

The Contested Campus: Christian Students in UK Universities

Kristin Aune and Mathew Guest

Accepted manuscript PDF deposited in Coventry University's Repository

Original citation:

'The Contested Campus: Christian Students in UK Universities', in *Religion and Higher Education in Europe and North America*, ed. by Kristin Aune and Jacqueline Stevenson, pub 2017 (ISBN 978-1-1386-5295-8)

Publisher: Routledge

Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

The Contested Campus: Christian Students in UK Universities

Kristin Aune and Mathew Guest

During the first decade of the 21st century several incidents occurred on UK campuses that highlighted tensions between evangelical Christian students, Students' Unions and university authorities about publicly expressed views on gender roles and homosexuality. Controversy surrounded the evangelical Christian Union at Bristol, where an attempt was made to limit opportunities for female speakers; at Exeter and Birmingham the issue was inclusion of LGBT students. These incidents illustrate that university campuses can be sites in which conservative, counter-cultural forms of religion emerge or even thrive, an observation that sits uncomfortably alongside the common assumption that higher education is a driver of secularisation (Berger 1999; Guest et al 2013a).

More recent controversies have tended to focus on Islam, with government rhetoric on counter-terrorism pointing to links between student Islamic societies, radical speakers invited onto campuses, and the dangers of 'radicalisation' (Brown and Saeed 2015). The Counter Terrorism and Security Act (2015) places a legal responsibility on universities to intervene where 'radicalisation' may be occurring, its Prevent Guidelines extending the focus of suspicion to a variety of forms of 'non-violent extremism', including far-right, far-left, animal rights and environmental movements that oppose "fundamental British values". The university is recast as a context of anxiety and risk, with religion marked as having a subversive potential that needs careful monitoring.

Such anxiety about public engagement with contentious topics is mirrored in the growing tendency among students refusing to share a platform with external speakers whose perspective they find offensive. This censorious approach to controversy extends beyond religious matters, with some prominent feminists prevented from speaking on UK campuses. The reasons given cite the importance of protecting vulnerable groups, although 'no platforming' is also treated as a form of protest, a refusal to grant legitimacy to an opponent's position. Government approaches to counter-terrorism reveal a tendency to exclude and delimit open debate, made plain in the language universities use to justify decisions to curtail public discussions about religion (Grove 2015). Although later changing its position, the University of Warwick's Students' Union initially refused to allow ex-Muslim human rights campaigner Maryam Namazie to speak on the grounds that she might 'incite hatred' (Adams 2015). Religion has become a sensitive issue on many campuses, its expression among students especially so.

These developments stand in tension with long-established traditions of freedom of speech. While coloured by a romanticised past, universities' commitment to freedom of expression enjoys the benefit of more structural support insofar as it is enshrined in equality law. The 2010 Equality Act requires public institutions (including universities) to ensure equality for those who possess the 'protected characteristics' of age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity. It directs universities to ensure equality of opportunity, elimination of harassment and good relations between those who share the protected characteristic and those who do not. It is therefore not simply a matter of 'equal opportunities', but also of wider campus relations. As supporting students and staff who are religious is now a legal requirement, universities have worked to improve their engagement with religion, for instance providing better facilities for prayer and religious diets, especially for the growing numbers of Muslim students who require Friday prayer and *halal* food. The inclusion of religion as a 'protected characteristic' presents significant challenges for universities seeking

to maintain both freedom of religious expression and opposition to discrimination and intolerance. This is a difficult balance to strike, especially when religious perspectives on gender, sexuality and inter-religious relations run counter to the equality norms embedded in British culture, as became clear during the conflicts involving Christian Unions mentioned earlier.

Against this background, the status of the university as a context for the expression of religious identities is far from straightforward, and is framed by competing urges to accommodate religious difference on the one hand, and exclude or control religious radicalism on the other. Definitions of the latter are unstable and vulnerable to popular prejudice, with some scholars arguing that the ‘radicalisation’ agenda has focused disproportionate attention on Muslim students (Brown and Saeed 2015). But as the examples above illustrate, a culture of suspicion extends beyond Islam and renders religion a source of contention on university campuses, a trend heightened by the emergence of a self-conscious and organised secularism among the student body, often mobilised in attempts to discredit religious truth claims or the legitimacy of religion as a constituent part of university life. One aspect of this issue that remains to be explored concerns the way in which religious students perceive their campus environment: what kind of environment is it, and how does it accommodate matters of faith? Dinham and Jones’ (2012: 194) qualitative research with senior university managers and students revealed that ‘A majority of the VCs and PVCs...were keen to promote their institutions as ‘faith friendly’’, citing provision of faith spaces and catering for religious diets. The desire to attract international students was an impetus for religious provision, implying an economic motivation, and ‘a number of the religious students commented that their university only dealt with questions of religious faith at a superficial level’ (p.196). They conclude that the university is a place where religion is given increasing consideration and Vice Chancellors ‘regarded religion as a potential source of enrichment and a resource on which universities could draw’ (p.199), but ‘It remains to be seen...whether in a context of financial hardship they can adapt to the challenges of a world in which both religious and secular worldviews will inevitably come into more frequent contact.’ (p.199). The research we present in this chapter explores how Christian students perceive universities to accommodate their faith, but first we draw on existing literature to highlight our analytical perspective, including its conception of institutional ethos.

