

Chapter One: Historical, Cultural and Scholarly Contexts

Introduction

While secularism and scepticism are nowadays more often associated with university education, religion, and Christianity in particular, has enjoyed a long and complex relationship with university life. This has mirrored changing understandings of scholarship, of the status of theology and of science, and of the public function of the university. It has also developed in reaction to the shifting needs of a diversifying student body, which in turn reflects the complex religious profile of the UK. This changing relationship, driven from above by academia and government policy, and from below by popular student engagement and religious organizations, shapes the opportunities and boundaries that frame orientations to Christianity among students today. In the pages that follow we offer a brief history of how the emergence of UK Higher Education has been caught up in wider cultural responses to Christianity, and discuss the complex Christian heritage of England's universities. The intention is to offer the historical and cultural context relevant to the task of understanding how universities function as sites of religious expression. We conclude by considering the existing scholarship that has focused on religion within university contexts, and note how this work informs our own approach.

Religion and UK Universities in Historical Perspective¹

The origins of the UK university are bound up in religious controversy. Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket famously fell out of favour with his monarch, Henry II, over the privileges owed to the church. Henry sought to weaken the independence of the clergy, while

Becket fostered a haven of scholarship at Canterbury. This association of learning with independent thinking meant that, following Becket's murder in 1170, Henry recalled the English clerks based at the University of Paris. Upon their return, they sought a new geographical base. Proximity to London, two large monasteries, and an Augustinian Priory, St Fridewide's, that had already attracted scholars by its impressive literary holdings, meant Oxford was an obvious choice (Armytage, 1955, pp. 34-38). By the end of the twelfth century the University of Oxford was established as a centre of learning. By 1207, some of its clerks had migrated to Cambridge, establishing the two 'ancient' universities of England that remained the nation's only universities for another 600 years. In the intervening period, Scotland established its own: St Andrews at the start of the fifteenth century, then Glasgow (1451), Aberdeen (1495) and finally Edinburgh (in 1583), the latter distinguished by being a civic, rather than religious foundation; the leaders of the city, not the church, brought it into existence and it was the Crown that gave it authority to confer degrees. This contrasted with all of the other 'ancient' universities, which retained significant links with ecclesiastical authority. Up until the mid-1800s, Oxford and Cambridge only admitted students who were members of the Established Church of England, and this was also the case for Trinity College, Dublin (established 1591) for the first three hundred years of its existence (Graham, 2002, p. 6). Moreover, religious testing (e.g. requiring prospective students to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England) was the norm in the ancient English and Scottish universities until well into the nineteenth century, until widespread discontent buttressed by political and theological liberalism forced a more open policy, steered through parliament by Prime Minister William Gladstone in 1871 (Bebbington, 1992).

The nineteenth century witnessed the end of the Oxbridge duopoly in England, first with the founding of University and King's Colleges in London and then with Durham University in

the north east in 1832. The latter two were established as Anglican foundations, while University College has explicitly secular origins, originally denied a university charter on account of its admission of Jews, Roman Catholics and Non-conformists (Graham, 2002, p. 7). University College London (UCL) achieved an early reputation as a centre of dissent, both as an institutional protest against Tory ascendancy (the Conservative Party emerging predominantly out of Oxford and Cambridge) and against Anglican control (Armytage, 1955, pp. 171-172). Indeed, the formal creation of the federal University of London in 1836 occurred in part as a parliamentary compromise response to protests that such a 'godless' place be granted the power to award degrees, which were, according to disgruntled figures in Oxford, 'badges of a Christian education' (Bebbington, 1992, p. 260). With the formal power to award degrees conferred, not on UCL, but on an umbrella University of London, the matter was apparently settled. This federal system also departed from the Oxbridge tradition in admitting 'external' students, i.e. those studying while living at home, sometimes at some distance from London, rather than in residence on college premises. This opened up Higher Education to a much wider constituency, including those in mechanical and industrial occupations and added momentum to a broadening of the student body that included the admission of women from the 1880s onwards.

