

## Introduction

In December 2012, as this book was being written, a news story appeared in the British press about a controversy triggered by a Christian organization at the University of Bristol. According to The Times, the Bristol Christian Union had ‘tried to ban women speakers at its meetings unless they are accompanied by their husbands.’ The student-led society, traditionally associated with a firmly evangelical brand of Christianity, had previously only allowed male preachers to speak at its evangelistic events. A proposal calling for equal opportunities for men and women triggered an internal revolt among those uncomfortable with the prospect of women speakers, and a compromise policy was drawn up by its leadership. The compromise amounted to allowing female speakers, but only in certain contexts, not including as a main speaker for mission weeks, although, according to a statement issued by the CU president, ‘a husband and wife can teach together’ on these occasions. The statement triggered a range of protests, by women’s groups, the Student’s Union, and even criticism from the evangelical Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship, the national organization to which the Bristol CU is affiliated. Soon afterwards, the Bristol CU amended its position, extending ‘speaker invitations to both men and women’ to all events ‘without exception’.

This episode is not an isolated incident. In recent years, Christian Unions have featured in a number of public conflicts on university campuses, chiefly over issues of equality and tolerance, and especially concerning 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

University's 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 constitution. The following year a similar conflict erupted at the University of Exeter over the rights of gay people, and controversies have occurred at Oxford, Edinburgh and other UK campuses in subsequent years. The consequent media coverage has illuminated the potential tensions that can emerge between freedom of religious expression and gender and sexual equality. These stories also highlight the capacity of universities to generate forms of religion that sit uncomfortably alongside dominant social norms concerning tolerance, equality and the status of men and women. There is something counter-cultural about the religion we often find on university campuses. Such underlying tensions are by no means restricted to Christianity; in recent years universities have been identified by the UK government and various other public bodies as a major source of recruitment to extremist forms of Islam. Several of the British Muslims guilty of recent acts of terrorism were students at British universities, some exposed to teaching by militant individuals invited to be visiting speakers by student-run Islamic Societies. As a consequence, the university campus has come under scrutiny as a context of religious radicalisation. Calls for a centralised interventionist response have inevitably come into conflict with those keen to preserve freedom of religious expression as well as the time-honoured status of the university as a guardian of free thinking.

Such fractious developments highlight the newly heightened visibility of religious matters on UK university campuses, not just as an issue of conviction for religious students, but for non-religious students as well. Indeed, if a measure of a group's

social significance is to be found in the excitability of its opponents, religion on campus appears alive and well. This is evidenced in the prominence of a ‘new atheist’ agenda in recent years, the growth of student Atheist Societies, and the 2009 establishment of the National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies (AHS), an umbrella association for student groups sceptical about religion to mirror the various national networks representing Christian and Muslim students. The expansion of such networks in recent years – e.g. the British Sikh Student Federation was established in 2008; the Union of Jewish Students in 2010 – suggests university campuses have witnessed not just a rise in counter-cultural religion but a heightened mobilisation of religion as an index of identity for students across the religious spectrum.

This is a book that takes these developments seriously and asks what they reveal about the status of universities as contexts of religious expression. Its specific focus is students who identify as Christian at universities located in England. As such, the book investigates the status of the most influential, embedded and culturally complex religious tradition in the British Isles. As revealed in the National Census in 2011, the majority of individuals in England and Wales (59%) still identify themselves as Christian, and while this figure is in decline (down from 72% in 2001), it indicates a persistent cultural resonance between the Christian tradition and the life of the nation. But how does this resonance become manifest within universities and within the lives of students? Sociologist Peter Berger has presented universities as carriers of modernity, vehicles for the furtherance of a certain way of looking at the world, one that – in Western Europe and the elite USA at least – has little use for religion. This is a common and influential understanding, and rests upon the idea that knowledge, at

least legitimate knowledge, is contaminated by association with religious concerns. As universities are in the business of furthering and conveying knowledge, their work is best achieved when religious matters are excluded, kept in their place, i.e. in the private realm, and certainly outside of the classroom. Berger's portrayal of the university is not without substance: there are indeed institutions governed by these assumptions, but it would be a mistake to say the matter ends there. Indeed, the recent developments described above suggest universities are contexts in which religion is a vital and powerful presence. Public disputes between university Christian Unions and Student Unions over issues of inclusion and tolerance point to pockets of conviction and well mobilised activism. While Berger may be right about the secularising biases of western European academics, we should pause before projecting the same perspectives on to their students.