Theoretical Framework

US sociology has produced an abundant body of research into religion on university campuses, in part as a means of exploring the institutional dynamics of secularisation. Universities and colleges are often assumed to be major engines of secondary socialisation into a ‘modern’, rather than religious, perspective (Berger 1999; Hunter 1987). This assumption has been confirmed and challenged, with some scholars pointing to examples of religious or spiritual vitality within campus contexts (Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield 2001; Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno 2003), and others calling for a more complex understanding of how the experience of students interacts with the complex range of encounters that make up university life (Clydesdale 2007). While traditionally focusing on the educational dimension – how what students learn shapes their orientation to religion – scholarship is now more sensitive to the broader institutional cultures that students experience, including social, political and religious aspects of campus life (Bryant 2005). As Mayrl and Oeur comment in an article surveying the field, a major problem has been decontextualisation. Previous studies presented a rather two-dimensional picture of university life, failing to investigate how ‘specific intuitional contexts interact with the religious engagements of undergraduate students’ (Mayrl and Oeur 2009: 271).

A sociological treatment of campus religion demands a more subtle theorisation of the university experience, capable of distinguishing between the various institutional cultures that characterise the HE sector. This kind of approach is also capable of highlighting the distinctive characteristics of the UK context; the US literature is helpful in guiding us through important conceptual and methodological matters, but UK higher education is very different, for instance, in housing a much less religiously-committed population and very few faith-based universities. The following analysis builds on research undertaken as part of the ‘Christianity and the University Experience’ (CUE) project, which explored the ways in which the experience of university shapes the moral and religious orientations of Christian students. The CUE project involved a survey completed by around 4,500 students, of whom approximately half identified as Christian, and 100 interviews: 75 with self-identified Christian students (15 at each of five universities) and 25 with professional and religious staff and student leaders working with Christian students – for example, chaplains and equality and diversity officers (for survey findings and student demographics, see Aune 2015, Guest et al. 2013a, Guest et al 2013b, Guest 2015). We addressed the diversity of Higher Education Institutions in England by dividing them into five types, each distinctive with respect to geographical location, historical background, student demographics and institutional ethos. In this chapter we take up the concept of institutional ethos – which we take to refer to the moral and aesthetic (i.e. evaluative) aspects of a given culture (Geertz 1973: 126) – and explore how a university’s ethos shapes Christian students’ perceptions of how Christianity is accommodated by their university.

Traditional/elite universities are characterised by a long history, stretching back at least to the early nineteenth century, a heritage that comes with status. These universities – including Oxford, Cambridge and Durham and older London colleges like UCL – maintain this high status on the basis of acclaimed academic research, reflected in high positions in university league tables and the popular imagination. They tend to be located in large and/or historical cities and attract higher proportions of students from privately educated and/or middle-class backgrounds. Their elite status fosters an ethos characterised by traditional scholarship, a sense of being set apart from the mainstream, and of continuing a centuries-old tradition of student life. By contrast, *Inner-City Red Brick universities* trace their origins to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, established to serve the industrial age within major urban centres such as Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, Liverpool and Bristol. Occupying a tier slightly below the traditional/elites with respect to popular status and recruitment of social elites, the Red Bricks nevertheless maintain levels of research excellence that are on a par with those of traditional elite institutions. Still dedicated to science and industry, in the 21st century they attract culturally and religiously diverse populations and benefit from the opportunities afforded by commercial vitality and night-life. Their ethos tends to reflect this, fusing wide-ranging disciplinary engagement with vibrant student politics and a social scene energised by the urban environment.

1960s Campus universities were established in the wake of the 1963 Robbins Report that recommended the post-war population boom and economic growth be met with an expanded university sector. A number of brand new universities were rapidly built, most set within purpose-built out-of-town campuses (most of the red bricks were located on various sites within the precincts of their cities). Self-consciously progressive, ambitious and experimental, universities like Lancaster, York, Warwick and Sussex reflected an ethos of social inclusion and a mission to make university education available to all with the necessary educational credentials, irrespective of social background. At some this came with radical politics and/or an essentially secular ethos, with only Kent establishing a department of Theology and Lancaster pioneering the first explicitly Religious Studies department, open to those of any faith or none. In maintaining a diverse student constituency and inclusive

campus culture, the 1960s universities share much with the *Post-1992 universities*, although the latter have contrasting origins and are our most institutionally diverse category. They originated as polytechnic colleges established to complement the older, more traditional universities by offering practical and vocational forms of training, often in close connection with local industry. This pedagogical focus made the polytechnics appealing to less privileged students, a tradition continued after they were gradually accorded university status following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. This diverse group of institutions includes a highly diverse student body. High proportions of locally-based students mean the post-1992 universities often lack the extra-curricular campus vitality found at most of those in traditional/elite, red brick and 1960s campus categories. That said, the cultural and religious diversity of universities like Derby and Kingston has fostered innovative expressions of student faith on campus, and warn against simple generalisations. Moreover, post-1992 universities' commitment to vocational education and widening access to populations traditionally under-represented in higher education fosters a shared ethos structured around values of accessibility, equality of opportunity and innovation in teaching and learning.

