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Challenging ‘Belief’ and the Evangelical Bias: Student Christianity in English Universities

Mathew Guest, Sonya Sharma, Kristin Aune and Rob Warner

Introduction

During February 2011, Durham University Christian Union held its annual ‘mission week’, this year entitled ‘Rescued?’, reflecting its aim of bringing non-Christians to faith. This week included a number of events, including a series of lunch-time talks held in the basement of the Student Union building, to which an open invitation was extended. The audience grew through the week to around 250 seated in a large hall listening to the guest speaker while eating their complimentary sandwich lunch. The final talk, entitled ‘Narrow Minded: Jesus the Only Way to God?’, was given by a visiting preacher in his thirties. His talk, gently and steadily delivered in a manner not dissimilar to a university lecture, focused for the most part not on defending the claim that Jesus is the only way to God, although this also featured, but on dismantling an alternative philosophy to Christianity, a philosophy claimed by the speaker to be the structure around which our contemporary culture is built: “religious pluralism”. According to “religious pluralism”, all religions are equally valid and equally true, this is its “doctrine”. The speaker then went about attacking this idea as inconsistent (an absolute rejection of absolutes), ethnically totalitarian (imposing itself on others), patronising (in saying all religions are essentially the same), and frightened (of disagreements, which are assumed to lead to conflict). Having ruled out pluralism for these reasons, the speaker then affirmed a clear-cut Christian message, based around the teaching that all are sinful, but that Jesus accepted death to take the punishment we deserve; Jesus “offers the unique rescue”.

Characterisations of Christianity within UK university contexts, both in the media and scholarly analyses, have tended to foreground a zealous and conservative evangelicalism. This is understandable, given the publicity surrounding conflicts between student unions and evangelical Christian Unions and the empowered confidence of student evangelicals, who appear to speak with a more united voice than other Christian sub-groups. The vignette above offers a brief illustration of this form of Christianity: discursive, presented in reasonable argument, and foregrounding cognitive, propositional belief in its expression of Christian identity. Indeed, this form is mirrored in the presentation of “religious pluralism” used to undermine Christianity’s opponents, as a “philosophy”, a “doctrine”, at once systematic, coherent and ideological. This implies a bifurcation that is characteristic of public discourse about religion in contemporary Britain, polarising religious and secular zealotry, while both take form via a propositional expression of ‘belief’.

This article challenges this understanding of campus-based Christianity by addressing evidence gathered as part of our recent national study of Christianity within English universities, evidence that suggests a much more complex picture. We argue that a sizeable constituency of undergraduates self-identify as ‘Christian’, but that evangelicals emerge not as the dominant majority, but a vocal minority. However, this internal complexity is masked by a public discourse that conceives of religion in terms of propositional belief and presents religious difference in terms of conflicts of belief.

Methods

The findings presented here are based on data collected as part of the Christianity and the University Experience in Contemporary England (CUE) project, conducted by the authors between 2009 and 2012.¹ A national survey was administered within thirteen universities during 2010-11, a chief aim being to paint a picture of religion among undergraduate students that is representative of the Higher Education sector in England. The universities that agreed to take part in the CUE survey, listed by category, were: Cambridge, Durham, University College, London (traditional, elite universities); Leeds, Newcastle, Sheffield (inner-city ‘red-brick’ universities); Kent and Salford (1960s campus universities); Derby and Staffordshire (‘post-1992’ universities); and Canterbury Christ Church, Chester and Winchester (from those church foundations known as the ‘Cathedrals Group’). These universities reflect the diversity of the Higher Education sector in all major respects,² and reflects typologies proposed in previous research (Gilliat-Ray; Weller). Access to each university was secured *via* university staff, with no communication with student religious societies, in order to avoid the possibility of these organisations lobbying their members to take part and thereby skewing the distribution of respondents. Following agreement from key managers and administrators, 3,000 undergraduate students were randomly chosen from the student database in each university³ and sent an email inviting them to take part in the online survey. Students were selected from across all years of undergraduate study.⁴ The covering email and introduction to the online survey stated that this was a survey of *all students, regardless of*

¹ For further information and emerging findings from the project, see www.cueproject.org.uk

² The primary factors guiding these choices were history, institutional ethos, student demographics, and the character of the immediate locale.

³ The only exception to this rule was Cambridge, where recruitment of respondents was via four participating colleges, which together comprised 1,340 undergraduates (of which 275 responded, i.e. 20.5%).

