

# **Religion and the Cultures of Higher Education: Student Christianity in the UK**

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## **Introduction**

This chapter is about the relationship between higher education and the religious identities of university students. Unlike some other essays in this volume, its primary concern is not with how religion is managed as a curricula topic within classroom contexts. Rather, it focuses on how the experience of university – broadly conceived - exerts an influence over the religious perspectives of students. The empirical foundation of the following discussion is research into Christian students studying at universities within the United Kingdom, although the patterns discerned there have clear resonance with tendencies in other parts of the Western world. In keeping with the sociological approach used in this research, the chapter begins with an extended overview of universities within the UK and their relationship with religious concerns, tracing historical developments and the challenges of the contemporary context. This is followed by a discussion of how we might access and make sense of the different cultures of higher education manifest within these universities. We then turn to fresh empirical evidence gathered on Christian students across universities in England.

There exists an international subculture composed of people with Western-type higher education, especially in the humanities and social sciences, that is indeed secularized. This subculture is the principal ‘carrier’ of progressive, Enlightened beliefs and values. While its members are relatively thin on the ground, they are very influential, as they control the institutions that provide the ‘official’ definitions of reality, notably the educational system, the media of mass communication, and the higher reaches of the legal system. (Berger 1999, 10)

This quotation from sociologist Peter Berger, taken from an essay published in 1999, affirms his argument that universities are persistent vehicles for secular modes of thinking. Berger’s claim is striking in its implications: higher education not only frames the perspectives of influential elites, it also, in so doing, imposes itself on the versions of social reality elevated by western cultures as authoritative. While painted in broad brush strokes, Berger’s

description includes a thinly veiled evocation of his earlier work in the sociology of knowledge. He is ascribing to influential institutions the capacity to shape ways of thinking that achieve predominance within a given society well beyond their original advocates. According to Berger, universities contribute to the perpetuation of a worldview that presents religion as illegitimate within contemporary life.

In broad terms, it is difficult to refute Berger's argument, at least as a description of the demographic and educational backgrounds of those who have the power to define dominant public discourses in many western nations. Moreover, as institutional vehicles for the key values of liberal democracies – most importantly gender equality, cultural tolerance and respect for individual autonomy – many (though not all) universities embody values Berger sees as most inimical to traditional forms of religion. Indeed, universities are not passive social containers of these values; they actively teach and endorse them *via* their educational programmes. So much for public image and the 'supply side' of the equation; what about universities' capacity to have an impact upon the religiosity of students? Surveying the academic literature, sociologists Damon Mayrl and Freedom Oeur identify the common assumption that the 'expanded horizons and exposure to new ideas' associated with universities leads students to 'question and ultimately abandon' their religious beliefs (Mayrl and Oeur 2009, 264). Early research by James Davison Hunter set out to test Berger's secularisation theory (1967) among evangelical college students within the US, finding a widespread liberalisation of evangelical ideas and beliefs which he attributes to their exposure to the contexts of college education (Davison Hunter 1987). Historian Callum Brown has more recently analysed national longitudinal data across the UK, US, Ireland and Canada in order to elucidate patterns of secularisation since the 1960s. He finds fairly strong associations between university education and a tendency towards low religious practice and movement to a position of 'no religion,' reinforcing the general argument that higher

education often works in concert with broader processes of secularisation (Brown 2012, 233-244).

Studies that have added momentum to the secularisation paradigm have predictably provoked a range of counter-arguments, with some citing evidence of religious vitality on campuses (Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield 2001), or arguing for an association between higher education and a turn towards matters of ‘spirituality’ among emerging adults (Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno 2003). The most theoretically subtle research has called for greater attention to *how* universities shape the religious lives of students. Mayrl and Oeur point to how previous studies have tended to decontextualise students, paying too little attention to how the varying institutional cultures of universities shape students’ religious perspectives (Mayrl and Oeur 2009). Sam Reimer makes a similar point, highlighting research which shows that the *type* of educational experiences young people have is far more important in shaping their religious identities than the *amount* of education they receive (Reimer 2010). In other words, we should not be asking whether universities *per se* shape religious identity, but how different permutations of the university experience differentially shape the religious orientations of the students who study within them. Furthermore, this must be balanced with analyses of *how students engage* with the contexts of higher education. Tim Clydesdale’s research into students in the US highlights how religious identities – alongside those associated with class, politics or gender - may be put aside during the college years in an ‘identity lockbox,’ safe and available as things to return to when needed a little later in life. In this analysis, the college experience is not primarily characterised by a tendency to bring religious identities and new knowledge or experience into conversation; it is one in which the ‘daily life management’ of relationships, social lives and economic upkeep are centre stage (Clydesdale 2007). The absence of religion may not indicate its abdication, but a strategy for managing life circumstances peculiar to the university experience.