The final category encompasses the Council of Church Universities and Colleges, or '*Cathedrals Group*', 16 universities that were originally established - most in the nineteenth century - by the Anglican, Roman Catholic or Methodist Churches as colleges for training school teachers. While many have expanded to cover a range of academic disciplines, they maintain strong links with their originating denominations, affirm an explicitly Christian ethos, and express this in a commitment to vocational and public-service oriented programmes of study. Their Christian identity is also typically reflected in the prominent role they accord to chaplains, a greater frequency of Christianity-framed public events, and in some cases in systems of governance. Cathedrals Group universities tend to be found in historical Cathedral towns like Chester, Canterbury, York and Chichester, but are much smaller than typical institutions in the other four categories. In professing an ethos that is Christian and church-founded, they are unique within the UK.

The notion of institutional ethos emerges as especially important in the subsequent discussion, and can be appropriately understood as arising from and maintained by the other three factors of geography, history and student demographics. Moreover, institutional ethos is conceived here not in simple, singular terms, but as pointing to a number of contested narratives – some official and public, others more informal and implicit – together informing the institutional identity of the universities that formed the empirical basis for the research. While 13 universities featured in the national survey undertaken for the CUE project – spanning all five types and attracting responses from four and half thousand undergraduates – this essay focuses on the five case study universities – one from each type – that were explored in greater detail via semi-structured interviews with 75 students who self-identified as Christian. Each was questioned about their experience of being a Christian at university, the overall aim being to ascertain how this experience had shaped their religious and moral perspectives and attempts to live out their Christian identity within a university context.

Students were asked 'Would you describe your University as hostile, neutral or friendly to faith, and if so, in what ways?' How questions are phrased affect responses, and our open phrasing (in contrast to 'Would you describe your University as hostile, neutral or friendly to *Christianity*?') elicited responses relating to friendliness to Christianity as well as to other faiths or religion in general. This will be discussed later in the chapter. Data were coded, using NVivo, in two ways, in terms of relative friendliness, neutrality and hostility, then second, by theme.

First, six categories were created using a spectrum ranging from hostile to friendly, based on their assent to one or more of the terms 'hostile', 'neutral' or 'friendly': 'friendly', 'neutral to friendly', 'neutral', 'friendly to hostile', 'neutral to hostile' and 'hostile'. Where students wavered between two options or, for instance, described aspects they considered friendly and others they considered neutral, we coded this 'neutral to friendly'. 'Friendly to hostile' responses were initially coded as such rather than as 'neutral' when students did not use the term 'neutral' and indicated two contrasting aspects of their university; the six responses in this category were later recoded as 'neutral' because the 'hostile' and 'friendly' aspects balanced each other out, producing something not dissimilar to neutrality. Table 1 displays the results.

<Table 1 here>

Overall, more students perceived a friendliness than a hostility to faith in their universities. More than 6 in 10 thought that their universities were either friendly or neutral-to-friendly towards faith. Three in ten considered their universities neutral, or thought that they encompassed elements that were both friendly and hostile. One in ten experienced their campuses as hostile or neutral-to-hostile. This is an important finding, because it suggests that Christian students do not for the most part perceive their universities as a hostile environment for those with faith.

These findings bear similarities with Weller, Hooley and Moore's (2011) study of 3,935 students and 3,077 staff in UK universities, commissioned by the higher education equality body the Equality Challenge Unit in response to the Equality Act's religious equality requirements for universities to ensure equality of opportunity for religious staff and students. Like ours, their study found that the majority (93.9%) of students did not feel discriminated against or harassed. Only 4.3% of Christian students felt discriminated against or harassed, a lower figure than all religious groups other than 'Pagan'. The greater welcome experienced by Christian students in both studies is likely to relate to the partial alignment of Christianity with the dominant ethno-cultural traditions of the UK. Students with minority status were less likely to feel they were not discriminated against, especially Muslims (17.8% of whom reported harassment in Weller et al.'s study), Jews (10.3%) and Hindus (9.4%) (Weller et al. 2011: 76-77).

The second stage of coding was thematic. When we asked whether they thought their university was hostile, neutral or friendly to faith, students contextualised their comments in relation to four main themes, with the first two dominating discussion: 1) Christian/religious spaces and activities, 2) religious freedom and respect for faith, 3) the classroom/curriculum and 4) organised student social activities. These themes framed Christian students' perceptions of their campus contexts, feeding into constructions of institutional ethos that illuminate how religion inhabits different kinds of university spaces.