⁴ The single exception was a university that only granted us permission to target second year undergraduate students, on the grounds of protecting students from intrusive emails, especially vulnerable freshers and third years focusing on their final examinations.

their orientation to religion, and that we were interested in capturing the full range of orientations across the student body. In order to maximise response rates and hence the representativeness of the sample, potential respondents were offered the incentive of being entered into a prize draw if they completed the survey. The randomly selected students were also sent two follow-up emails reminding them to complete the survey if they had not already done so over a 4 week period (universities would not consent to any further follow up communications nor, quite rightly, any direct access to students' email addresses).

The questionnaire that undergraduates completed was divided into four main sections, covering: basic demographic information (including social background, educational background and current university study); moral values (including those associated with assisted dying, drinking culture, abortion, gender equality and homosexual practice); attitudes towards religion; and then (should the respondent self-identify as Christian) a series of questions to ascertain patterns of involvement in Christian activity, attitudes to religious authorities, and views on major doctrinal issues such as Jesus and the Bible. The broad picture afforded by the survey was supplemented by qualitative interviews with 75 self-identifying 'Christian' students at five case study universities, one from each of the five 'types', with 20 university staff,⁵ and by three focus groups conducted with self-identifying Christians at three of these universities. The aim was to probe deeper to discover the forms of Christian identity affirmed amongst students, and how the university experience shapes them.⁶ Following an account of broader relevant contexts, we will explore how our emerging data speaks to the image of student Christianity described in the introduction above.

⁵ Staff were targeted who were instrumental in each university to the provision and management of student services directed related to religion in general, or Christianity in particular, including chaplains, sabbatical officers working for Student Unions, and student welfare or equal opportunities officers.

⁶ This is not to underestimate the complexities of disentangling the various factors most likely to shape Christian identity among students, including university experience in all its forms, family background, ethnicity, prior church involvement and so on. This challenge will be addressed in detail in Guest, Aune, Sharma and Warner

The Public Discourse of Student Religion

In the UK, the association of university-based Christianity with evangelicalism is understandable, given the influence of the Christian Unions (CUs) located within each university, and the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF), to which most are affiliated. Chaplaincies and non-evangelical student Christian societies remain active, and are sometimes very well resourced, but rarely achieve the same levels of influence and grass-roots mobilisation among the student body. UCCF was known as the Intervarsity Fellowship (IVF) prior to the 1970s, and had by then overtaken the more liberal Student Christian Movement (SCM) as the most influential and most popular umbrella organisation representing Christians in British universities. Established in 1928, the IVF became a channel for evangelicalism, emphasising doctrinal conservatism and programmes of activity that prioritised the conversion of non-Christians (Johnson). UCCF retains this emphasis upon mission, conceiving its constituent university CUs as student-led mission organisations, focused on bringing students to an evangelical faith.

In recent years, Christian Unions have featured in a number of public conflicts on university campuses, chiefly over issues of equality and tolerance, especially gender, sexuality and the treatment of other religious groups. In 2006, the Christian Union at the University of Birmingham had its bank account frozen and its membership suspended by the Guild of Students over its equal opportunities policy, with CU members claiming the underlying issue was their refusal to mention gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered people in their charitable

(2013); the primary aims of the present article relate to the distinctive characteristics of the undergraduate Christian constituency, rather than its precise causal relationship with the university experience.

constitution (Lister). The following year a similar conflict erupted at the University of Exeter over the rights of gay people, leading to legal adjudication, with a judge ruling that the Students' Guild was entitled to insist that the Evangelical Christian Union open its membership, and leadership positions, to non-Christians (Newman). These episodes triggered comment in print and online media, including pieces by the Archbishop of Canterbury who, rarely associated with the evangelical party, supported their right to freedom of speech and religious expression (Lipsett). Others were less sympathetic, accusing the CUs of being fundamentalist, intolerant, of preying on the vulnerable, and exercising a narrow Christianity that leaves most people, including non-evangelical Christians, consigned to a fiery judgement (e.g. Wallace). In a memorable story, reported in *The Independent* newspaper, Nick Howard, the son of former Tory party leader Michael Howard and a Jewish convert to Christianity, was singled out for allegedly helping to organise a CU meeting at Oxford aimed at converting those of a Jewish background to the Christian faith (Garner).

