature particularly”. This is a sentiment echoed by the other participants. Jack stated:

Getting ‘out back’ and just waiting... gives me time to myself to just be with God... It’s just me, nature and God with no one to distract me, no mobile, TV, work or car. I can sense God more out back⁶... the ocean is just so huge and vast, it’s a realisation moment.

Furthermore, Jenny elucidated, saying:

The simplicity of it [surfing]... being close to nature. I feel like I connect with God most, or I experience God most, when I’m in the sea, and I think that just being in God’s creation, in nature, just helps to draw me to God more and helps me to focus on him

From these narratives it is evident that within the Christian surfer subculture, being in nature is important to their spiritual experience. They draw near to God through what Thomas (2010, p.44) terms the “naturalist spiritual pathway”, explaining one of the postmodern approaches to spirituality by stating “the naturalist seeks to leave the formal architecture and the padded pews to enter an entirely new ‘cathedral’, a place that God himself has built: the outdoors”.

In addition, during the participant observation I shared in various spiritual practices which would traditionally have taken place in church. For example, four members of CS made the decision to be baptised (adult immersion baptism) as an expression of

⁶ Surfing argot for the calm area beyond the breaking waves where surfers wait for their wave

their commitment to follow Christ. Typically, this would have taken place in a baptistery pool inside a church building as part of a baptism service (Hicks & Weedman, 2015). However, as surfers, in order to adapt this common spiritual practice to their context, rather than taking place in the church building, the baptisms took place in the liminal space between land and ocean that is the beach.

The postmodern representation of their spirituality was evident to me, and the whole situation felt more in keeping to the free, uninhibited expression that I had observed about this subculture. Light filtering through stained glass windows and the still water of the baptistery pools of other baptisms that I have attended within the formal restrictions of ecclesial architecture, felt stifling and unnatural in comparison to the beach location with the vibrancy of the setting sun as the baptism candidates were ritually submersed in the foaming white-water, to the backdrop of surfers catching their last rides of the day; truly primitive.

Furthermore, I reminisced to my adolescence where I had first encountered a yearning for the primitive, and time spent seeking adventure and an escape from daily life on the exotic S n galese coastline, concepts that Canniford & Karababa (2013, p.120) identify as being “notions of the primitive”. Specifically, a number of my close friends had undergone similar baptisms in the ocean, as the church I had attended in S n gal contextualised spiritual practices to the beat of a postmodern drum, with many of its practices being held outside or in ways that would not typify a ‘normal’ English church.

I came to the realisation that the similarities of this shared counter-cultural spiritual practice, this rejection of tradition and acceptance of their identities as postmodern faith communities was part of what drew me to identify with CS. Despite the cultural and geographical distance between Cornwall and Sénégal, I felt like I had rediscovered an element of my spirituality, through the postmodern practices and primitive discourse that the Christian surfer subculture enacts.

4.6 Unique Subcultural Spiritual Identity

During the participant observation I also witnessed another example of the way in which CS have adapted their spiritual practices to correspond to their subcultural identity. Traditionally in the UK, on Sunday mornings Christian gatherings/services take place inside church buildings, however, the CS Sunday morning service at the National Gathering took place outside the church building on a hill overlooking the beach. The speaker explained that this was done intentionally enacted in order to provide the congregation of surfers with a visual representation of the grandeur of God's creation and an indication of fellow surfers who were outside the Christian surfer community, thus representing evangelistic opportunities.

This aroused nostalgic sentiments, as having grown up in Sénégal with Christian parents I was often taken to local churches, many of which held services outside in courtyards or under the shade of mango trees. This way of performing Christian

gatherings/services resonates with what Thomas (2010, p.46) writes about, stating that those with naturalist pathways “often learn their best lessons in the outdoors... it is here that they visualize scriptural truths... [and] see God more clearly...” Therefore, in my opinion, another perspective was given by the Sunday speaker at the National Gathering who used the outdoor liminal space of the beach and the surfers who populate it to blend the waters of postmodernity, notions of the primitive and Christian spiritual practices in order to create a space in which CS expressed their unique subcultural, spiritual identity.

4.7 Environmental Conservation: Surfers Against Sewage

One of the afternoons during the National Gathering I participated in a ‘beach clean’ led by Surfers Against Sewage (SAS)⁷, who are in partnership with CS. SAS is a movement which aims to safeguard UK coastlines by reducing plastic pollution. Protecting the environment, specifically beaches and oceans, is an attitude which resonates with many surfers. Through surfing, “surfers are able to observe the effects of environmental degradation on the environment (e.g., polluted water), the ecosystem, and on their personal health” (Holland-Smith *et al.*, 2013, p.103) as they desire to maintain the environment and their opportunity to surf in clean waters (Hales *et al.*, 2017). Conserving the environment is important to surfers, and particularly to Christian surfers.

⁷ Founded in Porthtowan in 1990, Surfers Against Sewage is a national marine conservation and campaigning charity that inspires, unites and empowers communities to take action to protect oceans, beaches, waves and wildlife. <https://www.sas.org.uk/about-us/mission-vision>

Historically, Bosch (1991) explained that the modern worldview saw nature as a machine to be scientifically studied and as a resource for mankind to dominate and exploit. A more contemporary, postmodern worldview of creation, however, now emphasises the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of all life. This paradigm shift has permitted a new way of interpreting the relationship between Christian spirituality, mankind and creation. No longer is nature to be dominated and exploited, but it is to be conserved and protected.

