



**Christian postgraduates in England**  
**Exploring religious identity and the university experience**

**Szilvi Watson**

Thesis submitted for the degree of  
**DPhil in Education**

Supervisors:  
Dr Liam Gearon  
Prof Alis Oancea

Department of Education  
Kellogg College  
University of Oxford  
April, 2025

Declaration: No generative AI was used in the creation of this thesis at any point

# Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	3
TABLES AND FIGURES .....	8
ABSTRACT .....	10
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	11
<b>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>13</b>
1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE RELIGIOUS POSTGRADUATE EXPERIENCE .....	14
1.2 RATIONALE, AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	17
1.3 IMPORTANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS RESEARCH .....	19
1.4 STRUCTURE OF THIS THESIS .....	21
<b>CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>23</b>
2.1 INTRODUCTION.....	23
2.2 SECULARISATION AND THE ACADEMIA – HOW DID WE GET HERE?.....	24
2.2.1 <i>The first 700 years – in service of the Church</i> .....	25
2.2.2 <i>19th century changes – the modern university emerges</i> .....	27
2.2.3 <i>The 20th century and onwards – mass higher education and the height and fall of the secularisation thesis</i> .....	29
2.2.4 <i>Differentiation – incompatibility of religion and education?</i> .....	32
2.3 CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION .....	40
2.3.1 <i>EDI and religion</i> .....	42
2.3.2 <i>Freedom of speech</i> .....	48
2.3.3 <i>The university experience</i> .....	52
2.3.4 <i>Postgraduate mental health and belonging</i> .....	56
2.4 THE RELIGIOUS STUDENT .....	58
2.4.1 <i>‘Who am I?’ – Exploring identity</i> .....	58
2.4.2 <i>Religious identity</i> .....	63
2.4.3 <i>The religious student experience</i> .....	69
2.4.4 <i>The meeting of the religious, student and other identities</i> .....	74
2.5 ASSOCIATED BENEFITS OF HAVING A RELIGIOUS IDENTITY .....	80
2.5.1 <i>Religion and meaning in life</i> .....	82
2.5.2 <i>Religion, mental health and wellbeing</i> .....	85
2.6 CONCLUSION .....	88
<b>CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>90</b>

3.1	INTRODUCTION.....	90
3.2	RESEARCH DESIGN .....	91
3.2.1	<i>Mixed methods</i> .....	91
3.2.2	<i>Convergent parallel embedded multiple case study</i> .....	93
3.3	TYPOLGY AND CASE SELECTION .....	97
3.3.1	<i>Selecting participating institutions</i> .....	98
3.4	DATA COLLECTION .....	103
3.4.1	<i>Recruitment</i> .....	103
3.4.2	<i>Research instruments</i> .....	109
3.4.3	<i>Pilots</i> .....	116
3.5	DATA ANALYSIS .....	117
3.5.1	<i>Qualitative analysis</i> .....	118
3.5.2	<i>Quantitative analysis</i> .....	120
3.5.3	<i>Merging qualitative and quantitative findings</i> .....	123
3.6	ENSURING RIGOUR .....	123
3.6.1	<i>Methodological limitations</i> .....	125
3.7	RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY.....	126
3.8	ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	128
3.8.1	<i>In the field</i> .....	130
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	<b>THE CASE INSTITUTIONS .....</b>	<b>132</b>
4.1	INTRODUCTION.....	132
4.2	TRADITIONAL ELITE UNIVERSITY.....	134
4.3	SECULAR UNIVERSITY .....	137
4.4	CATHEDRALS GROUP UNIVERSITY .....	141
4.5	HOW DID POSTGRADUATE CHRISTIAN STUDENTS VIEW THEIR UNIVERSITIES? .....	144
4.6	SUMMARY .....	146
<b>CHAPTER 5</b>	<b>IDENTITIES AND CHARACTERISTICS .....</b>	<b>148</b>
5.1	INTRODUCTION.....	148
5.2	DEMOGRAPHICS .....	148
5.2.1	<i>Age</i> .....	148
5.2.2	<i>Gender</i> .....	149
5.2.3	<i>Ethnicity</i> .....	150
5.2.4	<i>(Inter)nationality</i> .....	151
5.3	POSTGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE.....	153
5.4	RELIGIOUS IDENTITY .....	155
5.4.1	<i>Religious commitment</i> .....	155
5.4.2	<i>Religious engagement</i> .....	160

5.4.3	<i>A more grounded faith</i> .....	162
5.4.4	<i>The importance of integrating faith and academic work</i> .....	166
5.5	SUMMARY.....	172
<b>CHAPTER 6</b>	<b>WHAT CHALLENGES AND DIFFICULTIES DO CHRISTIAN POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS PERCEIVE AS ARISING FROM THEIR RELIGIOUS IDENTITY?</b> .....	<b>173</b>
6.1	INTRODUCTION.....	173
6.2	FITTING IN AND ATTITUDES OF OTHERS TOWARD CHRISTIAN STUDENTS.....	174
6.3	ASSUMPTIONS AND STEREOTYPING.....	178
6.3.1	<i>The difficult historical heritage of the church is projected onto Christians</i> .....	181
6.4	CLASH OF VALUES AND ETHICS .....	183
6.4.1	<i>“Faith, of any sort, seems very counter cultural”</i> .....	183
6.4.2	<i>Gender and sexuality</i> .....	186
6.5	DIVERSITY WITHOUT EQUALITY OR INCLUSION.....	194
6.6	FAITH CONCEALMENT AND INVISIBILITY .....	199
6.6.1	<i>No space for faith in academia</i> .....	201
6.6.2	<i>Faith concealment</i> .....	203
6.6.3	<i>Invisibility</i> .....	206
6.7	SPARSITY OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY .....	208
6.8	SUMMARY.....	212
<b>CHAPTER 7</b>	<b>WHAT BENEFITS AND ADVANTAGES DO CHRISTIAN POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS PERCEIVE AS ARISING FROM THEIR RELIGIOUS IDENTITY?</b> .....	<b>213</b>
7.1	INTRODUCTION.....	213
7.2	BENEFITS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH IN THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE.....	214
7.2.1	<i>An external and eternal perspective</i> .....	214
7.2.2	<i>Faith gives meaning and purpose beyond academia</i> .....	218
7.3	THE BENEFITS AND IMPORTANCE OF FAITH COMMUNITIES.....	222
7.3.2	<i>Shared values and like-minded people</i> .....	228
7.3.3	<i>Support and safe space</i> .....	229
7.3.4	<i>Friendships formed through Christian communities</i> .....	232
7.3.5	<i>Christian community is enriching</i> .....	233
7.4	BENEFITS OF PERSONAL FAITH AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH.....	237
7.4.1	<i>The positive role of personal faith in maintaining mental health</i> .....	238
7.4.2	<i>Faith practices support mental health</i> .....	246
7.4.3	<i>Religious community and mental health</i> .....	249
7.5	SUMMARY.....	253
<b>CHAPTER 8</b>	<b>THE CHRISTIAN POSTGRADUATE EXPERIENCE</b> .....	<b>255</b>
8.1	INTRODUCTION.....	255

8.2	THE DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES OF HAVING FAITH AS A POSTGRADUATE STUDENT .....	255
8.2.1	<i>Stereotyping and hostile attitudes</i> .....	256
8.2.2	<i>Conservative values in a liberal environment</i> .....	263
8.2.3	<i>Gender, sexuality and Christianity</i> .....	268
8.2.4	<i>Lack of religious equality and inclusion</i> .....	274
8.2.5	<i>Faith concealment and invisibility</i> .....	279
8.2.6	<i>Sparsity of Christian community</i> .....	285
8.2.7	<i>From secularisation to invisibility – The process of religious fading</i> .....	287
8.3	THE BENEFITS OF HAVING FAITH AS A POSTGRADUATE STUDENT .....	291
8.3.1	<i>Theological benefits – The positive influence of Christian beliefs</i> .....	292
8.3.2	<i>Religious-social benefits – Ready-made communities and belonging</i> .....	299
8.3.3	<i>Psychological benefits – Faith and mental health</i> .....	315
8.3.4	<i>The flourishing of Christian postgraduates</i> .....	326
8.4	THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT IN THE CHRISTIAN POSTGRADUATE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE.....	329
8.5	THEORIES OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND THE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE .....	338
8.5.1	<i>Identity development in the Christian postgraduate experience</i> .....	338
8.5.2	<i>Identity theory and the postgraduate student experience</i> .....	342
<b>CHAPTER 9</b>	<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>348</b>
9.1	CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE .....	349
9.1.1	<i>Revisiting the research questions</i> .....	350
9.2	LIMITATIONS.....	353
9.3	POLICY IMPLICATIONS .....	355
9.4	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE .....	357
9.4.1	<i>For universities</i> .....	357
9.4.2	<i>For churches and religious student organisations</i> .....	359
9.5	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS.....	360
9.6	FINAL REFLECTIONS .....	361
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....		<b>365</b>
<b>APPENDIX A</b>	<b>RECRUITMENT MATERIALS .....</b>	<b>420</b>
<b>APPENDIX B</b>	<b>EXAMPLES OF RECRUITMENT ISSUES .....</b>	<b>423</b>
<b>APPENDIX C</b>	<b>DOCTRINAL ISSUES OF INCLUSION IN RESEARCH PROJECT .....</b>	<b>425</b>
<b>APPENDIX D</b>	<b>STUDENT STATISTICS AND DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION.....</b>	<b>427</b>
<b>APPENDIX E</b>	<b>WEBSITE AND PARTICIPANT INFORMATION .....</b>	<b>434</b>

<b>APPENDIX F</b>	<b>RELIGIOSITY SCALES .....</b>	<b>442</b>
<b>APPENDIX G</b>	<b>THE SURVEY.....</b>	<b>450</b>
<b>APPENDIX H</b>	<b>PLACE OF QUESTIONS FOR ELIGIBILITY .....</b>	<b>470</b>
<b>APPENDIX I</b>	<b>SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS.....</b>	<b>472</b>
<b>APPENDIX J</b>	<b>SUMMARY OF MASTER’S RESEARCH (PILOT) .....</b>	<b>477</b>
<b>APPENDIX K</b>	<b>GROUPING THE 24 CATEGORIES OF ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES .....</b>	<b>480</b>
<b>APPENDIX L</b>	<b>CORRELATIONS USED .....</b>	<b>483</b>
<b>APPENDIX M</b>	<b>CENTRAL UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (CUREC) ETHICAL APPROVAL...</b>	<b>484</b>
<b>APPENDIX N</b>	<b>DATA MANAGEMENT PLAN .....</b>	<b>485</b>
<b>APPENDIX O</b>	<b>PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM.....</b>	<b>491</b>

## Tables and figures

<b>TABLE 2.1</b> ERIKSON'S EIGHT STAGES OF THE LIFE CYCLE .....	61
<b>TABLE 3.1</b> INSTITUTIONAL TYPOLOGY WITH CASE INSTITUTION CHARACTERISTICS .....	102
<b>TABLE 3.2</b> RECRUITMENT NUMBERS PER UNIVERSITY TYPE AND CASE INSTITUTION .....	106
<b>TABLE 3.3</b> SURVEY OF PREVIOUS STUDIES OF RELIGIOUS STUDENTS' UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE .....	110
<b>TABLE 3.4</b> NUMBER, MODE AND LENGTH OF INTERVIEWS PER CASE.....	116
<b>TABLE 5.1</b> ITEMS MEASURING RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT .....	156
<b>TABLE 5.2</b> MEASURES OF RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT.....	160
<b>TABLE 8.1</b> COMPARING THE CHRISTIAN POSTGRADUATE EXPERIENCE BY INSTITUTION TYPE – DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES ..	332
<b>TABLE 8.2</b> COMPARING THE CHRISTIAN POSTGRADUATE EXPERIENCE BY INSTITUTION TYPE – BENEFITS AND ADVANTAGES.....	334
<b>TABLE C.1</b> COMPARISON OF CHRISTIAN AND MORMON BELIEFS.....	425
<b>TABLE D.1</b> DEMOGRAPHIC DATA BY WHOLE SAMPLE AND BY INSTITUTION TYPE.....	426
<b>TABLE D.2</b> AGE OF STUDENT RESPONDENTS IN EACH CASE.....	428
<b>TABLE D.3</b> SEX OF PARTICIPANTS AND POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AT CASE INSTITUTIONS.....	429
<b>TABLE D.4</b> ETHNICITY OF PARTICIPANTS AND POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AT THE CASE INSTITUTIONS.....	431
<b>TABLE D.5</b> HOME STUDENT STATUS VS UK NATIONALITY IN THE SAMPLE.....	432
<b>TABLE F.1</b> ADAPTING ASTIN ET AL.'S (2011A) ORIGINAL RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT AND ENGAGEMENT SCALES .....	442
<b>TABLE F.2</b> DETERMINING HIGH AND LOW SCORES OF STUDENTS' RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT.....	447
<b>TABLE F.3</b> DETERMINING HIGH AND LOW SCORES OF STUDENTS' RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT.....	448
<b>FIGURE 2.1</b> WORMLEY ET AL.'S (2023) MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FLOURISHING AND RELIGION (P2).....	82
<b>FIGURE 3.1</b> LEVELS AND DIRECTIONS OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF DATA FOR EACH INSTITUTION TYPE.....	94
<b>FIGURE 3.2</b> THE FLOW OF THE CONVERGENT PARALLEL MIXED METHODS CASE STUDY DESIGN .....	96
<b>FIGURE 3.3</b> PARTICIPANTS' DENOMINATIONAL COMPOSITION (%) .....	108
<b>FIGURE 4.1</b> "HOW WELL SUPPORTED HAVE YOU FELT BY YOUR UNIVERSITY AS A STUDENT OF FAITH? .....	145
<b>FIGURE 5.1.</b> IMPORTANCE OF FAITH IN STUDENTS' IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT (%).....	157
<b>FIGURE 5.2</b> IMPORTANCE OF THEIR PERSONAL FAITH FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS.....	158
<b>FIGURE 5.3</b> DEVELOPMENT OF FAITH DURING POSTGRADUATE YEARS .....	163
<b>FIGURE 5.4</b> THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATING FAITH WITH ACADEMIC WORK (%) .....	167
<b>FIGURE 6.1</b> FAITH AND FITTING IN AT EACH CASE UNIVERSITY (%) .....	175
<b>FIGURE 6.2</b> EXPERIENCES OF HOSTILE ATTITUDES AND DIFFICULTIES IN CHRISTIAN STUDENTS' LIVES.....	176
<b>FIGURE 6.3</b> WHERE DO STUDENTS PERCEIVE NEGATIVE ATTITUDES OR FEELINGS CASE BY CASE?.....	177
<b>FIGURE 6.4</b> STUDENTS' SENSE OF OPENNESS ABOUT THEIR FAITH WITH PEERS AND WITH STAFF, BY UNIVERSITY TYPE .....	200
<b>FIGURE 6.5</b> FREQUENCY OF RELIGIOUS GROUP ATTENDANCE (%) AND THE OPPOSING TENDENCIES IN THE SECULAR AND THE TRADITIONAL ELITE CASES.....	211

<b>FIGURE 7.1</b> STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF BEING LOVED BY GOD.....	215
<b>FIGURE 7.2</b> CHRISTIAN BELIEFS WERE A SOURCE OF STRENGTH, SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE FOR POSTGRADUATES .....	217
<b>FIGURE 7.3</b> THE ROLE OF FAITH IN PROVIDING MEANING AND PURPOSE .....	218
<b>FIGURE 7.4</b> THE ROLE OF STUDENTS' FAITH IN DEFINING THEIR GOALS IN LIFE .....	219
<b>FIGURE 7.5</b> THE LEVEL TO WHICH STUDENTS CONSIDERED BELONGING TO A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY ENRICHING .....	234
<b>FIGURE 7.6</b> THE LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE OF FAITH IN MAINTAINING STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH .....	239
<b>FIGURE 7.7</b> THE IMPORTANCE OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN MAINTAINING STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH .....	250
<b>FIGURE 8.1</b> THE PROCESS OF RELIGIOUS FADING AS IT AFFECTS THE INDIVIDUAL .....	288
<b>FIGURE 8.2</b> RELIGIOUS BELONGING IS PART OF THE OVERALL UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE .....	303
<b>FIGURE 8.3</b> THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIAN BELIEFS ON STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH.....	320
<b>FIGURE 8.4</b> STUDENTS' RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND FLOURISHING AT UNIVERSITY .....	329
<b>FIGURE D.1</b> HISTOGRAM OF QUANTITATIVE SURVEY RESPONDENTS' AGE (N=164).....	428
<b>FIGURE E.1</b> PROJECT WEBSITE LANDING PAGE 1/2.....	433
<b>FIGURE E.2</b> PROJECT WEBSITE LANDING PAGE 2/2.....	434
<b>FIGURE E.3</b> PROJECT WEBSITE SURVEY PAGE.....	435
<b>FIGURE E.4</b> PARTICIPANT INFORMATION PAGE 1/3.....	436
<b>FIGURE E.5</b> CONTACT PAGE TO RESEARCHER.....	437

## **Abstract**

63% of postgraduate students in England identify with a religion or belief (HESA, 2023a). There is a small but growing body of literature concerned with religious students, exploring the Christian undergraduate experience (Guest, Aune, et al., 2013), the role of chaplains (Aune et al., 2019, 2023), religious student societies (Aune et al., 2024; Perfect et al., 2019) and interfaith relations on campus (Peacock et al., 2023). These studies, however, focus on undergraduates, even though the number of postgraduates grew by 65% in the last decade to 30% of the student population (HESA, 2023b). Little is known about the postgraduate experience, or about religion as a protected characteristic in higher education (Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023).

This mixed methods study focuses on Christian postgraduate students' university experience as it pertains to their religious identity. The thesis employed a convergent parallel multiple case study design at three types of universities in England. Through thematic analysis of 48 semi-structured interviews and descriptive statistics of 165 survey responses I explore both the difficulties and the advantages of being a student of faith.

Findings indicate that a lack of religious literacy can lead to stereotyping and exclusion of Christian students for their perceived value differences, resulting in faith concealment and invisibility, making a tentative empirical contribution to our understanding of the complexities of secularisation as it plays out on campus. Uniquely, this study also explored the potential benefits of faith and found that Christian postgraduates' beliefs in a loving God are a source of meaning and purpose. Positive religious coping, their personal faith, practices and religious service attendance bolster Christian postgraduates' mental health and flourishing.

I argue that universities should develop religious EDI frameworks and should also utilise benefits of faith in student mental health provisions. Collaboration with churches and religious organisations can build bridges, enhance belonging and pastoral care. Ultimately, a general normalisation of religion within academia is needed in order for religious members to flourish.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I express my gratitude to my wonderful supervisors. Without Dr Liam Gearon, I would have never embarked on this journey. He created space for me on a full PGCE course, encouraged me to apply for and supported me throughout my MSc work, spurring me on all the way through the DPhil project. He has been a constant presence of good in my life in the last 9 years, and his amazing amount of knowledge, his thinking outside the box and courage to speak have been truly inspiring. Prof Alis Oancea's integrity, kindness and humility paired with her depth and breadth of knowledge, both in philosophical heights and pragmatic details is truly unique. I have been honoured to have had the chance to learn from her both as my supervisor and PI on two projects, and as a human being. She is an extraordinary role-model to all academics.

I am thankful to all my participants, who kindly, bravely and selflessly shared their time and thoughts with me. I learned so much from them and have grown in my own faith, having witnessed theirs.

I am thankful to the group of scholars and researchers who have been uncovering the experiences of religious students in Britain. Their work has been influential and inspirational. In particular, I would like to thank Prof Kristin Aune for sharing methodology advice with me even before she knew who I was, for listening to my first-ever conference presentation and spending the following coffee break talking to me – her work has inspired so much of what I do and her selfless attitude to and interest in students outside of her own institution is an example I wish to carry on.

I would like to thank Dr Steve Puttick for his insights in my Transfer of Status and Confirmation of Status examinations, for sharing his thoughts on academic life and guidance on the importance of the concept of space. To Dr James Robson, and Prof Ingrid Lunt for their feedback at those examinations I am also thankful.

I am grateful to Prof Steve Strand who selflessly gave his valuable time to help me with the quantitative element of the thesis. Also, to Mirna Šumatić who, despite being under equal amount of pressure, spent time guiding me in this area.

To my friend Dr Peter Jordan who has been an inspiration and support, encouraging me to reach higher, to spaces I didn't dare to look; for (im)pressing me to publish. Our termly lunches have been a highlight along the way.

To Dr Theodor Dunkelgrün for being the kind human and brilliant academic he is, and representing what true inter-faith respect and care should (could) look like in a different world. I learned so much in the CRASSH summer school at 'the other' University from all the contributors, including the Rt Rev and Rt Hon Dr Rowan Williams, Prof Alison Scott-Baumann, Dr James Walters and Prof Mona Siddiqui and all my fellow participants. This project would have been much poorer without their collective wisdom.

I am deeply indebted to the StMatthias Trust for the funding they generously provided for me to be able to carry out this research, and for their engagement with the project through yearly meetings and help in recruitment when I ran out of options. And to the Department of Education, University of Oxford, for their generous scholarship also.

My thanks go out to academics and chaplains working with postgraduate students. I cannot name them for data protection purposes, but their work is vital as evidenced in this thesis.

To all those on my DPhil cohort who have encouraged me and helped me along the way.

Thank you to Dr Sam Harper for encouragement towards the end of the DPhil that what I am doing is worthwhile and can have impact in people's lives, and for guidance in going forward. It gave me the uplift I needed just as I was running out steam.

I am deeply grateful to my husband, Doug for supporting me through these tumultuous years, for picking up the bill when the funding ran out and making it possible for me to do and finish this work. I am also thankful to my children for putting up with periodical absences of their mum on field work, writing breaks and general over-workedness.

I am thankful to the Early Birds and my fellowship group for all your prayers and support throughout the years. Thank you to Toria for being my friend and encourager.

Most importantly, however, thanks be to God.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Research on the experiences of religious students in England has been a small but increasingly growing field in higher education, with studies exploring the Christian undergraduate experience (Guest, Aune, et al., 2013), the role of chaplains and chaplaincies (Aune et al., 2019, 2023), undergraduate religious student societies (Aune et al., 2024; Perfect et al., 2019), interfaith relations on campus (Peacock & Guest, 2024) and the situation of Muslim students (Scott-Baumann & Perfect, 2021). However, the majority of these studies focus on the undergraduate population, even though the number of postgraduates grew by 65% in the last ten years and they now make up 30% of the overall student population in the country (HESA, 2023b). Very little is known about the postgraduate experience in general, and even less about the religious postgraduate experience or about religion as a protected characteristic in higher education (Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023). In today's national and international climate of riots and wars with perceived religious motives, it is increasingly clear that religion can no longer be avoided as part of the student experience, yet we know virtually nothing about how religious postgraduates navigate their faith identity within their academic environments. In an ever-shifting context of secularity, religious diversity and social justice agendas, it is imperative to understand the needs and experiences of postgraduate students who identify with a religion in order to best support them during their courses.

In response to this hiatus, this research aims to explore the experiences of Christian postgraduate students who form the largest religious minority at universities in England, with over 196,000 students, 31% of the total postgraduate population (HESA, 2022b). I

conducted a mixed methods multiple case study at three types of universities to identify ways in which students' religious identity interacts with their university experience.

In this introductory chapter I will first provide a brief background to the context of Christian postgraduates in contemporary English higher education, describe the research problem, aim and questions which guide this research before I summarise the contribution this thesis makes to the field of religious student experience. Finally, I close by outlining the structure of this thesis.

## **1.1 Background to the religious postgraduate experience**

England is a secular yet pluralistic Western society, with parallel processes of increasing both in non-religion and in religious diversity (ONS, 2022). The faith landscape in England has been changing rapidly in the last few decades. Although the country is historically Christian in religion and culture, less than half of its population now identifies with Christianity (ibid.). The number of Christians has declined significantly from 72% of the population to 46% in just 20 years (ONS, 2022)<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, Christians make up the oldest population within any group (including those of no religion), with the average age at 51 years – up from 46 in 2011 (ONS, 2023). Universities form microcosms within this larger society and include significant and growing numbers of students from around the world. Christians are no longer the majority in the country and can reasonably be assumed to have been a minority in academia in the West for even longer (Bebbington, 1992), although data on religious

---

<sup>1</sup> Religion was only introduced at the 2001 census, to “supplement the output from the ethnicity question by identifying ethnic minority sub-groups, particularly those originating from the Indian sub-continent, in terms of their religion”(Economic Secretary to the Treasury et al., 1999, p17). No ONS data on religion exist for the previous 16 censuses.

affiliation has only been collected since 2017 by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Christian students form a large and largely unrecognised minority in higher education. The place of Christians in UK society is changing.

Only the first few universities in the country were founded on religious, specifically Christian foundations, and since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century almost all of the over 140 universities in England (HESA, 2023b) have non-sectarian charters (with the exception of a handful of universities which now belong in the Cathedrals Group). In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, religion was considered irrelevant (at best) in higher education (Bruce, 2002), and universities themselves were viewed as a driving force behind secularisation (Uecker et al., 2007). By the 2010s, however, it was becoming clear that religion in the university was “alive and well” (Guest, Aune, et al., 2013) and the secularising effect seems to have slowed down (Schwadel, 2016). Simultaneously, universities have become part of mass education and were marketized, with the ‘university experience’ increasing in importance (Sabri, 2011).

Scholars started to explore the experiences of religious students at universities in this decade, with the first seminal work published in 2011 in the form of a report about religious student and staff experience by Weller et al. (2011) for the Equality Challenge Unit. The authors found that the majority of students (and staff) felt safe and free to express their views at their universities, similar to more recent findings of Perfect et al. (2019). Yet, there remained a small but significant minority of students who do not feel free to be open about their religious views, further confirmed by Peacock et al. (2023). Studies found that students who belong to this minority can experience othering and stereotyping (Stevenson, 2014), exclusion (Baratta & Smith, 2019; Reid, 2014), hostility (Burchett & Glanzer, 2020), minoritisation (Morgans, 2023), harassment and discrimination (Cornell, 2020; Weller et al.,

2011) on campus. Most relevant to the present research is Guest et al.'s (2013) *Christianity and the university experience: understanding student faith*, a large-scale mixed methods study with Christian undergraduates in England, which inspired the conception of the present thesis. Their research suggests that undergraduate Christians struggle with the home-to-university transition, fitting in on campus, the undergraduate drinking culture and authenticating their faith, experiences often associated with the specifically undergraduate phase of life. They report a relatively low faith-based engagement of 27% across their sample, with 12% of students becoming less and 15% growing more religious in their undergraduate years. Both their project and other studies do include some postgraduate students within their samples, but their experience as a separate phenomenon is almost entirely unresearched in the UK context. There is a small body of literature with religious postgraduate students in America, reporting that many hide their religious identity in academic environments, as it is a *concealable stigmatised identity* (Barnes et al., 2021; Google et al., 2023; Scheitle & Dabbs, 2021).

Strikingly noticeable by absence from these findings are the rich and well-documented benefits of religion, such as providing meaning and purpose (Nelson et al., 2021; Stroope et al., 2013), better mental and physical health (Koenig, 2012) and flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017b; Wormley et al., 2023), all of which are particularly relevant to students. Whilst the literature does acknowledge that there are those who struggle due to their faith identity on campus, and there are those who do not – i.e. not everyone has a difficult experience – the research focus is rather one-sided.

Thus, there is a double blind-spot in our understanding of the religious student experience: our knowledge of the postgraduate religious experience as well as what positive role their religion, if any, plays in the lives of religious students.

As the number of postgraduates is steadily growing, and 63% of them identify with a religion or belief (HESA, 2023a), there is a strong argument for exploring their experiences. However, the 63% do not make one homogeneous majority. In 2022/23, Christians represented 31% of the postgraduate student body, followed by 13% Muslim, 12% Hindu, 2% Sikh and Buddhist each, and 0.4% Jewish students (ibid.). Additionally, there are denominational and regional variations within most traditions. Furthermore, it may be reasonably assumed that the postgraduate experience is different to the undergraduate as their courses are different and their life stage is different. For example, 52% of undergraduates are under 20 and 24% between 21-24 years of age, whilst postgraduates are much less homogeneous in age and life experience. For instance, many juggle work (Coneyworth et al., 2020) and caring responsibilities with their studies (Scheitle et al., 2021). Researching the religious postgraduate experience is thus complex, yet urgent. This study set out to explore the largest group amongst them.

## **1.2 Rationale, aims and research questions**

Assessing the experiences of Christian postgraduates at universities will provide useful insight into their needs and inform institutions and religious organisations about how to cater to them. The study concentrates on Christian students as focussing on one tradition provides an opportunity to explore it deeper within the constraints of a doctoral thesis. Furthermore, my background as a Christian myself provided an opportunity to carry out insider research with its benefits of immediate rapport and deeper understanding (Brannick

& Coghlan, 2007), as will be further discussed later. The study explores the student experience within England (as opposed to the UK) because there are marked differences between universities within the devolved nations (Guest et al., 2013), which would further complicate an already 'supercomplex' picture (Barnett, 2015).

This research thus aims to explore Christian postgraduate students' experiences at universities in England as they pertain to their religious identity. It uses mixed methods – online surveys and interviews – to identify ways in which students' religious identity interacts with their university experience to answer the following research questions:

Overarching research question:

*How do Christian postgraduate students in England describe the relationship between their university experience and their religious identity?*

The following three sub-questions will inform the overarching research question:

RQ1: *What difficulties and challenges at university do Christian postgraduate students perceive as arising from their religious identity?*

RQ2: *What benefits and advantages at university do Christian postgraduate students perceive as arising from their religious identity?*

RQ3: *What differences are there, if any, between the Christian postgraduate experience by institution type?*

Answers to RQ1 will lead to nuanced understandings of whether the difficulties identified in the undergraduate literature (Baratta & Smith, 2019; Guest, Aune, et al., 2013; Reid, 2017b; Stevenson, 2013) are present in the lives of postgraduate students. Answers to RQ2 will provide novel information on whether the benefits of faith are present and helpful in the

religious postgraduate experience. Finally, RQ3 will explore the role of the physical and social environment in which students are situated in, as large-scale studies conducted on religiosity in higher education in England evidence that the nature of the university environment has influence on the experience of religious students (Guest, 2015; Peacock et al., 2023).

### **1.3 Importance and significance of this research**

This research was designed with a dual purpose. First, by the very nature of a doctoral thesis, to expand our knowledge and understanding of the experiences of a hitherto under-researched group of students. Importantly, the second purpose is that such knowledge and understanding would further Christian postgraduates' flourishing in contemporary higher education.

Addressing the first of these aims, this study starts to fill an important gap in the religious student experience literature by exploring how Christian postgraduates describe their university experience. It is particularly original in its approach of studying a minority group through the dual lens of both the difficulties and advantages of the religious minority experience. Although I do highlight the fact that power structures have shifted, and Christians can no longer be thought of as the majority, I deliberately avoid the framing of identity politics and culture wars, as these carry negative connotations and reinforce an "us vs them" attitude which this research hopes to counter. Uniquely, this study also explores the wide range of benefits their religious identity provides Christian postgraduates with. Thus, one of the main contributions of this thesis is shining a light on the colourful prism of the religious student experience and providing a fuller picture than many studies hence have done.

As to the second purpose, this research contributes to the flourishing of religious postgraduates through informing practitioners – universities, churches and religious organisations – both about what difficulties students face and thus need addressing on campus and highlighting particular elements of the Christian faith which may be utilised in their pastoral care. Within universities, understanding the experiences of Christian postgraduate students has the potential to inform institutional equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policies as they increasingly focus on religious minorities. The study's findings will also inform Christian student organisations and local churches about the need for specific care of this cohort and what those needs may be. Finally, such recognitions may encourage and facilitate more cooperation between universities and religious organisations for the benefit of both the students and the institutions. The research should also bring attention to the fact that postgraduate students, and religious students may need different and specific social, educational or pastoral care.

Finally, my hope is that the study will inspire both further exploratory studies into the experiences of students and university staff of various religious commitments and may also form a first step in inspiring further, explanatory work.

I situate my research within the wider field of higher education research, specifically in the study of religion in education, whilst drawing heavily on the work of contemporary sociologists of religion as well as psychologists of religion, applying a theological lens to students' beliefs. Thus, I build an interface between understanding the societal sources of religious students' challenges at English universities and ways in which they may cope with such challenges through elements of their faith.

## 1.4 Structure of this thesis

The present *Introduction* comprises **Chapter 1** of this thesis, providing a background and rationale to this study, laying out the research problem, aims, objectives and research questions, followed by the structure of the paper.

In **Chapter 2**, the *Literature review*, I take the reader through a short history of the 'university' in England, focussing on its relationship to Christianity, drawing parallels between its progress and the development of secularism, arriving at the issues of contemporary higher education. Pausing here, I engage with topics on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), freedom of speech and the concept of the 'university experience', discussing the pressing issues of postgraduate mental health and belonging. In the second half of **Chapter 2** I turn from university to student, exploring the concept of identity and religious identity, moving to current knowledge of the religious student experience. I separately explore potential benefits of faith, as this literature is as of yet undeveloped within the student experience literature.

In **Chapter 3** I describe the *Methodology* of this thesis, including its choice of mixed methods and multiple case study design, sampling and data collection, methods of analysis, my own positionality and finally reflect on ethical considerations.

In **Chapter 4**, the first of four findings chapters, I present data about *The case institutions*, the Traditional elite, Secular and Cathedrals Group universities that this research explored.

**Chapter 5** describes participants' *Identities and characteristics*, including demographic data, but especially findings pertaining to students' religious identity characteristics. **Chapter 6** engages with the six themes which students used to describe *the difficulties and challenges* that arise from their religious identity at university: hostile attitudes, assumptions and

stereotyping, clash of values and ethics, lack of equality and inclusion, faith concealment and invisibility, and lack of Christian community. In **Chapter 7**, I turn to findings describing *the advantages and benefits of postgraduates' religious identity* while studying for their degrees, including how they describe the influence of their beliefs on their university experience, the importance and benefits of faith communities and several aspects of the religious identity which benefit student mental health.

In **Chapter 8**, I bring together all of the above and discuss *the Christian postgraduate experience* through the dual lens of difficulties and benefits, exploring also the role of the institution type in religious students' university experience. I close this chapter by exploring the religious postgraduate experience from an identity development and social identity theory perspective, concluding that students' religious identity is salient in most contexts and that postgraduates are indeed at a different life-stage to that of undergraduates.

I finish the thesis in **Chapter 9, Conclusion**, summarising its original contribution to knowledge, its limitations, policy implications, recommendations for practice and future research, closing with my final reflexions on the topic of this research.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature review**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

In England the relationship – or lack thereof – between higher education and religion has a long and varied history, which has left its mark on universities today, affecting the contemporary religious student experience. Indeed, the way universities were formed is deeply intertwined with the history of religion, and more specifically, that of Christianity in England. From its foundations in the Middle Ages as a place for training clergy for the Church to its hard secularity in the second half of the 20th century, academia in England played a significant part in the transformation of the role of religion in society, and within its own walls, through a rich tradition of scholarly thinking and debate. Being aware of these historical processes forms a vital base to understanding the culture of contemporary universities. I thus start this chapter with a short history of the relationship between Christianity and the English university, describing the process of going from fully religious to almost completely secular higher education. Their formation had a profound effect on the ethos and climate of English universities and this section will inform the typology used in the present comparative case study.

I then summarise some of the challenges higher education faces today, which are relevant to the present research, and touch on topics such as massification, internationalisation and marketisation. The issues of EDI and freedom of speech are particularly pertinent to the experiences of religious students and are also discussed in this section, followed by an exploration of the current postgraduate belonging and mental health crises.

After situating the place of postgraduate students within the 21<sup>st</sup> century campus, I turn the focus on the students themselves. I provide a short description of the concept of ‘identity’, and describe various aspects of the ‘religious’ identity, including religious belonging, intersectionality with other identities and negative consequences which may derive from being religious: I explore themes of marginalisation, identity concealment and attitudes toward religious students through empirical work with undergraduates in England and postgraduates in the United States. Finally, I highlight elements of being religious found to have a positive influence on lives of believers, and which may thus be beneficial in the postgraduate student experience.