The focus of public attention has presented university Christianity as a predominantly evangelical phenomenon. However, the 'bias' runs deeper than this, and includes a striking emphasis upon matters of 'belief', assumed to be synonymous with religious identity. That contemporary British evangelicals should be associated with propositional forms of truth, discursively expressed, is not surprising. The history of the movement since the 1960s has seen an internal division between charismatic evangelicals – those embracing spiritual gifts, but also often an entrepreneurial approach to church and positive engagement with cultural resources – and those often called 'conservative' evangelicals, stressing sober engagement with the Bible and a defence of 'core' doctrine over any emotional component (Tidball et al). This has led to a preoccupation with the nature of salvation, human destiny and Biblical authority at the expense of other issues historically central to evangelical identity, not least

social activism, personal transformation and moral improvement (Warner). The rise of conservatives in recent years has also seen the public mobilisation of doctrinal identity markers based around gender roles, women's leadership, and homosexuality. These frequently attract controversy, and in an age of globalisation, topics surrounding gender and understandings of the family generate renewed fervour as a result of conservatives finding common cause among Christians in more traditional regions, especially in the global south (Sadgrove et al.). However, more arcane, specifically doctrinal, rather than cultural, issues have also emerged as important (Wood).

For example, among evangelical churches, para-church organisations and Christian Unions, public 'statements of belief' are used not just as an expression of identity, but also as a means of policing membership. The UCCF has a "doctrinal basis" described on its website in terms of the "fundamental truths of Christianity, as revealed in Holy Scripture", and which includes statements on the "inspired and infallible" status of the Bible, the sinfulness of all humankind, meaning all are "subject to God's wrath and condemnation", and the notion that "Those who *believe* in Christ are pardoned all their sins and accepted in God's sight" (our emphasis).⁷ As almost all university CUs are affiliated to the UCCF, they in turn take on this "doctrinal basis", which is used as a public statement of the 'core', non-negotiable aspects of Christianity, as opposed to the peripheral, secondary issues like baptism and spiritual gifts. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in some universities, the suitability of CU committee members and guest speakers is measured by their open adherence to the doctrinal statements contained in this document. The "doctrinal basis" also informs the policies of particular CUs on the legitimacy of potential collaborating organisations, generating conflict on some campuses over perspectives on Roman Catholicism, and over a reluctance to engage in

⁷ See <http://www.uccf.org.uk/about-us/doctrinal-basis.htm>

ecumenical initiatives. The “doctrinal basis” is presented as beyond interpretation, being instead used as a series of purportedly univocal, propositional statements that one either affirms or denies.

However, the association of campus religion with matters of propositional belief - as a set of truths to proclaim or contest via discursive media - is not restricted to Christian groups. Indeed, this assumption arguably lies behind popular comment on the so-called radicalisation of Muslim students (McDonald) and opponents of religion perpetuate this bias in arguments that emphasise rationality; religious identity is assumed to be something one is persuaded out of as a consequence of clear, rational thinking and intellectual engagement. Such assumptions underpin the language used by the National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies (AHS), the umbrella organisation for groups established along these lines across the UK higher education sector. For both conservative evangelicals and secularists, religion is presented in chiefly propositional terms. Perhaps this is unsurprising within university contexts, where intellectual discussion is at the heart of student culture and group debate a pervasive medium within formal class contexts and informal recreational ones. But developments appear more deliberate and concerted than this, with the UCCF’s national mission week in February 2011 mirrored by a counter initiative – ‘Reason Week’ – from the AHS, each reflecting the other in so far as a national programme is implemented at local level, and in the media deployed in promoting an ideological agenda.⁸ Indeed, it is such events that lend credence to the notion that religion within universities is a matter of public dispute, associated with an interrogative, combative expression of personal conviction.

⁸ ‘Reason Weeks’ are assisted by the AHS and occur across UK universities (sometimes called ‘Think Week’, ‘Rationalist Week’, ‘Thought Week’ or ‘Awareness Week’). (see <http://www.dur.ac.uk/humanist.society/events/>)

Such patterns in popular discourse are often reinforced by prevailing assumptions among academics who foreground belief in their conceptions of religious identity. The tendency to define religion substantively, in terms of belief (often in the supernatural), has been common among sociologists and anthropologists of religion for over a century (Tylor; Berger 1967), and substantive, rather than functional, approaches to religion have been especially influential within scholarship on secularisation (Wallis and Bruce). Particular religions (especially Christianity) have been allowed to steer conceptual debates about religion, and rationality and belief have been emphasised at the expense of practice and embodiment. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan have pointed out that this reflects the colonial legacy of Religious Studies, and critics of this discipline have highlighted its conceptual indebtedness to liberal Protestantism, whose apparent prioritisation of individual belief is then artificially imposed upon non-western cultures (Fitzgerald).