Granberg-Michaelson (1992, pp.70-71) reported that:

“For the very first time in the history of creation, certain life support systems of the planet are being destroyed by human actions... it is extremely urgent that we as churches make strong and permanent spiritual, moral and material commitments... in respect for the whole of God’s creation.”

Furthermore, Hitzhusen (2007) and Wilkinson (2010) have observed that in postmodern times there has been a “greening of Christianity”. Various religious and environmental scholars contend that empathetic care for the environment is not only consistent with Christian values, but is in fact demanded (Clements *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, from a Christian surfer’s perspective, the significance of protecting the environment is twofold. Firstly, protecting the physical environment in which they practice their sport. Secondly, it is also a means through which they are able to safeguard the spaces in which they exercise their spiritual pathways.

4.8 Surf Trips: The Next Wave, The Next Adventure

During the interviews, the participants were asked about surf trips that they had experienced, and all three referred to different trips that they had been on. Jack listed the following places that he had travelled to on surf trips: Hawai'i, Indonesia, Bali, New Zealand, Australia, Morocco, Sri Lanka, Lanzarote, France, Spain, Portugal. Similarly, Jenny and David reported that they had been on a number of trips to foreign locations. Jenny stated:

Yeah, I've surfed abroad. I've done a couple of trips to Morocco because it was warm and cheap. We went to Fuerteventura because we thought it would have warm waves and wasn't too far. But actually it wasn't quite so warm and it was really windy. I also went across to Biarritz in France.

David elaborated:

I have surfed in France lots, the Canary Islands, Australia, Portugal... yeah, I mean, I haven't been to America... I'd love to do America! South Africa... I'd like to do New Zealand as well, and it would be great to do Indo' as well at some point.

While none of the participants are professional surfers, and their trips were not sponsored by Rip Curl or any other surf brand, it is a demonstration of the draw that The Search creates throughout the surfing subculture, as individuals seek out adventure through travel. Interestingly, not only did David and Jack discuss the places which they had already been to, but they voluntarily expanded upon the trips that they dreamt of making. Therefore, for surfers, the next trip and the search for the next perfect wave as well as the adventure which accompanies it is a key aspect their

identity.

Furthermore, this same mind-set was evident throughout the participant observation. I noted various conversations which centred on surf trips that the members of CS had been on, ranging from Australia to Iceland. Anywhere that there was a rideable wave and a new adventure was an option. These conversations were set to the backdrop of TV screens set up in the church, which had surfing videos running on loop throughout the weekend. Set in striking exotic locations, these videos would have been incongruous in other UK churches; at Tubestation they fittingly reflected the subcultural context. This is another reflection on the blend of postmodern expression of Christianity and the Christian surfers subculture, highlighting the primitive and The Search.

4.9 Personal Reflections: Zebra Bar

On a personal level, the birth of The Search in my consciousness came about while on a family holiday when I was 12 years old, long before I had ever witnessed stand up surfing. My family went on a trip to the north of Sénégal, an area of the country that I had not previously encountered. Driving north in our car, the savannah of central Sénégal gave way to the sands of the Sahel, the southern border of the Sahara. Our destination was a campement⁸ called Zebra Bar on *La Langue de Barbarie*⁹, nothing in my life thus far had prepared me for what I was about to discover.

⁸ A basic camp site with standing thatched roofed huts

The campment was situated at the edge of a tranquil lagoon that was separated from the coastline by a narrow, forested sand spit. Crossing the lagoon in a kayak, I landed on the spit and walked through the ribbon of forest. I had arrived at the Atlantic Ocean. Emerging from the forest, the vista was simultaneously primeval and exotic, with an unspoilt white sand beach stretching endlessly in both directions; seemingly untouched by humanity, not a single footprint or human mark to be seen. I had entered a different world. The serenity of the lagoon was shattered by the ferocious breakers of the untamed Atlantic Ocean. The curling, deep blue waves enticed, threatened and dared me to explore further. To me this embodied what Canniford & Karababa (2013, p. 130; 127) describe as “the edgy appeal and excitement of the primitive”, the ocean embodied “mysticism and danger”. I had found something that I knew I would always be searching for.

To me it was a spiritual moment, with the perfection of the unspoilt beach and the savagery of the waves evoking a sense of something *more*, something greater than my simple humanity. To this day, whenever I encounter The Search and the associated notions of the primitive, my mind is drawn to this visceral, spiritual experience in the “unsullied elsewhere space” (Canniford & Karababa, 2013, p.139) that is the Atlantic coastline of the *Langue de Barbarie*.

⁹ ‘The Barbary Tongue’, a spit that stretches 20km along the coastline creating a long lagoon between the mainland and the sea. It is also a nature reserve.

In labelling this experience as primitive I feel that it is necessary to address what may be construed as a Eurocentric perspective that I have taken. However, despite my European ancestry, having grown up in Sénégal I do not consider Sénégal as a typically exotic location, it was simply home. In fact, at the time when I had this experience, when thinking of exotic, other locations, it was Europe that came to mind. Therefore, I would like to clarify that I have not sought to label Sénégal as other or primitive, instead it was my experience of nature at that moment that fell within this conceptualisation of The Primitive.

4.10 Cold water surfing: A new manifestation of the primitive

Historically surfing originated in the warm waters of Hawai'i, however, during the last fifty years there has been an interesting shift in the locations in which surfing is practiced (Warshaw, 2005). For example, the British Surfing Association was established in 1966, with British conditions being a far cry from the idyllic conditions of Hawai'i (Warshaw, 2005). Surfing in significantly colder extremes than the UK, such as Iceland and Russia, has also been discovered. This is a concept that was brought to my attention during the interviews when Jack expressed an interest in surfing Scotland and the Shetland Islands, explaining that "you have to be a bit of a hardy surfer to get up there and surf".