Intrigued by this problem, the authors of this book undertook a three-year project aimed at discovering what distinguishes university students who identify as Christian and how their experience of university affirms or undermines their Christian faith. The project, entitled 'Christianity and the University Experience in Contemporary England' (or CUE), was conducted between 2009 and 2012 and this book reports on its main findings. Our argument, unpacked in detail throughout the course of the subsequent chapters, is that Christian students – much like UK Christians in general – comprise a sizeable and diverse population of individuals. They are unified neither by doctrinal assent nor moral conviction, and engagement in the institutions of the church is uneven and often tentative. While the most visible are conservative in doctrine and ethics and conversionist in their orientation to the world, many more occupy the liberal centre ground that has much in common with mainstream British

culture. University shapes their identity, not primarily via intellectual challenges to their faith, but chiefly via existential challenges that arise from a disruption of familiar life patterns and the dominance of particular forms of organized Christianity within different campus contexts. To summarise, it is first and foremost the subjective and relational experience of university that engages their faith, with a variety of different consequences.

This is not an argument about long-term change. While we have a strong interest in how universities may influence Christian students in a way that has long-term consequences, a longitudinal comparison – assessing change by comparing the lives of students at two specific points in time – is not what we are dealing with here.

Excellent longitudinal work has been carried out in the USA, particularly in association with the National Study of Youth and Religion, led by Christian Smith, and has generated some insightful conclusions, based on large data sets collected at different points in the life-course (Smith and Denton, 2005; Smith and Snell, 2009).

While we have learned a lot from this work, and continue to pursue longitudinal issues based in our own data, the present book has a different set of ambitions. It focuses on a single point in time, taking a snapshot of Christian students studying at England's universities in order to discover what distinguishes them as a population.

What kinds of beliefs and values do they share, and how are these similar or different from non-Christian students? How do they practise their Christianity: do they pray, read the Bible or do volunteer work? If so, how often, and what significance do these practices have for their lives? This is, if you like, the descriptive dimension to the book; we are painting a picture, one that has not been painted before and which will therefore illuminate a significant sub-group within contemporary Christianity in the

UK, helping us understand better how this religion functions within a largely secularising context.

There is a second dimension to the book, one that concerns itself with the way in which these Christian students interact with their university environment. How do they engage with the peculiar set of circumstances that face them upon embarking on their career as an undergraduate student, and how does this appear to impact upon their Christian identity? This is why the title of this book refers to the university experience. Previous studies of the ways in which higher education impacts upon religious identity have tended to focus on factors like academic study or exposure to cultural pluralism. We take a different approach, exploring this process of interaction in terms of a more holistic approach to university life. In short, we take seriously the combination of factors that mark different types of university as distinctive, and build on this in forming an understanding of different configurations of student experience. As will be argued throughout this book, these configurations illuminate why Christian students respond to university life in the ways that they do. In this sense, we are advocating the pluralisation of the university experience; that is, as a variable impacting upon Christian identity, university does not function as a singular, homogenous phenomenon, but follows a variety of distinctive institutional patterns.

It is worth making a few comments in this introduction about focus and method. One obvious question one might have upon taking up this book and reading about the research upon which it is based, is why Christianity? This appears counter-intuitive on two counts. Why restrict a study to one religious tradition, considering the increasing religious diversity of the UK context? Given recent political interests, wouldn't Islam

qualify as a more interesting, more urgently relevant focus of interest, especially given concerns about the radicalisation of students within universities? Also, given research into young adults that suggests an at best loose adherence to conventional boundaries of religious belonging (Day, 2011; Collins-Mayo et al., 2010; Hopkins et al., 2011), is there not a strong argument for bypassing traditional categories like ‘Christianity’ in favour of a general analysis of ‘the religious’ (as opposed to the secular), or perhaps of ‘the spiritual’? Aside from reasons of conceptual focus and author expertise, the relationship between UK universities and Christianity has a long and rich history. Christianity is the most culturally influential tradition in this country, and hence accounting for its presence within universities is a challenge that has enormous relevance to understanding the nature and significance of highly influential institutions – universities – and a sizeable sub-group within the nation’s population – the students who occupy them. The evidence we have collected says a great deal about the continuing cultural significance of Christianity within the contemporary UK.