This is arguably a problem with much of the abundant research into the relationship between religion and higher education in the USA; sophisticated quantitative analyses depend upon survey measures of religion that often prioritise self-reported belief without consideration of more subtle, less obvious indicators of religious identity (Hill; Mayrl and Uecker). As such, those occupying the borderlands of particular traditions may often remain undetected. There is also an 'evangelical bias' in empirical research into Christian students, attributable both to a tendency to foreground belief among sociologists of religion (see above) and to foreground belief as an identity factor among evangelicals, resulting in sociologists focusing on student evangelicals as examples of religious vitality. A striking example would be Penning and Smidt's study of college-based evangelicals in the USA, which attempts to revisit the patterns of value change argued in Hunter's (1987) work. The book follows Hunter in conceptualising religious identity primarily in terms of professed beliefs and values, which can then be

measured in terms of their relative proximity to or distance from norms and values dominant in the wider culture. Bramadat's study of evangelicals at McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada is more subtle, but remains within the same theoretical tradition, conceptualising campus religion in terms of 'bridging' and 'fortress' strategies explicitly developed from Peter Berger's notion of "cognitive bargaining" (Bramadat 22; Reimer).

In analyses of religion among young people, religion or spirituality is often formulated as an expression of identity difference triggered by the instabilities associated with a transitional stage of life (Dutton; Hervieu-Léger; Wilkins). Insofar as religion is understood as a coping mechanism, it is in this sense defined over and against the cognitive and moral destabilisation associated with the university campus (Bramadat; Dutton). The presumed secularising effects of university education (Hunter 1983, 1987; Marsden), coupled with the behavioural excesses apparently typical of campus social life, are together assumed to be threatening to religious identities, which are therefore provoked into adopting a renewed zealotry as a means of identity preservation (Bruce 34). The 'evangelical bias' is therefore perpetuated not only by media-driven stereotyping of Christianity, but by assumptions about the nature of religion inspired by the secularisation debate and embedded within the sociology of religion. While recent studies (Ammerman; McGuire) have encouraged sociologists of religion to turn away from a predominant focus on rational belief and instead address the everyday, embodied practices and affective states that constitute religious lives and subjectivities, such approaches have not yet been applied to the issue of religion within university settings, one consequence being the potential overestimation and misunderstanding of the influence of evangelicalism within campus contexts. The aim of this article is to challenge this bias, present evidence that suggests a more complex picture of Christianity among undergraduates studying at English

universities, and to argue that its associated resources are obscured rather than illuminated by understandings that foreground belief.

The Religious Profile of Undergraduate Students

A key aim of the CUE project is to explore the contours of the Christian constituency among university students in all its diversity; to achieve a sufficiently nuanced picture, we translated this aim into two related questions. First, we asked survey respondents whether, ‘generally speaking’, they would consider themselves to be ‘religious’, ‘not religious but spiritual’, ‘not religious or spiritual’, or ‘not sure’ about this issue. The results appear in the table below.

	N	% (weighted)
Religious	1002	24.9
Not Religious But Spiritual	1305	30.8
Not Religious Or Spiritual	1536	33.2
Not Sure	498	11.2
Total	4341	100

Table (i): General orientation to religion among undergraduates studying at universities in England (2010-11)

Second, we asked: No matter how you have answered the previous question, to what religion or spiritual tradition do you currently belong? Please choose the one that fits best.’ Following this was a list of the six major world religions, in alphabetical order, preceded by ‘None’, and followed by ‘Other’, the latter allowing a ‘free response’ statement in the respondent’s own words (see Table ii). In focusing on ‘belonging’ as an index of religious identity, we avoid the ambiguity sometimes levelled at survey questions worded in starker terms (e.g. what is

your religion?⁹), and arguably discourage more nominal responses that refer to past, rather than present, affiliation. We also foreground a measure of religious identity based on community affiliation, *rather than belief*, while also leaving space for such affiliations to co-exist with scepticism or uncertainty with respect to the religious or spiritual. Placing the question *after* the one on religion/spirituality – rather than ethnicity, for example – also anticipates any criticism that religious affiliation might here amount to a synonym for culture or ethnicity.

	N	% (weighted)
None	1594	34.0%
Buddhism	88	2.2%
Christianity	2248	51.4%
Hinduism	58	2.0%
Islam	103	4.9%
Judaism	31	0.5%
Sikhism	9	0.3%
Other	209	4.7%

Table (ii): Responses to the question “to what religion or spiritual tradition do you currently belong? Please choose the one that fits best” among undergraduates studying at universities in England (2010-11).

