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Journal of Beliefs & Values
Studies in Religion & Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjbv20

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To cite this article: Lan Dong & Sophie Ward (2023) Exploring the religious and spiritual trajectory of cathedral choristers in England, Journal of Beliefs & Values, 44:4, 502-516, DOI: 10.1080/13617672.2023.2267928

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2023.2267928

Published online: 24 Oct 2023.

JOURNAL OF BELIEFS & VALUES
2023, VOL. 44, NO. 4, 502–516
https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2023.2267928

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Exploring the religious and spiritual trajectory of cathedral choristers in England

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ABSTRACT

The present paper reports findings from interviews with thirty ex-choristers from cathedrals and collegiate chapels in England, aged from eighteen to eighty. These interviews explored choristers' religious commitments before entering choir school and factors for staying with, leaving, or later returning to religious practice. The findings suggest that the attitudes to religion among ex-choristers mirror those of the wider population and confirms the trend that ex-choristers may be seeking spirituality but not religion. The study concludes that, although choristers are not invited into the spiritual community on a level that allows them to engage cognitively with organised religion, they remain open to its emotional connotations as expressed in music. They might, nonetheless, subsequently find faith if they get help to explore the meaning of liturgy and music within it. However, there have been accounts where this faith is forced upon them in a way that pushes them away.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 17 August 2023
Accepted 29 September 2023

KEYWORDS
Chorister; religious; spirituality; cathedral studies

Introduction

The *Daily Telegraph* in March 2016 reported that there was a noticeable increase in the number of students at Oxford and Cambridge Universities attending Choral Evensong in college chapels.[1] It mirrors a similar report published in 2014 by cathedrals across England which suggested that changing working patterns have made those who cannot go to regular Sunday services now become part of the growing congregations at the midweek evensong.[2] There is a desire, according to Kathryn King of Oxford University, 'to go to "a concert" of fine music performed to a high standard, for free; to hear favourite pieces of music seldom performed otherwise' .[3]

According to Reynolds (2021) Choral Evensong remains popular and does not ask for religious commitment from the attenders. Being able to slip into worship, as the working or learning day is ending, can be as liberating as it is convenient. It attracts and invites people because it is a gift (a gift that demands little or nothing in return), and because it happens on most days of the week (rather than being a Sunday-only occasion). Reynolds (2021) argues that 'Many who have not always considered themselves "religious" – have been drawn to cathedrals by their spacious and inviting architecture. . .. and the beauty

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and excellence of the music they offer' (24). While for some people, the atmospheric experience of Choral Evensong and access to a building of cultural interest may be strong motivations to attend, such attendance may awaken religious interest, as suggested by McGeary (2021).

> Far from being a nice free concert or a way of getting to look at the place without paying for entry, people have often been caught by some sense of what might be called 'God' or have been moved to think a bit more deeply about something important in their lives, or to find out a bit more about what it's all about. (McGeary 2021, 24)

In similar vein Corbett (2018, 2) notes that despite the recent decline in church attendance, 'choral music continues to be a significant part of many people's experience of, and theoretical reflection on, Christian faith and music today'.

The 2012 'Spiritual Capital' survey data found that eleven million non-religious adults living in England who had visited a cathedral in the previous year, provided cathedrals with 'mission opportunities' and had 'enormous potential' (Theos and the Grubb Institute 2012). The report suggested these people were on the margins of Christian faith or stand some way beyond, 'If the cathedrals are able to work with this duality of being both tourist destinations and places of pilgrimage, it opens up the possibility of encouraging a deepening of spiritual awareness and development' (23).