Soon afterwards came the establishment of the six 'civic' universities within major industrial centres. The Victoria University of Manchester (now part of Manchester University) was the first of the so-called 'red brick' universities to be established, in 1880, followed by Birmingham in 1900, Liverpool in 1903, Leeds in 1904, Sheffield in 1905, and Bristol in 1909. None of these were entirely new institutions, but were granted university status by Royal Charter following the merger and development of pre-existing colleges, often specialising in medicine, engineering and technology, in reflection of the burgeoning

industrial age they were established to serve. For example, the University of Sheffield emerged out of the Sheffield School of Medicine, Firth College, established in 1879 by a local steel manufacturer to provide arts and science education to the under-resourced Sheffield area, and the Sheffield Technical School, founded in response to the need for greater skills training among those working in local industry. The first clause in the original charter of the University of Liverpool, setting out the objects of the new university, made reference to ‘technical instruction as may be of immediate service to professional and commercial life’ (Kelly, 1981, p. 52). Industry drove expansion, and as a result, by 1932, there were eleven universities in England (with three additional university colleges: Exeter, Nottingham and Southampton), four in Scotland, one in Wales and three in Ireland, together recruiting well over 62,000 students (Robinson, 1944, pp. 85-88).

While traditionally confined to this original group of six, the label ‘red brick’ is commonly ascribed to other universities established between the turn of the twentieth century and the 1960s. This number includes the independent universities of Cardiff and Swansea, supplementing the higher education in Wales that had originated at St David’s, Lampeter in 1822, later incorporated into the federal University of Wales. Scotland saw the founding of the University of Dundee (originally a college of St Andrew’s) and in Belfast, Queen’s University was established in 1908. In England, this period saw the emergence of universities in Exeter, Hull, Leicester, Nottingham, Reading and Southampton. The University of Newcastle Upon Tyne began as a college of medicine, affiliated to the University of London from 1834 and then to the University of Durham from 1851. Its subject coverage gradually expanded into the physical sciences and engineering, and the University finally achieved independent status in 1963 *via* an Act of Parliament.

The 'red bricks' share a number of common features. Most are situated in urban centres, many in former industrial towns, and as such present students with a particular kind of environment: often multi-cultural, densely populated and commercially vibrant. These universities are also, for the most part, either located in buildings scattered around city centres, or else are based in clusters forming inner-city campuses, only a stone's throw from the city centre itself. This enhances the universities' linkages with the urban environment, and can foster a greater integration between town and gown. In this sense they contrast with Oxford and Cambridge, which, while also set within major cities, retain an elite and aloof reputation that perpetuates boundaries between university and local communities. Notable exceptions to the 'red-brick' pattern are the universities of Birmingham and Nottingham, which occupy some of the earlier established university parks, situated at some remove from their respective city bases. The 'red-bricks' marked a number of innovations in the university sector, one of the most significant being the prioritisation of disciplines more consonant with science and industry than with the classical disciplines of traditional scholarship. This arguably fostered an internal secularisation of universities, as the discursive subtleties of theology and other 'humanities' gave way to the more utilitarian logic of post-Enlightenment science.

The Robbins Report and 1960s Expansion

During the 1960s, higher education apparently grew faster than any other major industry, excepting electronics and natural gas. Between 1962 and 1968, the number of students in full-time higher education in Britain grew from 217,000 to 376,000, the increase during these five years greater than expansion over the preceding quarter of a century (Layard and King, 1969, p. 13). Key to this development was the 1963 Robbins Report, which issued predictions and recommendations for higher education that shaped the sector for the remainder of the decade

and beyond. The committee chaired by Lord Robbins was convened by the Conservative Government in 1961 for a number of reasons. Post-war economic growth in Britain had precipitated a rise in demand for university places, as advances in industry required more skilled and educated workers, and as rising standards of living made university a viable option for an increasing proportion of the population. The post-war baby boom also meant that, by the 1960s, a larger than previous proportion of the population was of university age, leading to an inevitable rise in demand in absolute terms. The existing university system was deemed to have fallen short in providing insufficient opportunities for this aspirant generation, measured simply by the ratio of individuals leaving school with two 'A' levels to the number of university places available. The Robbins Committee was formed to address this problem, alongside a series of other administrative and structural issues facing the higher education sector in a transformative decade, not least the status of the colleges of advanced technology and of education, and the need for greater co-ordination across different parts of the sector and with central government as its primary funder.