## 2.2 Secularisation and the academia – how did we get here?

Through the ensuing section I explore side by side the evolution of English universities and some of the main phases of the process of secularisation, especially as pertaining to the university. Universities are particularly suitable to demonstrate this process for four reasons: i.) they have been the crucible of progressive thought, as scholars throughout the last three centuries have described, analysed and debated the process of secularisation (Flatt, 2020; Wolterstorff, 2019); ii.) universities are currently some of the most secularised places in society (Berger et al., 2008; Bryant, 2006); iii) the situation of *Christian* students is particular among other religious minorities on campuses, for it is *this* religion that Western Europe has become secular of; iv.) the process of secularisation shaped the type of universities that exist in the English higher education system and has strong bearing on the typology used in the present thesis (Gilliat-Ray, 2009; Guest et al., 2013; Weller et al., 2011). Inevitably, my account describing this long and varied journey to a so-called secular society (and higher education) is not comprehensive. The intention here is not to go into deep

discussion and analysis of what secularisation is – especially as the concept itself is contested and scholars from various schools associate it with different meanings. Words such as “secularity (the condition of being secular), secularization (the process of becoming secular) and secularism (the ideology promoting secularization)” (Casanova, 2009; Woodhead & Catto, 2012) are sometimes used interchangeably and as Gorski and Altinordu (2008) point out,

*there is no single or widely accepted definition of secularization. There is, first of all, disagreement about its locus. Some definitions emphasize individual beliefs and practices, others the influence of religious norms and elites, and still others the differentiation of religious and non-religious spheres or institutions” (p57).*

Rather, I illustrate to the reader the transformation of the relationship between the English university – the environment the subjects of this research work in – and Christianity, the religion they identify with. British society has gone through enormous transformation, especially since World War II. Part of this transformation has been its relationship to religion, and particularly, Christianity, which has gone from being the common ground for moral and societal structures to being just one of a plethora of options one may choose to live by (Smith, 2014).

### **2.2.1 The first 700 years – in service of the Church**

England is a country with an ancient tradition of university education. Like in the rest of Europe, the first, Medieval universities were founded largely for clerical and law education, starting with Oxford in the 12<sup>th</sup>, and followed by Cambridge in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century (Bebbington, 2011; Bird, 2023). These universities were the only two for hundreds of years, with the majority of students preparing for the priesthood and state administration (Bebbington, 2011; Collini, 2012). Indeed, until the 14<sup>th</sup> century, they were two of only three

universities in Europe with papal degree-awarding powers in theology (Asztalos, 1991) (although theological education was rich in many other cities across the continent). These English universities didn't lose their status and independence with the Reformation, but rather became Anglican from Roman Catholic by the mid-1600s and this was to remain so for the next two hundred years (Beddard, 1997). By 1850, all those admitted to Oxford, for example, had to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, all tutors were clergymen, college chapel was compulsory and 80% of undergraduates were pursuing a clerical career (Bebbington, 1992).

It was at this point in history that after 700 years the hegemony of the Church was about to change – discontentment with the system was brewing in various circles. The effects of the Enlightenment and the Age of Revolutions – societal, intellectual and industrial – called for change (Hobsbawm, 2000); the arrival of *modernity* demanded progress, which penetrated even the walls of institutions so deeply rooted in the Church.

The ancient universities managed to re-invent themselves as world-class research institutions, but their Christian history left a strong legacy, including their collegiate structure, the presence of college chapels and evensong, the recital of grace at college dinners and the many churches that are spotted amongst the university buildings (Guest, Aune, et al., 2013). An interesting peculiarity, which most likely contributed to the survival of such religious functions are the charters of the ancient colleges, which bind them to this day to fulfil a dual purpose of education and the advancement of the Christian faith (Russell, 1943).

## 2.2.2 19th century changes – the modern university emerges

The most influential debate about higher education in 19<sup>th</sup> century England was dominated by John Henry Newman's *The idea of a University* (Newman, 1976). Newman first published a series of lectures on the need for a Catholic university in Dublin in 1852, after being invited by the archbishop to establish one (Newman & Turner, 1996). A devout Christian, first an Anglican then Roman Catholic priest (and later cardinal), an Oxford don and vicar of the University Church, Newman argued for 'liberal education': "(i) objective knowledge and (ii) critical thought in (iii) autonomous institutions" (Barnett, 2015, p15). He supported the ideals of academic freedom, but contested the central importance of utility, as a detrimental expression of secular modernity. He argued for knowledge 'as its own end' – a searching for truth – and the centrality of the study of (national) literature as means of delivering holistically trained people (Peters et al., 2018), both of which remained inseparable from moral and religious education for him, a devout clergyman with a radically new vision for a religiously infused higher education.

T.H. Huxley, prominent scientist at the time, also argued for independent knowledge, stating that "[t]he primary business of universities has to do merely with pure knowledge and pure art – independent of all application to practice; with the advancement of culture and not with the increase of wealth or commodities" (as quoted by Collini, 2017, p16). These were revolutionary ideas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when most of the few universities were controlled by the Anglican church (only University College, London accepted non-conformist and secular students before the 1870s). The independence founders of redbrick universities, scientist and industrialists argued for was not only from the church, however, but also from

practical, utilitarian purposes – the university had “higher aims”, the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake (Collini, *ibid.*). Their ideals were not realised, however.

The 19th century marks a seismic change in what we today call ‘higher education’. Despite Newman’s qualms, schools were being founded in large industrial cities for the education of the new wealthy middle classes with a focus on utilitarian courses, teaching medicine and subjects useful for industry (Whyte, 2015). At the same time, non-conformist Christians were also calling for the ancient universities to abolish the religious (i.e. Anglican) tests for admission, seeing the way to religious equality through the ‘secularisation’ of the universities (Bebbington, 1992), a curious occurrence in itself. It was the Oxford graduate, MP for the University of Oxford – a devout Anglican – W.E. Gladstone, who brought the bill through the House of Commons to make religious tests voluntary in 1854, and abolishing religious tests all together in 1871, by which time he was prime minister (*ibid.*). These acts set in motion profound change in British higher education, which in the course of the following century had gone from almost completely Anglican to almost completely secular. Presently, there are no explicitly Anglican, Christian or religious universities in England<sup>2</sup>.

Although very slowly at first, these debates and shifts were influenced by the German tradition of *Bildung*. Wilhelm von Humboldt’s holistic approach to (higher) education of the individual (as a citizen and a student), and the combination of research and teaching in the same institution became the root of the modern research university – traditionally marked

---

<sup>2</sup> As opposed to the American model, where state and religion are separate, but education can be religious. In England, there is state religion, but no religion in education.

by his foundation of the University of Berlin in 1810 (Peters et al., 2018). According to Marek Kwiek (2008):

*There are three main principles of the modern university to be found in the founding father of the University of Berlin. The first principle is the unity of research and teaching (die Einheit von Forschung und Lehre); the second is the protection of academic freedom: the freedom to teach (Lehrfreiheit) and the freedom to learn (Lernfreiheit); and the third is the central importance of the faculty of philosophy (the faculty of Arts and Sciences in modern terminology) ... Together the three principles have guided the modern institution of the university through the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (p. 5)*

Note the complete lack of religion, faith or theology in these ideals, despite Humboldt's personal religious faith (James, 1913). The ontology and epistemology of higher education was moving away from the religious. The German model became globally influential and remained so well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gradually it was adopted in England, imbued with Kant's ideal of 'reason' as the founding principle of the university (Peters et al., 2018).

Around the turn of the century many of the aforementioned city-based schools started to emerge as civic universities – such as Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield or Liverpool – providing education on a larger scale and on non-religious basis (Whyte, 2015). These were to become the so-called *red brick* group of universities, named after the architecture of their buildings so prominent in the Victorian era, leading into the early 1900s and quickly multiplying the number of students.

### **2.2.3 The 20th century and onwards – mass higher education and the height and fall of the secularisation thesis**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw two further and even greater expansions of the sector, in the 1960s and the 1990s. In the first wave, largely as a result of 1963 Robbins Report and a series of

decisions of the University Grants Committee prior to the report, new universities were established, older institutions grew in numbers and colleges of advanced technology were to be given university status in order to expand access and satisfy demands for university places (Calhoun, 2014). These new universities didn't have theology faculties, but the first religious studies departments emerged, as the "dispassionate study of religion as a purely academic endeavour" (Guest et al. 2013, p15). The new institutions were often built on campuses outside of cities and became known as plate glass universities (Beloff, 1968).

This boom in institutions came at the height of the classic *secularisation theory* in academia. The dominant view of sociologists of the time (e.g. Luckmann, Berger, Wilson, Fenn, Parsons, Bellah) was that religion was in decline (Tschannen, 1991), losing its significance at societal and personal level. Some scholars went as far as stating that religion's "evolutionary future [...] is extinction" (Wallace, 1966).

Bruce (2002) summarises the process in the following words:

*Industrialization brought with it a series of social changes – the fragmentation of the life-world, the decline of community, the rise of bureaucracy, technological consciousness – that together made religion less arresting and less plausible than it had been in pre-modern societies. That is the conclusion of most social scientists, historians, and church leaders in the Western world (p36).*

Even though there remain some hard-line supporters of the old paradigm to this day (Gearon, 2012; Gorski & Altinordu, 2008) defending a now 'unfashionable theory' (Bruce, 2011), by the 1980s and 1990s other voices in the debate emerged, the most prominent being the religious economies or supply-side school. Stark (1999) in his "Secularization: R.I.P.", and other sociologists posited that where people have free choice of religion, as opposed to one main church dominating the 'market', demand remains high. They sought explanation to the decline of organised religion (which they did not deny) by positing that

although organised religion may be declining, that is not to say it is also doing so in the private space (Davie, 2012b; Heelas & Woodhead, 2004; Stark, 1999). The thence ‘irrefutable’ claims of the secularisation thesis started to lose their hold.

It was in this era of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that the second wave of expansion of the university sector took place in England. With the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, 35 polytechnics were granted university status and other colleges became eligible to apply for this too (Hoskins, 2023). This act made it possible for former church-based teacher training colleges to gain university status, later forming the Cathedrals Group universities – 15 institutions which still remain church-affiliated, yet not religious universities.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some prominent secularist scholars also started to see the process differently. Berger, for example, came to the conclusion that secularisation as it was understood in the 60s and 70s was not how history unfolded. He published *The desecularization of the world: resurgent religion and world politics*, claiming that “the assumption we live in a secularized world is false.... The world today is as furiously religious as it ever was” (Berger, 1999, p2). There are exceptions to this rule, however. Academia in particular, according to Berger et al. (2008) is a sector where secularisation has a stronghold. Furthermore, Europe, and especially Western and Northern Europe, seem to be anomalies with their highly secularised societies – in the rest of the world religion is thriving (Davie, 2012a). This situates the present study then in some of the most secularised environments in the world.

Whilst with the internationalisation of higher education (discussed further in section 2.3 ), religion is coming back to European universities at even higher rates than the rest of society, the consequences of secularisation on academia in England are undeniable. Religion has

been largely exiled from higher education (apart from theology and religious studies faculties in institutions where they exist) as a result of one of the core concepts of most versions of the secularisation theory – *differentiation*.

#### 2.2.4 Differentiation – incompatibility of religion and education?

Throughout the history of the secularisation theory, and shared by the many different, sometimes even opposing branches of the debate, *differentiation* has been a common thread (Flatt, 2023; Van der Tol & Gorski, 2022). Casanova (2007) states that the “core component of classical theories of secularization” is “the differentiation of the secular institutions (state, economy, science), usually understood as ‘emancipation’ from religious institutions and norms” (p.7.). According to Gorski (2000), the separation of religious and non-religious institutions is the “central claim” of secularisation theory (p.143).

Sociologists describe different ‘spheres’ (Weber, 1978), sub-systems of society with different functions of their own (Dobbelaere, 2002), each with its specific, non-religious, innate purpose, religion forming its own sphere (Casanova, 1994). Particularly interesting is the relationship of this process to ‘education’, one of a handful of ‘spheres’ referred to by all schools and nearly all scholars who speak of the emancipation of education from the rule of religion (Berger, 1967; Casanova, 1994; Tschannen, 1991). Stark describes “a decline in the social power of the once-dominant religious institutions whereby other social institutions, especially political and educational institutions, have *escaped* from prior religious domination” (Stark, 1999, emphasis mine). It is clear from these quotes that leading sociologists did not look favourably on religion in academia in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As a result of such pressures, higher education has become fully differentiated, a sphere in its own right, with its own governing values, independent of religion. However, a large proportion of the staff and students who populate these institutions in England are religious themselves. Religion cannot be left outside of campuses and omitted from the thinking and work of those who identify as religious. Treating academia as completely differentiated is problematic.

### Another frame – is there room for God in academia?

By the 2000s, scholars were discussing a post-secular society (Habermas, 2008; Parmaksız, 2018; Sullivan & Vries, 2006) and writers claimed that “God is back” (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2010). There has been a resurgence of religion in the public space. Some of this took place in the political arena (Wilson, 2023): the 9/11 Islamist attacks in the USA, or the 7/7 London bomb attacks, for example, prompted policies such as the contentious Prevent Duty in Britain (Scott-Baumann, 2017), while Europe was also looking for new ways of ‘peaceful coexistence’ in its rapidly changing societal and religious makeup (Gearon, 2012). On the other hand, interest in religion has been rising in academia and education (Gearon et al., 2024; Starkey & Tomalin, 2022), as well as becoming one of several protected characteristics in the Equality Act (2010), and indeed, part of the so-called culture wars.

Charles Taylor published his seminal book *A Secular Age* in 2007, bringing a new voice and perspective into the debate. Taylor distinguishes between three forms of secularism throughout history. *Secularity 1* took place in the Medieval ‘enchanted’ world, where belief in the transcendent was the common ground. The separation occurred between everyday ‘secular’ people, and those whose main pursuit in life was the search of the holy, such as priests. *Secularity 2* for Taylor is the classic ‘secularisation theory’, i.e. the decline of religion,

the 'objective', neutral, areligious public space, as described by Bruce (2002) and originally by Berger in *The Sacred Canopy* (1967). It's a subtraction story: 'secularity equals reality minus religion'. Taylor uses the phrase 'immanent frame' whereby reality has become for many a vertically closed world, in which the transcendent no longer has a place.

Taylor, however, offers a third way. Whilst leaving room for the first two definitions, he posits that

*[the] shift to secularity in this [3<sup>rd</sup>] sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace (2007, p3).*

According to Taylor, in today's society, human flourishing, not the seeking of the transcendent, is the ultimate goal and nothing beyond that is aimed for. The world moved from the 'enchanted' world where belief was default to where it is now one of many ways.

The parallel with the history of universities in England is clear. They were once fully religious, even 'sacred' places, where science and religion both had their place within a created order and where many pursued the search of the 'holy' (secularity 1) within the university. With the Enlightenment and modernisation, the sacred and secular started to depart, and in the mid- to late 1800s separated, and religion started to be phased out of higher education, a process accelerated by the appearance of civic universities. By the 1950s and 60s religion was more rapidly declining, through what Taylor calls the *Nova effect* – secularisation, which used to be the way of the élites, has broken into mainstream society, creating a world of immanent frames (i.e. no room for the transcendent), leading to secular campuses and scholarship. Full differentiation occurred (secularity 2). Finally, there must be a recognition that religion, although no longer axiomatic, is still one of many options (secularity 3) even in the world of academia.

I argue that whilst we do live in a 'secularity 3' world, 'secularity 2' is how many conceive of academia in particular, and thus religious thought may be considered incompatible in such 'differentiated' spaces. Secularity is not neutrality – differentiation is the exclusion of the sacred from the public. To situate students and their experience more precisely in this public space, I explore the notion deeper.

### **The university as a public (secular?) space**

The concept of space dominant in science to this day is 'absolute space' – i.e. space as independent of people and objects, infinite, expanding, pre-existent. Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers and scientists worked with this concept of space, and it still underpins much of modern science and mathematics (Merriman, 2022). Debates over whether God is part of space were 'finalised' by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, leaving 'space' as a purely physical concept (Grant, 1981) within science. Yet, space for Christian students is infinitely occupied by the omnipresence of God, whether in public or private.

More pertinent to the subject of this study, thus, are other notions of space, such as 'lived' or 'social' space (Lefebvre, 1991) and 'relational' space (Massey, 2005). For feminist geographer Massey "[p]ublic space is negotiated socially, and it is this negotiation over the unequal power-relation that makes them public". Space is where people of all backgrounds are thrown together and are forced to make it work for themselves, "the possibility of the existence of plurality, of the co-existence of the difference" (p3) and space is thus shaped and created by the actors in it. "Space is a sphere of 'coexisting heterogeneity' (p13)". Space, then, has to be co-created, allowing for difference, allowing for multiplicity and acknowledging that individuals, religious or not, influence one-another in their co-created and co-habited social spaces. The inequalities of those occupying the socially created public

space force negotiations, and influence who has and how much say. Space thus is not static. “Spaces are moving, evolving constellations of social-material relations that humans make for themselves” (Marginson, 2022, p1371).

It is especially pertinent to explore the concept of public space regarding the experiences of religious students, because the ‘public’ has been assumed to be ‘secular’ for decades, with the process of secularisation understood by many as the driving out of the ‘sacred’ from the ‘public’ space (Van der Tol & Gorski, 2022). Apart from a handful of cases, universities in England are public institutions and form public spaces (with some private elements, such as halls of residence or sacred spaces, like chapels). The public is a physical – or virtual – space shared with others; a place which, by chance of space and time, contains what Massey (2005) calls our ‘throwntogetherness’ and where identity processes and social interactions also happen (Rose & Markowski, 2023), influencing the student experience. Students occupy these heterogeneous spaces, and find themselves negotiating their place, both within institutional boundaries and within the towns and cities these institutions are situated.

### **Institutional space**

Marginson (2022) posits that “space is one of the primary coordinates of the higher education world. It is continually made and remade in encounters between agents. ... What matters is the social relations that constitute, and are constituted by, each spatial configuration” (p1389). The inevitable question for Christian students is whether there is space for them in the so called ‘public space’ of the university, or at least how to negotiate their space within the shifting historical narratives. These are materialised in the built environment in different institutions.

In *Traditional elite universities*, for example, signs of historical Christian influence are inescapable in the public space. College chapels, Christian symbolism on buildings, the names of colleges, traditions, such as grace being said before college dinners, names of university terms and vacations, even the official seal of the universities have the obvious influence of centuries of Christian tradition. Churches dot the streets around their towns and there's often an active Christian community serving the students on and around campus (Guest et al., 2013).

In contrast are the campuses of *1960s institutions*<sup>3</sup>, which have very little or no reference to religion, providing a strikingly different spatial experience. A product of their time, modern, campus-based, outside city limits, the chapel – often now multifaith – the only 'sacred' space. The other two types of universities with secular charters, *redbrick* and *post-1992 institutions* – although often based in cities, have equally little relationship to Christianity.

Finally, *Cathedral Group universities*, whilst often campus-based near small towns, also have an obvious church-related past, with the chapel taking central place and are even tied to a cathedral, as the name suggests. Former Christian teacher training institutions, mostly founded in the 1800s, they often have a Christian ethos<sup>4</sup>, although are not Christian institutions as such.

---

<sup>3</sup> Institutions here are described in broad strokes only, in generalised terms. There are great institutional variations even within the types of institutions described here, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to give space to them all. Detailed descriptions will be provided of the case institutions in the findings chapters that follow.

<sup>4</sup> There is evidence that this is changing in many of them, as they are trying to appeal to a wider range of students.

The difference in the way public space is shaped and used in these institutions lends itself to be explored based on their relationship to religion. Some have a plethora of relics of their religiously infused past, most have never allowed religion within their walls or limited it strictly to the religious studies classroom and the chapel, and some have more recent but perhaps less dominant Christian roots. The composition of student and staff in each type of university, how the public space is negotiated, how different communities co-exist may be significantly shaped by the physical and social environment partially determined by attitudes to religion and what space is provided for its practice.

Sacred spaces within the university – prominent or side-lined within ‘campus geographies’ – influence the religious student experience (Hopkins, 2011), encouraging or hindering opportunities for practising religion. Wong (2023) states that “[t]he design and functioning of university spaces can reflect and perpetuate social hierarchies and positionalities that favour certain students over others” (p3). Certainly, the existence and prominence of sacred spaces convey part of the culture of the institution and will thus play a part in shaping the religious student experience. The centrality and visibility of the chapel, the architecture, the availability of prayer rooms are just a few examples of this. Importantly, however, the public, the shared space, where people are “thrown together”, where the social interaction and negotiation takes place, is at least equally influential in the Christian student experience.

Guest et al. (2013) point out that university managers often claim their institutions to be neutral toward religion, but in reality, this means the exclusion and marginalisation of “religious language and practice from the public life of their universities” (p78). A selection of “value-laden” attitudes exist, with some considering religion to be one of a number of options, such as:

*a positive aspect of student formation. A reality of human life that ought to be engaged and catered for, a sensitive political hot potato to be avoided at all costs, or as irrelevant to the proper life of the university, ideally focussed on rational thinking and the (secular) pursuit of knowledge (ibid.).*

Christian students negotiate a variety of cultures towards religion in public university spaces, whether institutionally, in the classroom and on a personal level. These experiences are paramount in shaping their sense of belonging.

Spaces play an important part in student belonging, further influencing the student experience and even student retention (Mulrooney & Kelly, 2021; Temple, 2018; Wong, 2023). Belonging is “situated, fluid and sociometrically constituted” (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022). Understanding the relationship between space and belonging is vital in creating inclusive educational places and environment (Wong, 2023). Andersson et al. (2012) posit that British university campuses privilege “white middleclass secular students” (p512), “potentially excluding non-dominant cultures and practices” (Wong 2023, p3). As established above, Christians are no longer a dominant voice in society and even less so in higher education. Yet, with the right campus culture, they can exercise their agency and be part of the fluid social interactions and spaces universities provide, allowing them to feel like they belong in these spaces (Fosnacht & Broderick, 2020).

Van der Tol and Gorski (2022) offer a useful lens to view public space through, asserting that public space can have multiple layers of meaning; there is no need to treat it as *either* secular *or* sacred – it is trans-liminal. When a specific meaning is dominant or even backed by law, other meanings are marginalised. Trans-liminality means that space can contain different layers of meanings, even incompatible ones.

*Trans-liminality is to take a different point of vantage: instead of reasoning from dominance through the binary of the secular and the sacred, it would*

*mean taking an interest in ways that ascriptions of meaning to space can coexist irrespective of dominance. In this sense, the trans-liminality of space might offer a political framework for pluralistic coexistence, especially when societies are strongly divided over the relationship between religion, culture, and society (p499).*

Allowing room for personal expressions of faith, for example, is only problematic if public space is conceived as exclusively secular. Such an approach leaves space for the religious student in the public university.

### 2.3 Contemporary issues in higher education

The 19<sup>th</sup> century ideals and debates about the role and function of the university described in section 2.2.2 sound foreign in contemporary discourses about higher education. According to Barnett (2004),

*Those who wish to sustain a positive idea of the university have a difficult time just now. ... Conceptually, the ideas on which the modern university was built – truth, knowledge, reason, communication – all stood in the dock as mere detritus. ... The university, therefore, was – as it were – emptied out, conceptually and empirically: it was no longer clear that the university could be said to be standing for any particular set of ideas, or to have any particular set of purposes (p65).*

The last 150 years were tumultuous in the history of the ‘university’ in England. After the reforms in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the foundation of civic (redbrick) universities, and later the waves of the 1960s campus- and the post-1992 new universities have resulted in over 140 institutions educating nearly 2.4 million students in 2023/24 (HESA, 2023a), with the vast majority of students taking applied and vocational courses (Collini, 2012). Just 85 years ago (in 1939) there were only 50,000 students at 21 universities (ibid.) or 45,000 at 16 universities according to Smith and Langslow (1999); whilst these numbers are subject to unsettled debates, the scale of change is obvious. Universities have gone from elite to mass education.

A much wider section of society is represented within the walls of the ivory towers than ever before, and thus wider societal trends are also present. Culture wars, social justice, issues of ethnicity and sexuality, and decolonisation of the curriculum (Arday et al., 2021; Moosavi, 2023) are just a few of many topics which dominate the debates. Equality, diversity and inclusion are central issues in universities (Scott, 2021); concerns over free speech (Adams, 2022) and student mental health (Brown, 2020; Worsley et al., 2023) are mounting. Such matters are especially pertinent to religious students and thus will be further explored below.

The shift from elite to mass education also brought financial challenges and made it impossible for the state to fund such a large sector (Williams, 1998), resulting in what Guest et al. (2013, p18) emphasise as the “fierce competition between universities” over limited resources. Student fees and loans were introduced, affecting access and social mobility (Major & Banerjee, 2019). Meeting the criteria of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), National Student Surveys (NSS) and university rankings all contribute to the pressures, as universities hope to attract more students. Massification thus resulted in marketisation and financialisation (Bruce, 2022) - a shift in values and aims of higher education (Barnett, 2015; Collini, 2012, 2017; Marginson, 2016). Employability has become a key factor for higher education ‘providers’ – even the language has become marketized and managerial. According to Collini (2012), the university is now serving the economy and corporate values guide university management, which ultimately results in a loss of trust in the contribution of universities (Marginson, 2022).

As part of their financial strategy, universities have increasingly focussed on international students as a source of income, charging them sometimes multiple of the home fees, and

accelerating the globalisation of higher education (Marginson, 2022). This is particularly pertinent in the present research, as many international students bring their religion with them and influence the religious make up of English campuses. Subsequently, the influx of international students is resulting in the relegitimization of religious practice in higher education – albeit, not as a result of changing convictions about the place of religion in academia but rather fuelled by internationalisation and marketisation. Universities feel forced to provide religious spaces and tolerance in order to entice students from around the world (Reid, 2017a)

Over 20 years ago Barnett (2000) was already talking of a ‘compounding supercomplexity’, stating that “a new epistemology for the university awaits, one that is open, bold, engaging, accessible, and conscious of its own insecurity. It is an epistemology for living amid uncertainty’ (p. 409). He called for universities to prepare students for such supercomplex world “in which we are conceptually challenged, and continually so” (p. 409). Academia has moved on from the old idea(l) of ‘seeking the Truth’; in postmodernism everything is relative (Jackson, 1999) and whether Barnett’s call has been answered in a quarter of a century is questionable. Within the supercomplexity sit the experiences of Christian students in a post-modern, post-secular and post-Christian higher education, where their place is contested.

### **2.3.1 EDI and religion**

Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) (with many other variations of the phraseology) has been a growing concern in higher education, in part due to the above-described processes of massification and internationalisation. With the growth of numbers in students and nationalities, the population of higher education has become extremely diverse along different lines, adding to its supercomplexity.

## Diversity

According to Gebert et al. (2014) “[d]iversity refers to the extent to which members of an organizational unit are dissimilar from one another in one or more attributes, as well as the distribution of these attributes within the respective unit” (p67). In and of itself, diversity thus is a neutral, descriptive fact. However, as discussed above, the dissimilar members of any organisation co-exist in a space that is to be negotiated along unequal power lines (Massey, 2005), which makes diversity a normative concept and thus potentially problematic.

The attributes of diversity in the UK are largely defined by the Equality Act (2010), listing nine characteristics which are protected against discrimination: age, gender reassignment, being married or in a civil partnership, being pregnant or on maternity leave, disability, race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. Indeed, one may identify with two or more of these characteristics at a time, thus diversity is often intersectional.

Although there is significant effort and consideration given to EDI in universities today, with Fossland and Habti (2022) claiming that equality, diversity and inclusion “represent the most important social responsibility within higher education institutions”(p1), whether EDI policies fulfil their purpose is yet to be seen. Gender equality, for example, became part of the discourse and policy scene in the 1970s and both female employment ratios and gender pay gap have received substantial attention since then. In fact, Bhopal and Henderson (2019) found that it has been prioritised as an equality measure even over racial equality, the other attribute which has been subject to widespread scrutiny. Whilst it is clear that much progress has been made through decades of initiatives and implementations of

agendas, such as the Athena SWAN Charter, for example, equality has not been reached (Prince & Francis, 2023; Scott, 2020). For example, whilst 47.9% of full-time academic staff are women, only 29.7% of professors are (AdvanceHE, 2023). Ethnic equality has similarly failed to reach its targets, despite strong support through programmes such as the Race Equality Charter. Although EDI has been an important guiding principle in higher education for decades, it has only been partially successful and is rarely subject to inquiry as to why (Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023).

As opposed to commercial organisations and companies, where it is often profitability that drives EDI measures, in higher education it is the social justice commitments of students and staff that inform the most current concerns (Scott, 2020), which focuses the EDI discourse onto power-relations (Fossland & Habti, 2022). In addition to gender equality and ethnic diversity, social mobility has been a long-term concern, with decolonisation and LGBTQ+ issues presently being central matters (Scott, 2020).

Religion, on the other hand, has been a neglected aspect of diversity (Gebert et al., 2014) both in the workplace and academic literature. As Small (2012) put it, “[w]e may be accustomed to viewing students based on... elements, such as their gender, race and sexual identity. Religious affiliation, however, is likely less understood ..., although it is no less salient to students” (p23). Albeit over ten years old, this statement still rings true in higher education in England. Wolbring and Nguyen’s (2023) scoping study of 1150 papers on EDI, for example, hardly mentions religion. The authors call attention to the fact that there is a hierarchy between EDI groups. The lack of mention is disempowering and such hierarchy “contains the danger of conflicts between EDI groups, taking away from the goal of fixing the systemic problem” (p185). Sotiropoulou (2022) in her EDI literature review

commissioned by UKRI, also found that religion and belief are much less-researched protected characteristics than ethnicity, disability and sex. Indeed, the UKRI's own evidence review (Guyan & Oloyede, 2019) of EDI does not list an overview about religion as a category and mentions in just one sentence that very few sources looked at this area. The evidence here suggests that religion, and thus people with a religious identity, have not been treated with the same interest and importance as some other equality measures have. This is problematic, because religious identity, as will be discussed further in section 2.4.2, can be of paramount importance to those who identify with a religion.

Gebert et al. (2014) and Oswick and Noon (2014) (among others) categorise religion, belief, values and attitudes as deep-level diversity factors because they are not directly observable – as opposed to surface-level diversity factors, like gender, age or ethnicity. Such categorisation, however, lacks a diverse lens itself. Certainly, there are many individuals whose religion is observable because they might wear religious clothing or are identifiable by other visibly religious characteristics or actions, such as prayer or dietary choices. However, the religiosity of the majority of Christians in a Western society is not directly observable and thus may constitute a deep-level diversity factor after all. Religion, much like disability, can be seen or unseen. Public revelation of religiosity can disclose an invisible or even a stigmatised identity (Oswick & Noon, 2014). As a result of differentiation, the workplace is viewed as incompatible with religious expression and people might interpret such disclosure of religion as proselytising, potentially creating tension between members of an organisation (Gebert, 2014, p553). Such nuance is just one small example which demonstrates how convoluted it may be to address religion as a protected characteristic.

To further complicate the situation, religion, just as other identities and social positions that shape the human experience, is not independent of one's other identities and thus EDI too has to be examined from the point of intersectionality (Fossland & Habti, 2022). Undoubtedly, religion is an attribute that may intersect with all other protected characteristics, as there are religious individuals in all ethnic groups, all genders, people of all sexual orientations, people with any form of disability, among pregnant women and mothers and people of any family setup. Wolbring & Nguyen (2023) call attention to the lack of work in the area of intersectionality of minoritized identities and emphasize that EDI practices which target groups with different and multiple attributes can empower such minorities.

### **Inclusion**

From the 2000s the focus in diversity management shifted to inclusion, recognising that it is not enough to acknowledge the existence of diverse groups in an institution, they need to be valued and accepted (Claeys-Kulik & Jørgensen, 2018; Scott, 2020). Prince and Francis, (2023) posit that "inclusion is firmly embedded within wellbeing, the environment and a sense of belonging, requiring us to nurture feelings of acceptance, connection and value"(p3). They emphasise the importance of involving members of underrepresented groups when developing action plans for their inclusion. Shore et al. (2011) add that when designing such inclusion practices, there needs to be a balance between facilitating *belongingness* as an insider whilst also encouraging *uniqueness* through valuing individuals' difference. The balance here is at the same time important and complicates matters even further, especially with groups as diverse 'the religious' but even just 'Christians', with their countless denominational, national and personal variations.

Furthermore, if poorly implemented, rather than helping, inclusion measures may in fact entrench old inequalities and reinforce “us vs them” dynamics (Stears et al., 2024). Bendl et al. (2015) point out that “[s]ome diversity management practices, although typically intended for achieving inclusion, have also the potential to reproduce exclusion as well. Therefore, practicing diversity management and dealing with diversity in organizations is never without controversy” (p1).

Scott (2020) states that whilst embedding EDI policies into institutional structures is very difficult, universities are in a unique position, as they can at the same time *research* (advance knowledge of) and *teach* EDI, while also *inform* and support wider policies. Such a position comes with responsibility.

*Acknowledging the importance of diversity in respect of gender, class, ethnicity, abilities, sexuality, faith, and age should be about transforming how universities operate. Such transformation should not only be about who they recruit to study, to research, to teach and to support their many activities, but also how they go about their core business of education, research and engagement, what they teach and research, and how they support students and employees to achieve their potential. This goes to the very purpose of the university, which is clearly different from what it was 50 years ago and even 20 years ago (Scott, 2020, p179).*

It is important that EDI is more than a set of policies and tick-box exercises. It must be more than providing a prayer room or catering to religious dietary requirements. Whilst diversity is a given, inclusion and equality are a matter of choice and attitude. They have to be part of institutional ethos. In the case of religion, this ethos has to be aware and inclusive, regardless of the institution’s historical relationship to religion. Such an environment will allow students of faith to be able to express their opinion freely and to be fully themselves. This piece of research will provide further insight into the equality and inclusion of religious students at different types of universities in England, assisting policy makers in the design of their institutional EDI measures and approaches to freedom of expression on campus.

### 2.3.2 Freedom of speech

The issue of freedom of speech at universities in the UK has been causing public concern in recent years. A YouGov survey in 2019 found that 52% of British adults thought that freedom of speech was in crisis on university campuses, with only 14% disagreeing (YouGov, 2019). Phrases such as no-platforming, cancel culture and safe space are ubiquitous in the press.

Although the Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights' (JCHR) report *Freedom of speech in universities* stated that problems were not as widespread as it had been made out in the media, they detailed issues and instances in their evidence which had a chilling effect on freedom of speech on some university campuses (JCHR, 2018). Several of the examples of limiting free speech on campus talked of Christian students' experiences, such as Baliol College in Oxford denying a place for the Christian Union (CU) at their Fresher's Fayre or Abertay University Student Association censoring the events and even emails of the CU. Critical speakers on topics such as abortion and transgender rights were especially affected by either no-platforming or protests that disrupted events or even made them impossible. The Policy Exchange think tank's report on academic freedom (Simpson & Kaufmann, 2019) similarly found that whilst not an overall threat, a sense of lack of freedom of expression is strongly felt by those in minority regarding certain, especially conservative, views. Whilst this study was conducted with undergraduate students and the questions asked did not concern actual academic content – thus the title *Academic freedom in the UK* is misleading – its findings and recommendations (for example, the need for an appointment of a 'free speech champion') were well heard in the debate.

Subsequent events demonstrate the degree of concern at governmental level and also the lack of unity on the issue. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) published

official guidance for universities about upholding freedom of speech on their campuses (EHRC, 2019). In 2023, the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 was passed and a ‘free speech tsar’ (Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom) was appointed (Adams, 2023b) by the Office for Students (OfS). The OfS ran a nation-wide consultation on how to update the above guidance in light of the new law, with a renewed guidance to be published by August 2024 (Office for Students [OfS], 2024). This, along with the implementation of the Freedom of Speech Act (2023) was subsequently halted by the incoming Labour government in July 2024 (Department for Education & Phillipson, 2024), clarification and restructuring announced in January 2025 (Ahmed, 2025). It is clear that there is concern, but freedom of speech is not a straightforward issue in higher education.

Debates around freedom of speech are not new – it has been discussed as far back as Socrates seeing it as elemental for the democratic state, but his student Plato seeing it a risk, especially if women were allowed free speech in ancient Greece (Beard, 2017). In England, the first real fight for freedom of expression took place in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, both in parliament and in religious circles – which were not separable at the time. State-controlled religion censured any non-mainstream religious (Christian) views, while dissenters and non-conformist argued for freedom of speech – as did puritan writers later, using the Greek term *parreshia*, but Biblical texts to support it (Bird, 2023). The fight in that era thus took place between Christians and Christians, so to speak.

*In England, that biblical basis, rather than the classical texts, was the dominant foundation for asserting a freedom of speech, and religious people were the predominant people proclaiming parrhesia or freedom of speech, in the sixteenth century. The same was true of England in the seventeenth century (ibid., p27).*

Bird (2023) concludes that “[t]oday, religious faith and religious speech are increasingly pushed out of the public square. But that does not change the fact that their role was central in producing that public square and in opening it to others” (p2).