The power of choral music in places of worship raises questions regarding the choristers themselves: what impact has this experience as choristers had on their subsequent religious attitudes? Has the rich variety of music they sang been consoling and spiritually enlarging? Has it developed their faith? Do they, like their listeners, experience the 'communication of the divine' through their singing? Or does the religious dimension of choral music simply pass over their heads, despite the promises made by choristers at their appointment and the nature of what is being assented to in their 'vocation' to the task? Such questions are given point by Day (2018) who gave examples of some of the most famous church musicians who are not 'deeply religious' or had 'little interest in religion', those names included: Hubert Parry, Benjamin Britten, and John Rutter (282–285). Only half of a 1992 cohort of choral scholars were active communicants, while David Willcocks and Stephen Cleobury articulated atheistic and agnostic beliefs of their own.

There is very little scholarly literature concerning English choristers' spiritual development and religious development, despite Britain's celebrated choral tradition of over 1,400 years of expecting young children to sit through three or more hour-long services per week. Mould (2007) provided a complete narrative of English church music and the role of boy singers in a liturgical context. He noted that choristers were part of an institution rather than simply young musicians, and drew a clear line between cathedral music foundations (including some colleges) and musical provisions in parish churches. Musical skills became the chief criteria in the selection of boy choristers, especially from the late fifteenth century onwards as the music became more complicated. By the close of the fifteenth century, choirs had expanded to sing polyphony for five, six or seven parts from high treble to low bass. There were approaching two hundred professional liturgical choirs with boys in England at this time (48). The specification of sixteen choir boys became a standard number for English choirs, first at New

College, Oxford (1379) and then at Winchester College (1382). Both were collegiate chantries with education facilities attached. Prior to the establishment of these two institutions, there had never been choirs which had such a substantial number of choristers, thus making it a new concept. 'This brilliant musical scene of the decades either side of 1500 looks and sounds like a golden age' (52). The choristers were being properly looked after for the first time and instructed in 'good and virtuous behaviour, in plainsong, prick-song and descant' by a Master of the Chorister (48). Today this great choral tradition with daily services continues, and the primary function of the choirs at the choral foundations is still to adorn and beautify the beliefs and the teachings of the Church of England.

In the recent two decades, literature on the education of English choristers focuses mainly on three areas: how intensive singing impacts vocal health (Williams 2010); the provisions for girl choristers and its recent development (Howard, Welch, and Himonides 2019; Welch 2011; Welch and Howard 2002); and choral singing and its sustaining impacts on the wellbeing of participants (Ashley 2002a; Clift and Hancox 2010). However, in relation to this study's research emphasis, a notable exception is the study by Ashley (2002b), which found that boys in a church choir identify as part of a social group through their singing, but not through a shared religious faith. According to Ashley (2002b, 257), 'All the boys in the study were found to be "spiritual" in that they loved and were moved by the music they sang in church, but few perceived their singing as a form of religious ministry'. The study of choristers by Murphy (2015) also concluded that the choristers' experience could prove an initiation into the faith but that, unless they actually think about it, it has little positive effect, and may even inspire them to abandon religion in later years.

In the wider public too, appreciation of music in and of itself as the major motivational factor in attending services, regardless of whether it enhances religious communion, can be seen in certain studies. For example, one recent survey conducted within the emerging field of cathedral studies (Francis 2015), collecting data during The Holly Bough service at Liverpool Cathedral, demonstrated that the top motivation at 95% for attending that service was to enjoy the Christmas music, compared with 62% who cited their motivation for being there was for the worship of God (Francis et al. 2020). Therefore, the motivational profile shows the participants to be drawn to the service more by the musical excellence than by purely the religious occasion.

Research question

Against this background, the primary aim of the present study is to investigate the perceptions of 30 ex-choristers who attended a broad selection of English choir schools between 1940 and 2010. The research questions are: what are choristers' religious commitments, if any, before entering choir school and what are the factors for staying with, leaving, or later returning to religious practice? The findings arising from these interviews might prompt church leaders and educators who work with choristers to consider how church foundations could help with the spiritual development and religious education of choristers.