Perhaps the best representation of cold water surfing is by the professional surf photographer Chris Burkard who has recently released a cold water surf film titled

‘Under an Arctic Sky’. Aged nineteen, he began a career as a surf photographer, capturing images of surfers in tropical waters. Despite the initial attractions of these destinations, he soon came to the realisation that his lifestyle in these exotic locations was actually monotonous. He was searching for adventure, but as time passed all he discovered was routine.

Feeling suffocated by the warmer, heavily touristic surf locations, his Search changed; instead of seeking out tropical line-ups¹⁰, he set out to capture perfect waves in places that others had disregarded as being “too cold, too remote and too dangerous to surf” (Burkard, 2015). His dissatisfaction led him on what he described as a “personal crusade against the mundane” (*ibid.*). Thus, his Search took him to places such as Russia, Alaska, Iceland, Norway and Chile, which in my opinion illustrate a variation on the discourse of The Search: extreme cold water surfing.

Even though Chris Burkard was no longer seeking tropical photo opportunities, his narrative gives contemporary meaning to the archaic notion of the primitive. The key elements of the primitive are present throughout this discourse, with epic journeys, adventure, danger, returning to human origins and escaping daily life being boldly expressed throughout the overarching metanarrative of his Search into cold water surfing (West, 2014).

¹⁰ Surfing argot for the place where waves are beginning to break, where most surfers position themselves in order to catch a wave

4.11 Searching for Spirituality

Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation suggested that there are five levels of human needs, with each being pre-potent fulfilment of the previous hierarchical level. He maintained that humans are initially motivated by physiological needs, such as food and shelter, and that the fifth, and highest, hierarchical level is self-actualisation, which refers to the ways in which humans are motivated to find aspects of their lives such as meaning, morality and spontaneity (Lewis, 1987). However, Maslow later revised his model, adding a motivational step beyond self-actualisation – self-transcendence, looking for meaning beyond one's self (Maslow, 1969; Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Whilst at the time this concept threw Maslow's hierarchy into turmoil it is important to note that self-transcendence is a significant motivation in human discourse (Daniels, 2005) and, in the case of this research, the motivation to find a greater meaning in life beyond one's self.

Pava's (2003) research among corporate organisational communities highlights the lack of spirituality in contemporary organisations. Pava (2003, p.393) states that:

Many of today's employees, even though well compensated, report a feeling of incompleteness... Contemporary organizations are efficient at meeting the material needs of their stakeholders, but often neglect those higher level needs that are more difficult to measure.

Whilst Pava (2003) examined the business world, parallels can be drawn to my research. Surfers are a subculture that is always looking for the next ride, always

seeking out the next perfect wave, a concept that is often expressed through the metaphor of The Search. In my opinion, The Search is in fact a veneer, covering a search for greater meaning and/or spirituality in an individual's life.

Originally, my conceptualisation of The Search was purely hedonistic. David for example said "I have always loved the sea, that sense of adventure. I find a lot of beauty in the waves I guess... It just kind of ticks all of the boxes for me I guess." Moreover, Jenny reinforces this idea, expressing that, "just being in the water, I mean that's generally where I feel my happiest..." However, Jenny provides a further insight, stating that "[non-Christian surfers] tend to be much more open to faith as surfing is quite a spiritual thing". This raised a question in my mind which I contemplated in conjunction with the participant observations. It occurred to me that there was an additional aspect to The Search. I surmised that, despite being a way in which surfers find adventure and hedonistic pleasure, The Search is more than that, and is in fact a veneer used to cover the search for something greater in their lives: a greater meaning to their existence. The hedonism that motivates The Search helps to sate this need for meaning; this creates a tension however, in that it is paradoxically self-perpetuating, with one peak experience leading to the drive to experience a greater one.

Jenny addressed this issue from a Christian surfer's perspective. She clarified:

I just sort of appreciate what God's provided me with and where I am at. Not to keep dreaming of this amazing other thing, or other life or just the next wave, but actually just to appreciate what I have, if that makes sense?

It is undeniable from the three narratives that The Search plays an important role in their identity as surfers, with all three repeatedly seeking out adventure through travelling to exotic surf locations. However, from what Jenny expressed it is evident that some Christian surfers may afford a further nuance to the meaning of The Search. While the hedonistic side is embraced, Jenny introduces a dualism – she dreams of adventure and the thrill of the next wave while at the same time having spiritual contentment in what God has provided. This appreciation of her spirituality relative to The Search alleviates the self-perpetuating aspect, therefore the power of The Search remains, but is tempered by contentment in what God has provided.

4.12 Addiction of The Search

During the participant observation I was in a conversation with a number of the CS members after a day of surfing at the National Gathering, when one of them surprisingly explained that, until recently, he had given up surfing due to the realisation that it had become an obsession. He described how riding waves had consumed all of his thoughts and time, and had crowded out any other features of his life. What had started out as The Search had become an obsession, which had taken over his life like a drug on which he had had become dependent: he had become addicted.

This notion of addiction is expressed in a quote from Time (1964), which stated:

Riding a board through the surf is like going on hashish. The addicts... have their own fashions in everything from haircuts to swimsuits... They listen to apostles, who preach: 'when the surf gets good, you've got to go and get it.' Work is secondary.