This section cannot do justice to the debates and discussions that took place regarding free speech in the last 500 years through the works of scholars and philosophers such as Spinoza, Kant, Mill and more recently Butler or Fish (Scott-Baumann & Perfect, 2021). Thus, it must suffice to state that by the 21<sup>st</sup> century freedom of speech has become one of the most fundamental principles in most modern constitutions in the world, whilst also subject to fierce and ongoing debates (Stone & Schauer, 2021). Religion is still both a participant in and a subject of these discussions. Where the public space has become secular and is at the same time often dominated by the culture wars, so-called conservative views are not always considered ‘politically correct’ (Reid, 2017b), leading to some religious members of society to feel hindered from freely expressing their views. I note that this is not the same as what some call the “Christian persecution complex” (Seifert, 2007) or a product of the victimhood culture (Campbell & Manning, 2018), but rather a sense for a need to self-censor, as discussed below.

The Theos Think Tank published a report on the state of undergraduate faith societies at 140 universities in England (Perfect et al., 2019). Their findings are in line with the JCHR’s own, in that whilst they have not found that freedom of speech would be in crisis at English universities, socially and politically conservative students did feel the need to self-censor. The OfS introduced a new question to the annual National Student Survey in 2023 addressing the issue of free speech and found that one in seven (14%) students did not feel free to express their views at their universities (OfS, 2023). The consistent theme here is a

small but steady minority of students who feel that their freedom to express themselves is hindered in some way.

Scott-Baumann and Perfect (2021) in their book *Freedom of speech in universities: Islam, charities and counter-terrorism*, discuss the two dominating camps when it comes to freedom of expression. One is treating free speech as an absolute *right*, without considerations to others. The second trend is to approach free speech through the lens of managing risk (i.e. limiting what one might say) out of fear: a.) people may self-censor in order not to offend others, especially minority groups; b.) others, especially Muslim students, may self-censor because they feel they may be viewed as a security threat (especially as a result of the Prevent Duty). Both impoverish “shared public understanding” (p7), because their views are not heard and discussed. I argue that there is a third reason why some students with opinions different to the mainstream (whatever that mainstream may be at the time) view free speech as a risk, namely, *fear of exclusion*. Exclusion can take on different forms from mild to severe. Religious students in earlier studies (Guest et al., 2013; Stevenson, 2013, 2014), for example, felt that mocking and ridiculing the Christian religion is ‘almost naturalised on campus’ and is casually done by lecturers and peers alike. It follows then that if they were to speak up or reveal their religious identity or views, they also could be mocked or ridiculed. It would be reasonable to assume that such experiences would lead to students feeling the need to conceal their religious identity, further discussed in section **2.4.3**.

Massey (2005) states that

*[t]he tendency to romanticise public space as an emptiness which enables free and equal speech does not take on board the need to theorise space and place as a product of social relations which are most likely conflicting and unequal (p302).*

Providing and upholding freedom of speech in the public space to *all* parties of these conflicting and unequal social relations is paramount on campus, where the living of cultures in such close proximity can exacerbate their differences. Scott-Baumann and Perfect (2021) advocate for a reciprocal, risk-aware, but open approach:

*Instead of the monologic outcome of speaking freely without considering how the exercise of my right affects others, or the silence that comes from risk aversion, we must communicate reciprocally, where everyone involved in a conversation acknowledges they have **obligations** to everyone else. These include an obligation to be explicit and open with the other, whose views must be recognised, however unpleasant they seem. ... We must believe in the power of conversation to strengthen social bonds that bind us together and must work constantly to reinforce them (p8, emphasis in original).*

As this study concerns postgraduate students, most of whom, by the nature of their work, will be producing academic content, it must be noted that freedom of speech and academic freedom whilst not the same, are not unrelated. The Education Reform Act (1988)

*ensure[s] that academic staff have freedom within the law to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges they may have at their institutions.*

This may include religious or otherwise unpopular opinions. When students learn in an environment which fosters such openness, despite potential differences and even tensions, they learn how to navigate their own views and ideas in an academic space within a secular, pluralistic society, enriching their experiences at university.

### 2.3.3 The university experience

The concepts of 'university experience' and 'student satisfaction' have been an important and growing policy and marketing factor in UK higher education for decades (Muijs & Bokhove, 2017). As discussed in section 2.2.3, higher education has grown to be an industry,

and as a result, these concepts made the leap from business marketing to education. The ‘university experience’ is such an important concept that the first sentence on homepage of the OfS states that “We want every student to have a fulfilling experience of higher education” (OfS, 2025).

As a result, the student experience has been measured through large-scale surveys in the UK since 2004. The sheer number of such studies and reports indicates the centrality of the issue: the National Student Survey<sup>5</sup>, the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey<sup>6</sup>, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey<sup>7</sup> or the Student Academic Experience Survey<sup>8</sup> all measure student satisfaction and experience. Such ‘measures’ and the competition they fuel are symptomatic of the marketisation of higher education. Sabri (2011) argues that “the ‘student experience’ homogenises students and deprives them of agency” (p657), limiting students’ voices, while the notion of student experience has reached “totemic status in higher education” (Sabri, 2013, 2017). Undoubtedly, institutions make significant decisions based on the results of student feedback surveys and as such, they form a formidable, if perhaps limited source of information. For example, and most pertinent to this research, there is no information collected about the religious experience of students in any of these surveys. It is denotive that HESA itself did not start to collect data about students’ religious identity until 2017.

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/reports-publications-and-resources/postgraduate-taught-experience-survey-ptes>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/reports-publications-and-resources/postgraduate-research-experience-survey-pres>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/reports-publications-and-resources/student-academic-experience-survey-saes>

On the other end of the spectrum are the vast majority of the student experience studies, which are more in depth and qualitative, but are by nature small-scale, cross-sectional, exploring a certain group of students or a certain element of the student experience. Whilst Tight (2023) points out that this makes it difficult to synthesize the field, the knowledge gained is valuable and can make a difference for the groups studied. Much research in the field of religious student experience belongs in this category, including the present study. They do, nevertheless, inform and inspire larger scale endeavours, such as Guest et al.'s 2013 study was, involving a nationally representative sample. Although efforts have been made for more longitudinal exploration of the religious student experience, such as the IDEALS UK project (Peacock et al., 2023), these are rare and would be a welcome addition in strengthening the field.

Understandably, a large proportion of questions in student experience surveys focus on the academic element of student life. However, the university experience is more than gaining knowledge and points beyond the classroom. Self-formation in higher education is not only done through academic exercises but is socially situated (Marginson, 2018). Personal and social elements are also important aspects of the student experience (Bird, 2017). This is evidenced by the HEPI-Advance-HE report on student experience during the pandemic (Neves & Hewitt, 2021), in which student satisfaction is showing at an all-time low in lockdown-struck higher education. One of the main reasons students cite for their dissatisfaction is the lack of face-to-face interaction not only with staff, but equally importantly with other students (Neves, 2022). “[T]he campus environment is seemingly a web of interconnected experiences that overlap and influence students’ overall satisfaction. What happens to students in the classroom is not independent of all other experiences relating to campus life” (Elliott & Shin, 2002, p198).

It is often these non-academic factors that influence university experience of postgraduate students the most, which is distinctly different to that of the undergraduate years. Postgraduate students vary largely in age: 26% are in their mid- to late twenties and 37% are over 30 (HESA, 2023a). 77% of research postgraduates don't live with other students (Neves, 2022), and “[m]any taught postgraduates are navigating the demands of study, work and caring responsibilities” (Leman, 2020); one in five taught and one in four research students consider leaving their course (Neves & Leman, 2020). Worryingly, 25% of PhD students report having been bullied by their supervisor peers or other staff, and 47% say they have witnessed bullying (Cornell, 2020). Mental health and wellbeing are a serious concern in this population, with the average reported PhD working hours being 47 per week and 37% having pursued help for anxiety or depression (ibid.).

The university or student experience thus is a wide ranging and elusive concept (Baik & Kahu, 2023). Baird and Gordon (2009, p194) summarise definitions in the literature in the following six categories, illustrating its complexity:

- (1) All life experiences of all students while they are students.*
- (2) All experiences of an individual student while a student, including wider life experiences.*
- (3) All experiences of an individual student while in their identity as a “student”.*
- (4) All experiences of facets of the university experienced by an individual student (e.g. a sense of “belonging”, wider social activities tagged to the university).*
- (5) “Consumer” experiences of an individual student, e.g. administrative procedures, catering, IT support, availability of amenities, car parking accessibility, child care etc.*
- (6) All experiences of an individual student that contribute to their personal development as learners (sometimes described as the “student learning experience”).*

For the sake of this research, I define the student experience as “All university-related experiences of an individual student while a student, including religious experiences.”

#### 2.3.4 Postgraduate mental health and belonging

The mental health of postgraduate students has been a growing concern globally. Studies have shown high levels of depression and anxiety in China (N=325) (Liu et al., 2019), higher than the similarly educated general population in Belgium (N=3,659) (Levecque et al., 2017), higher than in similar age groups in Australia (N=81) (Barry et al., 2018) as well as internationally (N=2,279 from 26 countries) by Evans et al. (2018). The situation is not different in the UK. Milicev et al. (2023) surveyed 479 postgraduate research students about their mental health and wellbeing, looking into multiple influencing factors. Similarly to international studies, they found higher prevalence of mental ill health and lower levels of wellbeing in this population. Their results suggested that being a female, workaholism, perfectionism, poor supervisory relationships and slow academic progress were among the correlated factors. Other studies reported that suicidal thoughts and behaviours affect over a third of students in the UK (Akram et al., 2020). Postgraduate research students are under significantly higher stress than the general population (Hazell et al., 2020). The immensely pressurised research culture and extreme workload (Metcalf et al., 2018), as well as poor job security and a precarious career outlook (Levecque et al., 2017) contribute to poor mental health in this population. Undoubtedly, the recent pandemic only exacerbated the student mental health crisis (Copeland et al., 2021; Grubic et al., 2020).

Non-belonging is also prevalent in the postgraduate population (Morris, 2021). The 2023 Advance HE postgraduate research student survey (N=37,661) found that 38% of this population didn't have a sense of belonging at their university and 43% didn't feel they

belonged to a community (Neves, 2023). Yet, a sense of belonging has been found to be particularly important in postgraduate student retention (O'Keefe, 2013; Pearson, 2012; Thomas, 2012). Morris (2021) posited that '[n]on-belonging particularly affects postgraduates with marginalised identities as the spaces, temporalities and cultures of academia are often forged around limiting assumptions about learners, their identities, journeys and experiences' (p141). This may particularly affect Christian postgraduates in an environment where the secular stance is the default and as Guest et. al (2013) observed over 10 years ago, there is a 'widespread ignorance about what Christians actually believe' (p9). Christianity has further declined since then, with the latest census counting less than half of the population as Christians for the first time since records began (ONS, 2022), with young people being the least religious.

As well as the negative features affecting postgraduate mental health, studies also aimed to identify potential supportive factors, such as resilience, social connectedness and peer support (Casey et al., 2022; Milicev et al., 2021), positive supervisory relationships (Metcalfe et al., 2018; White et al., 2023) and social support both in and outside of the departmental setting (Hazell et al., 2020). Milicev et al.'s (2023) results also showed that eudaimonic wellbeing among students was higher than hedonic wellbeing, suggesting that meaningfulness may support postgraduate mental health better than happiness. Some of these positive elements will be explored further specifically in relation to the experiences of religious students.

## 2.4 The religious student

### 2.4.1 ‘Who am I?’ – Exploring identity

The term ‘identity’ has been used in many contexts and “work on identity can be found in fields as diverse as psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, political science, education, family studies, and public health” (Vignoles et al., 2011). The fact that these fields apply the term differently, and their interpretations do not always overlap makes studying this concept even more complicated (Schwartz et al., 2011). Additionally, ‘identity’ has become an overused term in recent years through the dominant discourses of identity politics and culture wars (Fukuyama, 2019). Such societal influences do not leave the subjects of this study unaffected, especially as these cultural battles may potentially involve more than one of students’ ‘identities’ (e.g. religion, ethnicity, class, etc). For example, religion and especially being a Christian may associate them with the current decolonisation discourse (Fainga’a-Manu Sione et al., 2024); being an international student can bring issues of migration to the fore (Ploner & Nada, 2020); their ethnicity may evoke racial misunderstanding (Bale et al., 2020). Whilst it is impossible to detach ‘identity’ from such cultural and social notions, it is from the traditional, psychological perspective I will start to explore this loaded concept.

Although identity is one of the most studied social constructs (Vignoles et al., 2011), defining it is a difficult task. Not only are there a wide range of understandings and interpretations as to what identity is, but also the complexity of human nature and the many aspects of one’s identity make it a vast subject. Gecas in his classic *The self-concept* (1982) described identity as a concept which “focuses on the meanings comprising the self as an object, gives structure and content to self-concept, and anchors the self to social systems” – an internally

complex unit, situated in a social context. Identity is a “set of meanings that individuals attach to themselves” (Karelaia & Guillén, 2014); in very short, it is the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’ (Vignoles et al., 2011). In their call for integration within the field, Vignoles et al. (ibid) summarise the different components and schools of identity as follows:

*Viewed through the lens of an individual person, identity consists of the confluence of the person’s self-chosen or ascribed commitments, personal characteristics, and beliefs about herself; roles and positions in relation to significant others; and her membership in social groups and categories (including both her status within the group and the group’s status within the larger context); as well as her identification with treasured material possessions and her sense of where she belongs in geographical space (p4).*

This definition shows the complexity of a person situated within society, and can be very helpful in understanding how Christian postgraduate students may interpret the world around them and their place in it through different lenses. Note, however, that anything to do with the spiritual aspect of a person would be difficult to take away even from this encompassing summary. Scott's (2021) definition is similarly blind to religious aspects: ‘Fundamentally, personal identity is a matter of what human beings care about in the world. ... human beings interact with the three orders of reality: the natural, the practical and the social” (p141). Whilst caring about the religious/spiritual as an ‘order of reality’ can be important for as many as 85% of the world’s population (Dyvik, 2023) and 63% of postgraduate students in England (HESA, 2023b), it is often omitted from the study of the self. It is no surprise then that religious identity has received much less attention in research than other characteristics of one’s self-concept.

Examining the identities of Christian postgraduates may be helpful through the lens of *developmental psychology*, especially as this lens may be informative as to whether there are differences between the undergraduate and postgraduate identity. Erik Erikson

described eight stages of identity development in sequential and hierarchical order (see **Table 2.1**). The successful completion of each phase results in a healthier character (McLeod, 2025). The greatest work of identity formation takes place in adolescence, exploring and authenticating one's identity and role in society. In young adulthood the focus shifts to building intimate, meaningful relationships (McLean & Syed, 2014). Accordingly, many aspects of one's identity are formed during adolescence and young adulthood, such as ethnic identity (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2006), religious faith (Fowler, 1981), or goals and values (Ferrer-Wreder & Kroger, 2019), and most developmental psychologists believe that this formation once complete, remains relatively stable throughout one's life (Schwartz et al., 2011).

**Table 2.1** Erikson's eight stages of the life cycle

Stage	Approximate Age Range	Developmental task of that stage	Dialectic	Significant others	Virtue arising from successful passage
1	0–1.5 years	Attachment to primary caregiver	Trust vs. mistrust	Mother	Hope
2	1.5–3 years	Gaining some basic control over self and environment	Autonomy vs. shame and doubt	Parents	Will
3	3–6 years	Becoming purposeful and directive	Initiative vs. guilt	Family	Purpose
4	6 years–puberty	Developing social, physical and school skills	Self-esteem vs. inferiority	School	Competence
5	Adolescence	Experimentation and exploration of ideals and social contexts	Identity vs. role confusion	Peer groups, role models	Authenticity
6	Early adulthood	Establishing intimate bonds of love and friendship	Intimacy vs. isolation	Partner / spouse, friends	Love
7	Middle adulthood	Fulfilling life goals that involve concern for future generations	Generativity vs. stagnation	Children, younger generation	Caring
8	Late adulthood	Looking back over life and accepting its meaning	Integrity vs. despair	Mankind	Wisdom

*Note.* Reprinted from *Development through adulthood: An integrative sourcebook* (p.130), by O. Robinson (2013), Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan Publishers Limited. Copyright 2013 by Oliver Robinson.

Although Fowler (1981) established a model for the stages of specifically faith development, this is not the lens which will be operationalised in this research. His theory has been critiqued for various reasons. First, a lack of diversity, i.e. relying too much on Western cultural factors and the Christian faith (Furushima, 1985), which while true, would not necessarily limit its applicability in this study. Further criticisms include that it's too reliant on cognitive development (Streib, 2001), or too complex (Jones, 2023), yet it is for different

reasons I find Erikson's life stages more applicable to the present research. Whilst not without its own criticisms of being too linear, not allowing for stages to be revisited (a criticism he made of his own work in later stages) (Cote & Levine 2002), its 'androcentric bias' (Gilligan, 1982; Sorell & Montgomery, 2001) or being too hypothetical (Pelaez et al., 2008), without explaining how the 'crisis' is to be resolved (Greene, 2008), it has become the foundation of developmental psychology nonetheless. As this study does not aim to explain the processes of identity development, and will be focussing the empirical findings, the above criticisms do not significantly apply, and its approach is more informative for the present study for the following reasons. First, Fowler's developmental stages are concerned with faith development only and although this study is working with the concept of religious identity, it explores other life spheres as well, especially as it is the student experience which pertains the focus of this research. Second, Erikson's concepts of conflict (e.g. identity vs. role confusion in adolescence, or intimacy vs. isolation in young adulthood) seemed particularly fitting with the religious student literature of authenticating faith in undergraduate years (Klausli & Caudill, 2021) and adolescence being prolonged (Ochsner, 2015; Sawyer et al., 2018), whilst the postgraduate problems of non-belonging and loneliness (i.e. isolation) (Kalubi et al., 2020; Morris, 2021) fit well with the conflicts of the young adult life stage.

*Social identity theory* may further inform our understanding of what role their self-concept plays in religious students' university experience. According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), social situations and group membership can influence the level of commitment (salience) to varying elements of one's identity – such as ethnic identity, student identity, professional identity and for some, religious identity. The salience of various identities may fluctuate in different social situations (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Willetts & Clarke, 2014) or may be

influenced by other identities (Barnes et al., 2021; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). These processes can take place on an individual or at group level, and lead to in-group and out-group experiences. Salience can be further influenced by how the individual perceives others may react to their values (Tajfel, 1982). It is reasonable to assume that such shifts in salience between the religious and the academic identity take place as students navigate their campus, religious and social spheres.

Thus, identity is multifaceted, and is at once personal, relational and social, with some elements constant and others fluid (Vignoles et al., 2011). “Identities refer to the internalized meanings that individuals associate with who they are as people who enact roles, as members in groups or social categories, and as unique persons” (Rose & Markowski, 2023). In this study, an Eriksonian, developmental identity lens (Erikson, 1980) will be informative as to how the postgraduate identity – and religious identity – may differ from students’ self-described undergraduate self. This is important especially because of the sparsity of literature on the religious postgraduate experience. The social-psychological lens of identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) will also be applied to better understand how their belonging to various social groups and the dynamics of identity salience in different environments influence Christian students’ university experience.

## 2.4.2 Religious identity

### Religious identity development

A large proportion of the religious identity literature focuses on its development, especially as it pertains to adolescence and emerging adulthood (Halevy & Gross, 2023; MacLean & Riebschleger, 2021; Schachter & Ben Hur, 2019). Religion is considered helpful in identity

development and can be important in solidifying one's self-concept (Erikson, 1968; Hoare, 2009). Although as established above, the religious self may be fairly well developed and stable by adulthood – the life stage the participants of this research belong to -, Arnett (2000, 2006) posited in his influential theory that adulthood has been postponed in developed countries (including the UK by definition), often being reached by the mid- to late-, instead of the early twenties. People who are not adolescent anymore but have not yet reached adulthood are 'emerging adults' (not to be confused with 'young adults'), and are often still working out their full identity – including their religious identity (Morgans, 2023; Perrin, 2020). This complicates the study of the population of this research further, as those who would have traditionally been largely considered adults, may now be 'emerging adults' and research shows that their meaning making is often still ongoing (Arnett, 2012; Hood & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2022; MacLean & Riebschleger, 2021; McNamara Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014). Others, however, will have long reached an established religious identity. Furthermore, identity can be fluid even when well established, and thus, literature regarding both the developmental and the more established stage of religious identity is relevant to this research.

### **Components of religious identity**

Whilst there is no agreed definition of religious identity and research on it is patchy (Halevy & Gross, 2023; MacLean & Riebschleger, 2021), scholars have conceptualised various attributes of it in order to be able to study it, particularly across religions and cultures. Many agree that religious identity encompasses one's religious beliefs and practices, and provides a framework of values and morals, which influence the individual's way of life, choices, and self-perception (Etengoff & Rodriguez, 2020; MacLean & Riebschleger, 2021; Park, 2007;

Saroglou, 2011), including 'political debates', 'current events', 'family', 'gender' and 'opportunity/capabilities' (ibid, p4.). In other words, one's religious identity may affect any and every part of one's life, especially if it central to the individual's self-concept.

Whilst religious identity can be a significant part of one's ideological identity (Halevy & Gross, 2023), the level of its importance in people's lives – its centrality – varies between nominally identifying with a religion to it being something that is the main defining characteristic of one's self-concept. Davis and Kiang (2016) refer to the centrality of the religious identity as "the extent to which one defines oneself in relation to one's religious beliefs" (p533). I expect that the participants in the present research will be placed at varying distances on this continuum. Park and Edmondson (2012) state that "[r]eligion is the core of many individuals' identities, affecting how they understand themselves as religious or spiritual beings ... as well as determining their social identification with a particular religious group"(p150).

Saroglou (2011), in an attempt to bring together the various aspects of religion for its cross-cultural study, developed what he calls the Big Four religious dimensions model: believing, bonding, behaving and belonging. Each element pertains to an aspect of religious identity: belief, practice, values and community respectively. Religious identity thus comprises one's beliefs and values, which influence and dictate the individual's religious practices, and are both expressed and situated in community. I explore the latter further below, as the university experience is lived in community and belonging is a particularly important element of the student experience.

## Religious community

Religious identification gives structure to social interaction and relationships (Alisat & Pratt, 2012) and enhances a sense of belonging (Layton et al., 2012), both important in the university experience. Ysseldyk et al. (2010) suggest that religious social identification can be paramount to other group identities, as it can be central to the self-concept, and comes with 'eternal group membership.' Religion has a special role both in one's identity and social belonging compared to other identities, including the student identity, as it helps explaining and making sense of "the ultimate issues in life" (Pargament, 1997) and is often accompanied with significant social support (Park, 2007). The combined benefits of group membership and the sharing of an overarching concept about meaning, purpose and guiding principles interact, and together bring the greatest benefit to wellbeing (Ysseldyk et al., 2010).

Within the university context, religious communities can provide a place and sense of belonging (Aune et al., 2019; Perfect et al., 2019) which has been shown to be 'particularly valued' by religious students and staff (Weller et al., 2011). Li et al. (2019), for example, found that the local church provided international students (Chinese undergraduates at an American university) with a caring environment, a place to belong, which had such a profound effect on some students that although they were contemplating giving up their course, they decided to stay. For undergraduates, Christian communities can become 'surrogate families' (Sharma & Guest, 2013) and "can be crucial sites for combatting loneliness and supporting students with poor mental health" (Perfect et al., 2019, p2). Similarly, I found in my study (Watson, 2025) with 40 postgraduate Christians in England that the Christian communities on and near campus were an immediately available

community, enhancing the belonging of students and contributing to their wellbeing. Whilst Davie's notion of "believing without belonging" (1994) has been applied to many (especially Western) societies and social groups within them, it seems from the literature here presented that those students who believe want to also belong. And if they manage to do so, the benefits are considerable. This thesis will thus specifically explore whether and how Christian community and religious identity may be beneficial in postgraduate belonging and wellbeing.

### **Potential negative aspects of having a religious identity**

Whilst being religious has many benefits, which will be discussed in detail in section 2.5 , with such potentially strong identification and group belonging might also come conflicts – internal and external -, which may affect religious students.

Internally, individuals may struggle with and question their faith during identity development. This authenticating process can be beneficial and distil one's self-understanding and their relationship to their own religiosity. On the other hand, it may also be a deeply distressing process and does not always result in stronger faith (Guest et al., 2013; McNamara Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014). Failing to resolve these internal conflicts may even lead to crisis of the self (Erikson, 1980). Until recently, these processes would have been discussed in the undergraduate context, but with 'emerging adulthood' wedging itself between the adolescent and young adult phases of development, it is expected that some participants of the present research will also struggle with the authenticating of their faith.

Externally, conflicts may arise between different religious, as well as between religious and non-religious groups, from local all the way to a global level (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). This has been extremely visible recently; at the time of writing, wars are breaking out between

nations of strong religious affiliation in the Middle East (Vock, 2024), terrorist attacks take place on both Christians and Muslims (Turnbull & Atkinson, 2024) and places of worship in England need millions of pounds invested in their protection (Gregory, 2024). Such conflicts can and do affect campus relations as well as educational policies, with the Prevent Duty being an ample example in the wake of the 9/11 and 7/7 Islamic attacks, affecting inter-religious and religious-non-religious relations on campus to this day (Aune et al., 2020; Scott-Baumann & Perfect, 2021).

On a more personal level, having values different to that of the mainstream society surrounding the religious group or individual may result in feeling out of place, isolation and even discrimination (Halevy & Gross, 2023). Additionally, in an organisational setting, relational conflicts may arise from religious expression as others might not understand the actor and think they want to proselytise (Gebert et al., 2014).

Finally, being a member of a minority can be a stressor in itself, and having multiple minoritised identities, such as religion and ethnicity, immigrant status or LGBTQ+ identities, can exacerbate such stress (Etengoff & Rodriguez, 2020; Morgans, 2023). Etengoff and Rodriguez (2020), for example, point out the possibility of identity conflict between two or more salient identities, highlighting the relative abundance of literature on the clashing of identities between sexuality (LGBTQ+) and religion – although it is not limited to this area, despite the focus on it in the literature. As will be discussed later, the religious identity may, also clash with the academic self, leading to identity interference and the concealment of the religious self as part of specifically the student experience.

### 2.4.3 The religious student experience

Despite the significant role faith may play in the lives of religious students, relatively little research has been conducted in higher education exploring this aspect of the university experience in England. Moreover, studies of religious postgraduates are almost non-existent apart from where they form part of a majority undergraduate sample (e.g. Peacock et al.'s 2023 IDEALS UK project with 28% postgraduates).

What follows is an overview of the empirical literature of the religious student experience. Due to the aforementioned sparsity of literature in England, this section contains a mixture of UK- and US-based research, which is where I was able to find a handful of studies conducted with religious postgraduates. It must be noted, however, that most studies I refer to in the North American context were conducted with students pursuing degrees in the natural sciences, and the attitudes toward religion within scientific circles and departments in America can be markedly different to that in the UK, as highlighted by Peacock & Riggers-Piehl (2023). Among other variances, US STEM students are more influenced in their subject choices by their faith and beliefs, whilst non-religious worldviews are more prevalent among UK students. Furthermore, importantly for the present study,

*US STEM students were much more influenced by campus climate variables (e.g. perceived worldview diversity on campus, experiences with a divisive or welcoming campus, and encounters with diversity) than the UK students, whereas when UK students encountered insensitivity or coercive experiences, they were more impactful (ibid, p26).*

These differences must be borne in mind when interpreting any US data.

The most comprehensive study to date in England is Guest et al.'s 2013 *Christianity and the student experience: understanding student faith*, of which I give a very brief highlight here, as I refer to it throughout this chapter by various themes and topics. This project gathered

data from over 2200 survey responses (majority undergraduates) and 100 interviews at five types of universities in England. The authors found that 12% of Christian students became less religious while at university, 15% more religious and the rest stayed the same. The secularising effect of the university thus was not strong, although varied by institution. 27% of students regularly attended church or other Christian groups, although less frequently than at home. Class content challenged very few students' faith, but the heavy drinking culture and a general hostility towards faith in their environments caused difficulties to Christian students. The authors note tensions and differences between Evangelical and more liberal Christian students, particularly due to the Christian Union's evangelistic activities, although this was the most attended Christian student group, with 10% of Christian students participating. Social class, gender and ethnicity also played a role in the campus experiences of Christian students, who tended to build connection and belonging among themselves rather than integrate into the larger university context.

### **A recent snapshot**

To continue with a recent overview of some factors of the Christian student experience, I turn to Peacock et al.'s (2023) large scale (N=8019, 32% Christian, 28% postgraduate) UK project, the *Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey* (IDEALS) (based on and in cooperation with its US original by Rockenbach et al., (2020)). In this study, (only?) 73% of Christian students reported feeling welcome at their university. Interestingly, 86% of all participants (i.e. those of other worldviews and Christians together) felt that Christians were welcome, a small but not insignificant difference, suggesting that the perception of the members of the group as opposed to those outside diverge. Regrettably, 11% of Christian students reported being mistreated frequently or all the time for their

religion, and 13% felt silenced from sharing their experiences of prejudice and discrimination frequently or all the time.

In response to the question whether they felt accommodated by academic staff in celebrating their holidays or important observances, 63% of Christians agreed or strongly agreed, closely followed by 62% of Muslim students. As would be reasonable to expect with England's strong Christian heritage, which has shaped its calendar and days of observances (festivals), mirrored in the school and academic calendars, this was the group which felt the most accommodated, if only marginally. Even so, the number is surprisingly low and may indicate that secularisation or religious pluralism, or in fact, both are indeed having a strong effect on campus. Furthermore, of all other faiths and worldviews, Christians came the lowest when students were asked "In general, I have positive attitude towards [ members of ... worldview]" (agree or strongly agree), another indicator of societal shifts. It is not only Christian students themselves who need to adjust to such changes, but also the public, who may not be consciously aware that Christian students are no longer in a privileged status in England.

### **Minoritisation and marginalisation**

Talking of Christian students as minoritised in a UK setting may be surprising at first glance. Although the numbers referred to in the previous section may be showing a shifting picture in attitudes, they do not necessarily indicate this large minority to be marginalised and for many Christian students this is not the case. On the other hand, being marginalised for one's faith is a reoccurring theme in most— especially qualitative – research regarding Christian and religious students, even students in America, where the majority (63%) of the population is Christian according to the latest Pew Center findings (Smith et al., 2025).

In a qualitative study with 18 religious (13 Christian) postgraduate students at secular universities in the US, Burchett and Glanzer (2020) found that most reported feeling marginalised due to their faith, even though other aspects of diversity, such as ethnicity and gender were handled sensitively. Students shared stories of being judged by others without the opportunity to share their own views, – a finding echoed by those of Reid (2014) and Stevenson (2014) with undergraduates at two secular universities in England. The latter two studies reported religious students feeling judged, unheard and excluded based on external perceptions of their religiosity. Students felt that people assumed that their values did not fit ‘politically correct agenda’ (Reid, 2014). Similarly, students in Baratta and Smith’s (2019) research reported that their views were unheard and considered invalid as a result of stereotyping. This silenced them in classroom conversations and thus they were marginalised, experiences shared by postgraduates in Watson's (2025) recent study.

People stopping the conversation when a religious student walks into the room, being shown classroom materials ‘completely contrary’ to their beliefs without warning (e.g., video of abortion), or being bullied for mentioning their faith in classroom discussions are just some of the experiences which lead to students feeling marginalised (ibid.). Such incidents show “[p]erceived insensitivity and at times, outright hostility” both by institutions and peers (Burchett & Glanzer, 2020, p289). ‘Othering’ of a minority group by a dominant one can happen based on different identity characteristics, like race, gender or religion. It is a tool of stigmatising and stereotyping (Barther-Gordrey & Taket, 2009).

Stevenson’s study with 15 religious undergraduates at a post-1992 university (2014, p56) found that

*[m]ost of the students ... believed that they were ‘othered’ on campus predominantly ... because of their religious identity, through the processes*

*of stereotyping and, what they perceived to be, discrimination. ... The Christian students all complained that they were stereotyped by their fellow students.*

Students did not only feel 'othered' by peers but felt that the university also failed to recognise the legitimacy of their religion. Students who chose to be openly religious felt isolated and excluded and ended up socialising only outside of university (e.g. in their churches) and only coming onto campus for lectures. Although her research was carried out more than 10 years ago, these findings resonate with the more recent studies discussed in this paper.

Watson's (2025) mixed-methods study, for example, found that some Christian postgraduates experienced bullying for their faith, felt minoritized or experienced exclusion at their places of accommodation and felt the need to hide their faith in fear of their academic work being mis-judged if their religious identity was known. Similarly, 21 female Christian undergraduates in Morgans' (2023) study at a redbrick university reported that they felt doubly minoritized – both for their faith and their gender in the 'lad-culture' of their classes and on campus in general. Interestingly, Morgans' participants felt more excluded from engaging with their learning because of their gender than because of their faith. Students' faith communities provided a place for them to withdraw to from such situations, leaving them with a complex position of navigating their identities in different social situations.

Unfortunately, marginalisation can go even further and turn into harassment or discrimination (Aune et al., 2020). In Weller et al.'s (2011) study of (religious and non-religious) staff (n=3077) and students (n=3935) in the UK, 5% of Christian students reported having been harassed or discriminated against for their belief. In a more recent survey of UK PhD students (n=526) Cornell (2020) found that 3% of them report having been

discriminated against on religious grounds. However, 10% have witnessed such discrimination. Cornell's research also shows that 60% of those who feel they have been bullied don't feel free to express their concerns, often leading students to hide their religious identity. Aune et al. (2020), in their evaluation commissioned by the OfS report that 10% of students in their study have witnessed religion-related hate incidents and some report being victims of religion-related verbal abuse, harassment or cyber-crime. Although the majority of such incidents were reported by Muslim students at the case university, some Christians have also experienced such events. The authors state that "[w]ithin the UK HE sector, from a policy perspective there is a clear and indeed necessary drive towards inclusivity and equality. Yet students, especially from particular religious groups, continue to experience hate, and for them it remains a substantial and real problem (ibid, p42)."

#### 2.4.4 The meeting of the religious, student and other identities

##### **Integration of student and religious identity**

Christian students on campus live both with their religious and academic selves and recent studies reported them expressing a desire to integrate them. Morgans (2023) explains in her qualitative paper on the intersection of gender, faith and student identities, that Christian undergraduate women she worked with "described the joy of discovering instances of integration between their identities as students and as Christians"(p.152), although struggled with being a female in the university environment. Being challenged by what they were learning also played a positive role in these students' faith identity. Having to reflect on their own beliefs caused their faith to have a beneficial impact on their studies, pointing to positive experiences at the crossroads of these two identities. Similarly, Watson (2025) found that many Christian postgraduates were able to integrate their faith, the

meaning and purpose it gave them, with their academic self, enriching their student experience. Both authors point out, that the meeting of student and religious identities can also have favourable results. Baratta and Smith (2019) posit that “there is a need to engage with religious students campus-wide, and ensure, as far as we can, that religious and academic identity are mutually beneficial” (p783). This study hopes to significantly contribute to this aim.

### **Intersectionality of identities with the religious identity**

Religious and academic selves are not the only ones at play, however, when students are in their university environment. Their ethnic, socioeconomical, gender and other selves all influence their lives and experiences on campus. Rockenbach and Mayhew (2014) report that whilst undergraduate Christian students (N=1,071) – the worldview majority in America – were the least satisfied with the spiritual climate of their campuses, minority ethnic Christians were even less satisfied than their white counterparts. The authors put this down to “interconnected racial and spiritual components that together reinforce [students’] feelings of exclusion” (p57). In England, Guest (2015) found that

*[p]atterns in the distribution of students by gender, ethnicity and social class can exert a major influence over the character of the university experience, and of the place of religion within it. ... we found that experiences of campus Christianity could also magnify the exclusionary power of social class difference (p355).*

Other studies in England report that religious students felt more at ease about revealing other ‘minority identities’, such as their ethnicity or sexual orientation than their religious identity (Baratta & Smith, 2019; Reid, 2014; Stevenson, 2013).

More recently, Morgans’ (2023) study found that the intersectionality of being a Christian woman on campus “involved walking a fine line between their faith on one hand, which

drew them into deeper engagement, and their gender on the other, which demonstrated their otherness amidst the androcentric norm”(p160). Barnes et al. (2021) similarly found evidence that the stigma of the Christian identity may be intensified when it is influenced by other identities such as gender, ethnic or LGBTQ+ identity.

On the other hand, the religious identity may be helpful in dealing with negative effects of other minoritised identities. Schneider et al. (2024) have recently indicated through their study of the intersectionality of race and religion at the workplace that “[r]eligion can be a powerful source of social support and guidance in combating the negative and harmful mental health effects of racial discrimination, stereotyping and stigmatization” .