Method

Procedure

This study used a semi-structured interview with 30 ex-choristers: 24 face-to-face and six online. The face-to-face interviews were in various locations, such as in cafés or at the interviewees' homes, to provide a comfortable environment for participants to reflect on their childhood experiences as cathedral choristers. Ethical procedures were followed in line with the expectations of the British Educational Research Association, and the Durham University ethics committee granted ethical approval. Before each interview, it was made clear to the participants how the interview would proceed, that it would be recorded, how the data acquired would be subsequently used, and that in every case, anonymity would be fully preserved. They were free to withdraw from the study at any time, even after the interview, without giving a reason for withdrawing. Participants were asked to complete and sign an informed consent form.

Snowball sampling, also known as 'chain-referral methods' (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011), was used to identify interviewees, where initial interviewees recommended further potential fellow choristers to be interviewed. In snowball sampling, such interpersonal relations feature very highly. The Choir School Association and the Federation of Cathedral Old Choristers' Association were also contacted by the lead researcher at the pilot stage of the project, and both recommended several ex-choristers from around the country.

Participants

The 30 ex-choristers (24 males and six females) attended 11 English choir schools between 1940 and 2010 (see Table 1). They were divided into three groups: those in secondary or tertiary education, those in work, and retired people. All had received an intensive music education (27 as boarders at a choir school and three as day pupils[4]) and had sung three services every week in cathedrals or college chapels. The age profile was 15 aged thirty or under and 15 aged over thirty. All the females were under thirty (due to the fact that female choristers were only formally admitted to English cathedrals since 1991).

Interview structure

The interviews were designed to cover three main themes. First, the participants were asked about their religious background (and that of their family) before becoming a chorister. Second, they were asked whether there was any impact from their schooling or the choir experience on their religious development. Finally, the participants were asked about how their attitudes towards Christianity had changed or remained the same later on in life.

Analysis

All interviewees were allotted a four-digit number as their private code in the final report in order to make all participants anonymous. The first two digits referred to the order of interview; the third digit showed whether the interviewee

Table 1. Sample details.

Code	Boarder?	M/F?	Age in 2015	Y.O.B	Occupation	Choir School
1	Y	*M*	84	1931	College Principal *	A
2	Y	*M*	84	1931	Music teacher *	A
3	Y	*M*	80	1935	Retired Vicar	A
4	Y	F	20	1994	University music student *	B
5	Y	*M*	18	1996	A-level student	A
6	Y	F	23	1991	University student	B
7	Y	F	18	1996	University student	C
8	Y	*M*	56	1958	Organ technician *	A
9	N	*M*	20	1994	University music student *	D
10	Y	F	20	1994	University student	C
11	Y	F	21	1994	University student	C
12	Y	*M*	54	1960	Computer Consultant	A
13	Y	*M*	44	1970	PhD music student & music editor *	E
14	Y	*M*	47	1967	Director of Publishing *	A
15	Y	*M*	17	1998	A-level student	A
16	N	*M*	83	1931	Tax officer	F
17	Y	*M*	16	1998	Secondary school student	A
18	Y/N	*M*	37	1977	Accountant	G
19	N	*M*	75	1940	Sales	H
20	Y	F	22	1992	Soprano *	B
21	Y	*M*	75	1940	Treasurer	A
22	Y	*M*	35	1980	Sound Designer *	A
23	Y	*M*	66	1948	Managing Director	I
24	Y	*M*	74	1941	Bank manager/public speaker	F
25	Y	*M*	58	1957	Science teacher	I
26	Y	*M*	21	1994	University student-Medicine	J
27	Y	*M*	21	1994	University student-Mathematics	J
28	Y	*M*	22	1993	University student-Architecture	J
29	Y	*M*	22	1993	University music student *	K
30	Y	*M*	24	1991	University student – Theology	K

* = music connected.

was male or female (1: male/2: female); and the last digit meant boarder or non-boarder (1: boarder/2: non-boarder). (For example, 4512 would have meant that interviewee No. 45 was a male non-boarder). This meant they could not be identified or traced.

The interview data were then subjected to thematic analysis to recognise patterns within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis that can be divided into codes (Boyatzis 1998). Thus, all semi-structured interview transcripts in this study were coded several times using Nvivo software to organise and group the interview data thematically.