In this chapter I will be exploring these issues in light of fresh evidence of how Christian students respond to the experience of higher education in the UK. The research upon which the present discussion is based was conducted for a 3-year project entitled ‘Christianity and the University Experience in contemporary England’ by myself, Kristin Aune, Sonya Sharma and Rob Warner. A random selection of 4,500 undergraduate students from a range of universities were surveyed during the 2010-11 academic year, using an online questionnaire that focused on moral and religious perspectives, religious practices, and general demographic data. Five universities then served as case studies representing each of five categories of higher education institution identified as spanning cross-sector patterns of institutional ethos, student demographics and geographical location. Within each case study, a selection of Christian students and university staff involved in managing or serving on-campus religious concerns were interviewed. A detailed analysis of this research is featured in *Christianity and the University Experience: Understanding Student Faith*, published in 2013 (Guest et al. 2013). In this chapter, my intention is to draw on this research in presenting the university as a lens through which ‘Christianity’ achieves new contours of meaning and significance among students. Drawing on insights from Clydesdale, this process is not theorised primarily in a pedagogical sense, but rather in terms of complex reference points within an evolving set of social identities among emerging adults.

### **The peculiarities of the UK context**

The notion that UK higher education is ‘secular’ is less a matter of principle, more a matter of cultural assumption. While US authors treat the distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ universities as meaningful and unproblematic (Glanzer, Hill, and Ream 2014), the very idea of a ‘religious’ university is alien for many, oxymoronic for some, within the UK context. However, perhaps inevitably, the cultural norms of the present mask the complexities of the

past. The universities of Oxford and Cambridge owe their foundation to ecclesiastical clerics, the universities of Durham and King's College London were established as foundations of the Anglican Church, and the ancient Scottish universities – such as Aberdeen, Glasgow and St Andrews – retain links with the Presbyterian Church of Scotland forged at their foundation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Formal religious testing – such as requiring all students to subscribe to the 39 articles of the Church of England – was the norm until the late nineteenth century, a tradition that ceased following liberal reforms introduced by Prime Minister William Gladstone in 1871. It is worth noting that, at this point, there were only five universities in England, with another four in Scotland, higher education still the preserve of an elite few. Massive expansion occurred first with the establishment of inner-city 'red-brick' universities founded to train emerging generations for the post-industrial age, and then during the 1960s, when out-of-town modern campus universities were built in response to population growth and accelerating social mobility. These new universities mirrored more deliberately 'secular' concerns of modern Britain: a greater focus on applied disciplines such as engineering and medicine (and increasingly management and business), with an emerging displacement of traditional scholarship with vocational learning echoed in the newly established 'polytechnic colleges,' which also prioritised educating 'non-traditional' – i.e. less privileged and ethnic minority - segments of the population. While the ancient universities taught theology (or 'divinity') as an unquestioned element of their academic provision, many of these new universities deliberately excluded any study of religion from their degree programmes; a notable exception, the University of Leeds, only accepted 'Theology and Religious Studies' after fraught internal debate about its legitimacy (Armytage 1955, 245). Some founders of civic universities, while devout Christians, passionately opposed the discussion of theological topics within the university precincts, reflecting common assumptions about the proper differentiation of public spaces (Paton 1946, 15). Self-

consciously 'progressive' universities rationalised their exclusion of the subject as an expression of their 'secular' identity, echoing the diminished public standing of religion that characterised the 1960s (Brown 2009). Products of their age, these universities saw themselves as providers of a modern education, unencumbered by the trappings of the past. These included traditional modes of scholarship considered anachronistic, but more importantly, institutional connections to the churches, now viewed as outdated and irrelevant to the life of a modern university.

Since the 1960s, further significant changes have occurred across the HE sector. Numbers of 'polytechnic' colleges – concerned more with vocational and technical training – grew and were eventually granted university status. The emergent 'post-1992 universities' encompass a wide range of institutions, many of which attract large numbers of students from ethnic minorities. With high numbers of Muslims and Hindus, many of whom are descended from families who migrated from the Indian subcontinent in the 1950s and 60s, many 'post-1992' institutions have contended directly with issues of cultural and religious pluralism. In this they join universities located in major cities such as London, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds which, despite lacking historical connections to religious traditions, have had to steer their provision for student support with the challenges of religious diversity firmly in mind. Recent developments within university chaplaincy, increasingly conceived on a 'multi-faith' model, are a part of this evolving pattern (Gilliat-Ray 2000). Since 9/11 and then the 2005 bombings in London, the behaviour of Muslim students has been under the scrutiny of the UK government and popular media. Recent debates about the part universities play in the 'radicalisation' of Muslim students have reflected a politicisation of religion within campus life (Brown and Saeed 2014; Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison 2013, 108).