Theme 1: Christian/religious spaces and activities

46 students commented on this, and more than half of the comments about a university's friendliness to faith related to it. Christian students highly appreciate the university's provision of Christian groups and activities. This is the most significant factor in helping them to feel their universities are friendly to faith, as these comments illustrate:

I'd say it's friendly, predominantly because it's a Church of England institution and it seeks to encourage community as a university and I think community is something that is found deeply within religion... I think with the visual presence of the chapel, the

visual presence of the chaplaincy at the start of the year in Fresher's Week, with the fact that there are allocated faith spaces central to each campus for people of any religion, just to freely use. (male, Cathedrals Group)

It's pretty friendly. They have a lot of different societies for different denominations and different religions....They're certainly an accepting community ... It is easier for Christians because [name of university] is primarily a Christian base. The churches have been around a lot longer than mosques or synagogues or anything have. (female, traditional elite university)

I think it's friendly ...– there's [an] Anglican chaplaincy, Roman Catholic chaplaincies ...and the CU especially is very prominent on campus. ...There's lots of outlets if you're a Christian and ...lots of other faith chaplaincies as well, so I think that... it's very sort of open. (female, 60s campus)

There were some institutional variations. Students in traditional elite and 60s campus universities mentioned the annual university-run Cathedral carol service. In several universities the predominantly Christian nature of faith-related activities was noted, whereas in the red brick university, located in a major multicultural city, students commented positively on the inter-faith activities, describing an innovative inter-faith comedy show that had taken place on campus.

But some students described Christian activities as a more neutral facet of university life. In a classic example of what Davie (2007) calls 'vicarious religion' (performed by a minority on behalf of a majority who passively benefit), one red brick student commented on being glad that the chaplaincy existed even though she does not personally make use of it. She praised the provision of a Muslim prayer room alongside Christian chaplaincy, and described the student body as having a 'neutral' orientation to these facilities. However, when asked whether the chaplaincy makes a contribution to her life as a student, she replied:

Not massively because I haven't really gone to a church or institution here..., but I think it is nice to have it as part of the University. I think it's good to have it as part of a place where they have teaching and they also have Christian services. I think it does add to the University community.

Her more muted personal commitment to faith may explain her lack of wholesale enthusiasm for the university's Christian activities. For others who see the university as neutral or friendly-to-neutral, their strong Christian commitment is what leads them to perceive university Christian activities as not signifying sufficient friendliness to Christianity. Several at the traditional elite and Cathedrals Group universities spoke nostalgically of their university as having a historic Christian heritage which was now in the background or paid lip service to.

A male student at the 60s campus felt that granting the Christians a chapel after years of campaigning by the chaplains was a concession rather than a real commitment to faith, and compared the university unfavourably with the local Cathedrals Group institution. Interestingly, the two campuses were contrasted with reference to spatial characteristics, the Cathedrals Group university having buildings 'named after theologians' and a 'very large chapel which can be seen from all around'. This, in addition to them having a Christian Union that is 'very big and very much busier' contributed to a perception of a diminished Christian presence in his own university, where he discerned a 'vaguely anti-Christian sentiment'.

A female student from the post-1992 university also wanted more than just a carol service, an inter-faith forum and one Christian group that she felt excluded from as a black person.

...it looks friendly but when you actually experience it for yourself as someone of faith, it's not really that friendly. It's not really made me think people are really horrible and I'd never tell a Christian not to come here or anything like that, but there's not exactly a mass welcoming feeling. I think there could be a lot more Christian activities... I was the only black person in the Christian Union and so there's not a lot of things for us more Pentecostal kids.

Theme 2: Religious freedom and respect for faith

The second major theme cited by students discussing their universities' orientation to faith related to religious freedom and respect for faith; 42 students commented on this. Compared with the first theme, where the majority of students who commented perceived their university as friendly because it made available Christian-related activities, students who raised the issue of religious freedom were more likely to see their university as neutral, even hostile, on this issue.

Students who praised the university as friendly to freedom of religion commented on their appreciation for their university's openness to everyone's beliefs, religious or not. Words like 'respectful', 'tolerant', 'open' and 'non-judgemental' appeared many times.

...there are a lot of different people and of different faiths who come here, and I think they're very, very open to that, and I think that's good. I think they have to be, because obviously everybody's different and there are so many different students, you have to have that kind of balance, so yeah, I think they've been quite good. (female, post-1992)

This student assumes a culture of liberal tolerance ('I think they have to be [open]') and bases this on the pluralistic context of this post-1992 university. For this traditional elite student, respectfulness is based on intelligence rather than pluralism:

Part of the nature of it being a university is [it is] full of intelligent people who are going to take things fairly sensibly ... People don't tend to be fairly prejudiced about faith in my experience here. Maybe other people have had different experiences. I've found it pretty good. [Names city] seems fairly secular, but within that... it's basically any faith goes, that's fine. (female)

Some students spoke about the institution's ethos. Others talked more about the student or staff population. Students at the red brick praised the fact that their university had made an official commitment to protect religious people from discrimination:

I think the Student Union we belong to is very, very supporting of people from any walk of faith or any background. Equality is very much campaigned for and supported over here, so I'd say it's quite friendly. I think in terms of the student population, it might be a different story, but that depends on the individual.

This student, interestingly, felt that the SU was more positive towards religion than some individual students might be, highlighting the distinction between institutional orientations and those perceived at a more popular level.