Results

This paper presents the findings for four main themes that emerged from the data. These themes concern: the religious commitment of choristers before entering choir school, the factors for staying with religious practice; the factors for leaving religious practice; and the factors for later returning to religious practice. A fifth theme concerning music achievements of being an English chorister has been presented elsewhere (Dong and Kokotsaki 2021).

The religious commitments of choristers before entering choir school

In response to questions about religious commitments prior to joining the choir school, a clear divide was apparent between the younger (under 60) and older (60+) ex-choristers. The younger ex-choristers said that they had either limited or no religious commitments prior to becoming a chorister but felt that this did not preclude them from singing in church.

> I was never religious and when I came to the Cathedral, they told us very specifically, we don't care if you are religious or not but if you sing here, you join in. I do not go to church unless I am singing. (1021; Ely Cathedral, aged 20)

> The Abbey was really my first experience of going to church regularly; I hadn't really gone to church before that. (2811; Westminster Abbey, aged 22)

> I wasn't from a Christian background as my parents are not Christians. I didn't know the liturgy or totally understand what we sang. (3011; Winchester Cathedral, aged 24)

When younger ex-choristers were asked about the religious beliefs of their families, they tended to talk about older family members, rather than themselves. The older ex-choristers had spent more time immersed in a religious society, whereas the younger ex-choristers had grown up in a less religious setting.

> My Mum is religious, I think, but my Dad, I am not sure if he is. He doesn't talk about it and we definitely don't go to church. . . [My mother] does go to church weekly, she goes to the cathedral. She is a Sunday school teacher. (0511; Durham Cathedral, aged 18)

> My Granny was extremely religious. Actually, my parents used to do the Lord's Prayer and everything every evening so I think they are religious to an extent, I mean nothing intense, but they would definitely class themselves as Christians. (2021; Salisbury Cathedral, aged 22)

On the other hand, it was not unusual for the older ex-choristers to state that they had held religious belief prior to becoming choristers and that church attendance was an important aspect of their lives.

> We always went to the church, went to Sunday School and there was singing there, and we got put into music contests and particularly myself and one of my sisters as a group. My mother was a very keen churchwoman, Anglican Church, of course. (0111; Durham Cathedral, aged 84)

Factors for staying with religious practice and the church

The main reason for staying with religious practice was the attraction of music. Many ex-choristers highlighted that they enjoyed the musical aspects of worship the most and that religion was not the main reason for attending services. However, the involvement of ex-choristers in the musical side of worship resulted in them staying with religious practice, even if that was not their primary intention.

> I like going to cathedral services and it is certainly the music I appreciate the most. But it is nice to have the freedom not to go. (0912; New College Oxford, aged 20)

> My wife is probably more religious than I am. She will go to the church because of the religion, I go to the church because of the music. Certainly I wouldn't feel a compulsion to go unless I were employed singing there definitely. (1211; Durham Cathedral, aged 54)

> I think the attraction for choristers is the music. I like going to cathedral services and it is certainly the music I appreciate the most. But it is probably quite nice to just get away from it. (0912; New College Oxford, aged 20)

One ex-chorister explained that, despite spending a large part of his early life in the church, he had not been persuaded to become more involved in religion, instead he would only go to church for the music:

> There were a few times that it dawned on me that I had spent forty percent of my entire life between the ages of 8 and 13 in a church which is quite a long time. I spent so long in a religious institution but not so much that I felt that I needed to go and pray. At the moment, I would go to church for the music rather than the religion. (2711; Westminster Abbey, aged 21)

Similarly, some ex-choristers explained that they felt no need to engage with the religious content of the service, but that they were still professionally involved in religious practices, for example serving as an organist:

> I sang services six times a week when I was a chorister and now at Cambridge I sing three times a week and go to many services as an organist. Also during the holidays, I have two jobs as an organist so most Sundays when I am here at home I will be playing the organ for church services so there has almost never been a point in all my life where I have not been in church for most Sundays over the year. Apart from in Columbia, when I was on my gap year, I never went to a church service. (2611; Westminster Abbey, aged 21)

A particularly interesting point made by some female ex-choristers was that they noticed opportunities for both music and leadership roles within the church. One female ex-chorister explained that she stayed with religious practice because of the changing attitudes towards having female lay clerks and the opportunities that this presents. This demonstrates that women are gradually feeling more welcomed by the church and especially by the college chapels of Oxbridge.