The 'radicalisation' debate is a political one, and representations of Muslim students can be distorted by alarmist media reportage and comment that is rarely distinguished by a

careful examination of available evidence. Nevertheless, the debate itself echoes a broader phenomenon: the emergence of forms of religion within university contexts that are judged to be problematic by outsiders and hence attract controversy. This has to do with their apparent affirmation of values that appear at odds with those elevated as normative within western liberal democracies, most notably equality of opportunity and treatment with respect to gender, ethnicity, sexuality and religion. A striking illustration of this occurred at University College, London in March 2013, when an invited speaker walked out of an event organised by the Islamic Education and Research Academy on the grounds that the audience had been segregated by gender. Such incidents are by no means confined to Muslims. At the University of Bristol in December, 2012, the evangelical Christian Union (CU) came under fire following the announcement of its policy to restrict speaking opportunities for women at its events, including a stipulation that women could be public speakers during CU 'mission weeks,' but only if accompanied by their husbands. In 2006, the University of Exeter's Christian Union was suspended from its Guild of Students, leading to its bank account being frozen and its free use of Guild premises suspended. The issue here was the CU's declaration of faith - 'In joining this union, I declare my faith in Jesus Christ as my saviour, my lord and my God' - which all members are required to sign. The Guild of Students claimed this was not in conformity with its policy that all associated student societies be open to all students; the CU responded by claiming their freedom of speech and rights of religious association were being compromised (Education Guardian 2006). While parties arrived at a mutually agreed resolution the following year, this was only after each employed legal representation, at great expense, and threatened to take the matter to the courts (Cross Rhythms 2007). Of course all of these episodes received extensive coverage in the UK's news media, which encouraged a characterisation of student religion as intolerant and reactionary. Increased visibility of Christian and Muslim activity on campus also influenced the establishment of the

National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secularist Student Societies (AHS) as a national umbrella organisation in 2008, serving as a channel for anti-religious rhetoric across the Higher Education sector.

On-campus student-run societies have emerged as crucibles for the fomenting of religious controversy. This is sometimes in spite of the stated institutional priorities of their universities, which often assume religion is best confined to the private sphere, policies of ‘tolerance’ sometimes encouraging the removal of religion from the public spaces encompassed by university life. This is articulated in the language used by their senior managers, who often affirm a position of ‘soft’ neutrality – the university as a secular space that should remain apart from religious matters – or one of ‘hard neutrality’ – conceiving religion as not entirely rational or relevant, and so having no place in universities rooted in Enlightenment rationality and science (Dinham and Jones 2010). Insofar as these views pertain among those at the helm of university governance, Peter Berger’s comments about the secularising ‘subcultures’ of western higher education would seem to carry significant weight. They are similarly supported by the heightened emphasis upon STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) among UK policy makers, and a severe reduction in resource for Religious Education in UK schools, which in turn contributes to the decline and marginalisation of Theology and Religious Studies as university subjects (All Parliamentary Group on Religious Education 2013). While this is informed by shifting demands among more utilitarian-minded students anxious for a degree that comes with secure employment prospects, the dominant public discourse of UK higher education also plays a major role, not least in its emphasis upon education as equipping students for the global economy rather than expanding minds or fostering critical thinking (Collini 2012).

This tendency to marginalise religion within the life of universities echoes the broader secularisation of British society, which has seen religious elements gradually expunged or



diminished within public services concerning healthcare, welfare and education since the start of the twentieth century. However, this is not the only pattern, and in recent years universities have made efforts to respond more positively to the religious concerns of its staff and students. Instrumental here has been UK equality legislation introduced since 2000, particularly the Equality Act (2010), which placed religion alongside race, gender and disability as characteristics to be protected from discrimination and harassment (see Weller, Hooley and Moore 2011). A desire to be mindful of the cultural needs of high fee paying international students has also encouraged a greater sensitivity to the needs of non-Christian groups, including the provision of halal food on university campuses and a greater flexibility surrounding exams lest they clash with religious festivals. Some research has suggested such responses to religious diversity are often driven by a fear of litigation, there remaining “a significant distance between the rhetoric of promoting equality and diversity and the reality of working out differences in practice...” (Dinham and Jones 2012, 193). In some contexts, though, this combination of legal and financial factors, alongside willing staff and an institutional commitment to serving diverse communities, has fostered a perspective characterised by a benign multiculturalism, all forms of religion conceived as potential sources of human capital within a positive vision of harmonious campus relations. Another alternative model emerges within the ‘Cathedrals Group’ of 16 universities and HE colleges across England and Wales, established in the nineteenth century as church foundations oriented to the training of school teachers. Maintaining a Christian ethos to this day, these universities are unique in the UK context in seeking to foster a university community based around Christian values. Emphasising programmes of study that are public-service-oriented, these universities present themselves as “promoting the public good through our work with communities and charities” and as “supporting personal and spiritual development within a

challenging learning environment.”<sup>1</sup> Among the ‘Cathedrals Group’ institutions, matters of faith are not only admitted as legitimate within university life, they are also positively affirmed and integrated into organisational structures and systems of university governance (Guest et al. 2013, 17).