The positive reception of the Robbins Report by government, universities and the public reflected a new consensus that universities should enhance a larger segment of the population rather than serve an elite few, and that inclusion be based on merit alone. Its most significant recommendation endorsed an overall expansion of the higher education sector, resulting in increases in university places and the establishment of brand new universities. Those founded in the wake of the Robbins Report share significant family resemblances. First, and most obvious, is their campus context; while Leeds and Manchester occupy buildings interspersed among civic and commercial outlets within their busy city centres, the likes of Kent, Lancaster, York and Warwick are located in purpose-built, scenic university parks beyond the urban sprawl. In terms of the student experience, this makes for a more bounded sense of

community and for some an almost utopian separation from the non-university world, and with the better equipped sites now boasting a range of convenient food and service outlets, students may complete their degree with minimal need of leaving the safe confines of the campus. However, what for some is a welcome haven is for others a stifling and insular environment too distant from a more ‘authentic’ life experience. Purpose-built campuses, especially those at some distance from the nearest town, can foster a rather closeted existence, and it may be in such contexts that student societies acquire a particularly powerful role in shaping the undergraduate experience (as they also do within Oxbridge colleges, for different, albeit related, reasons). Campus universities can remain relatively untouched by the cultural diversity enjoyed by those based in inner-city contexts, and we might expect this to be an important variable in understanding patterns of cultural and religious tolerance among the student population.

Second, the 1960s campus universities are children of their time, and their contemporary ethos and institutional identity remains informed by the organizational structures put in place at their foundation. For example, as part of a progressive effort to mirror the industrial and cultural present – rather than the traditional, scholastic past – the universities of Essex, Keele, Sussex, Warwick and York were established without an academic department of theology. Lancaster University retained an academic interest in religion, but did so by founding the first department of Religious Studies, self-consciously defined over and against theology as the dispassionate study of religion as a purely academic endeavour, rather than one shaped by, or in service to, ecclesiastical institutions. Applications for its first chair of Religious Studies were invited from candidates ‘of any faith or none’ (Smart, 1967), reflecting a more confident public agnosticism and the loosening of ties between university and Christian tradition. An exception within this group of new universities was the University of Kent, whose location in

the historic city of Canterbury fostered stronger links with The Church of England: its Visitor is the Archbishop of Canterbury, students graduate in Canterbury Cathedral and the university has always had a department of Theology (Beloff, 1968, p. 137). These universities have retained the services of chaplains, and student religious societies have remained vibrant, but religion remains outside of their professed institutional identity, absent from their systems of governance and at best subdued within their public discourse.

Further Expansion and Restructuring

The 1960s also witnessed the establishment of the first 'polytechnics', institutions of higher education which grew out of the former colleges of technology and were viewed as complementing the older, more traditional universities by offering practical, vocational training and stronger links with commerce and industry. Over time, the polytechnics began to teach a wider range of subjects, many branching into the social sciences and humanities and inviting obvious comparisons with the more established universities. Nevertheless, the polytechnics were very different institutions, not least in remaining under the financial control of local authorities, whereas universities had autonomy from local and central government and hence more freedom to define their own priorities.

This situation changed in 1992 with the Further and Higher Education Act, which removed the binary system that separated the universities and polytechnics, instead establishing a unitary system for Higher Education based around subject-defined funding councils. The polytechnics, along with all colleges of higher education, were given the right to apply for university status, something most now have. As a consequence, during the early 1990s the number of universities in Britain doubled from around fifty to one hundred and the number of enrolled university students increased dramatically. The status of the former polytechnics also

changed, as with university status they could appoint professors, award degrees, join the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals, and compete for funding from the newly created funding councils alongside their more established colleagues (Graham, 2002, p. 11). Nevertheless, given their history and shared priorities – including the provision of vocational qualifications, widening access to students from under-represented groups, and the centrality of student learning over research – the former polytechnics are still often grouped together as the ‘post-1992 universities’. This has some justification, although also risks masking important differences among this large collection of institutions, not least in terms of subject specialisms, target demographics, and form of course delivery (including now, an increasing market for distance learning). One sub-group is particularly relevant here, as it reflects a peculiar set of relations with Christian churches.