When riding a wave the surfer experiences emotional elation, leading to the compulsive search for more surf. The brief flash of adrenaline bestowed when being carried by a breaking wave is a position where time is slowed. Preston-Whyte (2004, p.354) explains that "it is a moment of exhilaration in a liminal space before the collapse of a wave in a tumult of sound and fury. The desire to relive the experience is like an addictive drug" (Preston-Whyte, 2004, p.354).

To this individual work was secondary, but more importantly as a Christian surfer, God had become subordinate to his obsession. Upon the realisation that his relationship and belief in God had been deposed from the centre of his life, the participant made the decision that, in order to restore his spiritual equilibrium, it was necessary to purge surfing from his life until he felt that his relationship with God had been re-established. As Ford (2015) states, from the perspective of a Christian surfer, chasing the stoke¹¹ associated with riding a wave can never be entirely fulfilling.

¹¹ A heightened emotion... joyful or ecstatic experience (Ford, 2015, p.76)

This is something that is further elucidated by Jack, who suggested that surfing can become an idol in people's lives. He stated:

Surfing and Christianity, if you don't do it right... surfing can actually do the opposite of what you want it to do as a Christian, it's very easy to idolise it. Christian surfing is the opposite of [secular] surfing because you're idolising God as opposed to idolising the sport.

Thus, Jack warned against an idolising of surfing as a lifestyle, saying that the central focus of a Christian surfer's lifestyle should be their relationship with God. This is something that David echoed, stating that, as intoxicating as the laid back lifestyle that is associated with surfing can be, he thought that "we need to get some perspective as well". He explicated:

Surfing is one of my biggest passions, and being a follower of Jesus is, I hope, my biggest passion although it doesn't always appear like that.

Therefore, an important aspect in a surfer's life is the status that the sport assumes. In the context of the Christian surfing subculture, out of the two passions, spirituality and surfing, the participants indicated that the thrill of the ride must not become an obsession and be subservient to their relationship with God.

4.13 Huizinga, Marx and Engels and the Concept of Surfing as Play

"The riding of an ocean wave... is a particular kind of joy that only the surfer experiences and seeks to understand", and surfing, when in a non-competitive

situation, is in essence an act of play (Smith, 2010, p.83). This notion was encountered in the interviews, with all three participants expressing how fun surfing can be. As already recorded, David expressed that “the thrill of the ride... just kind of ticks all of the boxes for me I guess.” Furthermore, Jenny expressed her love of surfing when she stated:

What appeals to me most about surfing is the simplicity of it. You don't have loads of gear and, yeah also just that feeling of catching a wave and just thinking, like, this is amazing! Just that natural adrenaline rush but without lots of faff.

Jack explained that to him it is more about having a space in which to relax without any distractions from his daily life. This correlates with Huizinga (1938), whose seminal work on play (*Homo Ludens*, 1938) stated that one of the elements of play is to realise an individual's need for relaxation.

Huizinga explains that because work is a means to an end, a way through which sustenance can be attained; it is considered a rational behaviour. On the contrary, play is regarded as irrational (Smith, 2010). This does not refer to it being illogical or foolish, play is simply autotelic; an activity that is undertaken simply for the enjoyment of doing it.

‘Play’ is a concept which was discussed by Marx & Engels (1978), who posited that there are two realms of existence. Firstly, the Realm of Necessity, where all activity is logical, constructive and frequently disaffecting. Often this means that these activities

are vital economically as they “put food on the table and a roof over one’s head” (Smith, 2010, p.62). This realm of existence is indispensable, despite often being considered unpleasant, when operating within a capitalist economy. However, Marx & Engels (1978) enforce that simply making do is not adequate for a fulfilled life, with individuals requiring innovative activities which they are able to control, with no regard to their productivity or usefulness.

Secondly, Marx & Engels (1978) suggest that individuals turn to The Realm of Freedom when their daily work is alienating. These activities are irrational, unproductive and absorbing. Essentially, Marx suggests that people should reduce how much they work, and increase how much they play.

The participants all work full time, and it is evident from their interviews that surfing provides a time of play; a contrast to their work life. During the participant observation I gathered additional data from Jenny, who explained that she had intentionally relocated to the coast of Devon in order to gain employment in a location which provided improved access to surfing opportunities. This decision allowed her to increase the frequency with which she surfed, whilst at the same time giving her the opportunity to ‘play’ more often. Thus, Jenny was able to alter her work-play life balance. Jack and David on the other hand live and work in the London Metropolitan region which is much further from good surf locations. They are required to undertake longer journeys in order to surf, taking more time, effort and

commitment. Consequently the dynamic of their work-play balance is different to Jenny's.

According to Smith (2010, p.65) the "strong relationship with nature is one of the most beneficial elements of surfing from a Marxist standpoint". Marx explains that one of the consequences of the modern working milieu is that individuals tend to be more detached from the environment, as experienced by all three participants who have employment that requires working in an office or classroom. By existing within the Realm of Necessity individuals are less frequently able to connect with the environment (especially Jack and David who live and work in urban areas). Thus, to Christian surfers, this existence largely within the Realm of Necessity implies fewer opportunities to access the beach, and therefore they are less frequently able to exercise the naturalist spiritual pathway which facilitates their connection with God.