### **Negotiating the ‘cultures’ of the university experience**

Such institutional differences highlight one of the most important factors in the shaping of religious activity within university contexts. This is what might be called ‘institutional culture.’ Mayrl and Oeur rightly emphasise the importance of institutional cultures in distinguishing how universities engage religion, but characterising these cultures is less straightforward than it might first appear. The UK’s universities may belong within the same institutional category in so far as they are in the business of providing higher education, but they have evolved along diverse trajectories, shaped by complex histories, changing student demographics, educational reform, the politics of university funding, and the developments of academic disciplines. Their institutional identities embody much that is peculiar to individual cases and from one perspective we are dealing with as many institutional cultures as there are universities. However, historical developments also point to common trajectories and shared priorities, reflected in the division of the HE sector into ‘mission groups,’ such as the elite Russell Group of research-led universities. This is not to suggest that the institutional cultures of specific universities do not change over time. Penny Becker’s study of congregations in the US draws on Gary Fine’s work on organisational cultures (Fine 1984, 239-262), pointing to his notion of a “negotiated order,” evoking “both the regularities of group life and the processes that reproduce it” (Edgell Becker 1999, 10). Similarly, universities embody both a ‘group life,’ as expressed by its human population – staff and students – and a set of

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<sup>1</sup>See <http://cathedralsgroup.org.uk/> [accessed 4/9/14]

structural qualities (e.g. geographical location, provision of student accommodation, subject coverage) that help to reproduce the distinctive culture affirmed by these individuals. The people and the place interact, but in a way that develops over time.

And yet universities also have a set of peculiar characteristics that distinguish them from many other institutions. Most strikingly, the people who populate them may be divided into the relatively permanent (staff) and the relatively transient (students), the latter only occupying universities for a finite period, depending on the requirements of their course. In this sense they resemble schools, and as with schools, staff—and the educational procedures they implement—have a top-down, enduring influence over an ever-changing population of individuals marked as recipients of an education, with formal qualifications serving as legitimating markers of this. In this sense, relations of power are relatively asymmetric (we could extend this model into different strata of university staff, among which relations of power are sometimes less obvious, but nonetheless asymmetric). Students, like school pupils, are taught by those recognised as having the knowledge and expertise to deliver the necessary training, and students are expected to behave respectfully in class and complete the necessary assessed work. But students are not only taught the substantive content of their courses; they also learn how to embody the role of the student as a new identity. Given their legally adult status, university students have a great deal more autonomy and hence control over their lives than school pupils do. Many live away from home and have the responsibility of managing their finances, increasing numbers are sustaining employment alongside study, and distance from family brings its own individual freedoms that mean social lives can be explored and enjoyed within considerably expanded horizons. As such, *students are active agents in the production of the university experience, as well as the primary consumers of it*. They are far from passive recipients of what university life has to offer, and play a major part in sustaining and shaping evolving cultures of the university experience.

This agency is not unconstrained by external factors, however. For example, the capacity students have for shaping their university's institutional culture is directly connected to their capacity to contribute to university life beyond the essentials of attending lectures and submitting assessed work. These pedagogical dimensions have a social aspect, and seminars and informal group learning can play important parts in the development of subcultures among students on the same course, but this is best treated as a kind of baseline, a gauge that applies to most if not all students to some degree or other. Beyond this, many other contributions to a university's institutional culture can be made, but are contingent on each student's particular situation, not least their economic circumstances and proximity (both geographical and emotional) to immediate family. The students who live in a house with other students and are fully supported financially by their parents who live 200 miles away are in a very different situation to the students who live with their parents, attend their local university and spend much of their spare time earning money to support themselves. Both are of course equally legitimate participants in student life, but it would be naïve to suggest their circumstances do not shape their capacity to contribute to the broader student culture. Indeed, in researching the 'Christianity and the University Experience' project, we found that the case study university with the highest proportion of locally-based students was also the one with the most limited student-led religious activity and the one with the least religion-centred tensions among the student body. Working part-time and therefore unable to engage fully with campus life, many Christian students instead maintained connections with their local churches (Guest et al. 2013, 72-4). With economic constraints increasingly relevant, and gradually more students electing to live at their parental home while at university (Sharma and Guest 2013, 66), we might ask whether the forces that typically vitalise on-campus religion might be destined for further diminishment in the foreseeable future.

A further demographic factor that complicates any attempt to understand the institutional cultures of universities is the cultural diversity of the student body. During the course of the twentieth century, a university education in the UK ceased to be the preserve of an elite few, gradually becoming more accessible to a broader and much larger cross section of the national population. As a consequence, ascertaining what university students have in common is a lot less straightforward than it once was, given an evolving diversification in terms of gender, ethnicity, economic circumstances and social class, and the growing participation of international students originating from elsewhere in the European Union and other parts of the globe. This diversification is not evenly spread across the sector, and issues of equality and discrimination arise and are addressed to differing degrees within different institutions. But what this development demonstrates is the need to build into an understanding of institutional culture the current constitution of the student body and the networks of relationship that emerge within it. Patterns in the distribution of students by gender, ethnicity and social class can exert a major influence over the character of the university experience, and of the place of religion within it. For example, while the transitional nature of the university experience can foster a sense of 'heightened identity negotiation' among students, and hence a perceived fluidity in conceptions of self, we found that experiences of campus Christianity could also magnify the exclusionary power of social class difference. Students attempting to forge friendships within organised Christian gatherings sometimes reported feeling alienated by established in-group cultures and forms of speech, an experience further frustrated by prior expectations of inclusion and fellowship they had come to associate with Christianity. This was not so much a case of cognitive dissonance, as social dissonance. As one interviewee commented, "I just felt like I was almost alone in the crowd, if that makes sense..." (Sharma and Guest 2013, 74).