The Council of Church Universities and Colleges (CCUC), or ‘Cathedrals Group’, as it is commonly known, has fifteen members: fourteen universities in England and one in Wales. Each is a former church college of teacher training, a breed of institution that historian Callum Brown claims was important in ‘sustaining religiously committed teachers in Britain’ during the 1960s and 70s (Brown, 2006, p. 226), although the history of many goes back to the 19th century. Each university and university college within the Cathedrals Group was established as a church foundation by the Anglican, Roman Catholic or Methodist church, and continues to have a strong relationship with its founding denomination. This connection to organized Christianity has implications for systems of governance, collective identity, student welfare provision and chaplaincy, as well as fostering a shared understanding of what university education is for and what its mission might be within broader society. The fact that many Cathedrals Group institutions have retained teacher training as a core priority reflects their emphasis on vocational and public-service oriented programmes of study. On its

website, the Cathedrals Group states that it ‘supports the Churches’ continuing role in Higher Education through the Church Universities and Colleges as a means of developing the historic partnership between the Churches and the State and of contributing to the public good and the well-being of society.’ⁱⁱⁱ Hence, in contrast to the ancient universities, where institutional links to ecclesiastical bodies are largely expressed in tradition and ceremony, and the 1960s campus universities, which tend to marginalise religion in a campus environment, the Cathedrals universities openly foster a positive engagement with the Christian churches in a way that is allowed to inform their identities and priorities as public institutions.

21st Century Challenges

The UK’s Higher Education sector has been radically transformed over the past one hundred and fifty years. The number of enrolled students has increased dramatically and structures of funding have evolved as expansion of the number of universities and students requires the securing of finance beyond central government. The shrinking pot of government funding has become a resource over which there is fierce competition between universities, and this money is increasingly distributed according to criteria that prioritise research excellence. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) – now reconfigured as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) – has since 1986 assessed research quality at each higher education institution at roughly five year intervals. The results directly inform the distribution of research income across the sector and indirectly shape universities’ public appeal, reputation and status, not least through ascribed rankings in increasingly ubiquitous league tables published in national newspapers and student guidebooks. Also significant in this respect is the National Student Survey (NSS), which since 2005 has invited all final year students in higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to rate the quality of their degree

programmes. Widely published and increasingly used to construct university rankings, the NSS results have become essential to universities in maintaining strong reputations, especially those teaching intensive institutions for whom student fees, rather than research-related income, is the predominant source of revenue. This regime has fostered a more outputs focused, audit-driven culture within universities, with centrally driven processes of review and administrative accountability shaping research and teaching (Strathern, 2000). As previously stable income streams have become more contested, universities have responded with a marketization of educational product, investing in course advertising, school outreach, public relations and liaison with private business on an unprecedented scale in order to remain viable. Part of the same process has seen the gradual shrinkage in centrally available funding for students, including the abolition of mandatory payment of tuition fees via local education authorities, and the increase in fees between 1998 and 2012 from a standard £1,000 to up to £9,000 *per annum*, provoking questions about the accessibility of higher education, particularly among applicants from less privileged backgrounds.

If marketization is one dominant trend, another is a measured diversification, as different universities attempt to steer their activities in a way that capitalises on their strengths and maximises their chances of success. Expansion of the higher education sector has seen diversification in alignment with different target audiences, and the aggregation of universities of a similar core ethos into campaign groups which are thereby better equipped to negotiate current challenges and engage policy makers. Hence the sub-division of the sector into six mission groups: the Russell Group (comprising the 24 larger, research intensive universities); the 1994 Group (the 12 smaller universities which prioritise research); the Million+ Group (25 former polytechnic colleges with ambitions to achieve research strength); the Alliance Group (22 former polytechnics with an emerging track record in research); the

Cathedrals Group (the 15 church foundations); and GuildHE (the remaining former polytechnic institutions). This categorisation is driven by the current status and ambitions of different universities, accorded in relation to targets set by central government and their own managers. It also represents a structural hierarchy, on two counts. First, it is the research intensive universities that are awarded the most funding by the UK government and which – generally speaking – have less difficulty attracting students, and therefore student fees, than the more teaching-oriented institutions. Second, there is an enduring order of prestige within the sector, framed mainly with reference to the Russell Group, which continues to shape popular and academic perceptions of the status of different universities. The latter is determined by a combination of league table positions – increasingly pervasive in matters of student recruitment and academic status – and age-old reputations that endure in the popular imagination.