> I want to be a lay clerk. It is a changing world so it might happen that there will be female lay clerks out there. I am a practical rather than an academic musician, but I would say that if my degree is good enough I would go to Selwyn College, Cambridge, and sing there. In England it is not very well paid so I would do something mathematical on the side but I am not really doing it for the money as I just want to spend my life singing. (0721; Ely Cathedral, aged 18)

Similarly, the same female ex-chorister discussed the impact that her peers had experienced as a result of being a chorister.

> One of them is at Exeter at the moment as a Choral Scholar. Now she is very religious and wants to be a Bishop or a priest at least. She is going off to do theology at Cambridge after her year out. (0721; Ely Cathedral, aged 18)

Factors for leaving religious practice

The study identified four main reasons for ex-choristers leaving religious practice. First, some felt that they had received no formal introduction to Christianity from the choir or the choir school and therefore did not feel that they had truly understood religious practices in the first place. Second, some explained that they had been pressured into being confirmed and thus they felt that faith had been forced upon them. Thirdly, a few ex-choristers felt that a belief in God simply did not resonate with them. Finally, many ex-choristers mentioned the sermons which they struggled to comprehend and, in many cases, acted as a deterrent that pushed them away from religious practices.

A lack of formal introduction to Christianity

Since choristers were not required to be religious (for reasons which would make recruitment easier), the choir schools did not offer an introduction to the most fundamental ideas of Christianity, such as explaining liturgical terminology and explaining biblical texts which the choristers would sing (psalms).

> So little thought was given to spiritual development. The organists were all professional so there was never a strong sense of religion. We never prayed before doing anything and although there was formal Grace before and after each meal, there was never any evocation of a ministry being performed. (3011; Winchester Cathedral, aged 24)

> We sing Evensong three times a week but when the priest lines up Communion only a third of the choir go up while the rest remain seated. This demonstrates to me the interesting divide between choir members who are religious and those who are only there for the music. (2811; Westminster Abbey, aged 22)

Choristers seldom discussed topics of religion and faith amongst themselves. This was mostly due to the fact that they had already spent so much time in church services:

> I was never kind of terrifically engaged by the whole thing . . . . I don't know if we were too young or we just heard it too much, we spent every day in the cathedral and so we didn't want to talk about it when we weren't in the cathedral. I don't ever remember discussing religion when I was at school and certainly I didn't feel particularly religious then. (2611; Westminster Abbey, aged 21)

Most problematically, the choirmasters often omitted the explanation of the liturgical significance of the music to the choristers. Consequently, the choristers lacked a true understanding of what exactly they were singing about.

> To a certain extent you read what was on the page in front of you and didn't think about it . . . . I basically had no idea of the meaning of what I was singing. I just made sure I sang notes with correct pronunciation. (2811; Westminster Abbey, aged 22)

> When I did try to engage with the service, I found that very stimulating. It was totally foreign to me and I found myself kind of drawn out of myself. I wish somebody had taken the trouble to encourage us a bit more and ask 'All the psalms you sing, the hymns, the anthems - what do you make of the words? What meaning do you attach to them? How does it touch you personally? (2511; Ripon Cathedral, aged 58)

A sense of having faith forced upon them

Many ex-choristers felt that they had no choice but to get confirmed as it was expected of them. Most were confirmed whilst they were in the choir school (around 13 years old), but little effort had been made to help them understand what it really meant.