### **Identity interference and concealment**

Although the salience of the Christian identity may vary among Christian students, several studies show that many have to learn to ‘navigate’ their faith in their academic environment (Fairweather, 2012; Guest et al., 2013; Scheitle & Dabbs, 2021). In a large scale (N=1307; 321 Christians) quantitative study of American postgraduate science students, Scheitle and Dabbs (2021), found that students tend to conceal their religious identity due to *identity interference*, when one or more identities of a person clash (Karelaia & Guillén, 2014). The widespread scepticism of scientists toward religion (Losh, 2010) may lead Christian scientists to feel they need to hide their faith in order to ‘fit in’ (Rios et al., 2015). Elaine Ecklund’s work with scientists of faith around the world confirms these findings. She reports that academic scientists often perceive their places of work to be hostile toward religion (Ecklund, 2019), and consequently conceal their religious identity – resulting in a “closeted

faith and a strong culture of suppression” (Ecklund, 2010, p44).<sup>9</sup> Barnes et al.'s (2021) study with 33 Christian postgraduates from around the United States also found that Christianity is a concealed stigmatised identity among biology graduate students.

Scheitle and Dabbs’ (2021) claim about religious science postgraduates, that “feeling like one must conceal an important part of their life harms an individual’s willingness or ability to strongly identify with the social context or group perceived as requiring the concealment” (p9) is significant in my research. Hiding one’s concealable stigmatised identity can be detrimental to the individual’s sense of belonging to the group in which he/she perceives a negative reaction to that identity (Beals et al., 2009; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). If religious students feel that their faith identity is not accepted in their academic environment, it may limit their ability to belong there and as discussed, belonging in one’s academic environment is an important element in the postgraduate student experience and supports wellbeing and student retention. Whilst Scheitle and Dabbs’ (2021) research focussed on students in the natural sciences, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the experience may be similar in other disciplines, although further studies are needed to verify this.

Another way students deal with conflict between their identities is separation of the academic and religious selves through creating a ‘strict division’ between their faith and studies (Peacock & Riggers-Piehl, 2023; Reid, 2014; Sabri et al., 2008). Religious undergraduates, for example, can put their faith into an ‘identity lockbox’ and keep it there

---

<sup>9</sup> Whilst Ecklund’s work focuses specifically on *scientists* and their faith, it is worth noting. Not only because much of her work takes place in academic settings, but also because ‘science’ on a societal level is the very truth stance competing with the truth of religion (Evans & Evans, 2008).

until they return to it later in life (Clydesdale, 2007). A more recent example of separation of religious and academic identities as a tool in navigating stigmatisation is Google et al.'s 2023 study with 13 black Christian biology postgraduates in America, who took off religious jewellery in their scientific environments, and avoided the subject of studying biology in their religious contexts. Such separation can lead to lack of belonging, and like in Barnes et al.'s (2021) study, some of these students were leaving their courses due to being unable to reconcile their religious and academic selves. Those who did prevail found external strength in their black Christian communities and internal strength in their spirituality.

Baratta and Smith (2019) state that

*[w]hen the desires of one's faith to be enacted in some way are proscribed by the student identity, then for religious students to 'go along' with the student identity means that it can feel forced, fraudulent, and subsequently, the religious identity has to be silenced. As a result, we see a more 'permanent' identity being silenced based on the demands of the comparatively temporary identity; this is at the heart of identity conflict for several students (p782).*

The salience and centrality of the faith identity plays an important role in the way students reconcile these two identities, but its effect can go two different ways. On the one hand, Barnes et al. (2021) posit that the more central their faith to the student's identity, the stronger the sense of conflict between the two. On the other hand, Baratta and Smith (2019) point out that if their faith is strong, students find it easier to separate out the student and religious identities without the latter being compromised. Similarly, Ysseldyk et al. (2010) state that "when an individual's identity is threatened (e.g., through stigma, discrimination, or political violence), which ought to result in numerous negative psychological stress responses, highly identified individuals often experience the least distress" (p62). There seems to be a double effect influencing highly religious students' experiences when feeling stigmatised: whilst a strong religious identity exacerbates the potential conflict between the

academic and religious identity, at the same time it also provides the highest protective effect against its negative influence on the individual. Students show differing ability to resolve the conflict between these two and as a result, their faith – the permanent identity – may suffer.

Such unresolved identity conflict may have negative effects on the individual (Hirsh & Kang, 2016) and result in “increased stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, less satisfaction at work, tension at work, lack of job performance, lower satisfaction with family-life, depression and multiple physical symptoms” (Scheitle & Dabbs, 2021, p2). Such consequences may not only lead to lower student satisfaction and a negative university experience, but might even have long-term negative influence on the individual, creating adverse effects on social life and academic performance. I fully agree with Scheitle and Dabbs (2021) who state that “students should not feel a need to conceal important parts of their identity in graduate programs, whether it is their racial identity, sexual identity, or religious identity” (p9). Whether and how these identities “can be made productive and ... mutually beneficial” (Baratta & Smith, 2019, p783) rather than ‘clash’ is something my research will examine.

Apart from the two mentioned above (i.e. Morgans, 2023 and Watson, 2025), most studies exploring the intersection of the religious identity with other identities focus on their conflict and point to the exacerbating effect of the difficulties students face. Indeed, a major caveat I thus identified in the student religiosity literature is the focus on negative experiences, such as conflict (Ecklund & Scheitle, 2007; Scheitle & Dabbs, 2021), inequality and exclusion (Dinham & Jones, 2012; Stevenson, 2013), and silencing or concealing identity (Baratta & Smith, 2019; Barnes et al., 2021; Burchett & Glanzer, 2020) among others. The positive elements of being a religious, Christian student are largely unexplored and unreported in

the student religiosity literature, despite the fact that the positive effects of religion on wellbeing and mental health are widely evidenced. I dedicate the last section of this chapter to highlighting elements of the faith identity which may be beneficial for postgraduate students.

## **2.5 Associated benefits of having a religious identity**

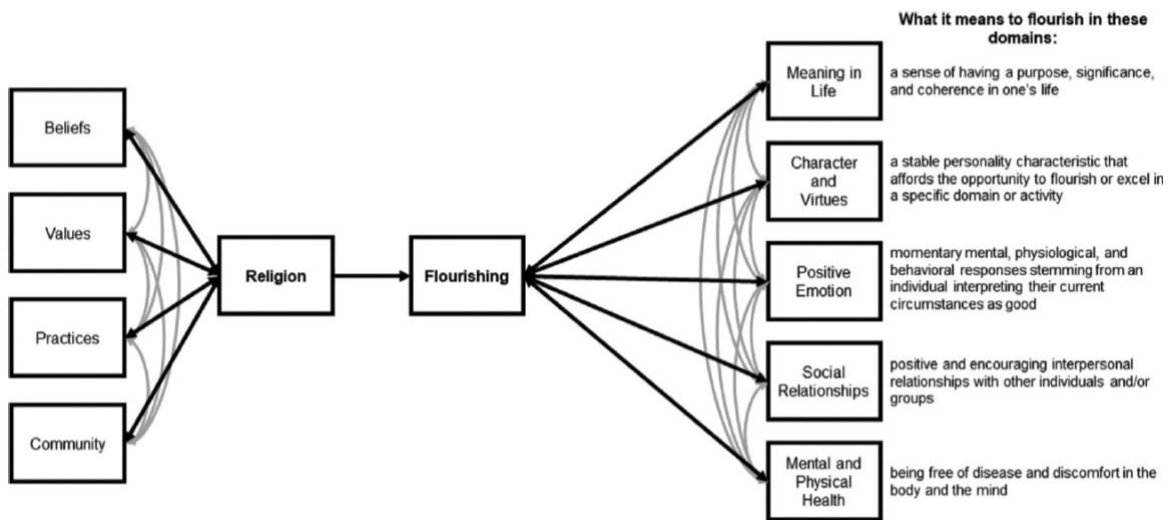
A plethora of literature explores and evidences the benefits of having a religious identity. A few examples of findings which may be pertinent to students include evidence of religion being associated with avoiding risk behaviours, such as drinking and smoking (Banazadeh et al., 2019; Cartwright, 2021; Sinha et al., 2007), higher academic achievement (Horwitz, 2021) and better mental health and wellbeing, with some experts positing that this relationship may be causal (Chen & VanderWeele, 2020; Koenig, 2012). This study cannot, of course, engage with all of these, thus in light of the current postgraduate mental health crisis, it is the relationship between wellbeing and religion this last section of the present literature review will focus on. More specifically, I engage with the relationship between flourishing and religion, in light of the increased discourse in this area (VanderWeele, 2017c; VanderWeele et al., 2023; Wormley et al., 2023).

For example, the world-wide longitudinal Global Flourishing Study (Johnson & VanderWeele, 2022) will provide high quality data on human flourishing on a very large scale, including religious aspects in the coming years. However, a major criticism of flourishing studies is that a lot of the work carried out is quantitative, limiting the nuanced understanding of this concept in research (Willen, 2022). Whilst the present research does not specifically work within the framework of human flourishing, components of it are

relevant to it and will contribute to our limited in-depth knowledge of religious student flourishing.

Of the five elements of human flourishing which have been predominant in current scholarship (happiness and life satisfaction; physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships (VanderWeele, 2017a)), mental health, meaning and purpose and social relationships may be particularly pertinent in the postgraduate student experience. As discussed earlier in this chapter, non-belonging (Morris, 2021; Neves, 2023), loneliness (Leman, 2020) ill mental health (Hazell et al., 2020; Metcalfe et al., 2018; Milicev et al., 2021) are problematic in this population and these three elements can potentially play a positive role in grappling with them. It is thus the connections between mental health, meaning and purpose and social relationships and religion the following paragraphs focus on. Wormley et al.'s (2023) model of the relationship between religion and human flourishing (**Figure 2.1**) helpfully illustrates the dynamics between and among aspects of religion and flourishing. The authors capture well the fact that both the elements of religion and the components of flourishing are whilst distinct, infinitely interconnected. Furthermore, all of the elements of religion may influence any or all of the components of human flourishing.

Figure 2.1 Wormley et al.'s (2023) model of the relationship between flourishing and religion



I briefly explore below the relationship between religion and meaning in life, mental health and religious service attendance.

### 2.5.1 Religion and meaning in life

Meaning in life facilitates having a sense of purpose, significance and structure, and thus it contributes to one's well-being and life satisfaction (Nelson et al., 2021). Scholars since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century recognised the relationship between meaning and religion. Frankl (1992/1946, as cited by Galek et al., 2015) claimed that "[m]an's search for meaning is the primary force in his life" (p105). His observation while imprisoned in German concentration camps led him to believe that even in such desperate situations, religion can provide meaning to people. Fowler (1981) conceptualised faith itself as a "quest for meaning". According to Clark (1958), "religion more than any other human function satisfies the need for meaning" (p419). Whilst many religious people would say that the 'function of religion' is rather more existential and soteriological, it unquestionably provides meaning to one's life, as shown in many empirical studies. Francis, for example, found that prayer, Bible

reading and religious orientation are positively associated with having a sense of purpose in life (Francis, 2000; Francis et al., 2010; Francis & Evans, 1996). Furthermore, Nelson et al. (2021) report that theists consistently find more meaning in life than atheists. Importantly for the present research, studies also revealed that Christianity particularly – among secular worldviews and other religious beliefs – is associated with higher reported meaning in life (Jung, 2015; Steger et al., 2010).

Frankl (1992) posited that whilst there is always a need for meaning, this meaning may change throughout one's life. Although I have not identified literature on the difference between meaning of life in various life stages, including any specifically about students, it is pertinent for the present research that Stroope et al. (2013) in their representative study of the relationship between images of a loving God and the meaning of life found students to be at least 4 times more likely to report having a sense of meaning and purpose than employed people. Furthermore, they report that "race, income, age, educational attainment and marital status [were] not significantly associated with purpose in life" (p32), however, those who believed God to be all loving as opposed to those who did not, were twice as likely to have a sense of meaning.

One way religion provides meaning and purpose is through a comprehensive set of goals (Pargament, 1997; Park, 2007). Galek et al. (2015) point out that life after death is one of these goals for many religions, and Christians (among others) may "put life experiences in the context of future spiritual salvation, which provides a sense of purpose in life" (p2).

Having a sense of meaning can also be beneficial for one's wellbeing in that it can influence the way people interpret stressful events or perceived injustices and can assist in making sense of suffering (Wormley et al., 2023). It is easy to see how relevant this may be in the

lives of postgraduate Christians who are facing the stresses of their courses and may also suffer perceived injustices, if their experiences include marginalisation, for example, as described by other studies in section 2.4.2 above.

Religious connection can further add meaning to one's life through a connection with God by becoming part of a "larger whole" within his love (Callister et al., 2019), believing in a loving God (Stroope et al., 2013) and through "joyfully loving, knowing and serving" God (Smart, 2000, p48). Note the importance of love in all of the above listed ways of connection between the human and the divine – a distinct feature of the Christian faith. Indeed, its 'greatest commandment' is as follows:

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is this: Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets (i.e. all other teachings of the faith) hang on these two commandments.*

The Gospel of Matthew 22:37-40

I refer back to the importance of 'love' in Stage 6 in Erikson's life cycle on p61, which I argued is likely to be the stage postgraduates may be at in their lives, aiming to resolve the conflict between intimacy and isolation. Love is thus an important element in social relationships through friendship, family and religious service attendance, which have also been found to have a positive relationship with religion (Jauncey & Strodl, 2018) as well as meaning making. It is certainly true that people find meaning in life through other means, particularly relationships, and especially family relationships tend to rank high in studies about meaning making (Callister et al., 2019). It is, however, clear even from this short and non-comprehensive review of the relationship between religion and meaning in life that religion enhances meaning and purpose. This can be particularly important for postgraduate students as they make their way through their degrees while potentially juggling work and

caring responsibilities (Leman, 2020), loneliness (Kalubi et al., 2020) and other mental health challenges in which Milicev et al. (2021) found eudaimonic meaning making important.

## 2.5.2 Religion, mental health and wellbeing

Religion's positive association with favourable mental health outcomes has been documented through decades of wide-ranging research, including representative and longitudinal studies (Aksoy et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2020; Garssen et al., 2021; Koenig, 2012; Park, 2007; Rosmarin & Leidl, 2020). It is beyond the scope of this paper to comprehensively discuss the various ways in which religion is positively associated with mental health and it must suffice to mention its potentially salutary effects on depression, suicidality, substance use, eating disorders and behavioural addictions, many problems postgraduates are particularly vulnerable to (Levecque et al., 2017). It may be reasonably assumed that religious postgraduate students can also benefit from such positive effects of their faith, and exploring these dynamics could inform their pastoral and psychological care at universities.

Frederick et al. (2016) posit that

*religious beliefs can provide more adaptive ways of interpreting stressful life events, therefore, reducing the potential negative impact of stressors ... In addition to giving meaning to their suffering, other religious functions may include providing a sense of control, a feeling of comfort, intimacy and connection with other like-minded individuals, and closeness with a higher power (p553).*

### Religious service attendance

Religious service attendance has been found to be particularly beneficial to religious individuals' wellbeing. Spencer et al. (2016), in their meta-analysis of 140 empirical papers on the relationship between religion and wellbeing found that of many observed factors "regular, frequent religious service attendance seemed to have the biggest impact on well-

being” (p10). Kaushal’s longitudinal UK study (2018) also indicates that frequent religious attendance is associated with better mental health. More recently, Garssen et al.’s (2021) meta-analysis focussed on longitudinal studies on religion/spirituality and mental health, and also found that frequency of religious participation is one of two strongest predictors of positive mental health outcomes, the other being importance of religion. Social support – “the perception of the presence and availability of people who we believe care about us, offer love, and can be relied upon” (Klausli & Caudill, 2021, p181) – is an important element of religious service attendance, yet it only explains a quarter of the positive effect according to Li et al. (2016). This may suggest that Christian students can benefit from religious social participation even more than from general social support at their universities. Yet, Guest et al. (2013) found that only 27% of their Christian undergraduate participants attended church services, religious student groups or other faith-based communities at least once a week while at university. Although the results of this study will not be comparable to Guest et al.’s sample, exploring the prevalence and role of religious participation will be informative about whether, and if yes, how postgraduate students utilise this strong benefit of their faith.

### **Religious coping**

Finally, I explore the concept of religious coping, which may be particularly beneficial in the Christian postgraduate experience because it has the potential to support students’ response to the well-documented stresses of postgraduate studies. Tix and Frazier (1998) defined religious coping as the “use of cognitive or behavioral techniques, in the face of stressful life events, that arise out of one’s religion or spirituality” (p411). These ‘techniques’ may include prayer, positive social support, finding meaning in life through religious beliefs,

reading scripture and getting advice from religious leaders among other factors and “may increase the individual’s ability to draw on spirituality as a source of support” (Klausli & Caudill, 2021, p191).

It is important to note that studies consistently show that religious coping can be both negative and positive (Frederick et al., 2016; Pargament et al., 2000; Park et al., 2018). Negative religious coping occurs when the individual blames God or elements of their religion for a stressful event and may thus lead to feelings of abandonment by or anger towards God (Pargament, 2007). Whilst positive religious coping is much more prevalent, accounting for between 85-93% of religious coping (Lucchetti et al., 2021) and is beneficial for both physical and mental wellbeing, the effects of negative religious coping can be harmful and thus must not be disregarded.

Positive religious coping works through downregulating stress and thus alleviating negative health outcomes (Wormley et al., 2023), again, reinforcing its potential relevance in the postgraduate university experience. Klausli and Caudill (2021), for example, found that positive religious coping can be beneficial in dealing with stressful life events and depression among undergraduate students. Pargament et al. (2000) posit that through religious coping, individuals may find meaning in their suffering, grow stronger, closer to God and learn important lessons, which gives meaning to difficulties in life. Abu-Raiya and Pargament (2015) further add that positive religious coping is rooted in belief in a loving and caring God, religious social participation and seeking out spiritual support when needed.

Ano and Vasconcelles (2005) report in their meta study that positive religious coping is favourably associated with efficacious outcomes of stressful events – individuals who use these strategies have higher self-esteem, and experience stress-related and spiritual growth

through such events. Furthermore, religious coping is negatively associated with mental ill health such as depression and anxiety. The authors suggest that religious coping strategies can be helpful in clinical work with religious individuals – an advice which may be implemented in student mental health provision. Moreover, awareness of these concepts may inform counsellors working with religious students to detect and minimise the potentially harmful effects of negative religious coping.

It is particularly important to explore further how these associated benefits may influence and even enhance the religious student experience, especially in light of a.) the overall postgraduate mental health crisis, b.) the potentially hostile or exclusionary environment Christian students may find themselves in the ‘secularity 2’ type public spaces they navigate. The thesis thus will explore elements of the Christian student experience which inform our understanding of a potential positive relationship between Christian students’ wellbeing and their religious identity.

## 2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I explored the parallel processes of secularisation and the evolution of higher education in England, particularly as it pertains to the secularisation of academia itself. I conclude that although the university space has moved from the sacred to the public, its complete differentiation is problematic. Religious members of the academic community are part of this space (Van der Tol & Gorski, 2022) and their perceived need to conceal their faith identity (Barnes et al., 2021) limits both their own freedom of speech (Scott-Baumann & Perfect, 2021) and the diversity of academic discourse. One symptom of treating the university as a secular space is the neglect of religion as a protected characteristic within institutional EDI frameworks (Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023). This thesis creates space for the

voices of some of the religious members of the higher education community, and advocates for the need to move beyond tolerance to mutual respect (Ackroyd, 2023) and a secularity 3 type pluralism (Taylor, 2007) in our unavoidable throwntogetherness (Massey, 2005).

The historical processes within English higher education and its relationship to Christianity resulted in a variety – and large number of – institutions, and studies have shown that the religious student experience is influenced by their ethos (Guest et al., 2013, Peacock et al., 2023). The typology born out of these processes (see section 3.3 and used by scholars of the religious student experience have become somewhat of a gold standard in this burgeoning field and I will also employ them, both for their very fitting nature and for the sake of creating comparable knowledge.

The dearth of literature on religious postgraduates in the UK has become clear through this review of the literature. As for postgraduates in general, belonging and mental health have been shown to be particularly critical issues (e.g. Milicev et al., 2021; Morris, 2021). At the same time, we have also seen that these areas are particularly strong benefits of being religious, although mostly through non-student related studies (e.g. Aksoy et al., 2020; Koenig, 2012; Spencer et al., 2016). This thesis thus will take an original approach of specifically examining the benefits of the religious student identity as well as the difficulties which may arise from being a postgraduate student of faith, aiming to start to fill gaps of knowledge both in the postgraduate religious student experience and the potential salutary effects of religion on student flourishing (Wormley et al., 2023).

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### 3.1 Introduction

This research uses a convergent parallel mixed methods design. I adopt a question driven approach, whereby the research question judged best to answer the problem researched guides the methodology (Graebner et al., 2023; Punch & Oancea, 2014). Such pragmatic approach is particularly well suited for the current study, as it acknowledges the influence of the “inner world of the human experience in action”, has an instrumental perspective of theory, acknowledges pluralism, supports empiricism, and takes an explicitly value-oriented approach (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p29). Whilst scholars often use the term ‘pragmatism’ as a paradigm to such question driven frameworks of mixed methodology (e.g. Johnson et al., 2007; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005), the present study was conducted within an interpretivist framework, as its main aim is to *understand* the lives experiences of Christian postgraduate students at contemporary English universities, rather than explain or generalise them (Willis, 2007). McChesney and Aldridge (2019) argue that (and demonstrate how) conducting mixed methods educational research within an interpretive framework may be practiced as long as the quantitative methods used expand our understanding of a phenomenon or experience rather than to make inferences or generalise findings.

In light of the concerns identified in the literature review (e.g. marginalisation, identity concealment) as Christians form an invisible minority in higher education in England, a transformative axiology was deemed to be the appropriate lens to apply (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Mertens, 2021). A transformative axiology “focuses on ethics in terms of cultural responsiveness, recognizing those dimensions of diversity that are associated with

power differences, building trusting relationships, and developing mixed methods that are conducive to social change” (Mertens, 2012, p802).

A description of the methods used in the design follows bellow. I first explain the parallel converged mixed methods design by outlining the qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods elements of the study before describing methods of data collection and analysis. I then explore researcher positionality and finally, present limitations and ethical considerations.

## 3.2 Research Design

A mixed methods *parallel convergent mixed methods multiple case study* design enabled me to explore the complexity of the religious student experience in its real-life context, whilst simultaneously providing an opportunity to compare cases and gain understanding of the ‘bigger picture’ (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

### 3.2.1 Mixed methods

Mixed methods provide the researcher with more and multi-layered information compared to mono-method studies (Clark & Ivankova, 2018; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Lund, 2012) and are “an intellectual and practical synthesis based on qualitative and quantitative research ... that often will provide the most informative, complete, balanced, and useful research results” (Johnson et al., 2007, p129). As the specific field this study is concerned with is largely unresearched, such complex understanding is particularly important. The convergent design is being used to corroborate the findings, utilising the strengths of both methods and building to a multiplex picture (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Qualitative research yields rich, in-depth data about participants' interpretation of the world around them and is often conducted in their natural settings (Cohen et al., 2018). The qualitative part of the survey and the interview data within the institutional case studies shine light on the lived experiences and in-depth perceptions of postgraduates at universities in England as it pertains to their religious identity. These data provide a deeper and richer understanding of the religious postgraduate student experience. As an under-researched topic, it was important to gain a more fine-grained understanding of the personal lived experiences of students as a vital first step, thus the study has a qualitative emphasis (QUAL+quan). This strand of the study aims to meet Tracy's (2010) eight "big tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research: a worthy topic (spelled out in the *Introduction*), rich rigour (evidenced in the present chapter and throughout the thesis), sincerity (displayed through *Positionality* and *Discussion*), credibility (evidenced through thick descriptions and triangulation), resonance (to be evidenced through the reception of the study), significant contribution (see *Introduction* and *Conclusions*), ethical excellence (see *Ethical considerations*), and finally, meaningful coherence.

A wider exploration of a larger population was also important a.) to determine whether the phenomena identified in the literature and also those explored through the interviews were present on a wider scale; b). to ascertain typological variation between institution types; c) to generally gain more understanding of this under-researched topic. As such, it was not used with a positivist lens but rather to expand our understanding of students' lived experiences and to enable between-group comparison (Punch & Oancea, 2014). As no relevant large-scale data exist on this cohort to date, a quantitative survey was designed to gain primary data in aid of the development of such a fuller, more comprehensive picture

(Johnson et al., 2007). The quantitative elements of the survey provide data on a larger scale and enable triangulation of some of the qualitative data, whilst also providing a means of testing whether the between-institution type differences exist on a larger scale.

Through these means of enquiry, the present research confirms Cohen et al.'s (2018) view that mixed methods research

*enables a more comprehensive and complete understanding of phenomena to be obtained than single methods approaches and answers to complex research questions more meaningfully, combining particularity with generality, 'patterned regularity' with 'contextual complexity' [...] focusing on the whole and its constituent parts (p33).*

Data were thus collected separately in both strands of the study, and were analysed according to their own methods, then converged (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), while maintaining rigour in both strands according to their own methodological requirements.

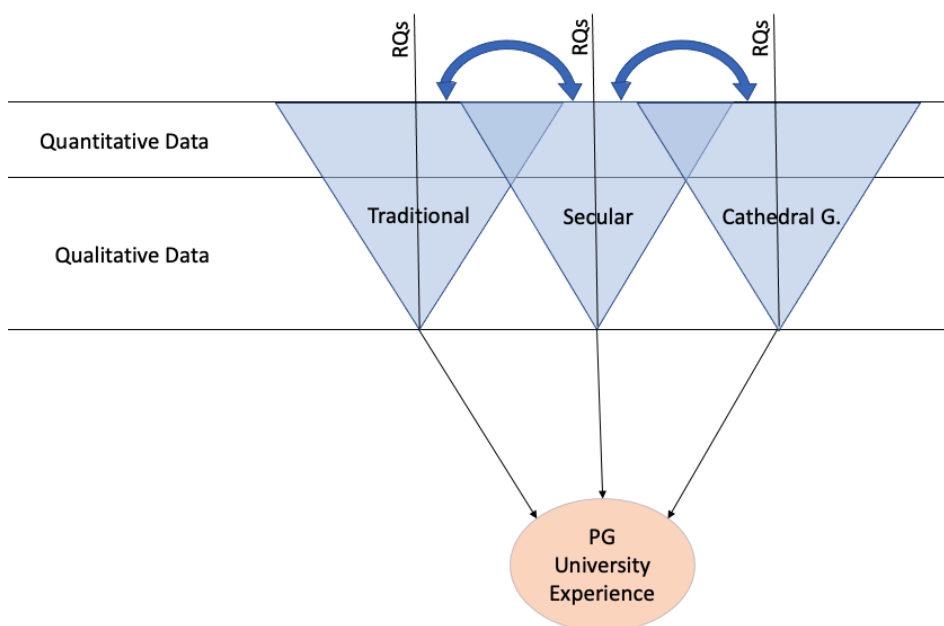
### **3.2.2 Convergent parallel embedded multiple case study**

Yin states that “the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena. Case studies allow [one] to focus in-depth on a ‘case’ and to retain a holistic and real-world perspective” (Yin, 2018, p5). *Embedded* case studies have been found especially informative when exploring new areas of social research, as these allow for the use of multiple methods as opposed to the traditionally holistic qualitative case studies (Scholz & Tietje, 2002). In light of the need for mixed methodology detailed above, an embedded case study design was operationalised for the thesis, combining multiple sources of data. Furthermore, embedded case studies allow for exploration of a larger unit and its sub-units or constituent parts, including for comparative, multiple case designs with the various and appropriate research tools (Cohen et al., 2018). In the present study, such

design allowed for the wider, quantitative study of a university type, and the closer, qualitative study of one specific institution within each type.

Mayrl et al. (2009) pointed out in their widely cited summary of research on religion in higher education that the lack of contextually situated studies is one of its main caveats. A small but increasing number of studies have been born in response to this call, most of them in the undergraduate context (e.g. Aune et al., 2019; Guest et al., 2013), therefore the present study was designed with this important aspect in mind, notwithstanding the fact that universities in England are diverse organisations, and one case would provide a limited and potentially skewed view into the research topic. For these reasons, *multiple cases* of different types of institutions were examined, refining the situatedness of the phenomenon, as illustrated in **Figure 3.1**. This approach facilitated individual understanding of how each type of institutional environment affects students' experiences, and helped gain a more overarching picture through cross-case analysis, demonstrated by the blue arrows (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Yin, 2018).

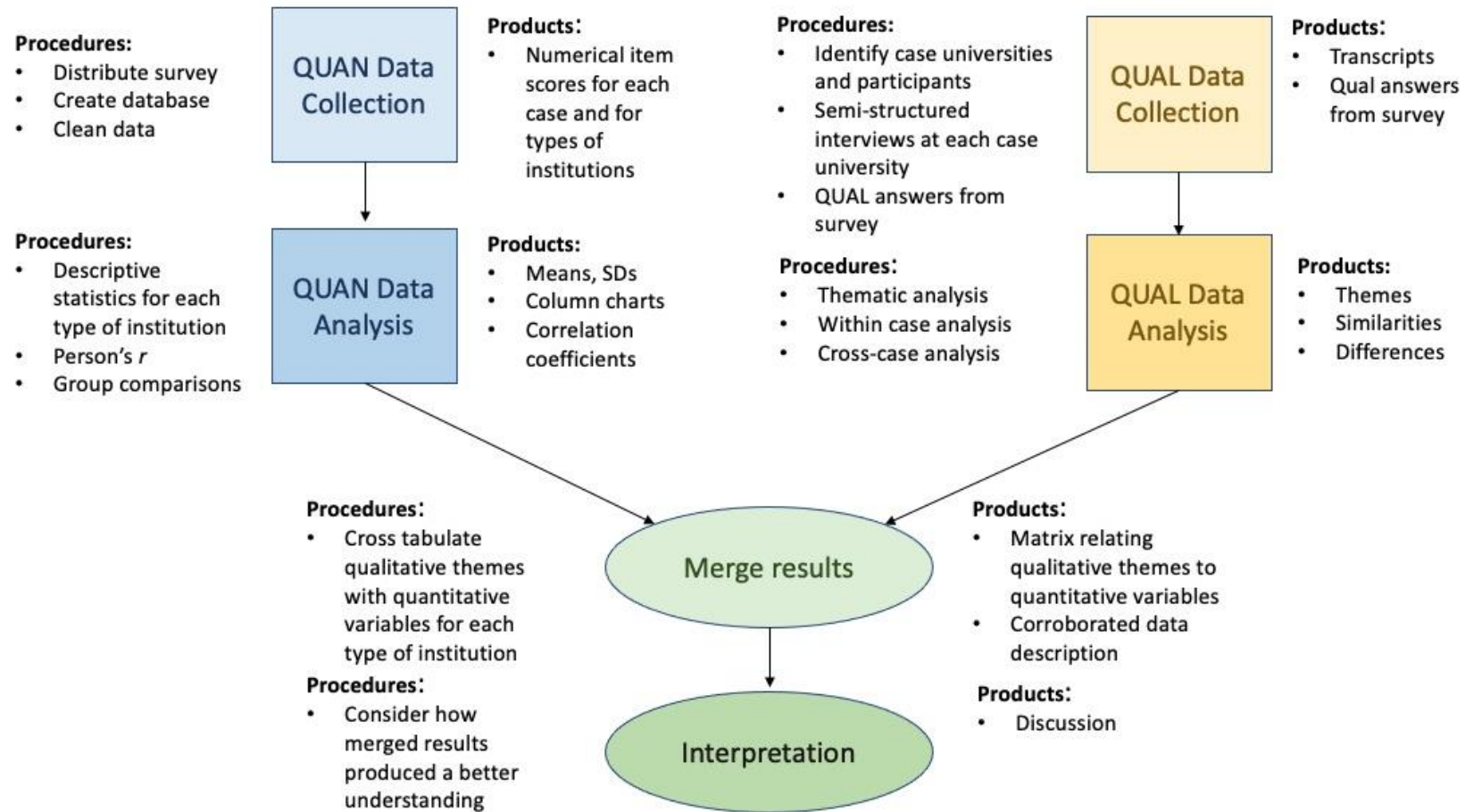
**Figure 3.1** Levels and directions of different types of data for each institution type



Furthermore, Yin (2018) states that case studies are particularly fitting when the “boundaries between the phenomenon and the context may not be clearly evident” (p15). The lives and experiences of religious students within the various higher education institutions in England are situated in a complex real-life context, the boundaries of which are intertwined with the phenomenon itself.

Through the resulting *convergent parallel mixed methods embedded multi-case design* the thesis provides an in-depth view of the researched phenomenon through examining the case from multiple angles (Creswell & Poth, 2013; Stake, 1995), and yields thick descriptive analysis (Yazan, 2016). As a largely under-researched topic, such a thorough understating of the case at hand is needed to provide an adequate foundation for further explanatory studies (Punch & Oancea, 2014). The flow of the project is illustrated in **Figure 3.2**.

Figure 3.2 The flow of the convergent parallel mixed methods case study design



Adapted from Creswell & Plano Clark (2018), p76.

### 3.3 Typology and case selection

Several typologies of universities exist in the higher education literature. The one chosen for this study was developed by Guest, Aune, et al., (2013) based on and refining earlier works of Gilliat-Ray (2009) and Weller et al. (2011) – namely, *Traditional elite*, *Inner-city redbrick*, *1960s campus*, *Post-1992* and *Cathedrals Group* universities. This typology runs along the historical foundations discussed in **Chapter 2** and is particularly fitting for the present research. Each type of university was classed by the era of its foundation, corresponding to a certain context of religiosity which had a significant effect on the institution's educational approach and content, cultural background, geographical location, and student population. Furthermore, each era represents a time-point further and further down the line of England moving away from being a largely religious country. I proposed to carry out a case study of each institution type, including a mixed methods survey and 10 student- and 2 leader interviews per case, providing a total of 60 interviews.

This typology was later revised to three main types of institutions – *Traditional elite*, *Secular* – combining the Redbrick, 1960s and Post-1992 categories – and *Cathedrals Group*. In light of the physical and time constraints of the DPhil, it was deemed wiser to focus on fewer cases at greater depth. The design was revised from 60 interviews at 5 institutions to 60 interviews at three universities. This allowed for a thicker understanding, whilst still facilitating for comparable and potentially distinct differences of institutional relationship to religion: a university whose roots and history are markedly Christian; an institution whose identity is explicitly secular; and a third institution which is still affiliated with a church. These cases are bounded by their university type, their geographical location, and by the

postgraduate population (Yin, 2018). As a cross-sectional study, the time of data collection also 'fenced in' the cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### 3.3.1 Selecting participating institutions

For the wider questionnaire sample, I originally planned to survey as many institutions in England as possible to have a very wide reach. However, this would have only been possible on a superficial level (i.e. reaching very few gatekeepers per institution) and the amount of work involved would have been beyond the scope of a single-researcher project. Thus, a decision was made to choose three institutions in each category through purposive sampling and try to recruit with a more focussed effort on these, being able to research all possible groups in which Christian students may be involved at these nine universities. The institutions were chosen with a geographical spread in mind, trying to include in each of the three categories universities from the North to the South of England. Furthermore, one of the Secular institutions was chosen in the same city as one of the Traditional elite universities with a view to later compare how much of the experience potentially comes from the institutional ethos as opposed to the city's culture itself. Unfortunately, this strategy did not yield enough data, and the search had to be widened subsequently by varying degrees. In the case of Traditional elite and Secular universities, one other institution was added to the list of deeper recruitment for survey responses; for Cathedrals Group universities I contacted 14 – all but one – and did not manage to raise a comparable number of participants.

Finally, my supervisors gave me contacts of their own at other universities and these were utilised as well. At this point, the recruitment email was revised, shortened and pre-written

paragraphs for invites to be used by gatekeepers added. (See **Appendix A** for recruitment materials.) Various gatekeepers at each institution, such as chaplains, course leaders, heads of departments and student wellness officers among others were approached and asked to send out the invite for students to fill in the survey. As recruitment snowballed, the final data set had responses from 4 Traditional elite, 15 Secular<sup>10</sup> and 6 Cathedrals Group universities.

The case study institutions were chosen through non-probability, purposive sampling for maximum variety (Collins, 2016; Seale, 2018) after close consideration of how strongly they represented their respective groups, including geographical location (I was aiming to represent different parts of the country), size of postgraduate population, type and history of institution among other factors. Each case university will be described in more detail in **Chapter 4**. Nonetheless, only one of the three original choices became a case in the study. A brief description of the case selection follows below. Geographical description is omitted for the purposes of data protection.