A somewhat larger number of more neutral comments related to two themes: student apathy and hostility to religion, especially to Christian Unions, mostly from students but also from lecturers. In relation to apathy, while students recognised that freedom of belief should also mean freedom to not believe, they resented the indifference they sometimes encountered from their peers. Answering our question directly, one student said:

Depending on circumstance, I'd say all three. So hostile, I received hostility from certain groups of students, because of what I believe, partly when they are drunk. So I don't know whether it's true feelings or whether 'you know what, I've had a bit to drink, I'm going to play the big man and have a stab'. But then neutral, because I think a lot of people at university are like 'you know what, I'm going to embrace whatever is going on, it's good for you but I'm right here. Yes you get on with that, but I'm happy where I am'. ...But then I've had a lot of friendliness in that a lot of my friends genuinely want to know what on earth I'm so passionate about and like they want to know, well, is it actually for me? (female, traditional elite)

Sometimes neutral and sometimes friendly. It does depend on who you're with. It's all split down the middle. Some people are very friendly to it and some people put neutral, they don't really want to give an opinion. But I haven't seen or been anywhere where it's hostile. I think a lot of people are accepting but sometimes they have their own beliefs and therefore they don't really want to put an opinion into it because they don't want to get into an argument... I think that's one thing people worry about, getting into a religious argument against another group. (male, 60s campus)

As this 60s campus student noted, students' reluctance to debate religion may be more due to fear of offending others than to apathy, echoing the tendency to treat religion as a sensitive topic associated with anxiety and risk, as mentioned earlier. This tendency recurred throughout the CUE data, as Christian students attempted to affirm values of civility and inter-religious tolerance, while retaining Christian identity markers (Guest 2015), reflecting at a practical level the challenge of balancing freedom of speech with respect for religious diversity.

This male red brick student perceived their university as neutral because it neither advocated nor prohibited religion on campus, and commented that although the institutional stance was neutral, students could be 'anti-religion':

In terms of this specific formal policy, I'd say they're neutral, they don't advocate for faith, they don't prohibit it, they're quite, you know, open to...all faiths In terms of informal interactions with the university, I'd say that the majority of students are sort of anti-religious, but they're not like aggressive anti-religious, they just like brush it off like, you know, that's, 'I don't believe in flying spaghetti monsters' and stuff like that. They like just, you know, brush it off like child's play.

Students who were more religiously conservative and belonged to the Christian Union were more likely to pinpoint hostility to the CU as a sign of neutrality or hostility, as this (somewhat guarded) comment illustrates.

I wouldn't say friendly, particularly friendly, or particularly hostile but that has been just my experience, and I think people have probably found other extremes, like both extremes within the university. I think like we're so blessed to have the freedom to meet as a Christian Union, to, like, book rooms to use to, like, use our college bars to put on events to share the gospel with our friends ...I think, like, people are quite, fairly open to, fairly open but I know within some colleges that that's not the case and there's, like, I suppose just a bit of resentment towards, like, evangelism. (female, traditional elite)

These students were also more likely to describe encountering negativity towards faith from lecturers, as those from the post-1992 university in particular did.

Theme 3: The classroom and curriculum

A small number (11) of students' comments on their universities' relative friendliness said what happens in the classroom was the leading issue. Universities having theology and religious studies courses were mentioned as demonstrating a university's friendliness to faith, as were those with theology study centres or Christian or Muslim youth work courses, such as those run by the Cathedrals Group university. One female student commented, 'Having a really top Theology, Religious Studies department...It's becoming recognised, you know, in the country. They wouldn't have that if they weren't bothered about faith and relating faith to real life, and especially practical Theology.'

Students on non-religion-based courses were more critical, especially students at the 60s campus and post-1992 institutions. This 60s campus student explained that being 'expected to do field trips on Sundays' was problematic as no allowance was made for her faith.

Even though I protested, that wasn't taken into account.

Interviewer: As part of your course?

Respondent: Yes, despite the fact that I made it clear I wanted to be at church on those particular days... It was a member of staff that helped get me into the Alpha course [an introduction to Christianity course], but other members of staff – they haven't openly mocked it, but ...I think they think it's sort of silly and they've not said it in so many words, but you know you'll have tutorials and I did a dissertation on church architecture. So conversations came up about my faith...I think from an academic point of view they find it foolish.

She went on describe being allocated course readings that said that God was dead. The most explicitly hostile example was given by this female student at the post-1992 university:

In my classes, you know the tutors, a lot of them swear. A lot of them blaspheme.

Interviewer: What would that be?

Respondent: Just saying the word Jesus and whatever. For example like the tutor was like, 'oh I've got more followers than Jesus' or something, you know, comments like that... I think they say them to make the class laugh, because then they do get a reaction and the class laugh.

... You do feel a bit sad sometimes because you're just hearing it constantly, you know, so much violence towards a religion that no one understands. Why do they hate Christianity and they don't know what it's about? Why does everyone say 'Jesus'? They don't say Mohammed or whatever. Why is it always Christianity that they use when they're cursing?