> I was confirmed about eleven because everyone felt that was the kind of thing that choristers should do. Certainly there wasn't much discussion. (2611; Westminster Abbey, aged 21)

> It became a thing that within the choir you would get confirmed around the age of eleven but actually I do think it was quite young to get confirmed. I don't really think you have an understanding of what you are doing until you are a bit older. (2021; Salisbury Cathedral, aged 22)

One ex-chorister felt particularly strongly about the reason he was given for confirmation. He considered that he was instructed to be confirmed for reasons which undermined the ethos of the church and that was what pushed him away from religious practices.

> I was told I should get confirmed so that I could receive communion because that looks better if everyone is doing it together – a terrible reason. I was baptised 20 minutes before my confirmation, and it was done with the bare minimum of confirmation classes. I mean it was ridiculous, even criminal, looking back on it. (3011; Winchester Cathedral, aged 24)

The idea of a belief in god did not resonate with some choristers

Some ex-choristers explained that they were never religious in any sense throughout their times as choristers. Some also expressed a degree of scepticism towards the whole idea of a god.

> In terms of the religious side at the Abbey I think I was never particularly religious. (2711; Westminster Abbey, aged 21)

> The first passages of Genesis are quite strange; I remember being quite interested in it because I didn't understand it. But when I left the choir school, I became more analytical and more reflective on the world around me. I thought the idea of a belief in a God didn't really resonate with me. (2211; Durham Cathedral, aged 35)

Sermons perceived as incomprehensible and therefore a deterrent of religious practices

When asked about potential barriers to religious development, a large proportion of ex-choristers reported that sermons were both boring and incomprehensible to young minds. This suggested that the services were not particularly well adapted to suit the choristers and that the sermons were not written with their comprehension in mind.

> I think most of us switched off during the service. Sermons tended to be a bit boring I am afraid, and they were very theological and a bit deep. (2411; York Minster, aged 74)

> I didn't pay attention to the sermon and just sat quiet. It was just a boring bit of the service where you had to sit still . . . I wasn't thinking anything in particular but just trying not to be bored out of my brains. A bit of whispering went on between choristers and I don't think anyone really paid attention to the sermon. . .Even now I only pay attention about half the time. (2811; Westminster Abbey, aged 22)

The inability of ex-choristers to engage with the sermons is directly linked to the first point on leaving religious practices which was the lack of religious education at an introductory level.

> The reality is that people who work in the cathedral are essentially theologians and academics. I don't remember their sermons. The service isn't, I suppose, the place for analytical dialogue. It is more that you are following a tradition. Sometimes in the sermons maybe they are weighing up some questions, but I would have been more interested in the kind of books my parents were reading about it . . . . To be honest we never really engaged with theology in an educational context. (2211; Durham Cathedral, aged 35)

> I used to give most sermons a chance. I would give them maybe two or three minutes to see if they engaged me. Some sermons were obviously intended for adults and went over my head, I would draw things or make up poems. (2511; Ripon Cathedral, aged 58)

Factors for later returning to religious practices

Four-fifths of ex-choristers did not regularly attend services after finishing their choristership, but occasionally returned to contribute to what they felt was a familiar environment. The ex-choristers who chose to return to the church mostly did so for social reasons and some wanted to give back to the community through volunteering.

> Most of them [the old choristers] don't go to church but they will come back occasionally. A lot of them are involved with the cathedral and help out in the cathedral and do things but they don't particularly go to services. (2111; Durham Cathedral, aged 75)

> I tend to go to services now because I am still involved with the civic side of the city. Last Sunday for instance I was at the Salvation Army. I go round different churches as I tend not to be at the same place all the time. I was in the cathedral yesterday singing for a memorial service so I tend to flit round. (2311; Ripon Cathedral, aged 66)

In contrast to those who chose to leave the church, a small minority of ex-choristers felt that their time as choristers had 'plant[ed] the seeds of [their] religious development'. The perspectives of these ex-choristers demonstrated that, even if certain memories were negative, the overall experience of being a chorister had a positive effect on their spirituality. However, it is important to note that this was only the case for fewer than one in five of the ex-choristers.