### **Traditional elite university**

After choosing a Traditional elite university I reached out to various gatekeepers and received 42 survey responses, with 27 survey respondents indicating willingness to interview. This was considered enough data for this institution to become the Traditional elite case university, which I call 'Riverside' in this thesis.

---

<sup>10</sup> 56% of these responses came from the case university.

### **Secular university**

I originally chose a secular 1960s university to represent this group. I managed to establish relationships with an associate professor and a professor who were together leading a thriving Christian postgraduate-and-staff group and helped me somewhat with recruitment. I also contacted another 19 gatekeepers in the city; however, I only received a total of 7 survey responses from students, only 3 of whom were indicating to be willing to participate in an interview. This was not enough to gain in-depth understanding of the case. In the meanwhile, an academic acquaintance who was working at a Redbrick university sent out the survey-invite to a cohort of Master's students at his university's social sciences division. He then asked a colleague, and she sent it out to all postgraduate research students in her division. This resulted in 42 valid survey responses with a total of 20 respondents indicating willingness to interview. After this, I switched strategy and organised a week of field work at this Redbrick university, with the pseudonym 'Victoria'.

### **Cathedrals Group university**

I selected a Cathedrals Group university with a relatively high postgraduate student population for this university type. I contacted 9 gatekeepers, including the chaplain, several churches, and the EDI president of the Student Union. I received just one survey response as a result. In fact, the chaplain passed on the information to his colleague at a nearby secular university, and I received more responses from there than my target institution, despite not approaching anyone specifically at that university. In the meanwhile, I was introduced via email to a lecturer at another Cathedrals Group university. Whilst I contacted the chaplain at this university previously, I had no response. After my new acquaintance also spoke to said chaplain, he put an invite to the survey in the chaplaincy newsletter. This

yielded 9 survey responses and 5 of them were willing to participate in an interview. I then focussed on this university and abandoned the original institution, interviewing 5 students and 3 leaders during my week there. This being a very low number compared to the other two cases, I reached out to other Cathedrals Group universities as described in more detail in section **3.4.1** . Even after this I only secured three more interviews at three different universities. After a second round of recruitment at the case institution – ‘Minster University’ – in the spring of 2023, I secured a few more survey responses and one more interview.

**Table 3.1** summarizes some key characteristics of the typology of universities applied in this study and illustrates how each case institution compares to the typology it represents in terms of institutional ethos, geographical positioning, historical relationship to religion and selected student statistics.

Table 3.1 Institutional typology with case institution characteristics

Type of university	Founding period	Institutional ethos	PG Student demographic	Geographical location	Religious relevance
<b>Traditional elite universities</b>	Early nineteenth century or earlier	Academic research led. Often collegiate. Full range of traditional academic disciplines.	17% Part time 61% White 28% Research 51% International	Mainly medium-sized towns, strongly associated with the university located in their midst	Religious foundations, various characteristics still detectable in traditions and curriculum
<b>Riverside University</b>	Before the nineteenth century*	Academic research led. Collegiate. Full range of traditional academic disciplines.	24% Part time 56% White. 52% Research 65% International	Medium size town, strongly associated with the university	Religious foundations, various characteristics still detectable in traditions and curriculum
<b>Inner-city redbrick universities</b>	Early twentieth century	Wide range of subject coverage, traditional and applied/industry-related research.	17% Part time 76% White 26% Research 51% International	Large cities. University buildings scattered around the urban centre	Non-religious foundations but not 'secular' universities with theology and/or religion departments
<b>Victoria University</b>	Late 19th or early twentieth century	Wide range of subject coverage, traditional and applied/industry-related research.	27% Part time 40% White 24% Research 54% International	Large city, university buildings in urban town centre	Secular foundations but with theology and/or religion department
<b>Cathedrals Group universities</b>	Late nineteenth century, university status granted in 1992 or after	Emphasis on training for public service professions alongside strong humanities coverage. Education for life. Explicit basis in ethical and religious values.	51% Part time 81% White 11% Research 11% International	Mostly historic towns, but also some large cities	Religious foundations, strong Christian ethos still practiced
<b>Minster University</b>	Mid-nineteenth century, university status granted in early 21st century	Emphasis on training for public service professions alongside strong humanities coverage. Education for life. Explicit basis in ethical and religious values.	47% Part time 78% White 13% Research 13% International	Historic cathedral town	Religious foundations, Christian ethos detectable on campus

Note: Data for overarching university types is from HESA (2022a). Data for case institutions were requested from their data offices and reflect their relevant 2021/22 census. Traditional elite university required freedom of information request. \* Case institutions' founding periods are kept non-specific for privacy purposes. Adapted from Guest et al. 2013 (p56)

## 3.4 Data Collection

Three types of data were collected for the project: *quantitative survey responses*, *qualitative survey responses*, and *semi-structured interviews*. Below I describe the methods by which participants were recruited, the type of research instruments used and the composition of the resulting sample.

### 3.4.1 Recruitment

#### Identifying and contacting gatekeepers

After choosing the institutions to be surveyed, I first went on the university websites and identified the chaplain or team of chaplains. For Traditional elite universities, I identified all chaplains of the various colleges and contacted them. Then I screened the list of all student societies and identified the ones that were Christian, including any denominational student organisations. I also identified any societies that were specifically for mature and/or postgraduate students. I reached out to these societies in an email if this was provided or through their social media pages if this was the only point of contact. I also contacted all the relevant Christian Unions, despite the fact that they are an undergraduate organisation; some have started to branch out to postgraduates and others may have connections. I also contacted the diversity and inclusion officer of the Student Union if there was one.

Next, I went onto Google Maps, found the university in question, and searched for places of worship within its vicinity. One by one, I went through all churches found on the map, working my way further and further out in consecutive circles from the campus to a distance where I arbitrarily assumed very few students would make the effort to travel to. In smaller

towns, I searched the whole of the town. In larger cities, this was limited to an area surrounding the campus. I went onto every church's website and checked through all of their ministries, small groups or events to see whether they had anything specifically geared towards students or even young adults, and contacted either the relevant person in charge of such a group or the church office if this was the only option. Contact was made through a recruitment email, and follow-up took place in case of no response.

### **Leader recruitment**

If the gatekeeper was in a pastoral position of students at a case university *and* responded to the original reach-out email, they were also asked to participate themselves through an interview.

### **Student recruitment**

Gatekeepers contacted students with an invite to fill in the survey. As I had no control or often even knowledge over who did and did not send out these invites, and to how many students in what way, keeping track of response rate was not possible. This method resulted in a sample which is not random or representative, except for one set of responses from Victoria University, where the recruitment email was sent to whole cohorts of students, as described above. (42 of the 75 survey responses in the secular data set came from this institution.)

Students were invited to fill in the survey and at the end of the questionnaire were asked whether they would be willing to participate in an interview. Originally, I planned on recruiting for interview through the gatekeepers. Later – but before rolling out the survey – this was deemed impractical for several reasons. Gatekeepers are busy people with

responsibilities for students and no vested interest in the present research. Asking the gatekeepers to send a link with a short paragraph to students was a large enough task. Relying on them to personally recruit for interviews would have a.) been too much of a burden for them; b.) left this task out of my control completely. Furthermore, recruiting for the interviews through the survey had the added benefit of being able to screen eligibility for participation prior to inviting to interview. Finally, the need for pre-interview questionnaire was eliminated by having the survey responses before the interview, providing a large range of information before meeting the interviewee. I was able to use survey responses as prompts and avoid having to ask basic questions, saving a lot of time both for the interviewee and myself, thus minimising impact on their lives (BERA, 2024).

Throughout the recruitment process it became exceedingly clear that personal connections made a difference. Where I knew someone, was introduced or could reference a mutual and trusted acquaintance, doors opened. 'Cold calling' as such was significantly less fruitful, despite the 'shared interest' of religious students and their pastoral needs. I expected such shared interest to be apparent in the Cathedrals Group institutions, but this was not the case. **Appendix B** describes the unexpected difficulties I ran into while recruiting from these institutions. **Table 3.2** summarises the number of contacts made and their outcomes in the respective types of universities and in the case institutions.

**Table 3.2** Recruitment numbers per university type and case institution

	Number of institutions	Gatekeepers contacted	Gatekeeper responses (pos+neg)	Survey responses received*	Valid survey responses	Interviews conducted
Traditional elite universities	4	128	32	71	64	
Riverside University		(59)**	(19)	(47)	(42)	24
Secular universities	6	62	21	92	75	
Victoria University		(16)	(4)	(57)	(42)	17
Cathedrals Group universities	14	72	27	26	26	12
Minter University		(23)	(13)	(12)	(11)	(9)
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>53</b>

*Note:* \*Institutional data were not collected for participants who ticked 'No' to the question 'Do you identify as a Christian', at which point the survey ended for these students. 14 such responses are not included in the data presented here. \*\*Case institution numbers are in brackets as these are included in the total for the university type but highlighted here separately as well.

### Selection criteria

While there is merit in studies examining the experiences of students from certain Christian traditions (e.g. Guest, Sharma, et al., 2013; Moran, 2007), the aim of the present study was to get a wider picture as a first step. Christianity is a diverse religion and limiting the denominations within the study could have skewed the overall picture. Thus, the only criteria for participation were that a.) the interviewee identified with the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381AD (Nicene Creed), b.) they studied at a university in England with degree awarding powers, c.) for a postgraduate degree.

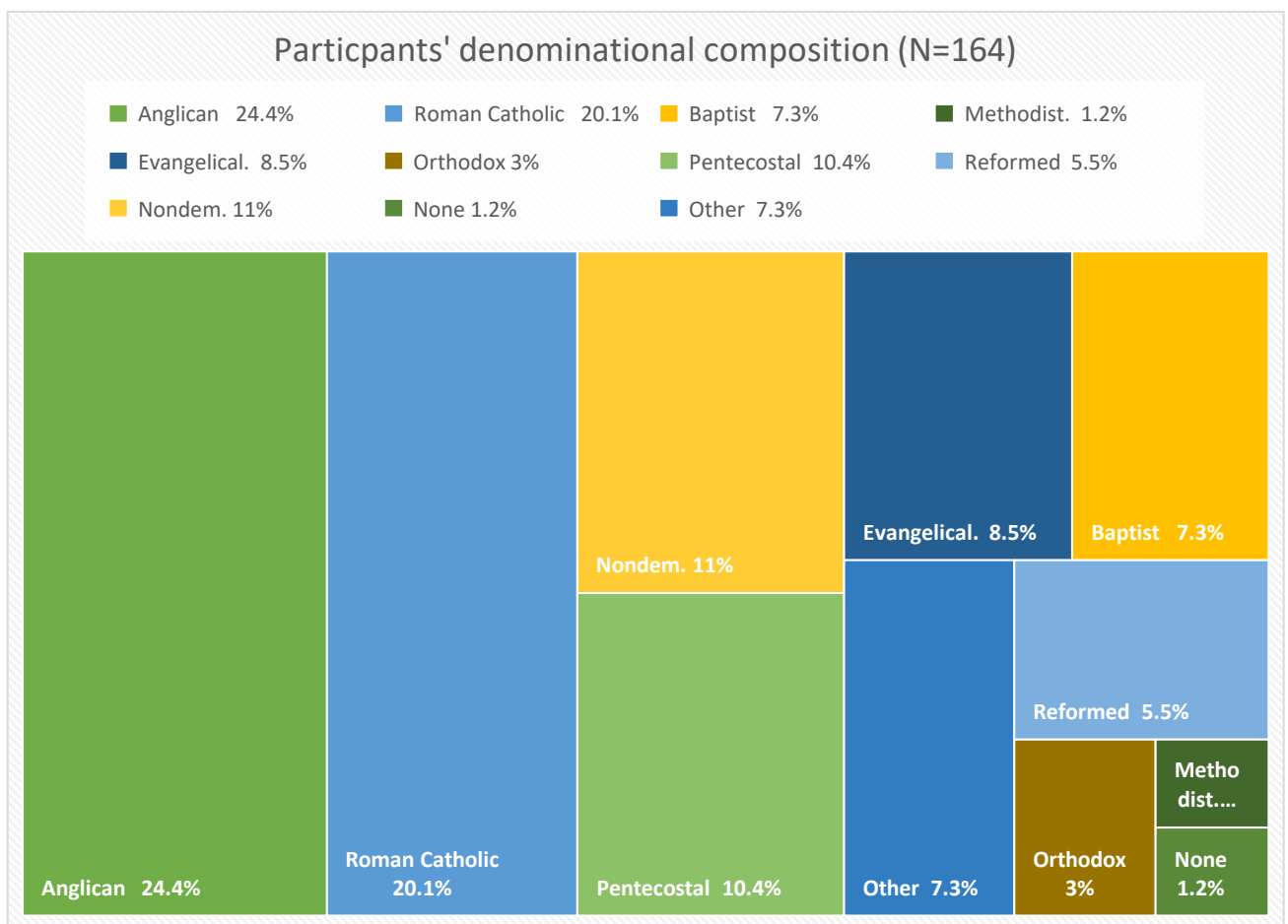
The Nicene Creed was chosen as a criterion because it is a defining document of basic tenets of Christianity and a very wide range of traditions and denominations sign up to it (McGrath, 2018). Particularly important parts are those declaring the nature of the Trinity and the equally divine and human nature of Jesus Christ. Students were asked about these two Christian beliefs in the survey, and if their personal beliefs were in line with the Creed, their data were included in the study. Whilst some researchers use pure self-selection as a criterion for being a Christian (e.g. Guest et al., 2013), this can be contentious and thus I reached back to the very foundations of the most widely accepted Christian dogma to reach both a wide sample and a level of theological clarity. A detailed explanation of the basic theology behind the Creed and the exact process of inclusion/exclusion are discussed in **Appendix C**.

207 responses were received in total. Responses which did not qualify based on the above criteria were excluded from the data. For students who ticked “No” to question 7: “*Do you identify as a Christian?*”, the survey ended with a polite thank you. However, at the point where the above-mentioned criteria regarding the divinity of Jesus and the nature of the Trinity were not met, the survey carried on as to not cause offense to these participants. They were also included in the prize draw if they signed up. However, they were then excluded from the data analysis and were not invited for interview, even if they signed up for it. This process resulted in 165 valid responses: 64 responses from students in Traditional elite institutions, 75 from Secular and 26 from Cathedrals Group universities. Detailed statistics of student participants are displayed in **Appendix D**.

**Figure 3.3** displays survey respondents’ denominational composition.

At the end of the survey, students were asked: “If you would be willing to further discuss your experiences in an interview, please fill in your name and email address, so I may contact you in due time. You will be offered a hot or cold drink of your choice in appreciation of your time. Otherwise, please move forward to enter prize draw.” 103 students put themselves forward to interview.

**Figure 3.3** Participants' denominational composition (%)



### The website

I designed and set up a website to aid recruitment and host the survey. The webpage proved extremely useful throughout the research process. In 2022 – the year of data-collection – the page had 682 site sessions from 538 unique visitors. Gatekeepers were regularly

referred to it and all participants reached the survey from here, having been prompted to read the 'Privacy and data management' page first. This ensured transparency about the aims and approach of the project as well as made essential information accessible.

An easy to remember web address was used to host the project page – [www.christianpostgrads.org](http://www.christianpostgrads.org) – including the following pages:

- a landing page (Home) with general information about the project;
- a page explaining the Survey, with a button taking students to the actual JISC page where the questionnaire was set up;
- a page dedicated to the 'Privacy and data management' information;
- a 'Contact' page, through which I could be contacted directly;
- later, there was also a 'Preliminary findings' page displaying a research poster I created as data were emerging. This was not accessible during data collection.

The website is now dormant due to financial restraints, but a saved version of its contents is attached in **Appendix E**.

### 3.4.2 Research instruments

#### The survey

After reviewing the student-religiosity literature of the last 15 years, I concluded that none of the existing survey instruments were adaptable for the present study. The majority of surveys were conducted in the United States (e.g. Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2014), with two exceptions, that of Guest et al. (2013) and Weller et al. (2011). All but one (Scheitle & Dabbs,

2021) of these was carried out with undergraduate students, and all focused on slightly different aspects of the student experience. For a summary of the studies see **Table 3.3**.

**Table 3.3** Survey of previous studies of religious students' university experience

<b>Authors</b>	Astin et al., 2011	Weller et al. 2011	Guest et al., 2013	Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2014	Scheitle and Dabbs, 2021	Rockenbach et al., 2020
<b>Study</b>	<b>The College Students' Beliefs and Values Survey</b>	<b>Religion and belief in higher education: The experiences of staff and students</b>	<b>Christianity and the university experience</b>	<b>The Campus Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey</b>	<b>Religiosity and identity interference among graduate students in the sciences</b>	<b>Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey</b>
<b>Religion</b>	All religions and none	All religions and none	Christian	All religions and none	All religions	All religions and none
<b>Year of data collection</b>	2007	2010	2012	2011-2015	2018	2015-2019
<b>Country</b>	USA	UK	England	USA	USA	USA
<b>Sample size</b>	14,527	3,935	4,000	16,450	1,307	3,486
<b>UG/PG</b>	UG	UG	UG	UG	PG	UG
<b>Relevance</b>	M	H	H	L	H	L
<b>Sample</b>	Across disciplines	Across disciplines	Across disciplines	Across disciplines	Natural and social sciences	Across disciplines
<b>Notes</b>	Of the 12 measures 2 were deemed extremely useful and adapted to this study: levels of religious belief and engagement.	Although UK based and examined HE experiences, the aim and context of this research were very different and no constructs were adopted.	No direct measures were adopted but the study overall is highly influential on the present research.	Not directly applicable.	One measure was supposed to be adopted from this study but was omitted by an error.	Interfaith focus, not directly adaptable or comparable to this study.

Two constructs were adapted, although in a modified form, from Astin et al. (2011a), measuring levels of religious commitment and religious engagement. These were originally

developed to measure student spiritual development in large scale (100,000+ participants) studies as part of the *College Students' Beliefs and Values* study at the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA in the early 2000s. This survey was used for a number of years and for several cohorts of students and is thus a well-tested and approved tool. The way these measures were modified for the present study is described in further detail in **Appendix F**.

An otherwise original questionnaire of 45 questions was developed to answer the research questions and to fit the cultural situatedness of the sample (i.e. England). See questionnaire in **Appendix G**.

11 questions in **Section A** elicited demographic data such as age, gender, ethnicity, financial status and caring responsibilities. This information is used to describe the sample population (see **Appendix D**) and include variables intended for correlations. Question 7 asked specifically whether participants identified as a Christian. If they selected 'No', the survey automatically ended with a polite thank you for participation.

**Section B** collected data through asking 10 questions regarding student status, such as type of university and study, and accommodation.

14 questions in **Section C** measured students' religiosity – importance and role of personal faith and Christian community, level of religious engagement, such as service attendance, prayer or reading Scriptures were rated, as per adopted construct from Astin et al. (2011a). This section also included further questions testing for eligibility to participate, through two questions which address the tenets of the Nicene Creed. (Reasons why some eligibility criteria were introduced so late into the questionnaire are detailed in **Appendix H**.)

**Section D** provided insights into the experiences of being religious at university through 8 questions probing issues of fitting in, perceived freedom of speech, integrating faith with studies and changes in faith during postgraduate course.

**Section E** contained 2 open ended, qualitative questions regarding the nature of positive and negative experiences of students, perceived as resulting from their religious identity.

Finally, **Section F** collected contact information for those willing to participate in an interview and wanting to enter the prize draw.

I used the university-approved JISC software to host the survey. Several gatekeepers wished to see the survey before they sent out the invite. After one of them filled it in themselves (which was subsequently deleted), a dummy copy of the survey was offered to gatekeepers to keep results clean.

### **Prize draw**

To incentivise response, especially due to the length of the survey, £100 in vouchers of their choice was offered as a prize draw to one student at the end of the data-collection period. The amount was determined in accordance with the latest Best Practice Guidelines (BPG05) (Central University Research Ethics Committee [CUREC], 2020) guidelines and offered to those who filled in the whole of the survey. The prize draw took place on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June, 2022, after closing the survey. 173 students signed up to the prize draw. I put this number into a random number generator and matched the result to the student who had this number in the database. The process was filmed from beginning to end for integrity and is available upon request. The winner was contacted the same day and the voucher of their

choice purchased subsequently. This process was repeated in the short second round of data collection in 2023.

### Semi-structured interviews

The explorative nature of this study called for a more open technique than a fully standardised list of questions, allowing room for new themes to emerge, providing in-depth information about the phenomenon. I applied the *interview guide approach* (Patton, 2015), in which the researcher has a set of open-ended questions and themes to be covered in each interview, but they may not be covered in the same order and may be adapted to fit the specific situation (see interview schedules in **Appendix I**). I aimed to conduct *multi perspective interviews* with students and leaders – different members of the same social group – at each site, to allow for systematic comparison (Santoro, 2014) and triangulation (Vogl et al., 2019), gaining a more nuanced and thick picture of the case. I designed the interview schedule so that students and leaders would be answering largely the same questions from a different perspective.

However, I found that these two approaches did not work well together in leader interviews. Whilst the interview guide approach provided flexibility, allowing a more natural flow to the conversation, and probing deeper in certain topics, it did not facilitate the discipline of having all questions answered. For students, their survey responses provided an excellent framework to work through during the interview, and dig deeper into relevant issues, but with leaders there was more freedom of topic. This caveat was not only the result of the interview technique but also of the variety among leaders' understanding of the religious student experience – some had very little contact with postgraduate students, some were

new in their post, others were very experienced. They had a variety of different approaches to their work and different setups in which they met these students – some in groups, some at conferences, others one-to-one. Thus, not all were able to answer all of my questions in a meaningful or comparable way. This will be evident in the data, where not all themes have leader contributions.

### **Summary of interview topics**

After asking participants about their topic of study/area of ministry to ease them into the interview, I enquired about

- What differences they saw between the undergraduate and postgraduate experience, both in life stage and in faith journey?
- What was it like being a Christian student at their institution? What was the attitude of the university and of people at the university (peers, teaching staff, etc.) toward Christian students?
- What (if any) religious groups they attended and why?
- What (if any) influence did their faith and/or their group involvement have on their mental health?
- Did being a Christian and/or anything else make them feel different?
- What was the most difficult thing about being a Christian at their university?
- What were the advantages of being a Christian student at their university?

### **Approaches to interview**

I aimed to have as many interviews in person as possible. Although there is some evidence that in-person interviews result in more conversation-like exchanges and may provide richer

data (Johnson et al., 2021), my main motivation for in-person interviewing was gaining a first-hand understanding of the case institutions. Interviewing students and leaders in their own environments and understanding the spaces they navigate, reading the signs universities display all added to my understanding of the case universities. Getting a real 'feel' for the environment students conduct their studies in, seeing the city for myself enriched my own understanding of the institutions with a slight ethnographic element (Silverman, 2017). Having taken field notes at each site helped to analyse the data with more authenticity at a later stage.

Despite my intentions, not all interviews took place in person. The most common reasons for this were that either the participant or myself contracted COVID-19, or the participant was not available at the time I was at their case university. In-person interviews took place in settings with little distraction whenever possible, ensuring that conversations weren't overheard, particularly because of the sensitivity of the topic of religion (Robson & McCartan, 2016). I made sure this was true for online interviews as well on my part. Efforts were made to make participants comfortable (McNamara, 2023). In-person interviewees were offered a hot or cold drink of their choice in appreciation of their time. **Table 3.4** shows the number of interviews in person or online, and the length of interviews.

**Table 3.4** Number, mode and length of interviews per case

	Traditional elite	Secular	Cathedrals Group	Total
Number of interviews	24	17	12	<b>53</b>
In person	16	12	5	<b>33</b>
Online	8	5	7	<b>20</b>
Range of interview length (mins)	20-66	27-61	22-64	<b>20-66</b>
Mean interview length (mins)	53	44	42	<b>46</b>
Total minutes of recording*	19:27:00	12:21:54	08:40:54	<b>40:29:08</b>

*Note:* \*One interviewee did not agree to recording, her interview length is not included in this data

Whilst I conducted 53 interviews, only 48 are included in the final data analysis. There was one Traditional elite interview excluded because the participant had been away from the university for 7 years and thus his experiences were deemed irrelevant to the present cohort. Three interviews from the Cathedrals Group data were excluded as it was decided that in order to bound the case, all interviews had to be from the one case institution. Finally, one more interview in the Minster sample was excluded, because the recording was corrupted.

### 3.4.3 Pilots

The research study I conducted for my MSc in 2018/19 served as the main pilot study for identifying themes and potential issues. I carried out a mixed methods study of the experiences of postgraduate Christian students in Oxford with a total of 13 interviews and 45 complete survey responses. The themes I found can be grouped into two main categories: difficulties and advantages. Among the challenges were perceptions of a hostile

environment, a sense of diminished freedom of speech, and feeling marginalised. On the other hand, I found evidence of the positive effects of faith identity, such as the importance of relationships with other Christians and the positive effects of faith and faith community on mental health and the university experience overall. (See summary of MSc research in **Appendix J.**) This study did inform the research design but did not serve as basis for pre-set themes for analysis.

The research instruments of the present project were piloted with two postgraduate students at my home university – one male PhD and one female Master’s student, in different departments. Their comments helped refine two questions in the survey. One student pointed to more possible options in what participants might believe about the Trinity – one of the selection criteria questions. The other student helped refine the questions regarding potential negative experiences by suggesting adding an “out of place” category to ‘bullying, exclusion and invisibility’. The rest of the questions were found adequate to be rolled out. I also interviewed one of these students as a pilot interview. The products of these pilots were included in the final dataset, as the changes made based on their feedback did not change the results of their survey responses, and my relationship with the students interviewed did not influence the interview any more than my insider position did in all of the other interviews conducted.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

In convergent design it is imperative that the data collected through the qualitative and quantitative methods answer questions about the same concepts (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), therefore the research instruments were created with this in mind. Bazeley (2018)

emphasises that it is best if each data strand is analysed according to its own methods and the results are merged at the end, and this is how data analysis took place.

### 3.5.1 Qualitative analysis

Interview data and answers to open ended questions in the surveys were subject to case-based analysis with a goal to “retain the integrity of the entire case and to compare or synthesize any within-case patterns across the cases” (Yin 2018, p196). For each case data were analysed inductively, to identify emerging themes. Interview transcripts and answers to qualitative survey questions were analysed applying Braun et al.’s (2019) six-phase framework of thematic analysis. *Emergent* rather than *a priori* coding was employed, in line with the exploratory spirit of the project (Elliott, 2018). Although not ‘pure’ grounded theory, there is a strong element of building from the ground up (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Yin, 2018). No explicit theoretical framework was operationalised in the analysis, to allow a relatively clean slate for any new phenomenon or theme to be identified in the data, with a view to generate theory. Themes were cross-checked during cross-case analysis and lead to “elevation of ... cross-case patterns to a higher conceptual plane” (Yin, 2018, p197) and theory generation.

#### Thematic analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed through Trint, a university-approved AI software. Such transcription does not result in perfect verbatim text, so I read and curated the transcripts whilst listening to the recordings. This process provided further familiarity with the data (Bryman, 2012). I kept taking notes and creating annotations along the way. This is especially important in later correctly interpreting the data, as written material lacks tone

or gesture which may alter meaning obvious in speech (Braun & Clarke, 2021). After uploading the transcripts to NVivo 12 (QSR 2018), I added the qualitative survey responses and read through all of the transcripts again, generating low inference, descriptive codes through 'summarising segments of data' (Punch, 2014).

### Checking reliability

After coding several transcripts, I went back to the first one and coded a clean copy again to check reliability and found a high level of match. Having gone through the whole dataset, I re-coded the first half of the interviews to make sure codes which emerged at a later stage of the coding process were all included throughout the whole material. This resulted in fine grained codes, which through a process of arranging and re-arranging were then built into 'candidate themes' (Braun et al., 2019).

At this point I started to create visual help in Power Point, where I was able to move prospective themes and topics around, discovering relationships between sets of constructs. This was an iterative process, and I was going back into the transcripts, checking for meaning, looking at codes and generating themes, keeping the research questions in the forefront of my mind all the while (Braun & Clarke, 2021). After reviewing such candidate themes, I started to write up the findings. This process provided further clarity and insight, as I kept referring back and forth between the transcripts, codes, thematic illustrations and written material – a process which resulted in the final themes and the qualitative elements of the findings chapters.

### 3.5.2 Quantitative analysis

Data derived through the questionnaire were collected in JISC and exported to SPSS v.29 (IBM 2022), where they were first cleaned and prepared for analysis through the following processes.

#### Data cleaning

Responses which filtered participants' eligibility for the study were checked and those deemed ineligible based on the inclusion criteria were deleted as follows:

- 10 students answered 'no' to whether they identified as a Christian.
- 3 answers had no or significantly little data.
- 25 respondents were disqualified as their beliefs about Jesus did not adhere to the tenets of the Nicene Creed, i.e. they chose answers which did not support the divine nature of Jesus, such as "A good man".
- 5 responses were excluded because students' beliefs about the Trinity did not adhere to the Nicene Creed – students who chose answers "Blasphemy – God is only one person" or "None of the above" were excluded.

This resulted in a total of 165 responses. 14 variables had missing values – 11 of these only one missing value, two of them 2 and one had 3 missing values. These numbers were so low that no imputation was deemed necessary.

### Collapsing variables

Demographic data were collected according to standardised values. Ethnicity values were based on ONS harmonised list of ethnic groups (ONS, 2015). A new ethnicity variable was created by collapsing the 18 categories into 5: White, Black, Asian, Mixed and Other, following ONS guidelines (ibid). University data were collected based on HESA's list of higher education providers in England (HESA, 2022a). 136 institutions were listed as a multiple-choice question. A new variable was created for the university typology this study and all universities were recoded into three categories: Traditional elite, Secular and Cathedrals Group from the 25 universities from which valid responses were collected.

Data regarding students' areas of study were collected through a multiple-choice question including 24 academic disciplines, based on the Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH) (HESA, 2021). These were subsequently grouped into 5 categories of Physical and Exact Sciences; Health and Life Sciences; Social Sciences; Arts and Humanities; Other (General and Combined Studies) – (see **Appendix K** for the breakdown of categories.) Classification was based on various discipline groupings of the UK's Research Excellence Framework (Higher Education Funding Council of England, 2021), Web of Science (Web of Science, 2023) and Scopus (Elsevier, 2023).

### Analysis

Data resulting from the above processes did not meet the criteria for conducting inferential statistical analysis. First of all, the data are not from a random sample and thus are not representative. The dataset is small scale – especially the Cathedrals Group sub-sample of only 26 responses. Furthermore, a Shapiro-Wilk test of normality was conducted to

determine whether the only continuous variable – age – was normally distributed in the sample (N=165). The results indicate that null hypothesis must be rejected ( $p < .001$ ) and conclude that data are not normally distributed (Pallant, 2020). I made attempts to find correlations between religiosity and other variables, but the results of these statistical processes were not robust enough and I decided not to include them in the findings. Nonetheless, processes used are described in **Appendix L**. Descriptive statistics were generated for the whole sample and by each university type after splitting the data in SPSS, to aid within case and overall analysis as well. Answers to Likert-scale type questions are displayed through column charts.

### Measures of religiosity

Astin et al. (2011a) developed 12 scales for measuring student religiosity in the USA. Two of these, 'Religious commitment' and 'Religious engagement' were adopted for this project, with 10 and 5 sub-scales respectively. Items defining these measures are detailed in sections **5.4.1** and **5.4.2**. As the original study collected data on students of all religions and none, the wording was modified to specifically Christian wording. For example, 'Higher Power' was replaced by 'God'. Several of the 3-point scales were modified to either 5 or 7 points to gain more nuanced data. Having a more fine-grained measure of these concepts was seen as particularly helpful in my pilot study and was thus retained and further developed for this research.

After modifying the questions and expanding their values to fit this research better, I specified high and low values, an arbitrary process as pointed out by the authors themselves (Astin et al. 2011a; p45). The rationale of the cut off points for each item is detailed in **Appendix F**. Following these steps, I checked internal consistency to ensure the items were

reliable even after modification. Cronbach's alpha for the religious commitment scale showed high internal consistency through excellent reliability level ( $\alpha=.91$ ), while religious engagement showed internal consistency through an acceptable reliability level ( $\alpha=.79$ ) (Field, 2013).

### 3.5.3 Merging qualitative and quantitative findings

Each data strand was analysed according to its relevant methods, as described above. Common concepts across the three datasets have been identified and are jointly displayed through narrative, side-by-side discussion, and are being used to 'confirm, disconfirm or expand each other' (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p224), followed by an interpretation of the results of the merged findings in **Chater 8**.

Cross case analysis took place after all three cases were individually analysed. Common themes were sought as well as themes which pertain to individual cases only. Differences and similarities to the overall data were analysed and interpreted. Many of these are discussed throughout **Chapter 8** and are systematically displayed in a matrix in section **8.4** on p329.

## 3.6 Ensuring rigour

Although rigour in mixed methods research must be ensured through meticulous quantitative *and* qualitative research, it is more than the sum of its constituent parts. Harrison et al. (2020) created the *Rigorous Mixed Methods* framework (p474), applied throughout this research. The authors identified the following six elements (p477), which

must be *described* in a study in order to meet criteria for high levels of rigour in mixed methods research:

1. 'rigorous data collection of each data strand' – this has been described in the present chapter;
2. 'rigorous data analysis of each data strand' – this has been also described in the present chapter;
3. the 'integration' of data strands – this has been done through the joint displays of qualitative and quantitative findings and their analysis in Chapters 4-7;
4. use of a 'specific mixed methods design' – this is evidenced throughout this thesis;
5. "a discussion of the aims and purpose for the use of mixed methods" – as has been done in the present chapter;
6. "including elements of writing that aim to promote the usage of mixed methods research" – there is evidence of this throughout this document.

Validity and reliability of a study can be enhanced by using mixed methods, maximising sample sizes, using multiple sources of qualitative data, recordings of interviews and verbatim transcripts (Muijs, 2012), all of which are evidenced in this chapter. Yin (2018) suggests a framework for validity within case studies (p42), such as triangulation of data (evidenced in the discussions in **Chapter 8**) and maintaining a chain of evidence. The latter has been done throughout the research journey via my research diary, recording decisions made and steps taken along the way. The journal has been used to record thoughts and questions, to keep track of- and evidence sampling, keep track of data collection, processing

and analytical decisions. It contains correspondence with supervisors which pertain to such decisions. This has helped in being able to refer back to these and a.) not have to redo things already done; b.) ensuring everything is done consistently; c.) providing a trail of evidence in case questions would arise at a later stage.

### 3.6.1 Methodological limitations

The results of this study will not be generalisable due to the qualitative nature of the case study research and also due to probability sampling (Leung, 2015). For the latter reason, quantitative survey results can only be descriptive. However, as this study is explorative rather than explanatory, these measures are still well fitting for the design. Moreover, Yin (2018) argues that generalisations in case studies can be made to *theoretical propositions* and inferences/conclusions may be *transferable*. In other words, analytic rather than statistical generalisations are sought, and theories formed may be strengthened by or applied to other cases.

Another issue arising from the sampling method may be a level of self-selection bias and self-reporting error. The former was mitigated through using *measures* in the questionnaire rather than yes/no questions, allowing for more refined responses; clear and simple wording; and by efforts to avoid leading questions. Finally, researcher bias must also be mitigated in case studies (Nisbet & Watt, 1978; Shaughnessy et al., 2012). For this reason, reflexivity has been a crucial element of my work, also recorded in the research diary.

As will be evident throughout this document, the small sample size in the Cathedrals Group universities and in Minster University limits the comparability of that case to the other two. The quantitative numbers and percentages all have to be read with these low numbers in

mind. Furthermore, the low number of interviews also limited the amount of qualitative data and thus the emerging themes at this case, which will be evident in the ratio of quotes coming from this case.

Finally, the quantitative data collected were not suitable to draw correlations, as was intended originally, thus these efforts were abandoned. Inferential statistics were also impossible, but as the research is exploratory rather than explanatory, this did not limit the outcomes. The resulting descriptive data allow for triangulation, identifying potential patterns and strengthens the findings overall.

### 3.7 Researcher positionality

*Research is value-bound and is influenced by the researcher's values as expressed in the choice of the focus of the research, its framing and bounding, method of working and data collection, analysing and reporting findings.*

(Cohen et al., 2018, p289)

Having had the experience of being a Christian postgraduate myself as a PGCE student undoubtedly sparked my interest in the subject of this study. But to dedicate to it over six years of my life (including my Master's research) reveals my level of passion and dedication to understanding how others experience being a person of faith in academia, and to giving them voice to share it with others. Having a common identity with the subjects of my research is a double-edged sword, however, where on the one hand, my insider position can be a real and tangible advantage but balancing the inevitable bias which comes with such a position requires careful attention.