Theme 4: Organised student social activities

For a smaller number still (9), the issue affecting their perception of their university's view of faith was what happened in the student social sphere. Most comments related to the Students' Union, who were seen as positive if they supported Christians' involvement, but negative when they challenged the Christian Union to be pro-LGBT or inclusive of other faiths. At the red brick institution, a female student pointed out that a candidate standing for election to the SU was trying 'to make the Union more faith-friendly'. This post-1992 Christian Union student was also positive about her SU:

We've got the multi faith centre so they're very friendly towards people having beliefs and all that kind of thing but I think like the rest of the world, they're very taken over by this politically correct stuff... When we did our Exec training for the CU with all the Execs for all the societies, they said every society has to make sure that it's approachable for all religions or something, and I was like, 'My society's a Christian Union so how does that work?' and she was like, 'Oh, I don't know really'.

I think if we started saying we all believe it's wrong to be gay, that would probably not go down too well but generally, they're really good. The Students' Union are very into societies in general so because we're a society, they like us because they want as many societies as they can get! They're generally pretty supportive and when I try and get things signed off, they're like, 'Well, you're the Christian Union so you'll be fine.'

Both students referred somewhat disparagingly to the university's culture of liberal tolerance, which the first student perceived as an unhelpful imposition for campus Christians. SUs were also criticised for excluding Christians through organising alcohol-fuelled events:

Every single event that goes on, I haven't been able to attend because it's been against my religion or whatever. Like I really want to go to one of the balls, but they've got like bands on that I won't listen to, and it's the wrong kind of environment for me. You look in the student magazine and you'll see people like half naked and totally drunk and wearing really outrageous fancy dress and everything, and I can't associate with that. (female, post-1992)

The alcohol-focused nature of student life appears to be an almost peculiarly British 'problem', causing problems for some religious students who do not drink, as we have discussed elsewhere (Guest et al. 2013: 122-127; Sharma and Guest 2013; see also Valentine et al. 2010 and Weller et al. 2011: 47-52).

Institutional variations

<Table 2 here>

While all universities included students with responses that varied between 'Friendly' and 'neutral', three observations stand out when their responses are categorised by university

type, as in Table 2. First, Cathedrals group students were the group most likely to perceive their university as friendly to faith, and none of their responses were on the negative side of the balance. Second, while the responses of students at the post-1992 institution ranged across the spectrum, they were the type most likely to perceive their university as hostile to faith (indeed, they were the only one that featured responses from students perceiving their university to be unequivocally ‘hostile’ to faith). Third, the remaining universities included responses that spanned the friendly to neutral categories, with very few indications of hostility to faith.

It is not surprising that Christians at a Christian-foundation university perceive their university as friendly to faith. Indeed, an important question is whether students of other faiths would agree; perhaps this is an institution that is positive to Christian faith but not to other faiths – our data cannot tell us, but Weller et al.’s (2011) findings that religious minority students experienced more hostility indicate that this is likely to be the case. It is perhaps more surprising that students at the post-1992 institution were the most negative about their university. Post-1992 universities are socio-economically and, like red bricks, ethnically, diverse, located in multicultural cities, so a tolerant atmosphere, accepting of religion, might be assumed to correlate with this ethos. However, the students we interviewed were Christian, and this raises the issue that Christian students might not perceive a diverse university as sufficiently friendly to *their own* faith. It is here that institutional ethos appears especially relevant; does the successful fostering of a multi-religious ethos also heighten a sense of alienation among Christian students who might presume to hold the ‘majority’ faith? Cathedrals Group universities may be better than post-1992 institutions at nurturing a campus culture that is affirming of Christianity, but does this owe more to their less diverse student populations than any structural features they might have?

Examining the reasons why Cathedrals Group students felt their institutions were friendly to faith, they often listed their plentiful Christian activities: the on-site chapel, the chaplains’ prominent welcome tepee at Fresher’s Week, the city’s Christian heritage (it has a Cathedral) and the city’s many churches which welcomed students. They also praised the university’s tolerance and friendliness towards other faiths – for instance the fact that the institution ran a Muslim youth work course – but the most important aspect seemed to be the institution’s Christian activities. In the post-1992 institution, which had fewer Christian activities and a multi-faith centre rather than a bespoke chapel, the Christian Union and Chaplaincy’s existence were praised, but there were perceptions of a more negative climate elsewhere in the university, with a Students’ Union who were not always understanding of Christian students’ social or religious needs, and teaching staff who were critical of and mocking towards Christianity. There was also a perception that other faiths, especially Islam, were treated more positively.

In what way might Christian students’ varying experiences of friendliness, neutrality or hostility relate to the institutional ethos that each university is attempting to foster? Large scale research is needed to test out any typology of university stances to religion, but Dinham provides a useful starting point. Dinham (in this volume) describes four university stances towards religion: hard neutral’ (the university asserts its need to protect itself from religion), ‘soft neutral’ (the university is conceived as neutral and avoids mentioning religion as far as possible), ‘repositories and resources’ (the university sees religion as a learning resource and supports religious diversity) and ‘formative-collegial’ (the university offers education ‘for the whole person’ and sees spiritual development as central to this, as is common in religious-foundation universities like the Cathedrals Group). Ethos can be gauged by university mission statements and annual reports and from more informal

institutional cultures (and the two may diverge), but gauging ethos from the university's multiple constituencies make this a difficult task. Moreover, how might students' perceptions, and staff behaviour, differ from the institution's intention?