The proportion of undergraduate students who self-identify as Hindu, Muslim, Jewish or Sikh all roughly correspond to the proportion of these groups within the general population of England and Wales according to the 2009 British Social Attitudes Survey.¹⁰ The proportion affirming ‘no religion’ and the proportion aligning themselves with Christianity make up much larger proportions of each population, and yet they suggest opposing trends. The BSA figures show 44% aligning themselves with some branch of Christianity - down significantly

⁹ This was the wording used in the 2001 national census in England.

¹⁰ Figures drawn from www.britisocat.com (accessed 8/8/11). The BSA survey does not offer figures for Buddhists, presumably including them within the ‘other non-Christian’ category.

from 50% in 2008 (Voas and Ling 67) – while our figures suggest 51% of undergraduate students identify as Christian. Conversely, the BSA figures for ‘no religion’ are suggestive of an upward trajectory, from 43% in 2008 to 51% in 2009, while our figure for students is a lower 34%. The contrast is even more striking when compared to the BSA figures for 18-24 year olds, among which the proportion of self-identifying ‘Christians’ is 26.8%, with those of ‘no religion’ making up 65.5%.

One reading of these figures might suggest Christians are over-counted in the CUE survey. We received 4,341 responses, which amounts to an overall response rate of 11.6%. In consequence, the survey data needs careful handling as it is vulnerable to non-response bias. The 88.4% of students contacted who chose *not* to take part may in theory exhibit important trends that are not available to us, and hence the picture painted by our 11.6% could be skewed, perhaps in favour of those who are most interested in religion, or who are religious themselves. This is not an uncommon problem with survey research, especially in the internet age in which ‘questionnaire fatigue’ threatens response rates across disciplines, but there are useful measures one can take to mitigate this.

First, the sample is randomised, hence the participating respondents are drawn from across each university’s student population (every undergraduate student had an equal chance of being asked to take part, and no individual’s participation could directly impact upon another’s). Second, the data has been weighted to correct for (i) the different size of student population in each of our participating universities; (ii) the gender distribution in each of them; and (iii) the basic ethnicity distribution in each. Effectively, this should correct for any non-response bias attributable to a skewed set of respondents in terms of gender, ethnicity or

with respect to university size.¹¹ As a consequence, our results should be much more representative of the student population of our 13 participating universities. Third, we can go some way towards assessing the validity of the sample by comparing it to other data sources. We can compare the CUE data on religious identity with data collected by universities themselves at the point of registration. This practice is only undertaken by a handful of universities, but based on the five willing to share their data with us, we find a mean average proportion of undergraduates self-identifying as Christian of 43.62% (23.3% + 43.4% + 51.9% + 56.3% + 43.2%). While this is a very selective data set (roughly 6% of the English HE sector), the universities included are located in different areas of the country and span three of the categories of university used in the CUE research (and only one is a church foundation). They also cover *all* registering students in each institution, not a sample, and hence offer a complete picture. The emerging figure is indeed lower than the CUE figure of 51%, but not dramatically so. Furthermore, while the BSA measure of Christians among 18-24 year olds is half that of our survey, the BSA sub-sample is very small (N=411), and surveys covering larger segments of the population arrive at figures closer to our own. For example, the 2001 census data for England measures Christian self-identification amongst students (economically active and economically inactive) as 58.5%¹², and the 2011 YouGov@Cambridge Survey on religion, covering a national sample of 64,303 individuals, found 38% of 18-34 year olds self-identifying as Christian.¹³ The profile of our self-identifying 'Christian' respondents is also markedly diverse, including only 40.4% viewing themselves as 'religious',¹⁴ and less than a third attending church on a weekly basis during

¹¹ Benchmark measures for each of these variables have been identified for each participating institution, drawing from data collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

¹² This is calculated by cross-tabulating economic status (which includes two categories for 'student') with self-ascribed 'religion'. In covering all 'students', this figure includes all those in further education viewing themselves in this way as well, although the overall figures are unlikely to be dramatically affected by this. Extracted from Table CT153 on CASWEB, see <http://casweb.mimas.ac.uk/>.

¹³ See <http://www.yougov.polis.cam.ac.uk/archive>

¹⁴ 31.2% of self-identifying Christians in our sample see themselves as 'not religious but spiritual', 15.4% as neither, while 13% are unsure.

term-time, undermining any suggestion that the data has been distorted by an inflated proportion of highly motivated Christian enthusiasts, particular churches or Christian student organisations, a finding discussed in more depth below. In summary, while our measure of 51% for Christians among university undergraduate students may have been inflated by the religiously indifferent opting out, the evidence cited above suggests this is probably not a dramatic inflation. Indeed, the figures from large-scale national surveys and particularly from official university statistics suggest a percentage measure of Christian identification well into the 40s would not be unrealistic.