4.14 On the edge of civilisation: The Beach as both a Liminal and Sacred Space

Beaches are liminal areas that exist between land and sea, as well as "on the edge of civilisation, figuratively and quite literally" (Smith, 2010, p.79). When playing football or basketball, a field or court must be built/created, however, for surfers this is not necessary as the playground in which surfing is practiced occurs naturally (Fiske, 2010). Through the processes and practices of particular leisure activities (such as swimming, surfboarding and sunbathing), these beach spaces assimilate the cultural and social meanings that are ascribed to them (Fiske, 2010).

In Fiske's (2010, p.44) interpretation of spaces he outlined "Culture" and "Nature" as contrasting divisions which give distinct meaning to beach spaces. Nature refers to the world in its pre-cultural corporeality, before social perceptions and human sense-making have been attached to it. Culture refers to the ways in which communities have civilised the land, giving meaning to spaces through urbanisation. Thus, land is established as Culture, with its cities and civilisation, while the sea is Nature, "untamed, uncivilised, raw" (Fiske, 2010, pp.44-45). However, Fiske (2010, p.44) determined that a third division also exists: "Natural".

Natural is nature that has been fashioned by cultural forces and tamed in order to create a safer, more user-friendly division. An example of this is the beach, which is an anomalous space separating the land from the sea. While partaking of both spaces, yet remaining distinguishable, the beach creates a situation that abounds with meaning. Fiske (2010) explains that it is a suitable space for behaviour that strays from the hegemonic norm and which challenges the confines established by notions of Culture and Nature. Therefore, beaches are a Natural space where aberrant social and cultural behaviours can be explored, according meaning to the "nonphysical part of the human condition" (Fiske, 2010, p.44).

This is further explored by Preston-Whyte (2004), who states that beaches are favourable spaces for many religious groups to seek intercession, solace and support

from their god. Through religious ceremonies the beach is infused with a special significance, generating a sense of religious fervour within those who follow a divine being. To these religious groups, the beach operates as a locale in which the sacred can be realised, exemplified and encountered.

Huizinga (1955, p.10) establishes that the beach is a playground, which, in line with his model of “the consecrated spot”, labels the beach as a sacred space. Huizinga (1955) explains that these areas have a special social and spiritual meaning to those who play in/on them. This is corroborated by Preston-Whyte (2004, p.79), who elaborates that normal statuses are suspended in liminal spaces, thus making them sacred spaces, areas which inherently abound with “meaning and apartness”.

One of the fundamental factors inherent within these sacred spaces is that they are secluded, enclosed, consecrated spaces which are governed by a particular set of rules (Huizinga, 1955). These spaces, and the nature of the ceremonies, rules and perceptions enacted within them, vary based on the social and cultural situations in which they are found. Preston-Whyte (2004), gives the example of his ethnographic observation of religious gatherings on a beach in Durban, South Africa. In this account, the believers seemed entranced in a realm of adulation, existing in a liminal space where the perception of identity and community were affirmed through the bonds forged in the fire of their beliefs and religious zeal. Observing from a polite distance, excluded onlookers were left to speculate and remark on the scene from their assorted cultural standpoints.

This account evoked memories of the adult immersion baptism that I witnessed/partook in on the beach during the participant observation. In this ceremony, I was a member of the CS group of believers, and I experienced what Preston-Whyte (2004) observed in Durban: an affirmation of my identity as a member of the community through our shared belief. However, while I participated I remained conscious of my role as a researcher, and that despite sharing in the ceremony I was aware of my detachment, seemingly an onlooker speculating on the scene in which I found myself. Consequently, I was participating from a liminal position, on the border between worshiper and onlooker, part of both, but not wholly belonging to either.

4.15 Symbolism of the Dawn

Preston-Whyte (2004, p.353) explains that “the symbolism attached to dawn” can be a powerful spiritual factor. During the participant observation this symbolism was evident, as every evening the question was enthusiastically posed by the National Director, “who’s coming for a dawning tomorrow?” A ‘dawning’ is a sunrise surf where surfers aim to be in the water as dawn is breaking, seeking to beat the crowds and to surf before commencing their daily routine or work, in the case of the participant observation, before the first meeting of the day. While there is a certain logic to this, as there will be less competition for the waves early in the morning, I am convinced, from a spiritual perspective, that there is a more profound motivation. The beauty and solitude of surfing as the sun rises, strips away other distractions and grants a purer,

more primal quality to the experience, thus creating more conducive circumstances in which to engage with the naturalist spirituality pathway.

As can be seen from both Preston-Whyte's (2004) observations, as well as my own, the beach is a space which enables religious collective worship. Yet, it is also a space which provides the individual with a haven from the tumult of daily life, which facilitates the exploration of their inner self (Louden, 2002). Preston-Whyte (2004, p.353) continues, adding that entering the ocean in order to wrestle with its breaking waves stimulates "a sense of wellbeing, a suspension of time and a communion with self". During the interview Jack corroborates this notion, alluding to elements of surfing being an act of meditation by stating that "getting out back and just waiting... gives you time to yourself with no distractions, it's just you, nature and God". This is what MacNaghten (2006, p.140) formulates as an immersive bodily practice. He states surfing is a practice "within which nature is encountered as a means of gathering stillness, both inside and outside the body". Likewise, meditation is a practice which engages the mind, allowing a growth in consciousness of physical perceptions, thoughts, emotions and mindfulness which an individual performs in order to form a more intimate insight into their spirituality, thereby attaining experiential knowledge of God (West, 2016). Furthermore, Louden (2002, p.1) suggests that the way in which Jack intentionally enters into this liminal space for the purpose of finding solitude in nature is a symbolic act of meditation which sets aside "time to attend to the hearth of [his] inner life".