At the post-1992 university, it is unlikely that lecturer criticism of Christianity relates to formal institutional ethos, given that all universities have policies promoting respect for religion. However, it may indicate that this university had not, at the time of research, promoted religious inclusion sufficiently through staff development courses, given that the Equality Act only came into being in the year our fieldwork began.

In contrast, religious-foundation universities are arguably distinctive in focusing on provision for students' spiritual needs; as the Cathedrals Group's introductory web page says 'there is a strong commitment to providing a high quality education for students, supporting personal and spiritual development within a challenging learning environment' (The Cathedrals Group n.d.a). The Cathedrals Group's strategic priority document describes their mission statement as:

To present a distinctively ethical perspective in the higher education landscape, that celebrates our heritage as Christian foundations, influences national and local agendas and supports our Member institutions to offer the highest quality experience for our students, staff and partner organisations. (The Cathedrals Group 2013)

As a report on the Cathedrals Group found, for this group the 'student experience' does not mean a consumer experience (as Sabri 2011 argues has been increasingly the case as universities have improved their facilities to compete for increasing numbers of home and international students), but means that these universities support and respect students as individual members of their community.

A key – perhaps *the* key – distinguishing characteristic of Cathedrals Group institutions lies in the nature of the student experience. Following the major shift in emphasis to the student as customer, consumer and funder, the high value placed on the student relationship must be a critical factor in distinctiveness to which the Group should play strongly... Each institution supported individuals on a day to day basis and was concerned about personal values of dignity, trust and respect. (Wooldridge and Newcomb 2011: 5)

The small size (less than 10,000 students) make it easier for these universities to create a sense of community. The group's commitment to 'building communities that embrace and value diversity' and 'social justice' (The Cathedrals Group, n.d. b) exists alongside a commitment to their Christian heritage. This tension is keenly felt, the 2011 report found, with some within the group more 'reticent' (p.3) about their Christian values than others, especially in promotional material. The Christian students we spoke to value both, but emphasised their university's Christian activities more than they mentioned the ethos of diversity. The Cathedrals Group have to work to retain their distinctive ethos, and Warner (2013: 348) observes 'a secularising trajectory' among them, as they come under pressure to remove the occupational requirement that senior managers share their Christian values and chaplaincy is 'redefined as essentially pastoral counselling' (Warner 2013: 349). Nevertheless, Warner argues that the Anglican universities (a subset of the Cathedrals Group) can retain a distinctive five-point vision of inclusivity, public service, seeing education as life-enhancing, 'faith-development friendly' (p.356) and being 'reflexively dependent upon a Christocentric meta-critique' (p.355).

Conclusion

Institutional ethos, we conclude, has a bearing on how friendly to religion different universities are perceived as being among students of faith. This was most clear in the differences articulated by students in Christian-foundation universities, who perceived their institutions as most friendly to faith, and students in the modern ‘post-1992’ universities, who believed that the ethos of diversity meant there was less respect for Christianity. Institutional ethos, however, is shaped by many factors, and although university type – in the UK, the five are traditional elite, inner-city red brick, 1960s campus, post-1992 and Cathedrals Group – is one significant factor in framing institutional ethos, it is not the only one. Moreover, differences between the Christian students’ experiences at the traditional elite, red brick and 60s campus university were not large enough to draw clear conclusions.

Most Christian students we interviewed tended to view their universities as friendly to faith, but at times feel their faith is marginalised and confined to a ‘private’ sphere of religious activities and religious spaces. The majority of students who see their universities as friendly to faith seem to accept the partial secularization of the university and the confinement of religion to an enclave rather than being present throughout the university’s structures and activities. Which students are uncomfortable with this? We argue that minority status – which arguably results from their marginalisation by the attitudes and structures of the more privileged – accounts for some of the perceptions of neutrality and hostility. Previous research suggests that ethnic minority students perceive their university experiences less positively than white students, with some seeing their religious identity as insufficiently understood by their institutions (Aida et al. 1996; NUS 2008). While the majority of Christian students in our survey (75.8%) were white, Christian students from ethnic minorities demonstrated higher levels of Christian commitment as measured by frequency of churchgoing, private prayer and Bible reading (Guest et al. 2013: 172). Moreover, our interviews indicate more discontent among these students about a perceived marginalisation of Christianity at their universities. For them, achieving ‘friendliness to faith’ requires a more public discussion of religion that may unsettle the fabric of the institution. Yet it is not true to say that religion is absent from everything but the faith-spaces of the university, as for some institutions it is there in the fabric via graduation ceremonies in the Cathedral and religious equality policy. Where it is most frowned upon is in the classroom and the leisure and social spaces of student peer interactions.

That some religious students – particular those of minority faiths or minority backgrounds – perceive their universities in less positive terms is not a new finding, though ours is the first investigation of this in relation to Christianity. Nor is the conclusion that faith is, to at least some extent, marginalised and privatised by HEIs new – it reflects Dinham and Jones’s (2012) and Dinham’s (this volume) conclusion. Dinham argues that the fact that most people opting to attend his Religious Literacy training events were chaplaincy and equality and diversity officers reflects a ‘widespread assumption amongst our sample that “religion” is something that is done in the chaplaincy primarily, with little resonance or relevance in the wider life of the institution.’ He comments: ‘The risk is that religion is “bracketed off”..., rather than understood as something which pervades universities, and wider societies’. Universities have become, to greater or lesser degrees, replete with secular and secularising assumptions. This new moment, where public and political anxiety about campus religion is accompanied by new research evidence about faith on campus, gives universities a new opportunity to comprehend the religious commitments of their students and staff and decide whether this requires accommodation of privatised faith or, rather, a deeper structural transformation.