Given recent debates about religious or spiritual affiliations being tempered by a widespread suspicion of religious institutions and traditions, it is worth offering a note on those respondents who affirmed a religious orientation but ticked the 'other' box. We sub-divide these open responses into several categories, including those affiliated to unlisted traditions (e.g. Zoroastrians, Jehovah's Witnesses), those combining several traditions/practices, and those resistant to categories altogether. One striking finding relates to the very low alignment with recognisable expressions of 'alternative spirituality'. Of the 4341 respondents, while 206 ticked the box next to 'other', when asked to elaborate, there are only 17 pagans, 5 spiritualists and 3 Wiccans. In the age of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *True Blood* and the apparent profusion of themes associated with witchcraft throughout youth culture, it is striking that the very generation said to embrace the 'new gothic' (Cush) shows virtually no evidence of embracing it for its religious or spiritual potential. This reflects the findings of Savage et al on 15-25 year olds (37), and those of Heelas and Woodhead, who comment on how the 'holistic milieu' is not tapped into as a source of relational meaning among the young (110), to come extent echoed in Christian Smith's research into North American teenagers (Smith). Our findings add to these in suggesting that if the English university was

ever a vibrant hotbed of alternative religion, then it is no longer. In actual fact, of the 206 respondents who place themselves within the ‘other’ category, far more - 33 - affirm a decidedly Christian position, opting into the ‘other’ box apparently out of a discomfort with the categories otherwise offered.¹⁵ One possible retort to this is the argument that the high proportion of young people calling themselves ‘spiritual’ rather than religious indicates engagement with ‘alternative spiritualities’ and/or a perspective of detraditionalised spiritual seekership (Cherry, DeBerg and Porterfield, 276-7). However, in asking separate questions about religious belonging and religious/spiritual status, our own questionnaire was able to disaggregate these two dimensions and offer a more nuanced understanding of how ‘spiritual’ is being used by students who ascribe it to themselves. While 31% of our respondents are happy to describe themselves as ‘not religious, but spiritual’, *of these*, only 27.5% distance themselves from organised religion by choosing the ‘no religion’ option in the following question (with another 7.9% choosing ‘other’); the remainder (over 60%) felt comfortable aligning themselves with one of the established religious traditions listed, including over half who called themselves ‘Christian’. In other words, ‘spiritual’ is not an unambiguous indicator of scepticism about or alienation from organised religion, but is a descriptor that may be – *and most often is* - embraced alongside a professed identification with one of the major world religions.

Mapping the Profile of Christian Students

If self-identifying Christians make up a sizeable proportion of the undergraduate population within English universities, what distinguishes this group? One obvious finding is that the

¹⁵ Some respondents here preferred to affirm denominational specificity (e.g. Roman Catholic, Orthodox or Quaker), while others took the opportunity to distance themselves from institutional categories in favour of a Christian faith centred on a personal relationship with God and/or Jesus.

Christians in our sample do not suggest a predominantly evangelical cohort, as might be suggested by the public discourse surrounding student religion. The picture is complex, and several indicators need to be considered. Firstly, the sheer numbers implied by our figures do not reflect those cited by the UCCF. 51% of the total undergraduate student population of England's universities would amount to well over 800,000 individuals.¹⁶ The UCCF website claims that there are now over 20,000 individuals involved in over 350 CUs across the UK¹⁷, although correspondence with the organisation revealed a lower number: just over 200 affiliated CUs including around 10,000 members. Of course, it would be a mistake to assume that all evangelicals are associated with their local CU, still less that they are signed up members, but the disparity between the numbers does suggest the apparent influence of CUs is grossly inflated compared to their approximate 1% share of the total Christian student population. It might also suggest student evangelicalism stretches well beyond the faith style associated with the UCCF. However, when asked which student-based Christian activities they are usually involved in during term time, 10% (i.e. over 82,000 nationally) of Christian respondents tick the box next to 'Christian Union', the higher number perhaps reflecting a large periphery, engaging in CU events whilst remaining uncomfortable aligning themselves with the evangelicalism associated with the UCCF. Consequently this is mixed news for the Christian Unions: among self-identifying Christian undergraduates, only a tiny proportion are CU members, although ten times this number participate in CU events during term time, more than any other major Christian organisation. Having said this, this active population still form only a tenth of self-identifying Christian students.