The significance of campus sub-cultures is strikingly illustrated in levels of religious instability among different segments of England’s student population. In the ‘Christianity and the University Experience’ national survey, we asked students: ‘Since attending university, how has your perspective on religion changed?’ Among self-identifying Christians, 15 percent answered that they had become more religious, 11.9 percent had become less religious, and 73.2 percent said their perspective had ‘generally stayed the same.’ In other words, a large majority, in reflecting on their religious identity during their university years, affirmed stability, rather than any marked intensification or diminishment.<sup>2</sup> However, when results are broken down into sub-populations within the student population, interesting patterns emerge that suggest higher levels of religious instability characterise certain groups (see fig. 1).

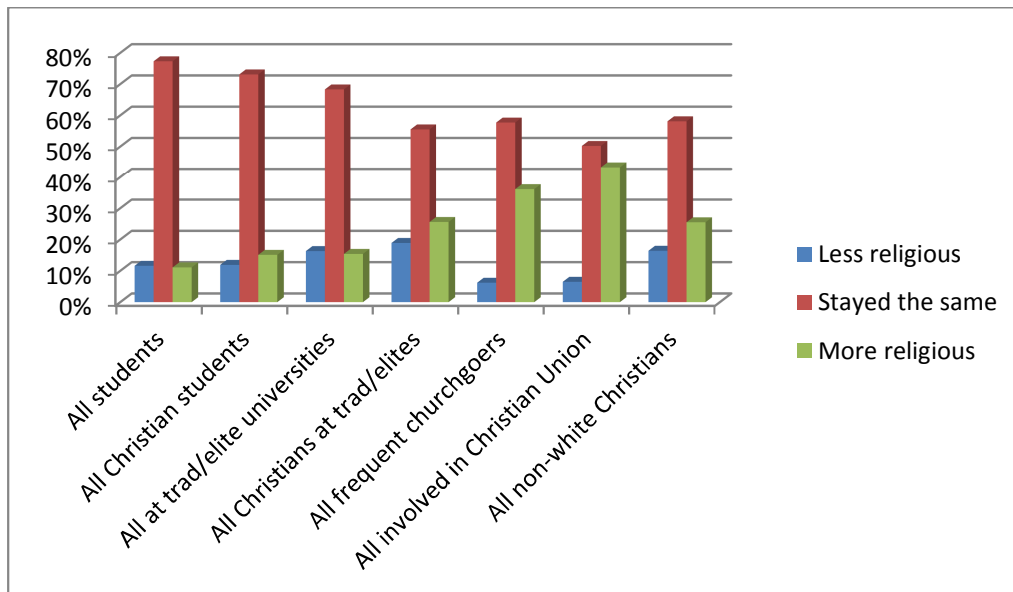


Fig. 1: Since attending university, how has your perspective on religion changed?

<sup>2</sup> Correspondingly, less than 5 percent of our total sample – some 4,500 students – claimed to have experienced a dramatic change of heart during their university career, amounting to a conversion into, or out of, a religious perspective.

Nuancing the analysis reveals how different kinds of organisational or institutional alignment are associated with a greater imbalance in responses. That is, certain kinds of university environment appear to trigger change in religious perspectives among Christian students. It is worth noting that these triggers of change appear to be chiefly social experiences, rather than any exposure to new ideas within the context of degree programmes. In fact, statistical analysis of our survey findings found no clear relationship between choice of degree subject and orientation to religion, suggesting that any tensions between the university experience and the religious identities of students centre on *cultural*, rather than cognitive, processes. It is sometimes assumed, including by churches and Christian organisations, that Christian students are most likely to struggle with university because of the content of their degrees, which require engaging with ideas that may sit in tension with their faith, i.e. the challenge is one of plausibility, perhaps driven by class-room encounters with rationalism and pluralism. However, our evidence suggests this is of secondary importance to the more cultural challenges of the university experience, such as the drinking culture, sexual promiscuity or encountering Christians who have a different perspective to one's own. That is, challenges not to the plausibility of one's Christian beliefs, but challenges to the validity or stability of one's sense of Christian identity.