> Now I enjoy singing again in church. I go because I sing and actually I think I would enjoy going even if I wasn't singing. I think that obviously has got something to do with the fact that I was so used to going when I was so young, especially at Christmas. I love going, it is the centre, the base, isn't it? (0621; Salisbury Cathedral, aged 23)

A similar sentiment was also expressed amongst the older ex-choristers who took up religious careers after their time as choristers. This used to be a traditional route to take after a youth spent as a chorister.

> I think a lot of them did practise religion and were influenced by it because quite a lot of the boys who were in my social group in the school actually became vicars. My best friend became a vicar. He was the chaplain at the Quayside, for the sailors. And the guy who was head of Decani became a vicar also so there was quite an influence. After spending 21 years in the Civil Service . . . I left to enter St John's College Durham to complete training for the priesthood. (2111; Durham Cathedral, aged 75)

It is also interesting to note that the parents of ex-choristers often returned to religious practices, even if their children did not choose to do so. This can be explained by the many hours some parents chose to spend listening to their children sing.

> My parents actually, they weren't religious when I started at all but my Mum of course came a lot to the cathedral and she became quite involved with the cathedral community through my being a chorister. She met lots of people there and even though of course my sister and I are long since finished, she still volunteers at the cathedral. So I guess you could say my Mum has become religious or more religious at least through my being a chorister but I myself . . . not really. (2611; Westminster Abbey, aged 21)

> Now even though I have left the choir and my brother has left the choir, my parents still go to the cathedral services and my Mum in particular, so they do Evensong quite a lot even though none of her children are singing, she has found that she really likes it. (0421; Salisbury Cathedral, aged 20)

Discussion

From the fifty hours of recorded interviews, one of the most prominent themes was the religious attitudes of choristers. In contrast to the stereotype of choristers as 'Anglican angels', ex-choristers interviewed in this study emphasised that their singing experience did not necessarily encourage them to engage with the Christian faith. The data from this study show that ex-choristers did not perceive the religious and spiritual purpose of the music, making a clear distinction between appreciating the music and assenting to its religious content. Indeed, many had distinctively negative memories of worship, although it is also clear that many of the ex-choristers continue to enjoy singing in church. What, then, accounts for their lack of religiosity?

One reason for this could be the general decline in religion in the West. Singleton (2018) claims that each generation since the 1960s has been less religious than the previous one. Singleton (2018, 27) argues that many young people, whom he dubs the 'religious nones', do not affiliate with a religion. Many of the younger ex-choristers in this study would fit this description during their times as choristers and beyond.

Another theme which arises is the surprising lack of religious instruction in choir schools, given that it is the role of choristers to lead worship through their singing. Most choir schools welcome students with little or no knowledge of Christianity. In the absence of religious education, many of the participants placed more value on the cultivation of spirituality through immersion in church music rather than on religiosity.

Today, most parents send their children to audition as cathedral choristers because of the high standard of academic and musical education. In his review of *The English chorister: A history* by Mould (2007), Harper (2009) mentioned that 'the survival of cathedral choirs with the huge cost of children's education represents one of the most significant ongoing investments in specialist musical and general education of children aged 8 to 13 outside the public sector' (662). Dong and Kokotsaki (2021) show that many choristers had the potential to become members of the church and to contribute in the later parts of their lives. It used to be that a number of Church of England clergy had once been choristers, but this has now changed. Equally important is the role of the choral scholar, young student singers mostly aged 18–21, who not only populate the choirs of Oxford and Cambridge colleges but also form a significant part of many cathedral choirs.