4.16 Throwing the Perfect Shaka¹²

Fiske (2010) explains that it is important to appreciate that the physical space which the beach represents contains a rich supply of semiotic meaning and interpretation. Danesi (2016, p.ix) defines semiotics as being a study which seeks to “unravel the meaning of symbols”, enabling individuals to delve into “how humans ‘produce meanings’ and how these constitute small scale versions of humanity’s larger-scale need to unravel ‘the meaning of life’”. Chandler (2017) simplifies this concept, stating that semiotics is essentially an investigation into how symbols, signs and codes are utilised and understood.

Smith (2010, p.78) states that the act of surfing does not occur in a physical/social vacuum and as steeped in meaning as it is, surfing’s physical act is not its entirety, as the setting in which surfing is practiced is similarly abundant in meaning and interpretation. During the participant observation at the National Gathering I observed a number of different semiotic factors. Firstly, attached to the ceiling of the Tubestation main hall were twelve surfboards, each inscribed with the name of one of the twelve disciples (Christ’s closest followers). This unusual interpretation of ecclesiastical decoration seems to have taken the place of tapestries or stained glass windows that would appear in more traditional churches, thus, through this symbolism, affirming the church’s identity as a post-modern, alternative ‘surf church’.

¹² The shaka sign, or ‘hang loose’, is a gesture often connected with surf culture which symbolises friendly intentions. It consists of spreading the thumb and littlest finger while curling the three central fingers (Flynn, 2008).

Secondly, another example replete with semiotic interpretation was the stage in Tubestation. It was in the shape of a halfpipe¹³, with one end of the curve merging with a symbolic wave made of wood, seemingly breaking over a large wooden cross located in the centre of the wall behind the stage. This unique assimilation of the surf/skate and Christian church symbolism combines a key aspect of surfing and the central tenet of Christianity (the Cross) in a way which focuses the attention of the congregation. This is a demonstration of what Fiske (2010) describes when stating that a surfer's experiences in the waves aids in their search for meaning, which he maintains may then be translated into finding greater meaning in their daily lifestyles. In the case of the congregation of Tubestation, this decoration demonstrates a symbolic perspective through which meaning is granted to their lives through both surfing and Christianity.

Thirdly, during the Sunday morning church service the pastor used the shaka as a symbolic way in which to give focused direction to the congregation's prayers. The concept involved regarding yourself as the thumb, the little finger as the other surfer (who you were praying for) and the three curled middle fingers represented the Trinity, of God the Father, Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit. Whilst it is a seemingly straightforward concept, it indicates the profound significance through which surfing can be used as a vehicle to reach non-Christian surfers, thus enabling the sharing of the gospel. Furthermore, it adds a complexity to 'throwing a shaka'; in that instead of simply being a greeting/expression of connection between two surfers, for the

¹³ A ramp curving up at both ends used by skateboarders to perform jumps and other manoeuvres (Cain, 2017).

Christian surfer it is a way of establishing a prayerful connection between themselves and God. Therefore, to Christian surfers, throwing the perfect shaka is not entirely symbolic of 'hanging loose', but also involves incorporating their Christian spirituality into the semiotic expression of goodwill.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Reflections and Future Directions

On reflection, one of the main surprises that I encountered while undertaking my research was the realisation that the main focus of CS was outward looking; while fellowship and community are important, the overriding *raison d'être* of the organisation was to share the gospel message of Christ with other surfers. This was aptly expressed by the leader of CS, who asked the pertinent question, “who better to reach surfers than surfers?” While I was aware of this aspect to a certain degree before the study, the emphasis that was placed on it during the National Gathering surprised me. The methods and strategies which CS employ to reach other surfers is a potential area for future study. This future research could be undertaken by attending other events at which CS are either represented or are part of the organising body, such as Boardmasters Festival¹⁴ and Creation Fest¹⁵.

Another potential area of future study would be the different spaces in which Christian surfers manifest their spirituality and explore their different spiritual pathways. For example, having interviewed the three participants it was clear from what they reported that different beach spaces, such as being out back (a calm area of solitude and reflection) or in the carpark (a transitional space of fellowship and meeting other surfers) facilitated different spiritual experiences, and thus further

¹⁴ A secular music festival during which surfing/skateboarding competitions are held in and around the town of Newquay in Cornwall.

¹⁵ A free family music festival with faith talks, a skate park and various other family activities held in Wadebridge, Cornwall.

understanding could be gained as to the significance of these spaces to the Christian surfer subculture.

5.2 Strengths of the Research

One of the main strengths of the research was the element associated with participant observation, which allowed me to explore my own identity as a Christian, as a neophyte surfer and as a participant in The Search. The National Gathering was a situation that was overflowing with spiritual and sociological meaning. It gave me the opportunity to identify and expand upon a number of key themes which had emerged from background reading and the participant interviews, such as notions of The Primitive, The Search, liminal spaces and semiotic interpretations of spiritual practices.

5.3 Methodological Journey

The research was simple and effective in design, however, in execution various difficulties transpired. One such difficulty was establishing times and dates with potential participants in order to conduct interviews. Although it was a sample of convenience, accessing their locations was still problematic, and thus undertaking the interviews face to face was neither economically nor time efficient and was therefore not possible. This potentially hindered the comprehensiveness of the data, as visual data could not be collected.