### **What Makes a Christian Student?**

The question of stability is especially significant as it extends beyond the experiences of Christian students as such, to the status of Christianity itself as a category of identity. The problems surrounding the definition and measurement of Christian identities in the contemporary world have been noted by scholars across disciplines, with this issue perhaps especially taxing within the context of the UK. The most recent evidence suggests around 60 percent of the population identify as Christian, but less than 10 percent attend church on a

regular basis. With varying levels of Christian belief and embedded associations between Christianity and national, ethnic and moral identities, together with residual but significant variations of nominal allegiance, the category of Christianity has become destabilised within the popular imagination, and elusive to the theorisations of scholars. Mindful of this, the ‘Christianity and the University Experience’ project set out with no prior assumptions about what being a Christian actually or legitimately entails, instead using our questionnaire survey of all students to identify those who call themselves Christians, regardless of what they mean by this. Subsequent questions then allowed us to unpack patterns of connection and association further. The national pattern of destabilisation was echoed among self-identifying Christian students, who occupied a range of perspectives on moral and religious issues, and expressed these practically in very different ways. For example, before the questionnaire enquired about respondents’ religious identity (‘to what religion or spiritual tradition do you currently belong?’), it asked whether students saw themselves as ‘religious,’ ‘not religious but spiritual,’ ‘not religious or spiritual’ or ‘not sure.’ Of those who subsequently self-identified as ‘Christian,’ 40.4 percent saw themselves as religious, 31.2 percent as ‘not religious but spiritual,’ 15.4 percent as neither, while 13 percent remained unsure. Whatever meanings are ascribed to these terms, there is clearly very little consensus or coherence to the way in which Christianity is popularly connected to notions of the religious or spiritual. Christianity does not encompass a ‘religious’ unity, but remains suggestive of varying patterns of uncertainty, nominal allegiance and cultural Christianity. Christian students also affirmed strikingly varied orientations to doctrinal issues and varied levels of involvement in churches (including 30.1 percent who never attend).

Interviews with Christian students were even more revealing, suggesting not simply a shared uncertainty, but a reflexive fluidity of identity – a tendency to rethink and reconfigure one’s perception of and orientation to Christianity in an ongoing dialogue with personal



experience. This is most obviously affirmed in terms of denominational allegiance and involvement, which for many shifted over time in accordance with the evolving stages of their individual religious journey. Moreover, while term-time churchgoing was approached as an active resource – framed by a range of local possibilities and subject to a sense of personal development that could involve moving between several different places of worship without necessarily rejecting any – vacation churchgoing was associated with the stabilities of the parental home. If Christianity as a lived identity is subject to negotiation over time, its institutional reference points are also often kept in play as resources in service to a longer-term quest for meaning and fulfilment. For some, this pattern is expressed in a merging of the projects of faith development on the one hand, and the quest for autonomy characteristic of early adulthood, on the other.

I got to choose my own church ... [A]t home everyone knows me as the daughter of my mum and dad. [H]ere, I got to choose where I went, make my new friends, and people know me for me...coming and living here, you're learning to live with people you've never lived with before; you're learning to build really good, strong friendships with them...you've got to then work out how you apply what you believe into a completely new situation, with a new set of people, and it's made me think about what do I actually really believe coming and living here.

'Christianity' was often presented by interviewees as a portable resource, a symbolic connection to family and home, but also a set of ideas, traditions and sentiments available within the unstable, transitional context of a university. In this sense it simultaneously serves both an 'anchoring function,' in channelling connections to pre-university life – however framed - and a 'perspectival function,' in framing new experiences, lending them new meaning and significance within the university context (Sharma and Guest 2013, 31).

Many of these connections of familiarity and opportunity become manifest in social forms and in so doing achieve especial power within universities as axes of identity and lifestyle. In fact, our research found that shades of Christian identity were most closely related to different practical orientations to church involvement. For example, those actively

and regularly involved in churches both during vacations and during term-time affirm a very different constellation of attitudinal tendencies to those who attend in both contexts but only occasionally, who are in turn distinctive from those who never attend. Local churches are especially important here, with many university towns featuring large, thriving evangelical churches that owe much of their vitality to a constantly changing student intake. These become known as ‘student churches’ and reinforce this reputation by prioritising activity likely to appeal to younger Christians. In turn, a vibrant community of undergraduates brings energy and social capital to churches keen to establish a strong presence in the local community, and/or a strong missionary force among neighbouring citizens, including non-Christian students on the local campus. Our survey and interview data reinforce this picture: comparing levels of church attendance before and during university, all denominations show a pattern of decline aside from the independent evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which achieve marked, if modest, growth, in part as a consequence of migration by Christians with backgrounds in other denominations.