Being an insider provided a level of insight and pre-understanding that is not immediately available for an outsider researcher (Gummesson, 2000; Robson & McCartan, 2016). The advantages of access to the field, immediate rapport, ability to gain richer data and an equalised relationship (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007) have greatly enhanced both the processes of data collection and analysis. Understanding religious concepts, practices and beliefs without having to have them explained, and knowing how to converse and probe regarding them sped up the process of interviewing as well as analysis, thus allowing for more data to be collected in the same amount of time. Furthermore, there may have been multiple identities through which my participants might have identified with me even beyond the religious and academic standing, such as ethnicity, age or having been born outside of the UK. This created a 'constant flux' of researcher positionality (Srivastava, 2006). Moreover, this position kept changing according to the stage of the project as well. Thus, balancing shifting levels of the insider-outsider position required constant awareness. Employing reflexivity through "the conscious revelation of [my] beliefs and values ... and deliberate self-scrutiny" (Hellowell, 2006) has been an essential and ongoing process throughout the project, helping to keep researcher bias at bay.

This balance can be difficult to maintain. In my effort to try and keep bias to a minimum, my own faith position was not immediately revealed to interviewees in written communication as to not influence their approaches to the interview and also to ensure that a professional standard was upheld. However, it became apparent from some interviews that it was not instantly obvious to students where I stood with religion, and some asked in the flow of the conversation. Although I did not detect mistrust prior to this question being clarified, I conclude that it may have been beneficial to be more directly forthcoming on this point,

especially in light of the benefits of insider research. Positionality can also be important in how gatekeepers respond to the researcher. The two examples presented in **Appendix B** illustrate this well.

Positionality in analysis requires a different kind of attention and is even more important when drawing conclusions. This I am aware of and have kept a reflective diary throughout the research project and have been in open and continued communications with my supervisors regarding the issue. Furthermore, the mixed methods design and triangulation of data has been helpful in detecting potential biases of my own.

### 3.8 Ethical considerations

Careful consideration of ethical issues is essential in conducting any social research and must be practiced throughout the process from conception of the study to the delivery of the results. “Good researchers are reflexive and consider both general issues and the specifics of each research situation” (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2024, p8.). From deciding to whether the project is worthwhile, through the protection of the identity and interest of participants to honest reporting, a myriad decisions have to be made and transparency about them ensured (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Such considerations were thoroughly thought through and described when applying for ethical approval from the University. CUREC approval was subsequently granted for the study (see **Appendix M**).

The following steps were taken to ensure ethical guidelines laid out by the University of Oxford and BERA (2024) to protect participants at every phase of the project:

- a) As religion is a legally protected characteristic (Equality Act, 2010), I had to be extra vigilant about data security and participant anonymity. For this reason, a *Data*

*Management Plan* according to BPG09 (CUREC, 2020b) was created and has been strictly adhered to throughout the project (see **Appendix N**).

- b) Case institutions are described only vaguely for the sake of protecting the anonymity of participants. Institutional student statistics are only provided in percentages for the same reason.
- c) Qualitative data were anonymised based on criteria suggested by Saunders et al. (2015) and adhering to BPG09 (CUREC, 2020b). Participants were assigned pseudonyms which were non-telling of their real names. The list of names is password protected, has never been printed and is stored on a password protected encrypted external drive. Transcripts were only saved with pseudonyms. I took care to protect geographical, national and cultural background, or any other identifiable characteristic.
- d) After confirming interviews with participants, I sent them an email with a link to participant information (on the website, see content in **Appendix E**) and a link to the consent form (see **Appendix O**) and asked them to fill it in prior to interview. If this was not done, I sent a reminder closer to the interview. In line with BERA's guidelines (2024), information on right to withdraw at any point of interview was included in the consent form. I confirmed consent orally again at the beginning of each interview and answered any questions raised.
- e) Online interviews were all conducted on Microsoft Teams, a software the security of which had been checked and approved by the University. Both online and in-person interviews were recorded on my personal device (smart phone) directly, taking care that no data went to the cloud but the hard-drive only, accessible to me alone. Recordings were backed up immediately upon my return from the interview to an

external, encrypted and password protected drive and the University's OneDrive server and erased from my phone. Raw transcriptions were carried out via Trint, an AI software security checked and approved by the University. Voice recordings were deleted from Trint immediately after receiving the transcripts, typically within 30 minutes of uploading the mp4 files, in line with CUREC's BPG10 (2020).

- f) Survey responses were printed for the purpose of interviews and used as prompts in conversations. These were shredded immediately after my returning from the interview and disposed of securely.

Participants were offered to be contacted after the research is concluded and given a copy of the thesis. List of these participants' email addresses will be promptly deleted after sharing the thesis with them (BERA, 2024).

### **3.8.1 In the field**

Based on the Literature Review, and on my own findings in the Pilot Study, I was aware that feeling marginalised, being bullied or finding it difficult to fit in were common experiences of religious students and I was anticipating signs of this within the study sample. Indeed, such notions were not uncommon during interviews and several participants cried during our conversation. There were instances where I had to stop the recording as the interviewee was working through a particularly difficult personal struggle, and then I restarted the recording after a period according to BPG08 (CUREC, 2023). A high level of tact was required throughout the process of field work and analysis. Handling such situations required empathy, sensitivity, and professionalism and continued attention throughout the writing process.

Navigating the insider position – i.e. my empathy with participants' certain difficult situations – and keeping a 'professional distance' was sometimes challenging to the point where I once offered a hug to a distressed student who cried a lot through her interview, the conversation having brought back painful memories. I apologised afterwards. In other situations, it was the participant who crossed those boundaries. One interviewee, for example, felt that our conversation was therapeutic; being able to talk about her struggles of being a Christian in what she perceived to be an anti-religious environment had a healing effect and she contacted me later to keep talking. Here, I was the one who had to keep the boundaries, as much as I would have liked to be of help. The research field was a morally and ethically imbued space, with Christian ethics (undergirded by the theology and virtue of love) and research ethics (focussed on the care and protection of the participant) both at play – and most often in harmony.

## **Chapter 4**

### **The case institutions**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I describe the three case institutions to provide a background and situatedness for the students who form the subject of this study. Each institution represents one university type based on the typology identified earlier in **Chapter 3** on p97: one **Traditional elite**, one **Secular** and one **Cathedrals Group** university, where the interviews took place. Each has a different history, which to some extent still determines its relationship to Christianity and it is this difference which forms the basis of the comparative element of the present research. These backgrounds thus provide a basis in my endeavour to answer RQ3, exploring whether and if so, how these features of the university environment influence the religious student experience.

First, I give a general description of each university and its vicinity, including faith-related provisions I was able to identify. Although I aimed to have an ethnographic element in my research, and travelled to each site to experience the environment students were taking their courses in, the following descriptions are rather vague, lack pictures and true situatedness, due to my commitment to protect participants at an institutional level. A balance had to be struck between the richness of research data and protection of participant data, and the latter took precedence. Nonetheless, experiencing their physical environments, the cities, the universities and some of their places of worship did inform my work and enriched my understanding of each institution greatly, which would not have been possible without having immersed myself in the field.

In the second part of each section I turn to the voices of leaders interviewed in each institution and describe their reflection on its culture and attitude towards Christianity and Christian students. Participants classed as leaders were chaplains, academics and church-based ministry leaders, who, due to their position, had a wider picture of the larger trends within their universities. Having worked with a number of students over the years, as well as having the perspective of fellow leaders and academics, being privy to meetings students were not, they were able to provide more of a bird's eye's view.

Students' views and experiences regarding their institutions' attitudes to their faith will be spelled out throughout this document. However, one survey result regarding how well supported they felt by their universities as a student of faith will be presented in the final part of this chapter.

Quotes from students are displayed with their gender-specific pseudonyms, age and a code for ethnicity (A=Asian, B=Black, MA=Mixed Asian, W=White, etc.), home/international status (H/I) and institution name, e.g.: Tara (23BH, Victoria). Leaders' names are displayed with their role and institution. Quotes are left verbatim, allowing for the richness of spoken language to come through where possible. International students' grammar was not corrected for the same reason. Names and types of institutions are provided in bold to aid the reader. Findings throughout the next four chapters are presented from breadth to depth: quantitative survey results are followed by qualitative survey responses and finally the deepest level of data, interviewees are presented for each finding. Finally, where abbreviated, TEU=Traditional elite university, SU=Secular university, CGU=Cathedrals Group university.

## 4.2 Traditional elite university

### A short description of the university

**Riverside University** was a collegiate institution with centuries old Christian foundations, where postgraduate students made up over half of the student population, and over 60% of them were international students. As is typical, it was situated in a middle-sized town dominated by the university. Although founded for training clergy and kept its religious affiliation up until the Gladstone reforms abolished religious tests for university entries in 1871 (Bebbington, 1992), it is no longer a Christian institution. Cutting edge and research heavy, it is internationally renowned and not affiliated with any church. Yet, its history is very obvious in the form of its buildings, traditions, names of its constituent colleges and the academic calendar among other indicators of its past. The majority of colleges have chapels and employ chaplains, whose role is increasingly diversified as welfare officers to students of all faiths and none.

Traditions such as saying grace before college dinners or sung evensong in some college chapels specifically derived from the Christian heritage of the university. These illustrate well, however, that the remnants of such traditions do not necessarily retain their religious meaning. Because of the external presence of such Christian symbolism, some may mistake the institution to be a religious one or suppose that Christians would fare very well within its walls, but this is not necessarily the case. As Kevin (24MAI, Riverside), member of a chapel choir, explained to me, most of the members of the choir attended for the sake of the art of music. He was one of only two Christian members of a 16 strong chapel choir himself. This is not to say that Christian students cannot thrive in such an environment but rather to demystify its seemingly Christian nature.

I identified a protestant chaplaincy which had active postgraduate work throughout the university (i.e. not a college chapel) and a Catholic Chaplaincy also, with up to a dozen students in regular attendance of its weekly and special events (mixed postgraduate and undergraduate groups). Of the over 300 student societies on the Student Union website, five were Christian, one of which was explicitly postgraduate.

Apart from the university-based provisions and opportunities, the city had a wide range of active churches of various denominations, many of which had vibrant postgraduate work, some with dozens, others with well over a hundred students in regular attendance of their mid-week groups and some had dedicated student church services on Sundays. Many of these churches were in or near the city centre, within easy reach for most students. 14 interviewees and 5 survey respondents spoke of the diversity of Christians in the city. They referred to the number of denominations represented and their mutually respectful and enriching relationships, the number of ministries catering to the needs of Christian postgraduates specifically. The diversity and richness of Christian culture in and around **Riverside** was a strong theme, and will be discussed in detail in **Chapter 7**, as a significant benefit in the university experience of Christian postgraduates at this institution.

### How did religious leaders see the Traditional elite university?

I interviewed 5 leaders – two college chaplains, one church-based postgraduate student group leader, one chaplain working with postgraduates across the university and one Christian academic involved with Christian postgraduate work. There was a general lack of insight into an overarching university approach to religious, and within that, Christian students in my conversations with these leaders. This could be partially explained by its collegiate structure, however, the fact that the university's website dedicated to EDI

contained only a couple of paragraphs on its religion-related page, which was several years old and was celebrating a historical milestone on the path to becoming a non-religious institution speaks of an overall lack of attention. This was in contrast to other EDI sections, such as gender, racial and LGBTQ+ equality measures containing a great wealth of information, contacts and support.

I gained some insight at college level through Rev George, who was also a fellow at his college, an associate professor in a non-theological subject and an ordained minister – which was not evident to most of his fellow academics. He described the academic culture in relation to faith in the following words:

*Certainly, I would say that – and this will have an impact for me in talking about students – certainly, my perception of Riverside from the inside is... it is... it's a dominantly atheistic culture but so dominant, it doesn't realise that it's dominant. ... The assumption is always atheism as opposed to anything different.*

Based on this observation, not only was **Riverside** not Christian, religion was so insignificant that it did not even cross people's (and certainly fellows') mind to account for or consider it. The implicit atheism Rev George talked about was not meant as a direct and fervent opposition to religion, but rather perhaps an even unconscious disregard for it.

Rev John, college chaplain, theologian and long-time ministry leader for postgraduate students did sense a shift, however, when he told me:

*I'm going to be blunt. I think the overarching confidence of the aggressive atheists using scientism as a way of crushing faith is over. ... I do think that the next generation will be able to say, 'yes, we can see that there's been a change and a shift between an aggressive hostility to what I call plurality and diversity'. ... Diversity is the name of the game then, so to say, 'hold on a moment. We need a more holistic solution'.*

Note that he refers to the “next generation”. Such pluralistic thinking where there is a space for all in the public space, may not have arrived yet to **Riverside**, but there are signs of

change ahead. Prof Thomas, a Christian academic working with Christian postgraduate students, and other leaders also mentioned that the militant views of the 'new atheists' are no longer considered the norm.

Rev John spoke about another change as well in the situation of Christian students in regards to diversity and inclusion. He explained how Christians may be thought of as privileged, because they used to be "dominant and representative of the whole of society, church and state" but this no longer was the case. He spoke of a dynamic in relation to both the university and wider society, which will be informative in understanding some of the findings about students' experiences of assumptions and stereotyping at their universities, including this case institution:

*the arising of protected zones for space for minority groups could, in the long run, lead to an instinctive victimhood where it's apparent that Christians have been the oppressor or perpetrator, and these are not. So therefore, Christians must be, in some way silenced in order to allow space for others to speak. And that could be personally experienced by Christians of every kind, particularly graduates who themselves may feel not necessarily so much part of a Christian community unless support is offered. So, I do think that for some, ... their experience has been to be pushed to one side, strangely. It's ironic because the whole point in diversity is that every group should have a voice, should be empathetically treated, should be treated with respect.*

This was a phenomenon particularly apparent at **Victoria University**, as will be discussed in

**Chapter 6.**

### 4.3 Secular university

#### A short description of the university

The secular case study took place at a redbrick university situated in an industrial city, its original schools founded during the higher education revolution in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup>

century. These developed and were united at a later date and given royal charter. The university has no religious affiliation – past or present – and was founded on non-sectarian principles. Its *Charter, Statutes and Ordinances* hold no reference to religion or faith, apart from one notion about the Student Union not to make any distinction along the lines of protected characteristics, including that of religion and nationality. It is a large and well-renowned university of tens of thousands of students, of whom over a third are postgraduates, and over half of these are international students. The campus is spread around the heart of the city, with other higher education institutions in the vicinity. It's a bustling student city with a rich and active cultural life.

Whilst inherently a non-religious institution, the university's relationship with religion and religious students is evolving with the demands of the times. Though the secularisation of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has no doubt left its further mark on the culture of the institution, there are signs that the unprecedented wave of international students into UK higher education is creating a diverse campus, with high fee-paying students bringing their religion with them and expecting that their religion is catered for.

The university has a multi-faith chaplaincy in the heart of the campus, with a Christian chaplaincy part of it. At the time of data collection it was going through restructuring, with Rev. Paul, the Christian chaplain as the leader of the organisation. Interestingly, the chaplaincy had no specific Christian groups attached to it, but it did have a very diverse and active group of volunteers running various successful social projects. There was also a Catholic Chaplaincy with its own building and church. It used to run a popular postgraduate group but with the pandemic this stopped and was struggling to gain traction again. There were a few churches within walking or cycling distance of the university, but many others

were not within easy reach of students. I failed to identify any church-based postgraduate groups.

Of the well over 500 student societies listed on the Student Union's website, five were Christian, including the Catholic Chaplaincy and the Christian Union. I also identified a postgraduate-and-staff Christian society here, a group of about a dozen people, whose leader was interviewed for the present research.

### How did religious leaders see the Secular university?

I interviewed 4 leaders – the head of the multifaith chaplaincy, the Catholic chaplain, the leader of the staff-postgraduate Christian fellowship and the leader of a student group in a local church. Both chaplaincies served all higher education institutions in the vicinity. Leaders reported a generally positive attitude of the institution toward religious and, within that, Christian students. Rev. Paul, the university chaplain, kept referring to a post-secular campus, explaining that it was no longer possible to ignore religion as it used to be customary in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century. And he saw evidence of this on the part of the university:

*I was at an... EDI conference earlier this week and I asked the question to the head of EDI, you know, is Victoria a secular institution? And their response was that it essentially is a secular foundation. But the community that make up the university aren't secular. So constitutionally, yeah, secular. But we don't live in a secular world anymore. And, so, religion needs to be given a space on campus and with, you know, religion being a protected characteristic as well. They've got a responsibility towards their staff and to their students to provide, you know, religious support for people... So, I think that there has been a shift within the last maybe just kind of two or three years to recognise the place of the faith on campus.*

Fr Victor, the Catholic chaplain seconded Rev. Paul's observation of a shift in institutional approach. The university realised that half of their staff and students have a faith affiliation and the institution's attitude

*may be changing. It's coming around to thinking 'maybe we need... we need to cater for this', you know, just as a standard of equality, diversity, inclusion. People's faith is one of the characteristics; we need to make sure it's included.*

He also talked about the openness of one of the natural and life sciences faculties towards the different faith chaplaincies and how all the chaplains were invited annually to introduce themselves at a big event at the start of the year. Yet, Rev. Paul also talked about backlash when prayer rooms were created in buildings which were considered 'scientific', for example. So, whilst the EDI leadership were accommodating a shift, the wider community may not have been at the same place yet.

Bethany, the leader of a church-based student group, thought that the university was "quite open to Christianity", because the CU and their events were allowed. She also referred to an event right before the pandemic, which brought together all Christian organisations and churches related to the university and its students and was a very successful initiative. She said that at a university level, things are amicable, however

*there's definitely still a clash, but that happens in halls more than it happens anywhere else. That happens when lives are clashing up against one another between Christian and non-Christian.*

Quinn, who'd been at the university for decades and headed up a group for Christian staff and postgraduates, was of a different view, however:

*I don't think it's anything to do with the culture of the university, really. I don't find that it supports or not supports... it gives us space on the staff*

*network to advertise [our group]. It's totally preoccupied at the moment by gender differences or religious racial differences.*

At a higher leadership level then, there was no hostility evidenced by religious leaders' observations and even efforts at EDI/policy level were identified – there was evidence of a shifting attitude. Yet, there were also signs that such shifts were not yet detectable at an everyday organisational level, where it was still either indifference or even upset about the place of religion on the academic campus.

#### 4.4 Cathedrals Group university

##### A short description of the university

**Minster University** is situated on a campus on the outskirts of a small town with an ancient cathedral. As is typical of these former teacher training colleges, it is affiliated with a church, which is reflected in its values. Although not explicitly Christian, these are displayed in various places on campus and are well highlighted on the university's website. However, this is not a religious university. Open to everyone and diverse in course offering, it has less of a research focus, training mostly for service professions and humanities. Students typically come from nearby towns. It is significantly smaller than the other two case universities, with about one sixth of the few thousand students reading for a postgraduate degree, and a little over 10% of them international.

The university emphasises the spiritual elements to student life. The original Christian chapel from its church times is in a fairly central part of the campus. It has an easily accessible extension, which can be used as a multifaith prayer room. There are flyers for various – including Christian – events and organisations displayed at the chapel, which is used for significant life events, such as weddings and memorial services of students and

alumni, as well as the every-day life on campus. The university also had recently built a large and modern multifaith space for reflection and provided several Muslim prayer rooms around campus as well. For a small university, spirituality is well addressed, sacred spaces are provided and made available and accessible.

There was no postgraduate Christian group attached to the chaplaincy or organised on campus that I could trace. Of over 40 student societies, there were no Christian ones listed, not even undergraduate. This may be one indicator of how much the church affiliation of the university affects the actual lives of students.

There was only one church near campus, an active Evangelical church, which had good relations with the university, and ran student groups for undergraduates. Other churches were in town, but due to its size, fairly easily accessible. Some of these also had student groups, but none for postgraduates. The cathedral was also within walking distance, but its focus was not on students.

### **How did religious leaders see the Cathedrals Group university?**

I interviewed the chaplain, a Christian academic and one student (undergraduate) ministry leader from a local church. There were significant changes in the university leadership near the time of data collection and the Christian leaders who were associated with the institution were not yet clear on whether and how much the new leaders were sympathetic to the institution's religious affiliation. This was somewhat unnerving for them at the time, including the fact that the new leadership was intending to restructure the values mentioned above, which were easily adaptable to chaplaincy settings and values up to this point, but there was an uncertainty about the future direction of travel.

Odette, the undergraduate student ministry leader at the nearby Evangelical church, said that the university's values did reflect the importance of spirituality but in a way which was very generic and did not refer to Christianity. On the one hand, this made the message so vague, that many might not even realise the church connections of the institution. On the other hand, however, it may have made it easier for those who were religious to talk about this topic with others. She – an alumna of the university herself – was aware of several staff who were Christian and thought that this made a difference within the university. Indeed, at least two of my interviewees were lecturers at the university while also working towards a doctorate. Rev Molly, the Christian chaplain explained that many of the postgraduates used to be undergraduates at the university, and lots of staff were also alumni. It is a small institution, and according to Dr Jack, the Christian lecturer, a large proportion of the few postgraduates were mature students who were reading for their degrees part-time, and thus organising a postgraduate group has not occurred to them until we spoke.

However, it was not only the vaguely spiritual values and the familial environment which characterised the university. Odette shared with me a story of a student from their church who became SU president in a previous year and had a very difficult time. She was often subject to stereotyping and some hostile reactions because of her religious identity, which left her exhausted and disappointed by the end of her year in office. Furthermore, Dr Jack, who had years of experience of working with postgraduate students at other universities, expressed his concerns of the religious affiliation of the university being void of real faith and thus an empty shell of categorisation.

The chaplain also explained about changes in the role of chaplaincies. Having just returned from a conference of Cathedrals Group chaplains, many were sharing an experience of

having to start over from scratch, after the pandemic decimated student numbers. Furthermore, their approach was changing, and she felt it was no longer straight forward to minister in a Christian chaplaincy. Rev Molly herself admitted, that while they were proud of the university's religious identity,

*but also, we're not throwing it in people's faces. We're not saying 'you've got to come and believe this, to come and partake in chaplaincy'. We all kind of... liturgy in our worship is all-embracing. So, I struggle with even some of the liturgy that we use because it's so broad. And I've been challenged on that because I think, well, I'm an Anglican chaplain and this is pushing me out of my comfort zone. However, by doing that, it's embracing everybody and welcoming everyone to ask those questions.*

There is thus a mixed picture presented by those familiar with **Minster University**. There seems to be a confusion of identity, whereby the institution is uncertain about how to stay true to its heritage yet be open to all in the present, post-Christian society.

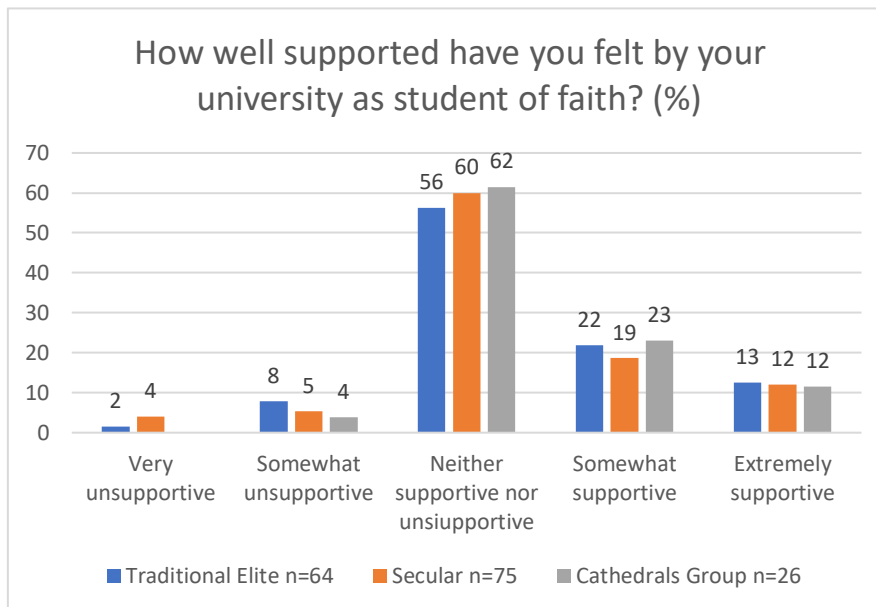
#### 4.5 How did postgraduate Christian students view their universities?

Students' perceptions of their universities, their cultures, and attitudes toward Christian students will be spelt out in detail throughout this thesis, describing a wide range of their experiences. There is one quantitative finding to include here, answering the question "*How well supported have you felt by your university as a student of faith?*".

Survey responses to this question were remarkably similar in each university type, despite the different institutional cultures and attitudes toward faith described earlier in this chapter. The largest proportion of students felt a sort of indifference from their institutions toward their religiosity, as shown in **Figure 4.1**. Students at the **Traditional elite** universities felt both the most and the least supported, with 10% of students reporting being unsupported, and 35% feeling supported. 9% of students at **Secular** institutions felt very or somewhat unsupported, whilst 31% felt supported. Only 4% of **Cathedrals Group** students

reported feeling unsupported, while 35% felt somewhat or extremely supported by their universities. (It must be kept in mind that the quantitative data came from a range of universities, not just the individual case universities described above.)

**Figure 4.1** Answers to the question "How well supported have you felt by your university as a student of faith?"



The large proportion of 'neither supportive nor unsupportive' answers are portrayed to some extent in the description of university leaders, who described a deep indifference to religion at **Riverside**, and a budding but not yet blossoming shift in interest at **Victoria University**. However, the picture at **Minster University** seems to be somewhat different than the survey results. As the sample was small, this may be completely the result of the sampling. Equally, as Rev Molly referenced in her interview, she was struck by how her institution was one of the few trying to openly own their Christian identity among the just 14 such institutions, and even they were struggling as to how to walk this tight rope. Whist not unsupportive, almost twice as many students in these institutions felt indifference rather than support from their apparently Christian institutions.

## 4.6 Summary

The three case institutions well represent the types of institutions chosen for the comparison. Their past and present relationships to Christianity vary significantly, yet students themselves feel an indifference to their religious identity from their universities. Whilst at an institutional level, **Riverside University** seems as secularised as any other, there are a plethora of both university-based and especially non-academic (church-based) provision for Christian, and within that, specifically for postgraduate students. The local churches understand the need for this group to have community and focus some of their resources on them. This, however, seems in stark contrast to both **Victoria** and even **Minster** universities.

The **secular** case university, while fully owning their identity as such, are recognising that this is not the same as the staff and students who make up their populations and are taking conscious steps to turn from a hard secular stance to one of inclusion. However, the churches and para-university organisations have not yet recognised the need of this rather large student body and have yet failed to provide them with the pastoral care and support needed.

**Minster University** on the other hand, is confused about its identity and this hinders it from being able to provide what students need, while potentially trying to be everything for everyone. Whilst they have the opportunity and the identity to be supportive of religious students, this does not manifest in the survey results any more than it does at the other two institutions. However, it must be noted that these universities often have a very small proportion of postgraduate students, who may be even studying remotely or part time, and

thus focussing their limited resources on this group may not be an efficient way of using them.

## Chapter 5 Identities and characteristics

### 5.1 Introduction

Postgraduate students are under-researched in UK higher education, thus new research that adds to our limited understanding of this diverse and growing group of students is important and must be rigorously conducted. The present chapter gives an overview of demographic characteristics of the sample of this research. (Detailed description of age, gender, ethnicity, etc. can be found in **Appendix D**, where nationality is also discussed, as international students form a large and potentially influential part of the postgraduate student population.) I then proceed to briefly describe the student identity of participants, followed by an exploration of the characteristics of students' religious identity, most pertinent to this research. Finally, I describe how students viewed the intersection of their academic and student identities. Each of these demographic descriptors and elements of their personalities play a part in students' identities and create a unique constellation for each person.

### 5.2 Demographics

#### 5.2.1 Age

The age-range of participants in this study was between 21 and 77, with the majority of students being in their twenties and thirties. Some interviewees pointed out that the age gap can be something that makes them feel different and may be unhelpful in fitting in. This was not always age objectively, but they referred to a generational gap. And sometimes it was hard to untangle the combination of several identity factors:

*Yeah, but it's more something inside me because they don't really care about my age. And also, I look younger, so they're not like feeling that I am older. But I do feel that there's some... cultural differences and generational differences. Like the way they think it's, yeah, it's very different now. The generations now, from my generation.*

(Zac, 33WI, Victoria)

*Szilvi: You said having faith made it slightly more difficult to fit into the university environment. What did you mean by that?*

*Xenia: Uh, it's difficult. I mean, I think it's a combination of some characteristics is the faith, that I'm coming from abroad. It's my age. I mean, I'm 36, 37, and my peers are going to be ten years younger than me.*

(Xenia, 36WI, Victoria)

Their age and age range, their stage of life and variations of it set this group of students apart from their undergraduate counterparts, of whom there is more knowledge available in the literature but may not be applicable to this cohort of students in various ways. These characteristics also make it more complicated both to research them and to cater for their needs. However, this fact also underlines the need to do such research and develop an understanding, paving the way to policies and provisions specifically formulated for postgraduates.

## 5.2.2 Gender

55% of participants were female. No issues of gender inequality were reported by any participants, despite my direct probing during interviews about “anything else” that made students feel different apart from their faith. The only reference to gender equality in the interviews was in a way positive, Wendy (37BI, Victoria) contrasting her positive experience as a black woman with her negative experience as a Christian:

*I think it's easier for me to be associated with being [Caribbean] and woman and black than it is to associate with being Christian.*

### 5.2.3 Ethnicity

Qualitative survey respondents did not mention race or ethnicity as an issue in their responses, although these questions were directly aimed at the religious student experience, thus this may not be indicative. Race as an identity did not feature strongly in student interviews either, even despite my probes and leaders expressed no concerns about students' ethnicity as an issue, even when directly asked.

Of the six non-white interviewees, two responded to questions about experiences regarding ethnic identity at **Riverside University**. Abigail (31AI) spoke about having come across stereotypes of Asian people, such as being timid or polite, which she sometimes felt like she slid into herself. She also mentioned cultural differences and language barriers in certain situations. Interestingly, it was her Christian identity among other students of her nationality which she felt like she had to hide before them as something not considered favourable in her home country. She did not, however, feel like she was sticking out at the university, as there were so many other Asian students around. Izzy, (31BI) also spoke of cultural differences, and mentioned how emotions were conveyed in strikingly different ways in her Caribbean communities, and thus she struggled to read British people's feelings. She even felt this was sometimes mutual:

*I think sometimes people don't know how to... or they're a bit nervous about how to interact with like black people. ... I think with all the social justice things too, people have this like what to say, what's okay, what's not okay.*

Finally, she mentioned cultural differences between African and Caribbean black cultures and issues she's run into with that but nothing at the intersection of faith and race.

At **Victoria University**, the two Asian students did not refer to issues of race at all in their interviews. Wendy (37BI), one of the three black students felt that being black and female were accommodated for better than her religious identity, as quoted earlier. Tara (23BH) didn't have negative experiences due to her ethnicity. She made an interesting comparison between her racial and religious identities:

*my race does make me feel different and like in a neutral way. I don't see it as a negative nor do I see it as a positive, just like, it's just me. I think especially because it's not a choice compared to my faith... I could get rid of my faith if I wanted to. But my race, I can't do anything about that. I think it is blending in quite well. So, I don't think it's affecting me in that way, but it does make me feel different.*

Tara (23BH, Victoria)

Petra (29BI) on the other hand was the only black female researcher in her predominantly white “very labour rights oriented” department and her experience was not entirely positive, including microaggressions, exacerbated by her research focus on a minority ethnic and disadvantaged population whose issues even her supervisors were not well acquainted with. She did not, however, relate her experiences as a black woman to her being a student of faith in her interview, nor did any of the other interviewees from a minority ethnic background in either of these two institutions.

As only white students were interviewed at **Minster University**, which had majority white students, this issue was not relevant.

#### 5.2.4 (Inter)nationality

Students in this study came from dozens of countries on five continents. Interviewees represented 16 countries from five continents. These countries had diverse relationships

with Christianity – some Orthodox or Roman Catholic, some Protestant, others not predominantly Christian, all with their varying traditions. Several students joined nationally relevant churches, such as Greek or Russian Orthodox or Roman Catholic and their specific cultures provided them with community through their national identity. This was especially apparent at **Victoria University**, where other type of Christian community was sparse. For these students, their national and their religious identities combined provided them with home away from home. Nonetheless, interviewees mostly talked about *not* feeling different at the university for being an international student, as there were so many others on their courses who were also from other countries, as Zac (33WI, SU) put it:

*Well, the thing is, like half of the class or at least one third is also international. So that doesn't make me very, very different.*

Wendy (37BI, Victoria) said, there were only two Brits in her PhD cohort of 29 people. Similarly, at **Riverside**, most international students referred to not feeling different because there are so many others, including often from their own nationality.

Natalie (26WI) at **Minster**, however, had a different experience in her small university in a small English town. There were only a handful of international students and staff, and although she was white and English speaking, her accent stood out wherever she went. The small group of international students did stick together, but after three years there she still felt like she was treated as a tourist and an outsider. This was not an issue at the bigger institutions in bigger towns with more international students. Natalie, however, felt ignored and used even at an institutional level. She was paying much higher fees than home students but was not helped as an international student, even when she was stuck here during COVID.

The notion of international students being recruited for the higher fees they pay was touched on by leaders, a dynamic discussed in section 2.3 . Rev Paul at **Victoria** referred to the fact that this is changing attitudes towards religious people, as these students bring their religion with them. Rev John at **Riverside University** had rather more negative views and saw it working the other way around:

*I feel that graduates have been taken advantage of in the past, because some people coming from abroad have got to pay excess fees to come and receive precious little supervision or encouragement in their research. And I feel that that I have to call it exploitation. And so it's our role as carers and Christian believers to fill that compassionate vacuum and give people a sense of purpose. I think we need to encourage one another.*

For most Christian international students their faith communities did fill the potential vacuum and provided a familiar place to belong.

### 5.3 Postgraduate student experience

Student identity is a wide-ranging phenomenon with a large number of associated characteristics, beyond the scope of this research to address in depth. Relevant sample characteristics such as discipline of study, part-time/full-time status, caring responsibilities and relationship status are displayed in **Appendix D**. Many of these factors vary the postgraduate experience beyond feasible detailed description. Here I briefly present the main topics raised by students when describing their postgraduate student experience.

In each case institution, both students and leaders reported that the postgraduate student experience is different to undergraduate study, both educationally and in faith life. (The latter will be described in the next section.) In terms of the student experience, participants spoke about postgraduate study being more focussed and having more purpose than the undergraduate work did. Several students described this by saying that in undergraduate

study, they focussed more internally, while with their postgraduate work, they focussed more outwardly and wanted to make a difference in the world. Many students treated their studies as work as opposed to 'just' studying. Being a postgraduate was described as isolating by students and leaders alike, especially for doctoral students. Several students reported social life and connectedness being significantly less than in undergraduate study. Both the amount of work to be done alone but also the narrowing of focus and less pastoral care were mentioned as reasons. Bill's (27WI, Riverside) words illustrate some of these experiences:

*My postgraduate studies are much less social than my undergrad was, like, you work on your own much more. And so, the necessity to belong to communities where you feel you fit in is much more important. You have less opportunities to do that in an absent-minded way. You know, when, when your friends will grow with you and you have classes that, like the classroom itself, is a group already formed that you can exploit socially and, you know, try to build connections through. In in a post-graduate context that isn't completely absent, but it becomes much narrower. I mean, I have I think I attend like eight seminars a term now. And I used to attend, I don't know, like 12 classes a week. Yeah, I have zero.*

Bill (27WI, Riverside)

In **Riverside**, impostor syndrome and especially the pressurised, competitive environment was talked about by many students and leaders, largely absent from the other two case institutions. There were some references to students with caring responsibilities, especially by leaders. The relatively low level of participants with this issue was probably due to the fact that students with so many responsibilities did not choose to take part in this study.

Many of these and other postgraduate-specific aspects will be described in more detail throughout these pages as findings are presented. I now turn to one of the central concerns of this research, the postgraduate religious identity.

## 5.4 Religious identity

Students' religious identity manifested in various ways in their lives, internally and externally. I first present findings relating to students' religious commitment and engagement through results of the measures adopted from Astin et al. (2011a). I then explore accounts of their personal faith being more mature, and finally conclude this chapter by describing Christian students' desire to combine their faith and academic work.

### 5.4.1 Religious commitment

Religious commitment is an 'internal' measure of religiosity (Astin et al., 2011a). It pertains to students' beliefs and the way their faith influences how they think of themselves, what motivates them, what purposes they have. As a complex and abstract concept, religious commitment is a latent construct, thus it was measured through a 10-item scale as shown in **Table 5.1**. Many of its individual measures inform this thesis individually as well.