A more recent aspect of diversification relates to the opening up of the higher education sector to private providers. Unlike the USA, the vast majority of UK universities are in most respects public bodies. This is not to say that they are, or ever have been, entirely state funded public service providers analogous to the hospitals of the National Health Service or the British state schooling system. Indeed, up to the First World War universities were funded by a combination of long-standing endowments, student fees and local initiatives; it was only after the establishment of the University Grants Committee in 1919 that a structured system of limited state funding was instituted on a national scale (Collini, 2012, p. 29). However, As a consequence of an exponential rise in student numbers from 1945 onwards, including among many from non-elite backgrounds, the state emerged as the dominant funder, so that by the 1960s universities had acquired the image of a public service commonly associated with the various wings of the post-war welfare state, albeit one available to a necessarily

limited cohort. That being so, continuing university expansion has proved no longer compatible with the resources at the state's disposal, and while marketization within existing universities has been one consequence, another is the establishment of private higher education independent of the state. For many years the only independent university in the UK was the University of Buckingham, established in 1976 (and granted its Royal Charter in 1983) following the example of similar institutions in the USA, whose independence from the state was associated with an enhancement of academic freedom and creativity. To date, Buckingham remains the nation's only fully fledged private university, although in 2010 law and business specialist BPP was granted university college status, and further private providers were ushered into the UK sector following the Coalition Government's education reforms, intended to diversify in-sector provision and expand student choice. Significantly, the recent increase in tuition fees at public universities makes some private providers highly competitive, so in weighing the options in economic terms, we might expect more applicants, and hence more providers, to gravitate to the private model.

A further dimension relates to globalisation, markedly visible within universities in the growth of international students, whose financial contribution in student fees configure them as a target market, while their presence on campuses has a significant cultural impact, not least in terms of religion. As we will discuss in later chapters, the influx of students from different parts of the globe can have a massive influence on the relative vitality of different Christian traditions, as well as triggering the establishment of brand new groups within campus contexts. Universities constitute a fascinating site in which the global flows associated with late modern economics and culture are arguably intensified, with the regular turnover of students securing constant change and an ever-new injection of new energies and influences. Their attraction of academic staff from across the globe also emphasises this

international cultural dimension, subverting conventional boundaries associated with nation, language and academic disciplines. Such peculiarities warn against taking universities as in any way representative of the broader British picture; as we will explore in later chapters, while illuminating possible trajectories of future generations in one respect, universities as spatial, institutional phenomena are highly distinctive, and offer an experience within an individual's life that will, most likely, not be repeated.

A third trend is especially relevant to this book as it coincides with our conceptual focus: the university experience. For good or ill, the codification of the 'university experience' has emerged as a major preoccupation of UK higher education policy makers in recent years. Therefore, formulation of our approach in this book demands special care, lest it be caught up in discourses not of our own making and possibly not in keeping with our intended argument. Duna Sabri has traced the emergence of the 'student experience' in government policy documents, particularly since 2009, noting its association with the conceptualization of students as 'customers' and the treatment of their reported levels of satisfaction as key indicators of the 'success' of higher education (Sabri, 2011). As such, as Sabri argues, a 'reified "student experience" is wielded as a criterion for judgment about what is, and is not, worthwhile in higher education' (Sabri, 2011, p. 659). Related to this is the valorization of student choice, claimed by policy makers to be instrumental to current efforts to improve higher education provision. Sabri cites the influential Browne Review of 2010 that states: 'We want to put students at the heart of the system. Students are best placed to make the judgment about what they want to get from participating in higher education' (Browne, 2010, p. 25). The trend in policy discourse identified by Sabri reflects the recent marketization of higher education and the elevation of the power of the student as consumer, whose act of choosing one university over others will presumably function as a driver of quality in the

sector. Within this discourse, the ‘student experience’ is a powerful notion, and ‘evokes radical reorientation, challenge to vested (academic) interests, consumer power and the quest for value for money’ (Sabri, 2011, p. 661). We will return in our concluding chapter to the question of how our interviews with Christian students might serve as a reflection of or challenge to this set of assumptions.