The popularity of evangelical churches amongst university students is also reflected in their involvement in campus-based Christian organisations. Support for denominationally defined groups such as ‘Anglican’ or ‘Methodist’ is limited, as it is for the once formidable Student Christian Movement, whose liberal, social-justice oriented message has arguably become so culturally mainstream as to undermine its distinctive appeal. Far more popular and well-resourced are overtly evangelical organisations, most notably the Christian Unions (see above), defined by a conservative evangelicalism affirmed in the doctrinal statement of their parent body, the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF). The Christian Unions have a presence in the vast majority of UK universities, and while student-led, the UCCF provide regional workers whose task is to train and support each CU’s leadership in their various activities. Given their theological commitment to Biblical infallibility, penal

substitutionary atonement doctrine, and hell as a place of eternal suffering awaiting all who do not come to a personal faith in Jesus Christ, it is unsurprising that much of the CUs' work centres on mission and, more narrowly, the conversion of non-Christians. Each year a 'mission week' is held in universities across the country, during which CUs heighten their presence on campus and run a series of campaigns focused on the evangelisation of the wider university community. Series of public talks will be given by invited speakers well known on the evangelical circuit, all geared towards a calling of all to a personal faith in Christ. Members will distribute leaflets and wear 'mission week' t-shirts in order to raise the profile of the local CU and promote an image of a vibrant student movement driven by a sincere pursuit of life's ultimate questions. UCCF have recently demonstrated a subtle use of social media and developed mobile technology for Bible reading which, coupled with an astute management of public image, suggest a desire to shake off its reputation for representing a strident, dogmatic and intolerant form of Christianity. These advances have also enabled UCCF to equip its member CUs with the resources to do mission in a way more appealing to young people than the more traditional 'top down' preaching model of the past, even though the student-led nature of CUs sometimes means this is overshadowed by doctrinaire public statements made by zealous members of local leadership teams. The so-called 'CU wars' that included the disputes at the Universities of Bristol and Exeter mentioned above are arguably a case in point. However, a reputation for dogmatic judgementalism is often not reflected in the cultures of local CUs, in which a doctrinal commitment to a conservative evangelical model of faith is fused with an equally passionate commitment to affirming a warm and inclusive experience of Christian community.

The picture of CU members that emerged from the 'Christianity and the University Experience' project reflected this complexity, with no evidence of an unreconstructed fundamentalism sometimes levelled at it by its opponents. CU members pray more often,

read the Bible more often, and go to church more often than non-CU Christians, and they show more evidence of gravitating to a conservative position on several moral issues, although not to the degree one might assume. The CU commitment to evangelism is also matched by a high involvement in volunteer work; in fact, the vast majority (89.5 percent) had done some kind of volunteering during the 12 months before completing our questionnaire, compared to 57.5 percent of Christian students generally (Guest et al. 2013, 155). The CUs appear to foster an engagement in social action that goes well beyond the evangelistic activities for which they are most known.

And yet the CUs – and more broadly the form of evangelicalism they represent – have acquired a significance among the broader student population that has little to do with its numerical size. Only 10 percent of self-identifying Christian students said they were usually involved in CUs during university term time. The remainder are oriented around a vague range of associations and values that are eminently more difficult to define, not least because so many appear to do very little in practice that is easily identifiable as conventionally Christian. One cluster of values that does appear to be axiomatic though is centred on cultural respect and tolerance. A tendency we found in many of our interviews – including among evangelical students – was a reluctance to speak with authority into somebody else’s life. Discussing the liberalisation of evangelicalism in the US, Hunter writes of an ‘ethic of civility,’ characterised by a commitment to the importance of being tolerant of those who have a different perspective, but also the importance of being ‘tolerable’ to those same people (Hunter 1987, 183). A concern not to offend or take any theological high ground is mirrored in forms of ‘outreach’ that prioritise warmth and welcome that is not conditional upon conversion, even in the longer term. For many Christians, a key concern was not falling foul of the evangelical caricature, both out of fear of offending others, but also out of an anxiety to

nurture a public reputation for Christians centred on inclusivity and non-judgement, rather than conversionism. One interviewee put it particularly strongly:

...the predominating churches here are Evangelical, so, the ones you tend to see on the street are Evangelicals, they do sort of things, oh, handing out pamphlets, giving out teas, and standing outside of club nights and doing a lot of apostle-like work, but a lot of people find that can be a bit too much. So, generally, when I've had conversations of faith with people it's because I've been trying to clarify their anger with what they see to be Christianity. Where, if someone comes up to you and says, oh can we have a discussion about Jesus, yes, that can put you on the back foot and you're a bit like, no, no, no.

What is touched on here are the paradoxical consequences of evangelical visibility on university campuses, which not only conveys a sense of principled Christian activism, but also feeds a more broadly evident anxiety about forms of religion not in keeping with cultural norms about respecting individual differences. Some Christian students appear motivated by a need to manage the public image of Christianity and preserve it from corruption by those who transgress underlying social assumptions about appropriate religious behaviour. However, this set of values is so deeply embedded that it is also in evidence amongst students who display typical markers of an evangelical Christianity, such as this student who affirms the centrality of a personal relationship with Jesus alongside a relativistic take on personal religious identity:

[Christianity] is a personal relationship with God, who (through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit) has provided us with teachings which encourage one to live one's life in a moralistic fashion. However, these morals and their interpretation are something each person must come to terms with separately, and so one person's Christianity (or religion, or belief) is different from another's and should not be imposed upon them.