References

- Adams, R. (2015) 'Student Union blocks speech by "inflammatory" anti-sharia activist', *The Guardian*, 26th September: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/sep/26/student-union-blocks-speech-activist-maryam-namazie-warwick>
- Aida, E., Roberts, D. and Allen, A. (1996) *Higher Education: The Ethnic Minority Student Experience*. Leeds: Heist
- Aune, K. (2015) 'Faith and the University Experience in the UK', *Occasional Papers on Faith in Higher Education*, a joint publication of Whitelands College, University of Roehampton and Colleges and Universities of the Anglican Communion, No. 1 April <http://cuac.anglicancommunion.org/media/153639/Occ-Papers-on-Faith-in-HE-no-1.pdf>
- Berger, P. (1999) 'The desecularization of the world: a global overview' in *The Desecularization of the World: Essays on the Resurgence of Religion in World Politics*. ed. by Berger, P. L. Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center & Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1-18
- Brown, K.E. and Saeed, T. (2015) 'Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization at British Universities: Muslim Encounters and Alternatives', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38 (11), 1952-1968.
- Bryant, A. N. (2005) 'Evangelicals on Campus: an exploration of culture, faith, and college life', *Religion and Education* 32 (2), 1-30
- Bryant, A. N., Choi, J. Y. and Yasuno, M. (2003) 'Understanding the spiritual and religious dimension of students' lives in the first year of college', *Journal of College Student Development*, 44 (6), 723-45.
- Cherry, C., DeBerg, B. A., and Porterfield, A. (2001) *Religion on Campus: What religion really means to today's undergraduates*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.
- Clydesdale, Tim (2007) *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Davie, G. (2007) *The Sociology of Religion*, London: Sage.
- Dinham, A. and Jones, S. (2012) 'Religion, Public Policy, and the Academy: Brokering Public Faith in a Context of Ambivalence', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27(2), 185-201
- Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. London: Fontana Press.
- Grove, J. (2015) 'Sir Ken Macdonald: 'obnoxious' anti-radicalisation measures attack campus free speech'. *Times Higher Education* [online], 2 July 2015, available from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ken-macdonald-obnoxious-anti-radicalisation-measures-attack-free-speech>
- Guest, M., Sharma, S., Aune, K. and Warner, R. (2013a) 'Challenging "Belief" and the Evangelical Bias: Student Christianity in English Universities', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28 (2), 207-223.
- Guest, M., Aune, K., Sharma, S. and Warner, R. (2013b) *Christianity and the University Experience*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Guest, M. (2015) "Religion and the Cultures of Higher Education: Student Christianity in the UK", in *Issues in Religion and Education: Whose Religion?* ed. by Beaman, L. G. and Van Arragon, L. Leiden: Brill, 346-366.
- Hunter, J. D. (1987) *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mayrl, D. and Oeur, F. (2009) 'Religion and higher education: current knowledge and directions for future research', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48(2), 260-75
- National Union of Students [NUS] (2008). *Student Experience Report*. London: NUS/HSBC

- Sabri, D. (2011) 'What's wrong with 'the student experience'?' *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 32(5), 657-667
- Sharma, S. (2012) "'The Church is ... My Family': Exploring the Interrelationship between Familial and Religious Practices and Spaces', *Environment and Planning A*, 44(4), 816-831
- Sharma, S. and Guest, M. (2013) 'Navigating religion between university and home: Christian students' experiences in English universities', *Social and Cultural Geography*, 14(1), 59-79
- The Cathedrals Group (n.d.a) 'Welcome to the Cathedrals Group', <http://www.cathedralsgroup.org.uk/> accessed 25 February 2016
- The Cathedrals Group (n.d. b) 'Our values', <http://www.cathedralsgroup.org.uk/OurValues.aspx> accessed 25 February 2016
- The Cathedrals Group (2013) *Cathedrals Group Strategic Plan 2013-2016* <http://www.cathedralsgroup.org.uk/Docs/47.pdf> accessed 25 February 2016
- Valentine, G., Holloway, S. L. and Jayne, M. (2010) 'Contemporary cultures of abstinence and the nighttime economy: Muslim attitudes towards alcohol and the implications for social cohesion', *Environment and Planning A*, 42(1), 8-22
- Warner, R. (2013) 'Re-imagining a Christian university in a secular age' *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 34(3), 347-358
- Weller, P., Hooley, T. and Moore, N. (2011) *Religion and Belief in Higher Education: The Experiences of Staff and Students*, London: Equality Challenge Unit
- Wooldridge, E. & Newcomb, E. (2011) *Distinctiveness and Identity in a Challenging HE Environment: A Unique Opportunity for Cathedrals Group Institutions: Executive Summary*, Chester: The Cathedrals Group