A second question might be, why England? Why not study Christianity within universities across the UK? Since devolved governments were established in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, all with powers of governance over education, the institutional trajectories of each have become more distinct. The Scottish Parliament abolished university tuition fees for Scottish and EU students (but not for students from England) in 2008, instigating a change likely to have a marked impact on the demographic constituency of its universities’ students. The federal university of Wales has undergone a significant re-structuring, with several institutions facing an uncertain future. These changes complicate existing distinctive features that arise

from the histories of universities within the three provinces. For example, Scotland's ancient universities maintain a strong relationship with the Presbyterian State Kirk, one not replicated in England, Wales or Northern Ireland. What these various factors together point to is a structural fragmentation and reconfiguration along national lines. In focusing upon England alone – where the majority of UK universities are situated – we are dealing with a single system, albeit one that is increasingly complex.

A third question relates to our selection of universities and their capacity to be representative of England's Higher Education sector as a whole. As we discuss at length in chapter one, these universities have emerged from a complex history, and appear to us today as a wide variety of educational establishments. For example, Durham University – one of the three universities leading this project – is the third oldest in England, established in 1832, and has become one of the leading research universities in the country, being recently admitted to the prestigious Russell Group of elite, research-led universities alongside the likes of Oxford and Cambridge. Its coverage of traditional academic subjects and long-standing elite reputation is reflected in its high proportion of privately educated undergraduates, while the city's ancient Cathedral and the nearby colleges create a sense of tradition, antiquity and privilege. Contrast this with the University of Derby, which was formed out of pre-existing local colleges and granted university status in 1992, maintaining a long-standing focus on vocational training. Two-thirds of its students are from the local region in the industrial Midlands, with around 5% from outside the EU and even fewer from private school backgrounds. Derby's emphasis on widening access to higher education is reflected in the high proportion of its students who are from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Such differences – the product of both historical and



contemporary factors – also influence how religion in general, and Christianity in particular, are expressed within different student bodies. Durham was founded on ecclesiastical bases, has a leading Theology and Religion department, multiple college chapels and chaplains, and holds matriculation and graduation ceremonies in its Norman Anglican Cathedral. A sense of Christian context and history is enhanced by the use of Christian festival names for university terms (Michaelmas, Epiphany and Easter) and the multitude of churches nearby. Derby, on the other hand, has a much more multi-cultural student body, as well as a purpose-built multi-faith centre, which caters to those of all faiths, incorporating several adaptable worship spaces and male and female washing areas for use before Muslim prayers. The university offers halal food, publishes a multi-faith calendar and factsheets on religious holidays, and includes a mandatory equality and diversity online training module for staff. These two examples represent just two orientations to religion affirmed within England's diverse HE sector. Others may be described as practically indifferent or wilfully dismissive, still others as positively affirming, some even embracing Christianity as integral to their identity and mission. So how do we capture this diversity?

Our analysis of universities across England has allowed us to develop a typology, outlined in detail in chapter four, structured around key differences in the ways universities function as contexts for the expression of religious identity. It comprises five clear categories: traditional/elite universities; inner-city red-brick universities; 1960s campus universities; post-1992 universities; and universities belonging to the Cathedrals Group, a collection of church founded institutions that have an explicitly Christian ethos. The universities that eventually agreed to take part in the CUE project, listed by category, were: Cambridge, Durham, University College London

(traditional, elite universities); Leeds, Newcastle, Sheffield (inner-city ‘red-brick’ universities); Kent, 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 English Higher Education sector in all major respects, including with respect to history, institutional ethos, student demographics, and the character of the immediate locale, all of which are highly likely to affect the patterns of religious expression associated with each university.

Our large-scale survey of university students across these 13 universities provides us with a wealth of data, and with 4,500 students completing it, the survey constitutes the most ambitious study of religion among university students in the UK to date.<sup>1</sup> As this book unfolds, we will draw from our survey findings in mapping the broad contours of student Christianity – what these students say they believe, what moral values they hold, and how they express their Christian identity in practical terms. The survey also provides us with valuable information about the social background of Christian students, including their gender distribution, school background, and the economic circumstances of their parents. This allows us to trace connections between different variables, not least the relationship between social class and religion, something that is understandably magnified by the university experience (this relationship is explored in detail in chapter seven). But the survey only takes us so far. It provides us with clues about the expression of Christian identity within universities, but only limited qualitative detail. We might develop a metaphor that likens the Christian student’s progress through university to a journey. Much of the questionnaire data may be viewed as co-ordinates on a map representing student identity. We, as academics,