**Table 5.1** Items measuring religious commitment

	Score ranges		Traditional elite n=64		Secular n=75		Cathedrals Group n=26	
	Low	High	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<i>Religious commitment</i> ( $\alpha=.91$ )	10–26	47–57	<b>51.1</b>		<b>49.6</b>		<b>51.5</b>	
Personal goal (a)								
Seeking to follow God in my everyday life			5.4	0.8	5.2	1.0	5.4	1.1
Self-Rating: Religiousness (b)								
Belief (c)								
I know I am loved by God			4.5	0.7	4.6	0.7	4.7	0.7
Experience (d)								
I feel a sense of connection with God			3.8	0.7	3.9	0.8	4.3	0.7
I feel loved by God			4.0	0.8	4.1	0.8	4.6	0.7
My Christian beliefs (e)								
Are one of the most important things in my life			5.7	0.8	5.5	1.0	5.4	1.3
Provide me with strength, support, and guidance			5.7	0.8	5.4	0.9	5.5	1.1
Give meaning/purpose to my life			5.7	0.8	5.4	1.0	5.5	1.1
Lie behind my whole approach to life			5.4	1.0	5.2	1.2	5.5	1.1
Have helped me develop my identity			5.6	0.9	5.2	1.0	5.4	1.3
Help to define the goals I set for myself			5.3	1.0	5.1	1.0	5.2	1.2

a. Personal goal measured on 6-point scale, 1 (*irrelevant*) to 6 (*essential*)

b. Self-rating was missed by an error and not measured

c. Belief measured on 5-point scale, 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*)

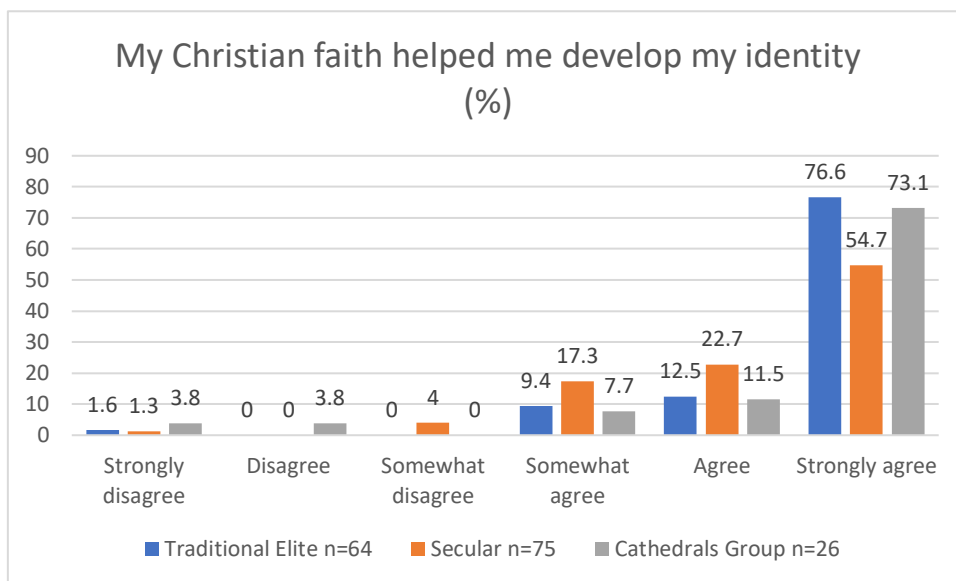
d. Experience measured on 5-point scale, 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*)

e. Belief measured on 6-point scale, 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*)

As an overall sample (N=165), survey participants had high levels of religious commitment (M=50.41), with all three individual case's scores being above the high cut-off point (44-57).

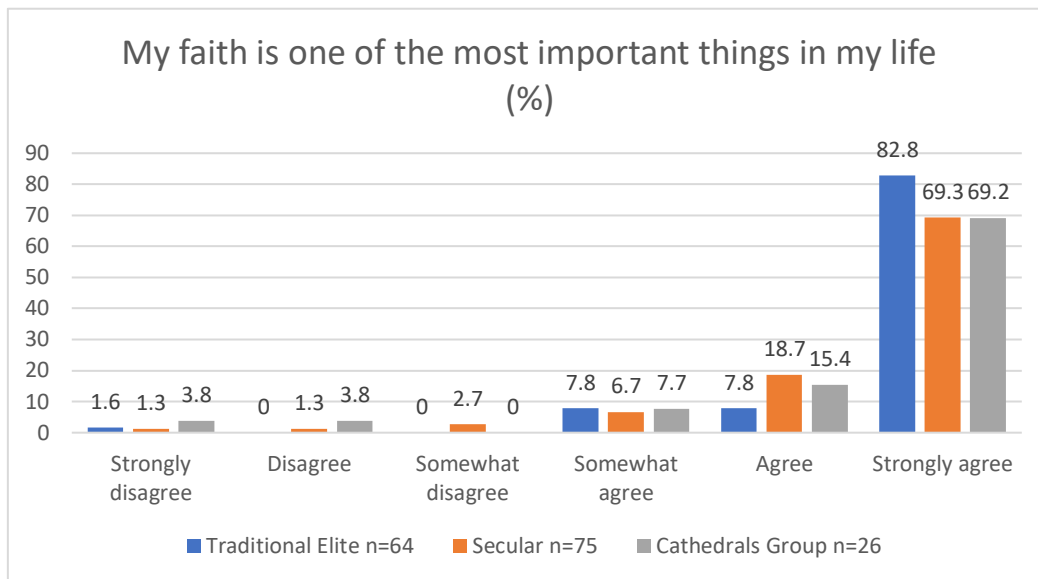
I highlight two individual measures within the religious commitment construct in direct relation to religious identity. **Figure 5.1** illustrates by institution type how important students considered their faith in their identity formation. Whilst students at **Secular** institutions reported lower level of importance than students in the other two institution types, 96% of quantitative survey respondents reported that their faith helped their identity formation, 66% agreeing strongly (N=165).

**Figure 5.1.** Importance of faith in students' identity development (%)



**Figure 5.2** displays the levels of the centrality of students' faith, a closely related concept to identity. As with identity formation, students at **Traditional elite** universities indicated the highest levels of faith centrality, but postgraduates at the other two institutions also reported very high levels, with "strongly agree" being by far the most popular answer.

Figure 5.2 Importance of their personal faith for postgraduate students



Although most interviewees spoke of high levels of religious identification and faith centrality, I naturally encountered various levels of religious commitment among students. For some, their faith was the single most important determining factor in their lives. Other students had a much looser association with their Christianity. I contrast the two ends of the spectrum within this sample, illustrating how even those who self-reported lower levels of religiosity may have been more committed than they realised.

On one end of the spectrum, Will's faith was the most important identity he had:

*It sounds very cliché, but my faith kind of defines my life. I think it's that which gives me meaning. It's that which gives me purpose. It's that which allows me to make sense of the world. It's that which gives me hope.... the short of it is, really, my faith is the most central part of who I am.*

(Will, 28WI, Victoria)

On the other end, Tara was less committed:

*I'm not super Catholic myself. Like, I don't pray a lot myself, but I do go to church every week, something I do maintain, and I do try to go to church on days obligation of the faith as well.*

(Tara, 23BH, Victoria)

Yet even Tara – who claimed not to be ‘super Catholic’ and there were areas in which she drew boundaries between her religiosity and other elements of her life – demonstrated many ways in which her faith influenced her identity. For example, most of her friends were Christians; she went to church and it was a priority in her life and she talked about ways in which going to church enriched her life, being a place where she felt at home away from home; she attended a Zoom meeting with young adults from her home church occasionally; she attended a rosary (prayer) group online every week; she chose not to study law regarding an ethically contentious issue because it contradicted her faith; and she spoke of other elements of her life which showed how at many levels her faith – consciously or unconsciously – influenced her life and decision making.

All interviewees were on a spectrum between these two examples in terms of how central their faith was to their identities. Faith influenced people’s choices of study, life choices, moral and ethical choices, mental health, general behaviour towards others, how they spent their free time, their work ethics, their relationships with other people, and so on. It interacted with many other identities. Student group leader Bethany talked about this saying,

*I think for most [postgraduates] is a strength of character that has begun to solidify after undergraduate. That means that they've made a decision to bring their faith into a lot of environments, most of the environments that they're in.*

(Bethany, church group leader, Victoria)

It may be reasonably assumed that the high levels of religious commitment in both the larger quantitative and the interview cohort can partially be explained by the self-selection of participation – students for whom this element of their life is more important are more

likely to be sacrificing the time to fill in the survey and/or participate in an interview than those for whom their faith a less central identity. Nonetheless, being religious was a very strong and important part of the identity of the participants of this study, likely to influence many parts of their lives, including their university experience.

#### 5.4.2 Religious engagement

Religious commitment may manifest in students' lives through their engagement with religious practices such as prayer, reading the Scriptures and participating in religious services. Survey participants reported high levels of religious commitment ( $M=23.6$ ), where high was determined to be between 21-35, as shown in **Table 5.2**.

**Table 5.2** Measures of religious engagement

	Score ranges		Traditional elite		Secular		Cathedrals Group	
	Low	High	n=64		n=75		n=26	
			M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<i>Religious engagement while at university (<math>\alpha=.79</math>)</i>	5–10	21–35	<b>24</b>		<b>24</b>		<b>25.3</b>	
Activity (a)								
Bible reading			4.6	2.1	4.6	2	5.1	2.1
Reading other Christian/ spiritual literature			3.9	1.9	3.9	2	4.2	2.1
Listening to Christian music or sing/play Christian music			4.3	1.9	4.3	2	4.9	2.1
Prayer			6.1	1.4	6.1	1	6.6	1
Religious service attendance (b)								
How frequently do you attend Christian meetings?			4.8	1.8	4.8	2	4.5	2.3

a Activities measured on a 7-point scale 1 (never) to 7 (every day)

b Religious service attendance measured on a 7-point scale 1 (never) to 7 (several times a week)

Students in the interview cohort talked about various levels and types of religious engagement. The interviews were focussed more on the activities which are directly related

to the student experience and being on campus rather than on the more private practices of faith, such as prayer and Bible reading, yet such activities regularly came up without prompt in the conversations. Janet (32AI, Victoria), for example, talked about some of the ways she engages with her faith throughout her day in the following way:

*...in the morning when I wake up, I usually pray first because I'm very thankful that's today's the gift. So, I always think like this, and if I'm very stressed ... I usually, I like to listen to some music or Christian music that helps me and then will sing together. As I like to do as they say community, Taizé, as they say. So, I really sometimes I just listen to that music... Or sometimes I like to share my mind as friends<sup>11</sup> do it, but that helps me to control my mind. And sometimes... not sometimes, every day I read the Bible. But I don't I have to read more. But I just read chapter, just one chapter every day.*

It is clear from Janet's words that she was engaging with her faith in many different ways.

Rich talked about his religious engagement in terms of its manifestations towards others:

*I suppose I've re-committed to the kind of simple, practical things of Christianity. There's a group called [...], which exists in lots of parishes, and all we do is, we just go visit people who are lonely. And that's not a very grand thing to do. A lot of time you're talking to people ... who are currently in early-stage dementia. They're confused. It's a bit like emptying oneself. ... I mean, when I talk about how there's a sort of simplicity, I guess, that I would like to occasionally to touch... Which is... just about having a practice in one's daily life that is life giving for yourself and hopefully other people you are connected with.*

(Rich, 61WH, Victoria)

Rich talked eloquently about some of the ways he served others motivated by his faith, including those quoted above, and how these faith-based activities enriched his own life.

---

<sup>11</sup> Friends here refer to friends in general, not to Friends as in the Quaker tradition.

Students also talked about participating in church music, praying in groups and in private, serving the poor and helping younger people along their own education.

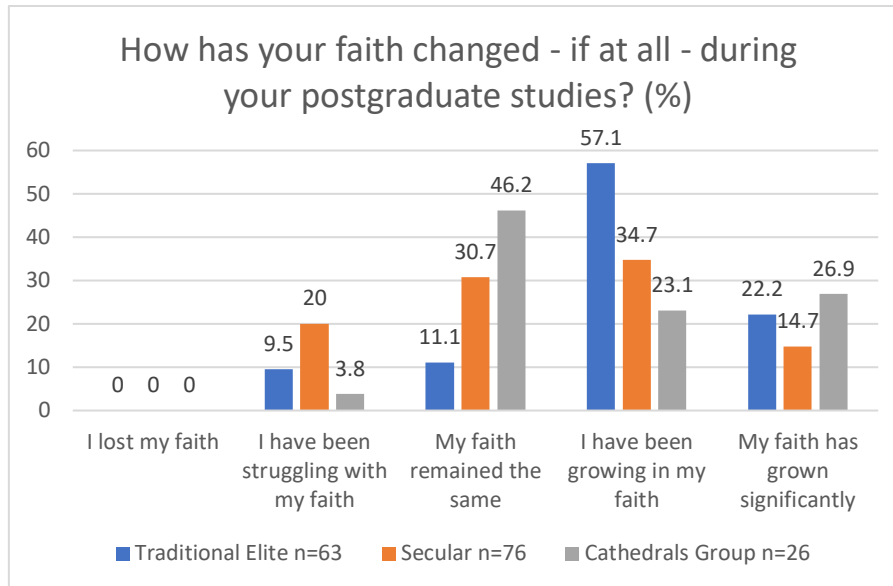
Most religious engagement, however, was discussed in the form of church- and religious group attendance. This element will be detailed in section 7.3, wholly committed to fleshing out the role of Christian community in students' lives.

### 5.4.3 A more grounded faith

As expected, postgraduates in this research were found to be at a different stage in their faith journey than their undergraduate counterparts have been reported to be through much of the literature. In the undergraduate years, the emphasis is on authenticating one's faith, testing it and making it their own (Klausli & Caudill, 2021; Small & Bowman, 2012). Both the quantitative and qualitative data suggest that postgraduate students in this study had a more stable, grounded faith, which was less subject to authenticating and indeed was growing rather than falling away. Whilst the data in the present research are not representative, and not directly comparable, they are informative of a different trend than observed by other scholars in the undergraduate phase. 13% of participants (N=164) reported struggling with their faith (similar to the 12% becoming less religious in Guest et al.'s (2013) study), but only 26% said it remained the same, while 61% said they have grown in their faith since starting their degree. Furthermore, 73% of survey respondents (N=165) reported that one of the reasons they attend Christian meetings was to grow in their faith. When broken down by university type, these trends show a varied picture (see **Figure 5.3**). At the **Traditional elite** universities, 78% (n=63) of students reported that they were growing

in their faith; this number was 49% (n=75) at the **Secular** and 50% (n=26) at the **Cathedrals Group** universities. Personal faith struggle was highest by far at the **Secular** universities.

*Figure 5.3 Development of faith during postgraduate years*



Whilst the picture is thus varied, the majority of students (61% of the overall sample) reported to have been growing in their faith and wanting to grow in their faith through their religious service or group attendance.

Interviews provided an opportunity to specifically explore whether students perceived a difference between their undergraduate and the postgraduate experiences as students of faith. Both students themselves and leaders spoke about a positive difference between the two stages, with postgraduates having a more tested, more grounded faith. Students felt they were ahead of their undergraduate selves on their faith journey. The process and struggle of forging one's faith, the authenticating was largely done earlier and thus this was a more settled faith, bringing with it the confidence to own it more and not be influenced by external pressures, more characteristic of adolescent years.

Agnes (25WH, Victoria) talked about being able to resist peer pressure better as she grew more confident in her faith, for example:

*and just realising that you don't have to hold pieces of yourself back and that if people aren't going to react well to you, if you tell them you're a Christian, you probably just shouldn't hang around with them.*

Hazel (25MAH, Riverside) compared the maturity, stability and groundedness of their faith now to how it was in her undergraduate years:

*I think all in all undergrad was like developing my faith and post-grad has been kind of... just settling in, like a continuation of it. Like the foundations are there and those foundations were strong. So, it set me up well for post-grad life.*

Stuart (36WI, Victoria), who came to faith in his late teens, spoke of the difference in the following words:

*Just to sum up, in my early times, I think that my connection to religion was somewhat emotional, sensitive. Now it's more rational, trying to understand things, trying to understand what God wants for me, and it became more into ethical domain... [My faith] became stable. ... I think it became somewhat more independent. Independent in my thoughts.*

Leaders also described how life experience and having worked through the questions of their younger selves made postgraduates more settled and mature:

*I think the postgrads are a bit more settled in their faith. I think at [undergraduate] age you often have questions and things you need to work through. ... Not all, but mostly I think talking to postgraduates... they have questions. But I think the higher proportion have kind of worked through a lot of that phase maybe and, I mean, certainly some of the most dependable people are postgraduates.*

(Fr Victor, RC Chaplain, Victoria)

*Yeah, we do have postgrad students that come to chapel as well. And, and quite often it's, I just welcome them because they're mature, they're experienced, they've been through it. And yeah, what they offer and what they bring just adds depth really to everything that we do.*

Molly (Chaplain, Minster)

These findings indicate that having worked through questions and having a deeper understanding of their faith brought stability and confidence in students' faith and identity as Christians. This can free up important mental and emotional space and energy to deal with other pressures which come with the postgraduate stage of life and potentially help facing the challenges identified in **Chapter 6**.

### Personal faith struggle

Whilst to a significantly lesser extent, there was some evidence of faith struggles as mentioned above, especially among students at the **Secular** institutions, including the qualitative data at **Victoria University**, although one student also spoke about such an issue at **Riverside**. Each of these experiences were different in nature, illustrated by the following three examples. Tara (23BH, Victoria), for example, had been struggling with the issue of unanswered prayers in relation to her own mental health and feeling guilty for not being strong enough in her faith. Zac (33WI, Victoria) struggled for many years with staying celibate till marriage. He failed to find a Christian girlfriend who would have the same value system – an example of how being a minority can make life more difficult for students. Eventually, a few months before the interview – and by then in his 30s, he gave up and “*started exploring more sexually*”. Before he did this, he was growing resentful toward God, now he was enjoying church again, albeit he was aware that he had made a compromise. Chloe (24WI, Riverside) described her own struggles in the following words:

*I've been finding it hard to pray and for different, like, just complicated things that have happened to me and the hardships. Um, and also the more I learn, the more I doubt. But in the same way, I'm kind of in the mindset right now that even if there is not a God, I believe that having Jesus as a role model is just going to make my life better and I'm going to be a better person. ... But it's true. I'm more questioning things than than believing and not being at peace, you know, with everything.*

Two leaders at **Riverside** spoke of the compounding effects for those students who struggle with their faith, as illustrated below through a quote from Rev. John (Chaplain, Riverside):

*[I]t can be quite tough. So for instance, if you are somebody who's, who has experienced depression, depression is bad enough on its own. But if you then have a faith perspective and you have quite a strong and powerful belief in God, and suddenly you feel that you no longer believe in God, it magnifies the impact that depression can have. So, I do think that faith is a huge resource in terms of people's health and well-being, but occasionally it can almost make matters worse.*

Whilst this is not a substantial amount of data, for the minority who do go through such crisis can potentially lose their whole framework of life and thus it can be significant.

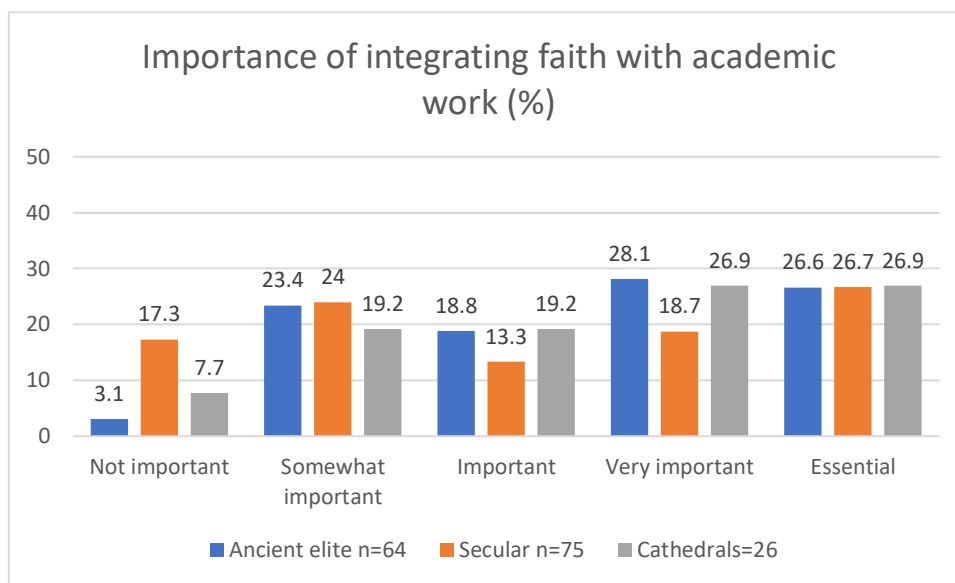
#### 5.4.4 The importance of integrating faith and academic work

There were two identities which all participants in this study shared: the student identity, an arguably temporary yet determining identity for the time of their course, and their religious identity, the more permanent part of their self (Baratta & Smith, 2019). It was clear from the pilot study that these two identities interact deeply, thus a question regarding the importance of integrating faith and academia was included in the questionnaire.

The quantitative results indicate that integrating their faith and their studies was important to Christian postgraduates, with over 50% (N=165) responding 'very important' or 'essential' to the question *How important is it for you to be able to integrate your faith with your academic studies/research?* and just 10% choosing 'not important'. 26% of students in the sample were reading for a degree in *Historical, philosophical and religious studies*, thus being a student of theology does not explain the high level of importance of the desire to integrate faith and studies.

**Figure 5.4** illustrates the institutional differences within the sample regarding students' desire to integrate their faith and studies. A strikingly similar 27% of students in each case chose 'Essential' as an answer to this question, but overall students in the **Secular** institutions considered it less important to integrate their faith with their studies or research than those in the **Traditional elite** and **Cathedrals Group** universities, with over 17% choosing 'Not important' as an answer.

**Figure 5.4** The importance of integrating faith with academic work (%)



The qualitative data reflect similar trends. Whilst there were 85 coded references to integrating faith with academic work at **Riverside** University (24 interviews), there were only 17 such references at **Victoria University** (17 interviews) and 15 references from just 8 interviews at **Minster University** (all three qualitative datasets include qualitative survey responses).

Many survey respondents reported that being able to combine their studies with their faith was one of the best things about being a Christian at their universities. This was not only so for students reading theology – although some do refer to this – but also for other

disciplines, with students of history, literature, science, anthropology and other disciplines referring to this phenomenon:

*It's lovely to be constantly reminded of the intimate connection between seeking knowledge and seeking the face of God/trying to know Him better by understanding his creation better.*

(Survey respondent, TEU)

*[Being a Christian] gives me purpose in life, studying biology/genetics is studying the building blocks God used to create us, which I think is amazing. It is all connected for me.*

(Survey respondent, SU)

Combining faith and academia gave students another dimension or depth to the way they viewed their academic work and added meaning to it.

*Being grounded in the Good News of Jesus Christ allows me to truly find meaning in the information I take in.*

(Survey respondent, SU)

Viewing their work through the lens of faith and viewing their faith through the lens of intellectual activity created conversation between the academic and the religious self. For some, the best thing about being a Christian at their university was:

*That there was a lot of room to integrate my interest in the historic Christian tradition with my studies (not being theology..!)*

(Survey respondent, TEU)

*Seeing God's hand move in the midst of my research.*

(Survey respondent, SU)

*...developing my faith intellectually,...*

(Survey respondent, SU)

Students not only considered this interaction important internally but saw advantages in their academic environments as well. Both survey respondents and interviewees commented on the fact that having a different perspective in their academic environment enriches debates and discussions.

The importance of consolidating faith and studies or research came across clearly in the interview data as well. The following quotes illustrate how inseparable the two were for many interviewees.

*I think my faith affects every area of my life because that's part of my identity and the core of who I am. So, yeah, my identity is first as a daughter of Christ and everything else flows from that. So. Yeah. I don't consider [my faith and my studies] separate. Um, I think a stereotype of science can be very much that. Like, how can you be religious and do science at the same time? ... if anything, I think my faith enriches my research. Um, in the day to day, I mean. I just marvel at God's creation.*

Hazel (25MAH, Riverside)

*My faith is who I am. My studies is what I'm passionate about. And I think there has to be a marriage between two.*

(Wendy 37BI, Victoria)

*my faith has to be sort of, you know, wound up and caught up into [my research]. Or [my research] has to be wound up and caught up into my faith might be a better way round of putting it. And yeah, even when it comes to science ... I don't think you can sort of put the Christian hat on when you're outside of work and then sort of, you know, stick your work hat on when you're in the lab.*

Xavier (41WH, Minster)

Bethany (Church student leader, Victoria), similarly to other leaders I interviewed, observed what went beyond postgraduates' desire to integrate their faith and their academic work – rather, an inability to disentangle them:

*I think most [postgraduates] would say that their world view and the lens with which they now view how they think is, is impacted by their faith. And, so, I don't even think they would know to separate them out or even think to separate the two. It would be 'I'm understanding this research through the lens of my devotion to Jesus and the exploration of my faith through however many years I've been a Christian'.*

Valerie (49WH, Victoria) and Dan (29WH, Riverside), among other interviewees and survey respondents, talked about their faith informing their methodological choices and philosophical assumptions. Petra's (29BI, Victoria) project was creating community among the people she researched, and although the work itself had no religious aspects, she believed that because "God designed community", fostering it among people was "to the glory of God". Zara (23WH) talked about how on the outside faith and academia were seemingly separated but inside her they were inseparable and influenced each other. As Agnes (25WH, Victoria) expressed it, by the time one gets to postgraduate level, often their work is very specifically theirs, something they created themselves and pursue with passion. It is at this deep level that these two worlds meet, further illustrated by the following quotes:

*Feminism is for me a part of my faith as well. Because for me, like, Jesus was the greatest feminist ever. ... and like helping others like it was so striking to me like reading the Bible, ... And love is the ...most important aspect of our lives. And I think love is very much present in my life right now. I have such meaningful friendships and a meaningful PhD project to me. So, and for me, God is love and love is God. As cliché as it sounds when you say that.*

Chloe (24WI, PhD Literature, Riverside)

*...because it's so personal to you, because you're doing a project that you're interested in that you have put forward, that really kind of relies on your own everything. And that feels more like you need that kind of personal connection that I think faith gives you.*

Agnes (25WH, MA applied arts, Victoria)

The interaction between the academic and faith identity worked both ways – students viewed their studies through the lens of faith and similarly, their studies influenced their beliefs. Valerie (49WH, Victoria), for example, said:

*one thing that I hadn't really expected was the impact on personally for me and my faith in listening to the stories of [these] people. Transformed my faith.*

Stuart (36WI, PhD business studies, Victoria) expressed this experience in the following words:

*I think the way I'm talking about religion now is being shaped also by this kind of... kind of educational influence. It is influenced by my scientific beliefs. It's influenced by my scientific rationalism.*

In **Riverside**, several students spoke of being called by God to do their particular course or research. Here, students across disciplines also explained how they were either 'shining light into the darkness' through representing Christ in their field of research or shining light onto the world by discovering new knowledge of God's creation – whether physical or social.

There was no indication of students becoming biased in their work due to their faith. Rather, in music, it gave more joy; in anthropology, a better understanding of indigenous peoples; in business, a more caring ethical stance; in criminology, another perspective; in sociology, more care for those whose lives were affected; in social work, more empathy; in mediaeval history, a deeper understanding.

Finally, several students felt that in their university environment faith and academia were considered incompatible, and their longing to be able to express their full self – both of such intertwined worlds – was hindered. This experience will be discussed in more detail in section 6.4 on p183 but the quote below illustrates well how this inner coexistence of faith

and academic identity was perceived as a clash between the academic world and the researcher of faith:

*You don't necessarily need to relate these prods with a bias because I'm a Christian. Just allow me, just allow me to express myself! I mean, that yes, be able to say that I'm Christian and I'm also able to provide logic [sic] arguments, because they **are** logical arguments.*

Xenia (36WI, Victoria)

## 5.5 Summary

In this chapter I presented findings which indicate that postgraduates' age and life stage did make their university experience different to their undergraduate years but due to their high numbers, they did not necessarily feel this marked them stand out. No issues of gender inequality were evidenced. Some minority ethnic students expressed feeling different and one black student in the sample reported negative experiences due to their racial background. International students fit in well at the larger universities due to the high numbers, but it was harder to do so in **Minster**. Christian postgraduates in this study had a high level of both religious commitment and engagement and their faith was more mature and stable than in their undergraduate years. Student expressed a desire to integrate their faith with their academic work.

## Chapter 6

### **What challenges and difficulties do Christian postgraduate students perceive as arising from their religious identity?**

#### 6.1 Introduction

Christian students form a large and diverse (i.e. non-homogeneous) minority on university campuses in England. Being in minority inherently means being different from the majority, a position which often entails some difficulty. In the case of something as personal, as contentious and as diverse as religion can be, a number of difficulties were expected to be found, in line with the literature. Some of the well documented issues include secularity and the negative perceptions of religion in academic contexts (Smith, 2014; Wolterstorff, 2019), freedom of speech (EHRC, 2019; YouGov, 2019), mental health and belonging (Milicev et al., 2021; Morris, 2021), marginalisation (Burchett & Glanzer, 2020) and faith concealment (Baratta & Smith, 2019; Scheitle & Dabbs, 2021), most of which were identified in the present sample. The nature and strength of difficulties varied between the three cases, some featuring in all three institution types, while others being detected in just one or two. Importantly, not all students found it difficult to be a Christian on their campuses. For example, 32 survey respondents (12 TEU, 13 SU, 7 CGU, N=165) did not choose to answer the question *“What is the most difficult thing about being a Christian at your university?”*, and 12 students (1 TEU, 8 SU, 3 CGU) said nothing was hard about it. Three in four students, however, did take the opportunity to share varying levels of difficulties they experienced or struggled with as a result of their faith identity at their university, and interviewees talked at length about issues they faced.

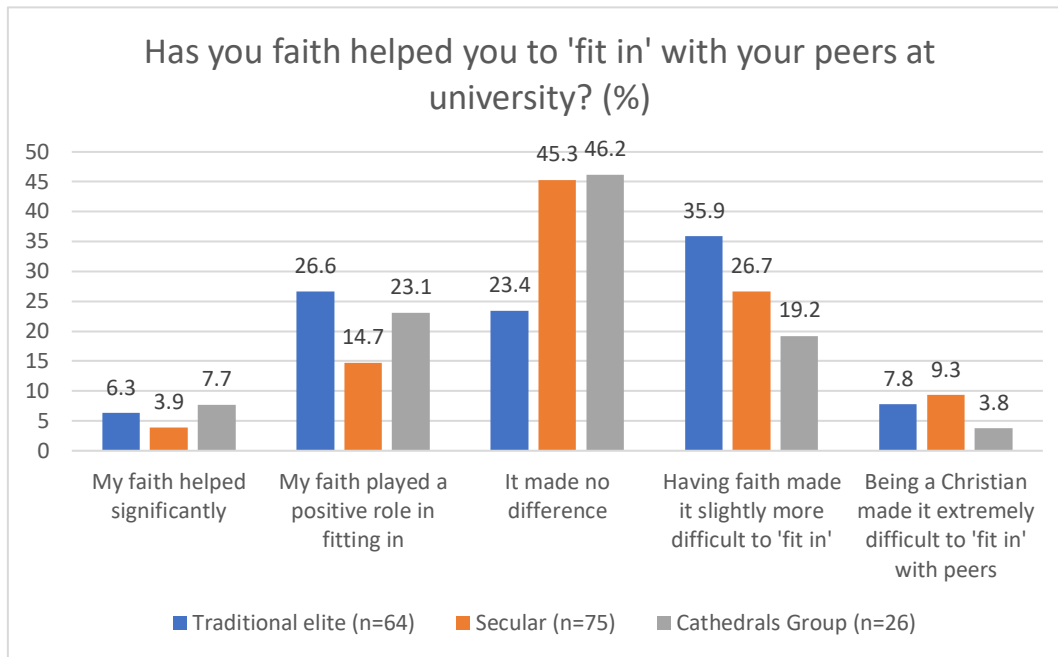
Students experienced a range of challenges due to their faith identity, but it is important to note that no direct personal or hate incidents were reported by students or religious leaders, apart from one student talking about an occurrence at a previous postgraduate course. On that note, I point out that some of the perceptions, apprehension and faith hiding were the results of earlier experiences, sometimes during students' undergraduate courses or even as early as secondary school. Students talked about very specific incidences, some at their present university, some at other universities or even in other countries. Untangling these from how students feel now is difficult, but I have made attempts to separate out or highlight previous experiences where possible.

In this chapter I first present quantitative findings of hostile attitudes students faced for their faith identity. I then proceed to introduce four further themes identified under the strand exploring difficulties Christian postgraduates report to have experienced due to their faith identity at their universities: assumptions and stereotyping, clash of values, faith concealment and invisibility and finally, sparsity of Christian community.

## 6.2 Fitting in and attitudes of others toward Christian students

Answers to a direct question about how their faith identity influenced Christian postgraduates' experiences around fitting into their university environment at their institutions are shown in **Figure 6.1**. and indicate that the difficulty of fitting in was varied across cases.

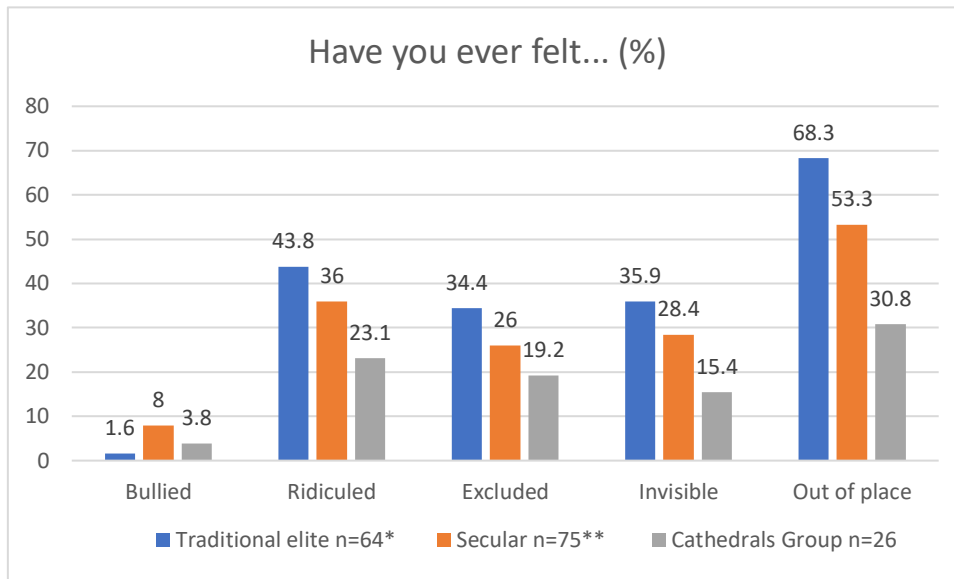
Figure 6.1 Faith and fitting in at each case university (%)



Students attending **Traditional elite** institutions had a mixed experience and despite the historical influences of Christianity and a markedly wider provision for Christian postgraduates than at either of the other two cases, having faith made it more difficult to fit in these universities for 43.7% of students, as opposed to 32.9% finding it easier to fit in due to their faith, and only 23.4% finding that it made no difference. At **Secular** universities, the negative influence of faith on fitting in was still higher than the positive (37.8% and 18.7% respectively), but here the neutral experience was strongest at 44.7%. Finally, 46.2% of **Cathedrals Group** students found no relationship between their faith and fitting in at their universities, whilst 30.8% had a positive, and only 23% a difficult experience.

The results regarding difficulties of fitting in are supported by the findings of another survey question, describing the different *types* of difficulties students faced at their universities, such as bullying, exclusion, feeling invisible or out of place, displayed in **Figure 6.2**.