¹⁶ Based on a Higher Education Statistics Agency figure of 1,608,300 total undergraduate students across English universities in 2009/10 (unlikely to have changed dramatically by the following year, when our survey was administered). See <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/content/view/1973/239/> (accessed 17/3/11)

¹⁷ See <http://www.uccf.org.uk/about-us/our-story.htm> (accessed 27th February 2011)

Secondly, only a small proportion of self-identifying Christian respondents appear to affirm ‘evangelical’ as a positive label for themselves, and few affirm identity markers commonly associated with the evangelical tradition. For example, in responding to an open question asking them to describe in their words what it means to be a Christian, only a third of our respondents used the language of ‘belief’ and, for a significant number, evangelical language and associations were cited in wary or negative terms. Also revealing are answers to a question on religious authority, citing a range of sources: the Bible, the tradition of the church, reason and scholarship, personal experience and insights from today’s world. Faced with this list and asked how important each of these is, most support is found for the Bible, a key identity marker for evangelicals, with 55% saying this is ‘very important’. However, when results are collated so that responses citing ‘somewhat important’ and ‘very important’ are grouped together, ‘personal experience’ is most popular (84%, with 83% for the Bible), with the other three options some way behind, reflecting the elevation of the Bible and subjective experience as equal authorities among contemporary Christians. At the very least, a straightforward application of the ‘evangelical’ label becomes problematic, especially assuming its ‘conservative’ form.

If this is the case, then how is Christianity conceived among students who embrace it? When we cross-tabulate the answers to the questions on religious tradition and on religious/spiritual orientation (both cited above), we are able to find out how many self-identifying Christians understand themselves to be ‘religious’, ‘spiritual’ or otherwise. This enables us to map categories of ‘secular’ or ‘nominal’ Christians (Day 2010) as well as those whose ‘Christianity’ extends beyond conventional boundaries of denomination, church style or practice. Our findings are striking. Of all those who self-identify as ‘Christian’: 40.4% see themselves as ‘religious’, 31.2% as ‘not religious but spiritual’, 15.4% as ‘not religious or

spiritual’, while 13% are unsure. Interestingly, sub-divisions of the other religious categories – Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, etc – also display a degree of diversity, suggesting that each has come adrift from a previously stable meaning, if indeed this meaning was ever truly stable to begin with.¹⁸ At the very least, we cannot associate self-identifying Christian students with a common personal orientation to matters deemed religious or spiritual. But what of matters of religious practice?

We are especially interested in whether university as an experience – educational and social – fosters a more or less sympathetic perspective towards religion among undergraduate students. One way to test this is to ask them directly how they think their perspective on religion has changed since attending university. 10.7% of students in our survey claim they have become more religious since being at university, 11.2% claim they have become less religious, 3.2% are not sure either way, while an overwhelming 74.9% say their perspective has “generally stayed the same”. It seems the image of zealous converts embracing a doctrinaire Christianity amidst the social upheaval of ‘freshers’ week’ is more myth than reality. Faith positions appear, for the most part, to be defined *prior* to university. A pattern of continuity with pre-university life is also marked among the self-identifying Christians, 71.1% saying they attended church prior to university, and 90.5% are not the only person practising Christianity within their family. Indeed, while focus groups and interviews revealed Christian resources play an important role in helping students to adapt to life at university, the evidence suggests these resources were, at least in part, already in place, not negotiated anew following any conversion or intensification of faith experienced whilst an undergraduate.

¹⁸ Christian students encompassed a broader spread of responses to this question than students from any of the other major religious traditions, suggesting ‘Christianity’ is the least stable as a category of identity.

More indications of continuity are found when considering regular religious practice. Of those who claim a Christian identity, 28.8% say they attend services weekly or more during term time. Hence around 14.5% of our total sample attends church weekly, twice the proportion of the national population (Brierley), a surprise finding that challenges the image of the younger generation as prone to religious indifference. More interesting still is that, when asked about churchgoing outside of term, the figure for weekly attendance increases to 34.8% of all self-designated Christians. Apparently, many have a Christian identity that has its axis within a set of practices rooted in their home environment, and for some, these do not easily translate into a campus-based religiosity.

For some students, this relates to the evangelical discourse affirmed so publicly within university contexts, as it alienates those who find it does not resonate with their existing experience. It became apparent from students in our focus groups that many noticed the range of Christian expressions among the students they knew, and were reluctant to vocalise their faith in a way that could be viewed as intrusive or jarring to others. Some preferred to let others know they were Christian by how they lived rather than by their words. Others are self-identifying evangelicals who recognise the problems of affirming a public discourse that alienates non-Christians, and so seek a less confrontational means of doing evangelism, as one of our interviewees put it:

“...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."