Therefore, what the church and choir schools need to consider is how to nurture the spiritual development of children and how to link singing duties with a religious education. In an unpublished interview, Michael Sadgrove, Dean Emeritus of Durham, said that:

> I have done a lot of that here with all the choristers in their year groups, boys and girls separately. I have them all in regularly and we have talked about faith, we have talked about the words, we have talked about the psalms. In quite a low-key way but I just wanted them to understand what they are doing. I am not pretending that the work I have done will make any difference necessarily, I am just saying I think if an ex-chorister wanted to explore their own faith at a later date, the memory of the conversations we had might just make it a bit more accessible. (Michael Sadgrove, personal interview, 15 July 2015)

From this study we have produced two suggestions which would improve the trajectory of religious and spiritual development for choristers. The first suggestion concerns exploring the biblical meaning of the musical text and its role in worship with the objective of developing their understanding within the context of the service. For example, explaining the meaning of the words (including a translation of the text if not in English) and the mood/style/genre of the music can be incredibly beneficial to the choristers and their development. The context of the music, such as who had written it and why, and in what part of the church calendar it might fit, are all important points to be explained. The teaching of the major Christian seasons and Festivals such as Christmas, Passiontide, Easter Day, Pentecost, and the relevant bible stories would be beneficial.

The second suggestion concerns explaining the liturgy and the ministry. For example, a brief description of the layout of regular services could be explained. Additionally, it would be advantageous to describe the different areas of the building and to include the functions of certain aspects such as the altar and the pulpit. Such explanation, however, should take fully into account the learning needs of young choristers.

Conclusion

The data shows that being a cathedral chorister is almost purely a musical endeavour, as singing in a ritual setting does not necessarily enrich the spiritual development of young people. In some cases, it has even had the opposite effect and deterred choristers from religious practice in their later life. However, it is common to see retired people who had

once been choristers return to the church and either take up singing again or volunteer as a church stewards. This is less common with young ex-choristers who mostly only return for singing.

Amongst the factors which encouraged later church attendance, family upbringing is key, although studies show that only about half of parental religiosity is successfully transmitted, while absence of religion is almost always passed on (Voas and Crockett 2005). Studies also emphasise the need for researchers to view children as active participants in religious socialisation rather than as more passive recipients of parental influence (Boyatzis and Janicki 2003). If we differentiate further, we see that the cognitive aspect of religion (the sermon) is remembered as particularly negative. In contrast, a sense of transcendence, speaking to the emotive side of religion is rated highly, and ex-choristers still attend church for this experience. This study confirms the trend that people are increasingly seeking spirituality but not religion as shown in the data representing the participants who chose to remain involved with religious practices.

Bernd Wannenwetsch (2010, 91) describes listening as a 'moral, transcendental and sacramental act'. This description resonates with our experience of listening to choristers singing in Durham Cathedral and elsewhere. It seems, however, that for many choristers, the performance of choral music is devoid of religion. Religious education in choir schools needs to be improved by educating choristers and developing their appreciation for Christianity as well as developing their love of singing, but how this can be achieved is beyond the remit of the current project. The findings from this project, however, prompt two suggestions for further research. The first suggestion is to research how choir schools could support choristers' spiritual development by making sermons more accessible. The second suggestion is to explore how choir schools could manage the ongoing spiritual welfare of choristers from 'admission' (around the age of 8 or 9) throughout their period of service, and make the whole process more spiritually nurturing.

In conclusion, this research has demonstrated that, although the experience of being an English cathedral chorister is greatly rewarding musically, many choristers leave without a strong sense of spirituality and religion. This is an important issue which should be addressed by the clergy and educators who are responsible for all aspects of the choristers' professional and personal development.

Notes

1. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/12176998/Looking-for-Britains-future-leaders-Try-evensong.html.
2. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/10778254/Faith-not-just-frescoes-drawing-millions-to-cathedrals-says-heritage-chief.html.
3. https://www.choralevensong.org/uk/kathyrn-king-research.php.
4. It should be noted that boy choristers can board in choir from eight to thirteen while girls can be boarders until the age of eighteen in some choir schools such as Ely, Lichfield, Cardiff, and Truro cathedrals.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Ethical approval

The study received approval from the School of Education Ethics Sub-Committee, Durham University, April 2014.

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