Students' perceptions of their Christian identity appear rooted in certain governing ideas, but they are not the doctrinal or institutional reference points we might expect. On the one hand, they are framed by their changing experiences of university life; here we have focused on evangelicalism as a set of associations that is both embraced and opposed, but we could also cite encounters with morally permissive behaviour on campus or a heightened awareness of

religious pluralism. On the other hand, perceptions and understandings of Christianity are shaped by – perhaps even subservient to – broader cultural values about respecting individual difference. This appears to be a centre of gravity for the majority of self-identifying Christian students.

### **Concluding Comments**

Much has been written of late about the religious or spiritual inclinations of young people in advanced western cultures, and much of it foregrounds experiences of happiness and personal fulfilment over conformity to pre-defined doctrines or institutionally framed beliefs. For some this is a response to a broader subjectivisation of Western culture characterised by a turn to the self as a source of spiritual significance (Heela et al. 2005). The ‘moralistic therapeutic deism’ that Christian Smith and colleagues find among US teens is arguably an expression of this tendency, rooted in faith in a God who is distant but available to individuals at moments of personal need, and demanding little more than people be generally good to one another (Smith and Denton 2005). This rather atomistic analysis is to be contrasted with research that emphasises the importance of subjective experience but in terms of the self in relationship to others. Addressing the UK context, Sylvia Collins-Mayo et al. describe the religious orientations of Generation Y (those born from 1982 onwards) in these terms, suggesting that if these young people have a ‘faith,’ it is not, typically, focused on traditional expressions of religion as such, but is associated with happy and fulfilling relationships with friends and family (Collins-Mayo et al. 2010, 19). Such studies have highlighted what David Voas has called the ‘fuzzy fidelity’ (Voas 2009, 155-168) of many young people – vaguely defined with permeable boundaries, ambivalent towards institutional religion and following unconventional or elusive patterns of belief and practice. What is lacking in the existing literature is a concerted attempt to map these phenomena in relation to

how young people engage with more enduringly significant encounters, including experiences of religion and education.

The ‘Christianity and the University Experience’ project was a study of undergraduate university students and so was not restricted to young adults. In fact, almost 20 percent of our survey respondents were mature students (aged 25 and over) who exhibited interesting differences in Christian identity and practice from their younger peers (Guest et al. 2013, 166-8). These differences were often subtle, but they nevertheless serve as a helpful reminder that conflating age or generation-specific tendencies with the university experience risks missing an important aspect of student culture. Notwithstanding these important complexities, the vast majority of our respondents were aged between 18 and 24, and so it was unsurprising to find some evidence of the patterns of religious orientation and practice discerned in the research of Smith, Collins-Mayo and others. Furthermore, analysing student experiences in terms of their interactions with external frames of reference – including their orientation to Christianity as their tradition of choice – enables a more holistic perspective on student religion. The experiences of individuals are not addressed in relative isolation from one another, but as part of a complex network of ideas, values and practices that inform a reflexive engagement with what it means to be a Christian in today’s world. Writing within the broader sociology of higher education, Stevens, Armstrong and Arum warn against over-atomising the university experience, commenting that “...the presumption that higher education does its work on individuals should not lead us to ignore the fact that people experience schooling as a thick web of relationships” (Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008, 142). In addressing the interface between Christianity and the university experience, we have attempted to place students not simply in relation to their institutional contexts, but in relation to a shifting web of associations – arising from interpersonal encounters at university and from pre-existing connections originating in family or home-based church attendance, and

broader networks. Together, these inform emerging perspectives on Christianity that elude simple categorisation.

However, it is possible to discern clusters of ideas or values across the Christian student population that exert a relatively high degree of influence in framing these emerging perspectives. The most obvious, discussed above, is the widespread reticence about evangelism, expressed as embarrassment by some, and in tones of appalled anger by others. There are exceptions of course, but it is noteworthy that even among many evangelical students we interviewed, there was a clear discomfort with the idea of speaking authoritatively into somebody else's life. Alyssa Bryant has found similar tensions among evangelical students in the US, characterised by an 'ambivalence' towards evangelism and a 'cautiousness ... wielded in talking with others about their religious beliefs' (Bryant 2005, 24). The phenomenon is not restricted to the UK, and may owe a great deal to the 'ethic of civility' that has achieved cultural normativity, certainly in Anglo-American contexts. This is not to paint a saccharine picture of 'Christian niceness;' engrained dissonances between university life and religion remain important, but they have also changed in focus over time. In the UK, previous models of dissonance based on different forms of knowledge or the control of public utterance, have given way to a dissonance that is framed by a liberal hegemony that refuses to tolerate certain kinds of perspective. Religion is not excluded from campus for being irrational, nor steered away from campus on the grounds of propriety, so much as controlled and managed on campus in so far as it contravenes broader cultural values of tolerance and equality. Moreover, as the evidence from the 'Christianity and the University Experience' project reveals, this pattern of dissonance not only shapes official university governance and rhetoric, but also the ways in which students negotiate their way through university life.



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