The above changes, summarised as the interconnected processes of marketization, diversification and the elevation of the student as consumer, illustrate how England’s universities echo broader developments in contemporary western culture. The advancement of consumerism and superior influence of the neo-liberal economics of the free market have been cited by numerous authors as characteristic of late modern society (e.g. Carrette and King, 2005) so it is not surprising to find parallel influences extending into universities. The re-positioning of students as customers with consumer demands heightens their status as self-directed individuals, while disempowering academics whose expertise is sometimes required to defer to perceived market needs. In competing for student applicants, universities find themselves increasingly governed by organizational norms derived from private business, with managers prioritising the virtues of calculability and efficiency as they steer the provision of educational product (Ritzer, 1996). Taken together, it is possible to theorise these developments in terms drawn directly from Max Weber’s sociological studies of modernisation, i.e. as a form of intensified rationalisation, taking norms of bureaucracy and systematisation to a heightened level, while ultimately framed by a perception of ubiquitous and incontestable market forces. If we pursue this argument in keeping with Weber’s vision of modernity, we might conclude that universities also function as forces of disenchantment, although as we argue in chapter four, this would be to beg too many questions and do a disservice to the evidence at our disposal.

What is clear is that these developments have provoked widespread dismay on the part of academic staff, and triggered a debate about the proper purpose and nature of universities. Indeed, recent years have seen a burgeoning literature offering critical – sometimes scathing – comment on the various innovations that have characterised British university life of late. Tara Brabazon's *The University of Google* (2007) offers a passionate diatribe against the devaluing of higher education brought about by an uncritical, modish embrace of e-learning. The technology of the digital revolution has, she argues, been hijacked by capitalist agendas driven by a need to cut costs and maximise efficiency, with little serious consideration for the quality of students' education. Stefan Collini's acclaimed book What Are Universities For? (2012) critiques the increasing tendency to reduce the value of higher education to a process of equipping young people with the skills to contribute effectively to the global economy. Proceeding from a perspective shaped by the disciplines of the humanities, Collini probes the complex issues of the purpose and benefits of universities, getting beyond the modish reforms of the present by placing higher education in a broader historical and cultural context.

Notwithstanding the urgency and persuasiveness of these critiques, they highlight the persistent capacity of the university to generate critical discussion about itself. While this might seem a banal and obvious point, it is striking that academics attacking the current state of the university are employed by those very same institutions. Freedom of scholarship remains an inviolable sacred tenet, much more so than in the USA, where partisan ideologies can legitimately impose moral and religious demands upon university employees. This is in part a consequence of the peculiarly public status of UK universities – both autonomous and state-bound at the same time, steering a complex intermediate course between the private universities of the USA and the continental European model that maintains universities as

‘direct instruments of government policy’ (Collini, 2012, p. 5). As Collini acknowledges, in Britain, while largely funded from the public purse, and with ever more conditions attached, ‘successive governments have (so far) respected the principle of the autonomy of universities...largely leaving them to determine their own internal affairs, including their academic programmes’ (Collini, 2012, p. 5).

The reason why this is important to emphasise here is because of the implications of this enduring characteristic for the kind of culture fostered by universities among staff and students. In spite of the pessimistic nostalgia evoked among romantic academics who long for a time when state interference was barely heard of, universities remain, by comparison with many other forms of commerce, industry and public service, strikingly autonomous. The sector is admittedly diverse in this respect, and elite status may be inversely proportional to an encroaching culture of managerial control, but an experience of research and teaching relatively free from external oversight and preserving the self-directedness of individual scholars, remains commonplace. This leads us to the final section of this chapter, which focuses on ways in which we might understand the relationship between the experience of university and the culture of university students, particularly those seeking to embody a religious identity. While this broad question has been relatively unexplored in the UK, on the other side of the Atlantic it has generated an abundance of literature, much of it based on extensive empirical research. In the following paragraphs we attempt to bring insights emerging from that literature into conversation with the circumstances of the UK.