5.4 Effectiveness of the Research

The first objective of this research was 'to investigate and identify spiritual perspectives present in the Christian surfing subculture in the UK'. In chapter 4, I

identified several spiritual perspectives, such as how surfing with non-Christians gives Christian surfers access to spaces in which to share their faith and that communicating their spirituality with other surfers is the predominant goal. I also highlighted certain postmodern conceptualisations of Christian spiritual practices and symbols, such as the method of adult immersion baptism, ecclesiastical symbolism and a Christian interpretation of the shaka. A further perspective I specified was that whilst The Search is an important aspect of surfing culture, for Christian surfers their spirituality takes precedence, allowing them to temper the self-perpetuating/addictive nature of The Search. Finally, I identified that through beach/ocean spaces surfers are able to find solitude in nature, allowing them to explore their naturalist spiritual pathways and connect with God.

The second objective of this study was 'to assess the significance of concepts of The Primitive and The Search and how they relate to the UK Christian surfing subculture'. It was established that notions of The Primitive facilitate Christian surfers in the expression of their naturalist spiritual pathways through their desire to seek out wilderness and untamed environments. The extent of this sentiment was also exhibited in 'beach cleans' through which CS give time for the protection and maintenance of the environment which facilitates their connection with God.

I also examined the importance of The Search in the lifestyle of the Christian surfer, highlighting that all of the participants expressed their desire to surf in different, exotic locations and to continue discovering new locations to surf. However, it is also recognised that an important perspective for the Christian surfer is that any

tendencies for The Search to become idolised, obsessive or addictive must remain subservient to their relationship with God. In addition, this study proposes that cold water surfing is a new manifestation of The Search, and that adventure and novel surfing experiences are what drive this concept.

The third objective was 'to gain a deeper understanding of the connection between my spirituality and my identity as a Christian and a surfer'. The participant observation was a time of particularly profound reflection, punctuated by a number of moments of clarity. The journey to the National Gathering was an entry point that was particularly affirming in relation to my identity as a Christian surfer. The immediate connection that I felt with the two other novice surfers due to our shared passions and identity bestowed a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, I rediscovered an element of my spirituality through the wild and primitive contextualisation of CS spiritual practices, for instance, the adult immersion baptism that took place on the beach was a moment of particular spiritual significance for me. Free from the constraints of more traditional church practice, this experience allowed me to reconnect with my past and establish an expression of my spirituality that I had not encountered previously in the UK.

In conclusion, while in the process of conceptualising The Search I came to the realisation that, for me, this concept is not limited to looking for new geographical surfing locations or the next adventure to be discovered. On a personal level, The Search is also spiritual, involving looking for greater meaning in my life, a process that

may never end. This was a sentiment I first encountered on the wild Atlantic coastline of Sénégal. I had not anticipated the spiritual connotations that this primal experience would have on my life, when I realised I had found an expression of my spirituality that I would always be searching for.

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7. Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

MSc by Research

Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences, Canterbury Christ Church University

FOR MSc by Research Project(s)

NAME OF STUDENT: Craig Gibson

NAME OF UNIVERSITY SUPERVISOR: Dr James Brighton

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT: Surfing and Spirituality: Sociological Interpretations of Spirituality in the Christian Surfing Subculture in the United Kingdom

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

Exploring Christian spirituality in relation to the Christian surfing subculture

PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH WILL INVOLVE

Undertake an interview with an estimated time of 30 minutes

FORESEEABLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS

Participants may be asked personal questions relating to their spirituality

BENEFITS TO THE PARTICIPANT OF PARTICIPATION

N.A.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO YOUR DATA

Any data/ results from your participation in the study will be used by Craig Gibson as part of their project work. It may also be published in academic works, but your name or identity will not be revealed.

Data will be stored electronically using pseudonyms so that individuals cannot be identified.

If you have any questions or queries Craig Gibson will be happy to answer them. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant or feel you have been placed at risk you can contact:

Dr James Brighton

Tel: 01227 923102

I confirm that I have read the above information. The nature, demands and risks of the project have been explained to me.

I have been informed that there will be no benefits/ payments to me for participation

I knowingly assume the risks involved and understand that I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty and without having to give any reason.

Participant's signature _____

Date _____

Investigator's signature _____

Date _____

8. Appendix B: Transcript of Interview with Jenny

C – Interviewer

J – Jenny

C – So how did you become a Christian?

J – Ooh yes, small question there! So I guess it was through my grandparents, they were really strong Christians but I wasn't brought up a Christian by my parents but my parents were very, I don't know, kind of understanding? They sent us to Bible school, well Bible clubs after school and Christian holiday camps just because they were seen as good things to do I guess. I used to go along to church with my grandparents. Also, my friend went to a more lively church in town and I guess I've always had faith because of that foundation but it was only when I went to church when I was about 15 that I met any other young people and they were really cool and their faith was really different and I became more and more interested. I guess, yeah, it just sort of naturally grew, there wasn't a single moment where I was like, whoa, I'm now a Christian. Yeah, through getting into that church it just helped me, they saw my potential I guess in terms of, like, leadership stuff even though I hadn't really grown up in church and didn't know what I was doing. They just sort of mentored me. I guess another key thing was that there was a Christian sailing centre that I used to go to when I was a kid, and that was a really big thing for me. I think seeing people that were really outdoorsy, and doing water sports, who were cool and then going into some really good teaching for a week all helped. That was when I was about 13/14 and for a week I would be like, yeah! Really up for this Christian, God stuff and then it would sort of fade throughout the rest of the year. But that was a really good foundation I think.

C – So what were some of the aspects of surfing that appealed to you and drew you to becoming a surfer?