have defined the dimensions of the map, where the contours lie, the different roads featured, their direction and connectedness to one another, and to the various places depicted on the map. In asking respondents questions we invite them to place themselves on the map, but they can only place themselves in relation to our pre-defined co-ordinates. This has its advantages; it allows us to measure identities in relation to these co-ordinates and in relation to one another, and this facilitates a systematic analysis. It also enables us to count how many Christian students follow particular routes, and how many appear to take the journey alone. However, we must formulate assumptions about what respondents might mean by relating to the map in the way that they do, and these meanings cannot be explored beyond these assumptions. In short, we have to assume they represent common meanings, and any underlying nuance remains inaccessible. This is why we incorporated into the project extended interviews with Christian students at five case study universities. Interviews might be likened to an invitation to respondents to describe their journey through the same terrain, but with little or none of the constraints imposed by the map. While similar language and categories might be used, the respondent is not constrained by them, and can decide upon their own route through the territory, and may redefine the lay of the land, or adopt a completely different perspective on it, if they wish. In simple terms, we learn a lot more about how Christian students negotiate the university experience, because we can get beyond pre-conceived categories and explore these students' lives in much greater depth, including allowing them to tell us their stories in their own words.

Our interviews have been essential in challenging pre-conceived assumptions about the nature of religion, of Christianity, and of Christian students. We conducted semi-

structured interviews with 75 Christian students based in five universities, one from each of the categories described above, and another 25 or so with university figures instrumental to the management of religious identities in their respective institutions, such as equality and diversity officers, Christian Union presidents, and chaplains from various denominational backgrounds. Through these fascinating conversations, we were able to explore how students experience university, and how this experience influences their Christian faith. We were able to hear stories about their experiences, about academic learning that provoked a rethinking of their beliefs, about opportunities for evangelism that arose out of social engagements with non-Christians, about tensions between different on-campus Christian organizations and how this challenged assumptions about morality and the Christian life. Most of all, what our interviews reinforced was our emerging impression that university for Christian students is not primarily a context characterised by a cognitive undermining of faith. It is, rather, a context that presents challenges, but also opportunities, and these foster a sense of empowerment rather than disillusionment among many Christian students. The majority of students view university as having had a benign influence on their religious identity, even while the process of negotiating this experience is often portrayed as difficult. In the following chapters we will set out the evidence for this, and describe how this process takes place. Chapter one places UK universities within their historical and cultural contexts, paying attention to how such contextual factors shape the presence of Christianity within them. Chapter two offers an extended description of what distinguishes Christian students as a demographic group, drawing from our national survey. Chapter three complicates the picture by outlining a fivefold typology of England's universities, using our case studies as illustrations, and focusing on how these types fosters different orientations to

Christianity. Chapter four asks whether universities can be viewed as a force for secularisation, and draws from our survey evidence in offering a response that adds nuance to existing interpretations. Chapters five and six both focus on the experiences of Christian students, drawing from interviews to explore how university presents challenges to their faith and how they and their Christian organizations contribute to life on campus. Chapter seven places the case of Christian students in a wider theoretical context by asking how Christian identities relate to other indices of identity, such as ethnicity, gender and social class. In this way we place religious identity within a broader matrix of factors that shape life within England's universities.

Any team-authored volume presents unique challenges for the task of authorship. All four authors take full responsibility for the content of this book: it is the product of three years' empirical research in which we all played an important part, numerous team meetings, seminars and conferences at which we discussed our ideas at length, and an extended writing process during which all four of us read one another's drafts and offered critical comment. The practicalities of academic life have also required a clear division of labour in the production of the book's text, and it is useful to detail that here for the sake of transparency. While all four authors have contributed to every chapter, Guest was primarily responsible for the Introduction, chapters one, two, three and four, Sharma for chapter five, Warner for chapter six, and Aune for chapter seven. The conclusion was drafted by Warner and then revised and edited into the final version by the whole team.

The lived reality of contemporary Christianity in the UK is under-researched and commonly misunderstood. Indeed, the misconceptions surrounding the relationship between religion and education are mirrored by a widespread ignorance about what Christians actually believe. We hope that this volume will go some way towards addressing these issues. We have no illusions that this will be the last word on the matter, and look forward to emerging conversations about our arguments and our evidence. Like many of the students we spoke to and learnt so much from, we hope to provoke an on-going dialogue, not to claim an indisputable truth.

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<sup>i</sup> More detailed information about the survey is provided in the appendix.