Understanding Christianity and the University Experience

Debates about the interaction between religion and higher education have long been framed by assumptions about the secularising power of educational institutions, in turn attributable to the common association of knowledge and learning with rationalism, empiricism and post-Enlightenment science. Additional factors have also been cited, such as the heightened exposure to cultural and religious pluralism in university contexts, and the newly embraced opportunity to reject traditions associated with parents, commonly attributed to the transition through youth and young adulthood (Hill, 2009). In this sense western higher education is persistently understood as a powerful force for secularisation (Berger, 1999; Wuthnow, 1988), and its expansion a catalyst for the acceleration of the secularisation process. This understanding is lent scholarly credence by studies that have offered empirical evidence of how college students have moved away from home-based religious traditions towards more liberal, humanistic perspectives over time (Hastings and Hoge, 1976), and of how colleges have had a tendency to liberalise the perspectives of religious students (Hunter, 1987). As Mayrl and Oeur summarise, it became generally understood that the ‘expanded horizons and exposure to new ideas that college provides were thought to lead students to question and ultimately abandon their traditional religious beliefs’ (2009, p. 264). Recent studies have questioned this interpretation, providing empirical evidence that challenges the correlation between university and a liberalisation of belief (Mayrl and Uecker, 2011; Uecker et al., 2007). Among other scholars, an apparently opposing trend has emerged, whereby university campuses are characterised as hotbeds of religious vitality, with the majority of students apparently showing great interest in matters of religion (Cherry, DeBerg and Porterfield, 2001; Ivan, 2012; Lee, 2002b), or moving away from traditional religion but showing an interest in ‘spirituality’ (Bryant, Choi and Yasuno, 2003). Much like some influential debates about secularisation, the relationship between religion and higher education has sometimes become organized around bearers of bad news and resistant optimists.

Successfully avoiding this unhelpful bifurcation, recent research has focused on delineating in more detail precisely how university shapes religious identities. What is it that distinguishes the experience of higher education and what happens when religious identities are exposed to its influence? Indeed, the nature of this very exposure is an important dimension of this question; are we right to assume that the acquisition of new knowledge will necessarily trigger cognitive dissonance among students who hold religious convictions based around tenets seemingly at odds with this knowledge? Will creationist students always struggle with the theory of evolution, either accommodating their beliefs to this new set of ideas or fiercely resisting it and rejecting its legitimacy (Berger, 1980)? The ‘conflict model’ implicit in this argument, while popular within the mass media, apparently commands only limited support among US college students (Scheitle, 2011). The relationship among different forms of knowledge or truth claims is apparently more complex than this model might suggest. Working with a qualitative study of college students, Tim Clydesdale (2007) found that before embarking on their college education, students typically placed their religious identities in an ‘identity lockbox’, leaving them relatively unexamined and unquestioned during their first year. Religion was treated as something good to have, but chiefly as a resource to draw upon later in life; in effect, the relationship between religion and college was distinguished by a *lack* of interaction. Other research has theorised similar patterns in terms of compartmentalization, i.e. the strategy of handling religious ideas and non-religious ideas (especially those in potential tension with religion) entirely separately, as discrete aspects of life that are not brought into conversation (e.g. Sabri et al., 2008).

The work of Clydesdale and others alerts us to the dangers of assuming apparently logical ideational tensions (miracles vs scientific empiricism, creationism vs evolution, etc) will