Many students expressed similar concerns; their first encounter with campus-based Christianity is with evangelical groups, often the CU or thriving local churches. They encounter a warm welcome and lively Christian culture, but for some, it is unfamiliar given their pre-university experience. Sometimes the culture expressed is confident, established and defined, and thereby potentially closed to outsiders. For mainstream Protestants and Roman Catholics, a zealous evangelicalism projects behavioural expectations alien to their experience. Indeed, these expectations can also be uncomfortable for some self-identifying evangelicals, like one student who in interview conveyed his initial discomfort at finding the extent to which the Christianity emphasised by the Christian Union was oriented around evangelism. Emerging from a private school in which a Christian ethos was assumed, and where discipleship among one's fellow students was most important, this student found himself in a university context defined as a mission field, in which the chief social skill expected among CU members was willingness to bring friends to faith by actively talking about Christianity at every opportunity. This approach does not appear to be a majority one among Christian students, but it does shape the context in which they find themselves on account of the well resourced and organised nature of evangelical groups.

Nevertheless, some students we spoke to were able easily to correlate the Christianity they had become accustomed to prior to university with university-based faith and practice, chiefly by way of campus-based organisations defined by the denomination with which they were already aligned. This appears to be especially relevant among students with a Roman

Catholic background, for whom the Catholic chaplaincy plays a crucial role as a mediating institution within the ongoing process of acclimatising to university life. As one student put it, “it is about transferring and how easily can you get what you had at home here. Once you’ve got that it helps you.” Our data suggest that if chaplaincies play an enduringly important role within university life, it is one that reflects this description.

In light of this we argue that Christianity among undergraduate students needs to be understood in light of a range of factors that extend well beyond the public discourse of the evangelical movement. Our evidence points to a more complex constituency, the majority of whom have established norms of Christian practice – however expressed - prior to university and show minimal signs of adhering to standard evangelical identity markers. Evangelicalism appears as a crucial reference point for Christians negotiating the complexities of the undergraduate experience, and is a dominant discourse that, on account of high levels of collective mobilisation, demands engagement. Some respond with positive adaptation, others with scepticism and disengagement from open Christian practice, but a large proportion retain their sense of Christian identity, even if this is redefined via the course of their university career.

Conclusion

One interpretation of our evidence would find among students a simple echo of the general English population: similar levels of Christian self-identification as measured in the BSA Survey, indicating a minority of churchgoers and a majority of individuals opting for ‘Christian’ as a description of moral upbringing, and/or as a means of identifying with British

culture (Voas and Bruce 27-8). However, a closer look at the data suggests a more complex picture, with Christianity assuming the form of a portable cultural resource, drawn upon during university as a means of forging new friendships, new meanings within unfamiliar experiences, and of maintaining a rootedness with pre-university connections and values. These patterns of allegiance and identity formation are for many much more subtle and less publicly visible than the Christianity socially exhibited by evangelical organisations like the Christian Union or evangelical churches. They are also often highly selective and discriminating; as one interviewee reflected on her gradual appreciation of CU meetings: “Just because you’re there when they’re saying it doesn’t mean that you believe it too.” Rather than assume a simple correlation between professed identity and ‘belief’, our data support the contention that religion is best understood as arising from the complex relationships to places and people that change over time as individuals construct their identities in response to new challenges (Beckford; Day; Stringer). University presents very clear challenges, the literature is united on that (Mayrl and Oeur); what emerges from this data is Christianity mobilised as a multi-faceted, complex cultural resource capable of offering orientation and meaning in a variety of ways (Sharma and Guest).

Such expressions offer more subdued alternatives to the discursive visibility of the evangelical public discourse, which emphasises public expressions of ‘belief’ as recognisable identity markers that serve to distinguish Christian from non-Christian, saved from potential convert. We are faced with something far more subtle, demanding an engagement with the “everyday worlds” of student Christianity alongside their public declaration, either in CU meetings or on questionnaire returns. Rather than expecting religion to come in tidy bundles of well-integrated parts, there are often many fragments and side plots as to how the story unfolds and is told (Ammerman 228), including, we might add, the stories of evangelicals.

Student Christianity is lived and negotiated within different social contexts - among their peers, in the residences that they share, at Christian group meetings and in their classes – but apparently has no common, predominating institutional expression. As such, the ‘evangelical bias’ represents an influential node in a wider network, but one that triggers a variety of Christian responses.

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