J – Well just being in the water, I mean that's generally where I feel at my happiest. When I was young I used to wind surf and sail a lot but I think the thing that appealed to me most about surfing was the simplicity of it. You don't have loads of gear and, yeah also just that feeling of catching a wave and just thinking, like, this is amazing! Just that natural adrenaline rush but without lots of faff.

C – Yeah it is such a simple thing really isn't it!

J – Exactly, although it does feel like a bit of a faff during the winter when you're putting on your wetsuit and all that. But still, the simplicity of it. And also I guess being close to nature.

C – What sort of aspects of the surfing lifestyle appeal to you as a Christian?

J – I feel like I connect with God most, or I experience God most when I'm in the sea, and I think that just being in Gods, kind of in nature, in his creation just helps to draw me to God more and helps me to focus on him. And also it stops me from getting distracted, like sometimes when you're surfing you can get really frustrated. Or at least I do, mainly due to my lack of ability! But you do get really frustrated when you're like 'I'm not getting any waves!' And I'm like, actually you know what, well I've had a lot of it since moving down here but really it's like, get over yourself! You get to surf here, you get to flap around in the water and bob about every now and then trying to catch something. You just sort of appreciate what God's provided me with and where I'm at and not keep dreaming of this amazing other thing, or other life or just the next wave but actually just to appreciate what I have if that makes sense?

C –Yeah, and in what ways would you say that being a Christian surfer kind of defines and influences who you are?

J – I guess I'd like to think just maybe the way I was in the water was different in terms of being more open and maybe not taking it so seriously and being friendly and chatting to people, being encouraging. There was a thing a couple of years ago we have at CS that was about 'who do you surf for?'. Because surfing can be quite a selfish thing, where it's all about your wave, your ride, your own experience. There are lots of stories about people going out who are really, really good surfers, going out to not catch any waves but just to be out back and to chat to people and to encourage people onto waves which is something that really challenges me. I guess I hope that what defines me a bit more is that, just trying to be a bit of Jesus in the water I guess, and also in the car park. I guess because I now surf in the same spots I get to know the same people and it's such a small community so everyone knows who you are and it's just important to have integrity really.

C – What sort of elements of surfing help you feel closest to God?

J – Well just being in nature I guess is my spiritual connection thing, I can't remember what they call it, is it naturalistic? I think it's that element of it, mainly. The beauty of it all around me I guess!

C – Do you feel more connected to God when you're facing difficult or dangerous surfing conditions? Or I guess have you ever faced that sort of situation?

J – Well I don't surf in massive waves!

C – Actually let me change that question slightly, have you ever been out in situations when you have been afraid and have felt out of your depth? And I guess were you only focused on surviving that situation or was there, even a subconscious thought maybe of asking God for help?

J – Yeah I guess there is definitely that sort of survival thing but I do think it kind of draws you more to those panic prayers of like, 'help me get through this!', let me get over this next wave

or let me get out back without getting pummelled! I think it does, I guess maybe not so much in the scared situations but in the frustrating situations which have really helped draw me closer to God in terms of drawing on him to like put things in perspective a bit more. I think when I was younger I surfed a lot more, well, I guess it depends on who I'm with, if I'm with some really good surfers then I will kind of follow suit but usually I'm happy just to potter around and I don't really put myself in dangerous situations very much! Although maybe if you ask me again in a couple of months my answer would be different because I have just joined the lifesaving club!

C – Yeah maybe you'll get a taste for it! Cool, so obviously you have surfed down in Devon where you are, but where else have you surfed in the UK?

J – Down in Cornwall, over in Polzeath I've surfed quite a bit, I've been over to Wales, mid and south wales. I've flown over to Ireland a couple of times, Northern Ireland. I've been over to the west coast, down to County Sligo, that sort of way. That was amazing, definitely worth the trip.

C – So why did you make the trip to those destinations?

J – Well all of those times were when I was living in London, as part of the London surf club. There were other people going so there was that sort of social element to it which was quite key I think. Especially when living in London as going anywhere was such an epic sort of trip and you had to spend loads of time with all these different people that I guess it just sort of ticked my extroverted need to be around people! I guess some surfers would say they surf to avoid people, whereas I'm like 'it's great, I get to meet loads of people!'

C – Have you surfed anywhere further abroad?

J – Yeah I've done a couple of trips to morocco, Fuerteventura and across to Biarritz in France.

C – And why did you choose to go to those places?

J – Well morocco because it was warm and cheap. Fuerteventura we thought, warm waves and not too far but actually it wasn't quite so warm and it was really really windy. And in France I went with CS for the European leaders conference where we hung out a bit before and after.

C – Ok well that makes my next question slightly redundant! Have you surfed with CS? Or maybe a better question would be do you often surf with CS?

J – Yeah I have done and I still do, and actually quite a few people who I have been surfing with this weekend are guys who have come down from CS Bournemouth and there are is a family here who are from CS Hertfordshire. So I've surfed with them a bit this weekend. Also now there are quite a few CS from around my area who I don't necessarily plan to surf with but you just kind of bump into them in the water and then just surf with them. Although I guess I have been quite intentional about surfing with Christians in the past, mainly because it's just always linked in with going to conferences or helping out at competitions and stuff.

C – And would you say that that is a preference? Like do you prefer to surf with other CS?

J – No not really. I guess because I have been brought up as a nonchristian it's quite normal for me to hang out with lots of other nonchristians. So surfing with the London surf club was brilliant cause you met people from all sorts of walks of life and actually meeting guys who weren't Christians who surf tended to be much more open to faith as surfing is quite a spiritual thing.