necessarily be experienced as tensions by individual students. Religious identities cannot be simply reduced to a matter of propositional belief, conceived as coherent and cerebral, and hence vulnerable to cognitive dissonance (also see Guest et al., forthcoming 2013.. Recent research suggests teenagers and young adults have only limited understanding of the doctrinal content of the religious traditions they affirm (Smith and Denton, 2005). Matters of ‘belief’ are not of primary importance to them (Savage et al., 2006), or at the very least, are configured as ‘believing’, an active, embodied performance of identity, rather than an assent to a given set of official truth claims (Vincett et al., 2012). The form taken by religious and spiritual identities in the contemporary West, perhaps especially among young adults, is often more fragmented, more conflicted and more open-ended than our theoretical tools might lead us to understand. As such, we might find that cultural and religious pluralism serves as a source of inspiration to evolving, self-directed identities, rather than a threat to established plausibility structures (Berger, 1967). We might also expect such identities to be less vulnerable to the secularising power of higher education than more conservative forms of religion, which depend on the maintenance of a clearly defined moral order. Even then, we need to be open to the possibility that conservative religious students will develop strategies for circumventing such challenges to their faith, whether through selecting only benign subjects to study, forming sectarian-style support structures among like-minded students (Bramadat, 2000), or developing cognitive abilities that allow incompatible knowledge-claims to be engaged concurrently without the primary (religious) ones being undermined.

Just as religious identities cannot be simply reduced to a matter of propositional belief, so the experience of university cannot be simply reduced to what happens in the classroom.

Reviewing the abundant literature on religion in higher education, Mayrl and Oeur identify one major problem as a tendency to decontextualize students: to treat the university

experience as an essentially singular phenomenon, papering over important differences between institutions and failing to explore the ways in which ‘specific institutional contexts interact with the religious engagements of undergraduate students’ (2009, p. 271). This is not simply a matter of recognising that universities may fall into different types, distinguished by different cultures and fostering different patterns of religious expression (Hill, 2011; Small and Bowman, 2011), but that the relationship between the religious identities of their staff and students on the one hand and the identity of the institution in which they work is not a straightforward one. The official public life of many American colleges and universities is nowadays fairly secular, but it is secular in spite of the mostly religious perspectives of academic staff (Gross and Simmons, 2009) and students (HERI, 2004). In other words, there can be a qualitative difference between the culture of the institution as presented in its public discourse, and the culture of its constituent members. Furthermore, these two cultures can exist in tension, but with beleaguered religious identities thriving as a consequence, as reflected in Jonathan Hill’s findings that Roman Catholic students in the USA increase their religious participation when attending evangelical colleges (Hill, 2009). Institutional cultures can function as a force against which to react, as well as a social order with which to conform.

Adopting the language of our overall title, the ‘university experience’ is a phenomenon that extends well beyond the teaching and learning processes associated with particular degree programmes. In addition, it draws in the challenges of being away from home (including economic ones), exposure to new forms of cultural and religious difference, unprecedented levels of personal independence, the opportunities generated by new friendship networks, fresh avenues for extra-curricular pursuits and the possibilities of personal advancement and

empowerment these bring, and many other dimensions that feed into this complex amalgam that makes up a strikingly significant transitional experience.

Conclusion

The above account illustrates the peculiarities of the UK university context. For complex historical reasons, Christianity features heavily, though not straightforwardly, in the life of these institutions of higher education. It would be accurate to say that for most, it is an ambient, rather than salient institutional feature, colouring architectural contexts and ceremonial rhetoric, with more pro-active agencies such as chaplaincies very much occupying the margins of university life, catering to a select minority and enjoying very limited power and influence on the larger campus. Departments of Theology and Religious Studies exhibit a parallel shrinkage as STEM subjects are prioritised and economically stretched undergraduates migrate to more obviously vocational degree programmes. There are exceptions of course: Oxbridge chaplains remain numerous and central to college life; Theology has its centres of excellence that are prized and well-resourced by their universities; Cathedrals Group institutions retain their distinctively Christian ethos, enshrined in mission statements and structures of governance.

The national UK picture has been set out here in broad brush strokes. Chapter three will explore these dimensions in more localised detail, as we try and develop a typology of universities and offer some cases studies to illustrate how they differ. Before that, we continue in our attempt to offer the broader picture by presenting general findings from our survey of Christian students at England's universities. Just what is it that distinguishes this group?

Notes

ⁱ While our analysis in this volume is confined to universities in England, the survey in the present chapter covers the United Kingdom as a whole so that the Higher Education sector may be set within its broader historical and cultural context.

ⁱⁱ <http://cathedralsgroup.org.uk/AboutUs.aspx> (accessed 21/8/12)