**Figure 6.2** Experiences of hostile attitudes and difficulties in Christian students' lives



Note: \* Out of place n=63; \*\*Excluded n= 73, Invisible/Ignored n=74

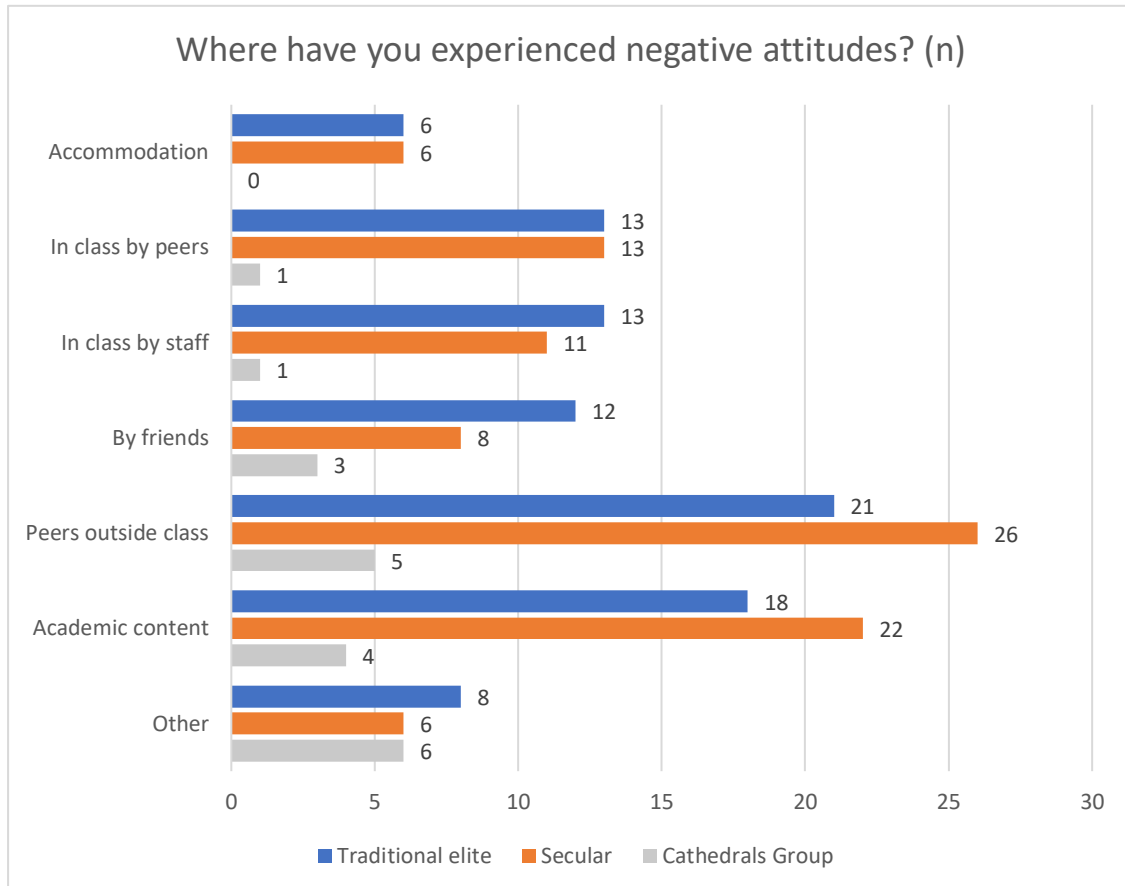
Students at **Traditional elite** universities had the highest level of negative experiences, with 68% of them feeling out of place sometimes (48%), regularly (8%), most of the time (11%) or always (1.6%) and an alarming 44% feeling ridiculed (all 'sometimes'). In fact, students at these institutions scored highest on 4 out of 5 negative experiences measured.

Students at **Secular** universities reported the highest level (8%) of being bullied for their faith, with all other indicators measured being relatively high, especially compared to the **Cathedrals Groups** results and not very far from those reported by students at the **Traditional elite institutions**. 37% of respondents at the **Secular** institutions felt ridiculed, 27% excluded, 29% invisible or ignored and over half, 54% out of place.

When asked where such negative experiences occurred, the number one area where students experienced negative attitudes was from *peers outside of class*, with *academic content* following closely both for the **Traditional elite** and **Secular** institutions (see **Figure 6.3**). *In class by peers* and *in class by staff* were also relatively high in both cases. Students

in the **Cathedrals Group** institutions experienced the lowest level of difficulty. These trends indicate that the academic environment did not always feel safe or inclusive for some students and contributed to them feeling out of place, invisible or excluded.

**Figure 6.3** Where do students perceive negative attitudes or feelings case by case?



*Note: Cases are not directly comparable, due to sample size differences. Secular: n=75; Traditional elite: n=64; Cathedrals Group: n=26; these numbers cannot be shown as %, due to the type of multiple question setting ('tick all that applies') and also because students who did not have negative experiences would not have answered this question.*

These quantitative data regarding students' negative experiences are well and richly supported by the qualitative survey responses and the interviews. The rest of this chapter will largely focus on various challenges Christian students faced due to their religious identity, and which thus may have made it more difficult to fit in at their universities. The

first such theme discussed describes the assumptions Christians postgraduates reported to be facing.

### 6.3 Assumptions and stereotyping

Many Christian students felt like people around them made (often negative) assumptions about who they were and what they believed. This theme was one of the strongest of difficulties in all three case institutions. Assumptions about Christians ranged from the general presupposition that students in a classroom (or other settings) were all of no faith, taking students' lifestyle choices for granted, assuming that Christians were unintellectual, that they hated people who had different ethical values to their own, through to being creationists or homophobic.

Several survey respondents referred to assumptions people had about Christians when answering the question *What is the hardest about being a Christian at your university?:*

*Assumptions (on the course and socially) of a worldview and values and beliefs that go against my faith and being made to feel as if I will not be accepted if I challenge them or don't agree with them*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*Other people's assumptions about your life and priorities.*

Survey respondent (SU)

*Christian views are attached to stigmas of "phobias." Because I believe in the Bible, I am automatically labelled anti-this or that because I don't support cultural trends.*

Survey respondent (SU)

*The perceived ideas of what a Christian is and people treating you differently because they think that you do not approve of them, ... but they do not listen to your perspective that I care about everyone regardless of their beliefs.*

Survey respondent (CGU)

Besides assumptions, 'prejudice' was also mentioned by several survey respondents – a word with stronger negative connotation. Some students perceived being judged by people based on their faith stance:

*[The hardest thing about being a Christian at my university is] Prejudice*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*dealing with other people's prejudice of Christians.*

Survey respondent (SU)

*a general sense of not being able to be open for fear of offending someone by associated schools of thought or presumptions about Christian beliefs, though those might not be my own perspective on issues.*

Survey respondent (SU)

Similarly, interviewees reported negative experiences or impressions due to what other people seem to have assumed about them. At **Riverside** 7 out of 23, at **Victoria** 10 out of 17 and at **Minster University** 3 out of 8 interviewees talked about assumptions and stereotyping being part of the Christian postgraduate student experience. Interviewees reported being assumed to be brainwashed, unable to make logical arguments in their research work, fundamentalist, 'like Donald Trump', aggressive and other negative associations, as illustrated by the following quotes:

*Because we are seen as backward and old fashioned, and also holding very hurtful views, which I don't share, but I totally understand.*

Chloe (24WI, Riverside)

*one is to be thought fundamentalist and therefore not really open to critical study, or to be thought to be evangelical or right wing in a way that can be, you know, caricatured as being unthoughtful. And and the third one would be, Christians who are, in some way... deficient and needing support. Not robust enough in themselves to face the challenges of life and need a crutch to get through life. These are some of the, cynical and can I say, unfair remarks made, which can lead to some [students] saying that they feel ridiculed at times.*

Rev John (Chaplain, Riverside)

*if you're Christian is equal to being, if you could compare it with something, I would say Christian equal to white privilege man. This is what I received in the environment of the university. Maybe I'm entirely wrong, but this is how I feel.*

Xenia (36WH, Victoria)

*I think our students would completely agree with people... you know that people are allowed to be what they want and do what they want. But I think other students might look at Christian students and think that's not what they think.*

Odetta (church student ministry leader, Minster)

What was difficult about these experiences for students came from the very nature of assumptions – that people were not *exploring* but rather *supposing* who they were and what they thought. It was difficult that they were not asked and were not considered individual and intellectual human beings but rather part of a uniform and supposedly misguided group.

As Zara (23WH, SU) put it:

*it's just like ... interacting with somebody based on what you think they are, rather than actually bothering to take the time to find out who they are.*

Such assumptions and lack of understanding can harm relationships. Natalie at the **Minster University** had a glimpse of this phenomenon through a friendship, which may have never formed, if she was more upfront about her faith:

*I had one friend who's a really close friend now, but her comment was like, I'm glad I got to know you before I found out that you were Christian and*

*that you went to church frequently. Because I don't think if you would have led with that, I don't think I would have been your friend.*

Natalie (26WI, Minster)

This comment had a lasting effect on her, and she told me during her interview that she is now very careful about when and to whom she discloses her faith identity and has become even more private about her faith practices, such as going to church.

### 6.3.1 The difficult historical heritage of the church is projected onto Christians

Various perceptions of historical events played a role in the way Christian students felt they were treated. Five students and a leader in **Victoria**, for example, referred to problematic elements of the historical heritage Christians have and how they felt people may personally associate them with these. This phenomenon might shed some light on the causes of the assumptions detailed above. Students mostly referred to colonialism when speaking of these issues, but the recent child abuse scandals were also indirectly mentioned<sup>12</sup>. Students and leaders absolutely disapproved of the wrongdoings of the historical church and the devastating effects it had then and throughout the centuries and did not wish to be associated with them:

*you never know, especially within kind of ... very educated people and sometimes that is kind of anti-faith or maybe specifically anti-Christian kind of ideas amongst people in this kind of bubble, I would say, and often for good reason because of, you know, some of the awful things that have come out in the news recently about what's happened to the church. You know, I absolutely agree with that. But sometimes you never really know*

---

<sup>12</sup> It must be noted that both of these are related to specifically UK church history, and in particular to the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. However, the general lack of religious literacy in England regarding Christianity as a whole (Guest et al. 2013) and the lack of nuanced understanding of denominational differences that follows may lead to such stereotypes being applied universally to Christians.

*how people will react when you say that A. you're from a church family and, B., that you're still a practising Christian who believes in it.*

Agnes (25WH, Victoria)

*Well, [Christianity] is also associated with lots of things that I hate. It's associated with colonialism and a reactionary thought process of all kinds, really.*

Rich (61WH, Victoria)

*And in my experience, it's like, oh, [Christianity] has been in power for so long. So it doesn't matter what we say to you or about you because it's been this like powerful institution, you know, that's controlled so much for so long in like the Western world that people feel like it's okay to do that... And I've grown to be a little bit cautious about kind of like being open about my religious identity and religious past in those spheres because you just never know how people are going to react to them.*

Zara (23WH, Victoria)

There was a clear admittance in these voices regarding the damage caused over the centuries. In fact, at **Riverside** this historical association came with a feeling of shame and need for reparation, mentioned by three leaders and a student.

*the Christian faith is being too closely associated with colonialism and imperial domination, ruining people's own spirituality. And it should have been evocative of love, but rather too dominating. We've got to revise that, repent from our history.*

Rev. John (Chaplain, Riverside)

*But when you have a minority [LGBTQ+] that have been really suppressed and persecuted for a long time, I can understand why, having found their voice, they want to do everything they can to activate and know what they want to change. It's just that if you take a different position, you get pilloried as being homophobic or or whatever. So I think, you know, we're at a challenging time for Christians on the issue of sexuality, not least because the church actually has been very homophobic...*

Rev. George (Chaplain, Riverside)

This historical heritage projected on the individual Christian may also be part of the reason why students in this study felt that Christians were marginalised whilst other faiths were being supported, as discussed in detail in section 6.5 .

## 6.4 Clash of values and ethics

### 6.4.1 “Faith, of any sort, seems very counter cultural”

Survey respondent (SU)

Faith being counter-cultural was the code with the most references in the ‘difficulties’ section of the **Secular** qualitative survey dataset and was also strongly present in the other two universities. At each institution, there was a clear clash of contemporary values between Christians and the society that surrounds them. Students talked about their values being counter to those promoted by the university or those of several disciplines, contradicting the progressiveness of the university, and being afraid of being expected to have to sign up to some socio-political initiatives contrary to their convictions, among other things. Going against the flow in such a way made students feel different, isolated and in cases unable to identify with their institutions, academic staff or peers, in other words, ‘out of place’ very much in line with the quantitative findings displayed in **Figure 6.1** on p175. A selection of answers to the question *What is the hardest thing about being a Christian at your university?* illustrate this below:

*My beliefs being in direct contrast with the values of my university on many matters and in this way possibly being viewed as a bad person by others*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*In general, the University is very progressive in research and support, so it has made me be hesitant to share my beliefs at times, for fear of being misunderstood or misrepresented.*

Survey respondent (SU)

*Studying ethics in a secular department, it has been difficult to feel that a faith position is unacceptable and expressing anything contrary to a secular view is best avoided.*

Survey respondent (SU)

*Values clash. Most content is focused on the self-production of the individual and valorises autonomy.*

Survey respondent (CGU)

In interviews at **Victoria University**, topics such as abortion and euthanasia were the focus of conversations about ethical issues and were also mentioned in some of the qualitative survey. Some students reported that they avoided ethical topics in their academic work, as these may cause them dilemmas or because they felt that dealing with such issues on religious-ethical basis was shunned upon and thus must be avoided. Xenia (36WI, Victoria), for example, working on a PhD, felt she had to hide her faith as she would otherwise not be taken seriously in her field, and her arguments would be overshadowed by the supposed bias of religious ethics:

*Sometimes it's fairly difficult. I have to go against my principles, my personal ethical principles and my faith. So generally, I avoid topics that might make me feel like this might bring some kind of dilemma, like abortion, euthanasia.*

Whilst at the **Traditional elite** institutions issues around female reproduction and euthanasia featured less – potentially due to the make-up of the sample, with less students reading law and medicine-related subjects compared to the **Victoria** sample – they did come up, as the following quotes illustrate:

*Attitudes and positions supported by both the university and SU are directly antithetical and even inimical to Christian morals and ethics. This included emails directing students to petition and counterprotest outside of abortion clinics, and offering students advice on the "safest way" to enter the sex industry.*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*if you have certain views on, say, abortion or those things, I find that you often feel like you're in direct contrast with what the university and wider culture and all the people who have a really influential role in your life, like your supervisors and the department believe.*

Izzy (31BI, Riverside)

Chris, the leader of a large postgraduate student ministry in a local church near **Riverside University** talked about a general shift compared to earlier years. He sensed more of a pressure on postgraduate students to sign up to projects they were not ethically comfortable with, if they were to enhance their careers. Sexual ethics, and especially the topic of premarital sex were also mentioned by some students, and the effects of their convictions being so different from most around them, as illustrated by the following quote.

*in my MCR once I remember... everyone seems to just assume that everyone else is like sleeping around or at least has like a very liberal attitude to sex. Like there was this big group in my MCR talking about anal sex once and like how it differs in in like, experience, whatever, from, like, normal intercourse ... they're all having this kind of very, like, honest conversation, ... people were just being quite open about their sex lives. But like still this sort of assumption in the room was that... everyone had, like, you know, a secular approach to sex. And then everyone was positive, which was assumed to be synonymous with having kind of a secular liberal understanding of sex and like. Yeah. Like and I think that if I had, I didn't say anything but I just felt like unseen. Um, and as though people didn't even think to like think that it is possible for someone to have a different view.*

Bella (26WI, Riverside)

There was one ethical topic that featured in all three case institutions: issues around gender and sexuality.

### 6.4.2 Gender and sexuality

LGBTQ+ issues were discussed throughout the interviews and were mentioned by survey respondents as well. As a topic very prominent in the media, politics and universities alike, and one that is often viewed as a point of contention within the church as well as between religious and other groups, it was no surprise it came up in conversations, even though it was not directly surveyed. This theme manifested somewhat differently in each case institution and hardly came up in **Minster**, probably due to the small sample. There, two survey respondents and one interviewee spoke about this issue, expressing worries about self-selected pronouns, being politically correct, the SU being left-wing and pointing to their reluctance of talking about one's views openly for fear of being stereotyped as homophobic rather than an opportunity to discuss issues in detail. It was more prominent in the other two cases, in different ways, which thus I present below separately.

#### Riverside University

LGBTQ+ topics were touched on by some students and leaders at **Riverside**, and there was one gay and one lesbian respondent in the sample of 24 interviewees (whose experiences are discussed in a separate section below). Interestingly, the topic was not as prevalent as in **Victoria**, despite there being a larger number of interviews conducted, and a greater diversity of Christian traditions represented. Nonetheless, the students who did speak about this topic reported perceptions of being judged and excluded because their views and beliefs regarding non-heterosexual relationships were either different to the mainstream or supposed to be different from the mainstream. Students explained that their assumed beliefs were viewed as hateful and felt they faced stereotyping in this area as well.

*[The hardest thing about being a Christian at my university] is feeling that my sexual ethics are so different from my peers, specifically my views on homosexuality and my decision to wait for marriage. I feel alien to them, as though they don't understand me, and worried that they think I'm Homophobic [sic] or bigoted, when this is far from the truth*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*Feeling like certain Christian beliefs – in particular about gender and sexuality – are very out of place within university culture, and the fear that I will be asked outrightly what I think about these issues and be judged as a result.*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*And so, I always feel that if they, if people do know, like, for example, in the department that you're a Christian, they'll assume that you're just a certain type of person that you hate everyone, you hate, and you don't believe people should have rights or whatever it is.*

Izzy (31BI, Riverside)

Hank (58WI, Riverside) explained at length how he felt that Christians, especially Evangelicals, were being labelled homophobic, being accused of being exclusionary, yet the very nature of such labelling creates two camps – “us vs them” – and excludes Christians.

All the students who brought up this topic were very conscious of their views being counter-cultural at best. Whilst some expressed fear to be openly questioned about this issue, others said that talking about it one-to-one, where real and respectful conversation can take place and the nuance of their views understood would be welcome. Bella (26WI, Riverside), for example, found an open attitude and was pleasantly surprised:

*But so, I was actually quite surprised when I came here from [my home country] and found like a lot of people engaging in a more balanced way about religious Christians, and being more open to the idea even. I'm just using that example again that like, you know, that there could be a non-homophobic way to think that homosexual expression was sinful. You know, like people are more nuanced and more it seemed on the whole that like I've met more people here who seem to be sincerely interested in truth.*

But students' experiences at the secular case institution were very different to Bella's.

### Victoria University

Tensions around LGBTQ+ issues were most notable at **Victoria University**, where all four leaders talked about these matters to some extent, and several students brought it up as well. The four leaders were from three different Christian traditions (Anglican, Catholic and Pentecostal), all of which have slightly different approaches to this issue and variation even within the churches. Furthermore, this was a topic with individually diverse attitudes between interviewees. Certainly, there is no uniform "Christian" LGBTQ+ standpoint, as pointed out by the leaders themselves.

Pentecostals, for example, are known for a conservative stance to gender and sexuality. However, the student ministry leader did not express any opposition to members of the LGBTQ+ community but talked about how the church's leadership is helping students find their own theology on this matter and expressed need for reconciliation for the past wrongdoings of the church in this area. She talked about the issue of sexuality being unavoidable, and the openness of students in wanting to explore the subject after an initial phase of avoidance:

*there's definitely a lot of questions around sexuality. That you kind of live in the grey, really nicely as a student. And then you almost feel this pressure to have conversations with people being like, 'I actually do want to get some clarity on what the Bible says about something like homosexuality or LGBTQ+ issues. ... How do I find that out? And who do I talk to about that kind of stuff?*

Bethany (leader, Victoria)

A survey respondent talked about this journey as well when saying that the most difficult thing as a Christian for them was "[f]iguring out my stance on LGBTQ+ issues".

The previously discussed topic of assumptions arose during this part of my interview with Bethany:

*I think there's definitely an assumption that if you are a Christian, you have a set of beliefs towards different communities that have historically been marginalised. And so, I think there's a lot of projecting those beliefs onto people. And I think the church has done a lot of damage and a lot of hurt. Historically, we've been really poor at loving people and loving people in truth and holding love and truth in the same balance. And so, I think [Christian students] find it really, really hard. And I think the reaction of others is usually quite intense.*

Bethany (leader, SU)

Quinn, the staff-and-postgraduate group leader (herself Anglican, but the group being non-denominational) was of gay-affirming convictions and as the group itself was under the university's umbrella, she strongly enforced this, which resulted in some more conservative members leaving their fellowship.

The Catholic chaplain talked about the matter coming up in conversations with students alongside other ethical issues:

*Sexuality is one that comes up a fair bit. ... the question about premarital sex and the question about sexual orientation... And [a student] asked me ... "do I have to be anti-gay and, and, and anti-choice to be a Catholic?" So, I said you certainly don't have to be anti-gay, okay, that's not required, in fact, is not what's required at all.*

Fr Victor (RC chaplain, Victoria)

Some student interviewees talked about a sense of a mutual distrust between the LGBTQ+ community and Christians.

*I can imagine if I tell someone I'm a Christian, that they would probably not want to tell me they're gay. So, it's best to always know somebody first. But even when they find out later on that you're a Christian, the audience probably assume that you have deeper, stronger feelings about*

*them behind their backs. And you probably just don't, don't even think about it.*

Wendy (37BI, Victoria)

Stuart (from Eastern Europe) described his journey from “shock” when he arrived in England to acceptance regarding the LGBTQ+ community. Then he went on to say:

*Now I understand how important it is to empower people to speak up and not to kind of diminish their presence. But yes, in [my home country], LGBT as opposed to church, it is a quite strong perception. ... And I don't think I have it now, but that's definitely what I had when I came to this country.*

Stuart (36WI, Victoria)

Note that both Wendy and Stuart came from conservative, less secularised countries, albeit from very opposite ends of the world. This potential shock of students who arrive from predominantly Christian, less religiously diverse and socially accepting countries was touched on in several of the conversations with other international students. For some, their views have shifted somewhat or significantly over time. Janet (32AI, Victoria), for example, changed so much that her parents wanted her to quit her course and go back to her home country. For others, it remained the same.

A sense of competition for attention between the religious and the LGBTQ+ communities was also present at **Victoria**:

*I don't find that [the University] supports or not supports [Christians]. ... It's totally preoccupied at the moment by gender differences or religious racial differences. And I think that's the main thrust at the moment.*

Quinn (leader, Victoria)

*I think if you come across as a LGBT ..., you're more accepted than with a kind of religious... There's more stuff going on for people with all kinds of, you know... all the other groups. But if you belong to a religious group, there's hardly anything.*

Rita (57AI, Victoria)

Others, however, drew a parallel between what both Christians and gay people as a minority may experience from society at large or the university community.

*There are a lot of assumptions people have with being religious, so I always try to wait until people know who I am. It's kind of like coming out as gay to be honest. I've been bullied for not fitting perfectly within my gender, and I've been bullied for my faith, and the feeling is the same.*

Survey respondent (SU)

*I don't feel like I'm oppressed in any way, but I'm conscious that [being a Christian is] considered a rather second-class thing to be. It's a bit like being gay.*

Rich (61WH, Victoria)

The comparison of being a Christian to being gay is interesting – an emerging minority of marginalised people and a former majority shrinking into minority cross roads here. Sometimes these difficulties and dilemmas were not about how to relate to the LGBTQ+ community but rather closer to home – how to be gay and Christian.

### Gay and lesbian Christian students – an intersectional experience

Chaplains both at **Victoria** and **Riverside** universities talked about students who were gay and conservative Christian having a difficult experience.

*if you're gay and you're a Muslim or if you're gay and you come from a conservative Christian background, then, then that can really affect mental health and wellbeing and there's, you know, tons of other things as well. Yeah, yeah, I've seen people where at times, actually it would be helpful if you didn't have faith because you, you'd interpret this in a different way.*

Rev. Paul (chaplain, Victoria)

*I think, you know, faith can be real, a huge resource. And I say sometimes it can be a huge obstacle. And I respect the way people will engage with these issues – some depending on their faith, Christian faith background, will own their sexuality and maintain them belonging by being celibate. Some try, try that and find it just too impossible. You know, it's just some people could manage that, and some people can't.*

Rev. George (chaplain, Riverside)

The two gay students I interviewed are good examples of both the dilemmas that come with such intersectionality and also of how individually different the experiences of students with these identities can be. These gay interviewees had some navigating to do on three fronts: in their church environment as a gay person, and in their academic environment as a Christian, and in their peer environment as a Christian.

When Andrew (25A1) arrived in **Riverside**, he settled in a local Evangelical church, the tradition he grew up with in Asia and also attended throughout the various international stints he had while studying abroad. This local church did not affirm a homosexual lifestyle but accepted and welcomed people of same-sex attraction; yet, he did not tell anyone there explicitly about his homosexuality. At the same time, he assumed people in his performing art group knew he was a Christian, as he was actively posting religious content on his social media account, and they knew he went to church on Sundays. In neither environment did he openly talk about the 'other side' of his personality. On his course, however, he was the "only openly Christian" student, with one other person he "suspected" might be a Christian. These three environments did not overlap.

Gwen, on the other hand, was openly gay in her Evangelical church, attending with her girlfriend, who was at the time of the interview her fiancée and whom she subsequently married. Gwen talked at great length of their journey in finding a church which was "teaching the Bible" (i.e. Evangelical, non-liberal), yet where they would be accepted as a

couple. Her faith and faith community were central in her life. Here she talks about her undergraduate years:

*And that was kind of the basis of my life; I'd be in church, I'd be in church on a Sunday once or twice for church and for student lunch. I'd be in church on a Tuesday for a student group and I'd be in church at other points for kind of planning and leaders' training and worship sessions and all of this stuff. And it was kind of it was the thing I structured my week around. It was my basis, it was my community and losing that has been really hard. ... And I feel like I've lost a lot of that and I don't really know how to replace it. So, as a postgrad, I guess I feel a lot, a lot less plugged into the Christian community.*

Gwen (22WH, Riverside)

Gwen lost the community she structured her life around, first due to the lack of acceptance of her life choices in her church and then because the activities she was structuring her life around tend to be well defined in undergraduate student ministry but not so much in the postgraduate life. When asked, she said it had to do more with going from undergraduate life (at another **Traditional elite** university) where “everyone kind of did Christianity the same way”, to postgraduate life, where

*it's really different. It's seeing how lots of people do Christianity differently and these are different ways of meeting God. And on the one hand that's really, really positive and on the other hand, I feel a little bit lost.*

Gwen then went on to talk about the depth of her faith and the ways it supported her through all of these hardships. She was passionate about God and reading her Bible and expressed a strong desire for deep Christian fellowship and integrating her academic work with her faith. With less shared contact hours (a fairly general postgraduate experience, alas one she was not prepared for), she did not manage to build meaningful relationships in her academic circles, and was herself surprised that most of her friends came from Christian circles, which was the other way around in her undergraduate years. She did not mention

trying to conceal her faith in her department, but rather that “where I have found hostility on occasion is more in kind of like feminist and queer circles, where it's kind of this assumption that [church is] bad” and her faith needed to be explained to be accepted.

Both of these students came from more conservative religious backgrounds and stayed or attempted to stay true to their faith. Andrew navigated this space by trying to fly under the radar, and allowing glimpses of his ‘other life’ to be seen in certain environments, but not all. Whereas Gwen chose to openly wear her gay identity in all of her environments, and this had dislocated her from the safety network she lived with until she started her relationship with another woman. Her now wife became a Christian along the way, which was also very important for her, and they were able walk this path together – of being counter-cultural within most church environments, while also potentially in their academic environments as Christians.

I close this section on value differences with a poignant quote from Dan (29WH, Riverside), who talked about his views about this issue with sobering honesty:

*there are just irreconcilable differences in values. That I believe that that there is an irreconcilable clash of values that no amount, even if they were, like, really friendly, it's not going to solve the issue. ... I've experienced a constant sort of ridicule of the values that I hold.*

## 6.5 Diversity without equality or inclusion

A novel finding I identified at **Victoria University** was the fact that many students reported feeling that other faiths had more support and recognition than Christianity. Two survey respondents wrote at length about this being a difficulty for them, while 8 interviewees, including three leaders have expressed thoughts regarding this issue.

This is a complex and sensitive theme and I proceed with caution. I have considered leaving this finding out of this document but on the one hand I would not have been true to my participants, risking my integrity as a researcher, and on the other, I feel this is an important and very timely issue on contemporary campuses, which are simultaneously secular and religiously diverse. In the present international climate, which does not leave university campuses unaffected, it has become even more pressing to acknowledge and include religious people and facilitate discussion with and among them. Contextualising these experiences is vital in order not to mis-read what the students and leaders do or do not mean, further complicated by the lack of intonation and context of the written text and quotes. It must be noted that I have not come across any hostility from students or leaders against other religions. Their frustration was not with other religious groups but the fact that whilst the institution gave them recognition and provision for their needs, they felt that Christians didn't get the same.

*it's easier to find support if you have a different religion rather than being a Christian.*

Xenia (36WI, Victoria)

*...this year, I had one professor ... the way that he would talk about religion – and it's never just religion. It's always specifically Christianity, because like speaking about other religions ... has like, it's different, you know? Christianity is the religion that you can shit on.*

Zara (23WH, Victoria)

*Szilvi: How do [postgraduates] experience their lives as Christians at university?*

*Quinn: Possibly secondary compared to [other faiths] ... [as opposed to other faith leaders] Jesus Christ as an expletive is quite acceptable.*

Quinn (leader, Victoria)

Several interviewees brought up the issue of holidays and practices. Examples of emails sent on behalf of the university for major holidays of other faiths were shared, but there was no such greeting or recognition of Christian festivals. This created a feeling of being secondary, or of not being welcome. Xenia said: *“I have to think twice before I say to someone, Happy Christmas”*. She shared a story of her being attentive and wishing a colleague of a different religion a restful holiday, the person thanking them for recognising that it was not Christmas for them but not taking the trouble of actually wishing Merry Christmas back to their Christian colleague. Another student said that he

*just felt that, uh, maybe there was some precaution against Christianity... Because I really, I, I don't remember a single, single postcard or a single email. Maybe there was one, but with tiny font about Christian holidays...*

Stuart (36WI, Victoria)

A survey respondent talked about this issue in the following words:

*... Christian holidays are intentionally ignored to be politically correct. For example, it is frowned upon and offensive to say Merry Christmas instead it should be Happy Holidays. Meanwhile, the university openly celebrates [other faiths' festivals]; .... Even in planning events, measures are in place to accommodate other faiths and practices but the Christians are silenced ... But Christians should also be accommodated and supported to share their faith and beliefs in any forum (as it is being done out of love for God and all His creation – not to harm or judge, rather edify).*

Survey respondent (SU)

Note that the student is asking for Christians to *also* be recognised. In a similar vein, another student suggested how easily this could be solved on behalf of the university – he went as far as thinking of a solution – and pointed out that the institution collects demographic data regarding students' religion, so they could create tailored messages for each religious community and send it to the relevant students of the religion having a festival.

These Christian students felt like their religion had somehow become politically incorrect, which made them feel invisible and they struggled to understand why it was acceptable to support other faiths and not Christianity, too.

*I think that is where... really why I feel that we're excluded. Christianity just never comes up. It's never a topic, but... being of other faiths, does.*

Wendy (37BI, Victoria)

This issue is not entirely independent of the above-discussed historical heritage and the notion of decolonisation whereby Christians may be considered the historical oppressors, and such assertions may be projected onto present-day individuals or groups – who do not identify with, rather, strongly disapprove of those practices. Whilst not at **Victoria University**, Rev John summarised this phenomenon eloquently in his interview:

*the arising of protected zones for space for minority groups could, in the long run, lead to an instinctive victimhood where it's apparent that Christians have been the oppressor or perpetrator, and these are not. So therefore, Christians must be, in some way silenced in order to allow space for others to speak. And that could be personally experienced by Christians of every kind, particularly graduates who themselves may feel not necessarily so much part of a, of a Christian community unless support is offered. So, I do think that for some, ... their experience has been to be pushed to one side, strangely. It's ironic because the whole point of diversity is that every group should have a voice, should be empathetically treated, should be treated with respect.*

Rev. John (Chaplain, Riverside)

The fact that **Victoria**, the *secular* university was actually recognising and addressing the needs of the religious among them is to be applauded. Their lack of religious, and indeed, inter-religious literacy, however, created some uncomfortable, even painful experiences for some Christian students. Leaders, whilst aware of some of these difficulties, had the advantage of seeing the bigger picture, recognising an opportunity whereby such

recognition of other faiths was opening doors for all religious students, after decades of secularisation. Both chaplains I interviewed spoke about a shift in the attitude of the university towards religion, and EDI policies playing a part in this.

*Conversations I'm involved with the university ... that's kind of a shift from, I guess, the form of secularism where there's no space for religion on campus. Now I think it's kind of about making sure that space is created within a secular constitution... So, whether that's in because of protected characteristics or whether that's because of the need for prayer rooms or, Jewish students on Shabbat needing to leave lectures early, having exam timetables, which kind of make sure that they don't clash with religious festivals. So all of that kind of reality means that I don't think they can be secular in a kind of old 1960s way.*

Rev. Paul, chaplain (Victoria)

And provision for other faiths is just one step away from (re-)recognising Christians as well, according to Fr Victor (RC Chaplain, Victoria, emphasis mine):

*And so, I think people realise... 'well, I wouldn't make fun of [another religion], maybe I shouldn't be making fun of Christians either'. A kind of sense that I think Christianity may benefit from the sense that people know they shouldn't be insulting to [others] about their faith, and they may even think, 'Oh, well then why is it okay to do that to Christians?'... **That's how we get in on the kind of inclusion kind of ticket, so to speak.***

Ironically, the group who is being potentially sidelined due to being considered a majority, is getting in the back of the queue to re-gain its legitimacy at the university. Unfortunately, whilst the words of the chaplains about the status of religion on campus were encouraging, since the time of data collection the services of the multi-faith chaplaincy at **Victoria University** were severely cut, an obvious and grave step backward in the inclusion of religious students.

## 6.6 Faith concealment and invisibility

A result of the above-discussed difficulties such as experiences of stereotyping, of associating Christian individuals with the negative historical actions of other people, clash of values, other minority groups being given more attention, and of being counter-cultural lead to many students hiding their faith in their academic environments. The following survey response (part of which has already been used elsewhere) richly and concisely illustrates how intertwined many of the themes discussed so far are:

*It is always difficult and nerve wracking when you reach the point that you have to tell people you're Christian. I.e. when you can't hang out on a Sunday because you're going to church and you have to tell people that. My peers here are great and supportive, but you just never know how people are going to react to you, so I like waiting until I am good friends with people before telling them. There are a lot of assumptions people have with being religious, so I always try to wait until people know who I am. It's kind of like coming out as gay to be honest. I've been bullied for not fitting perfectly within my gender, and I've been bullied for my faith, and the feeling is the same.*

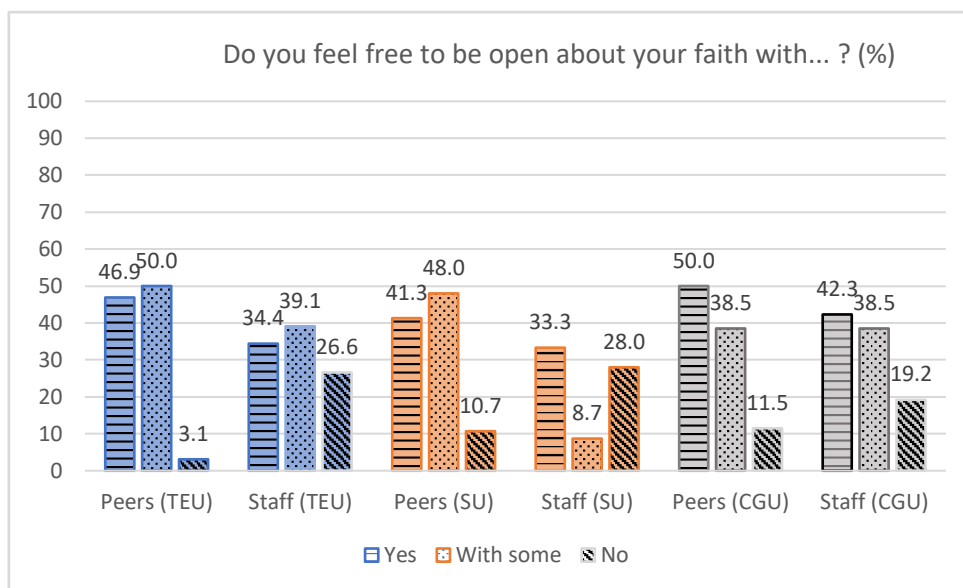
Survey respondent (SU)

This quote demonstrates well the inner fear some students had and the effort that went into navigating their Christianity, even despite a supportive peer environment in this case. It is impossible to know where and when bullying for her faith took place in this student's life, but the effect is clearly long lasting, generating mistrust, fear to speak and identity concealment.

As shown in **Figure 6.4**, survey respondents felt more open about their faith with their peers than with university staff in all three institutions, although the levels of openness varied between cases. Only 3.1% of students in the **Traditional elite** universities felt they shouldn't talk to their peers about their faith identity. Almost 4 times as many, 10.7% at the **Secular**,

and 11.5% at the **Cathedrals Group** universities felt the same. However, their openness with staff was quite different, most strikingly at the **Traditional elite** institutions, where 26.6% of students felt *unable* to be open about their faith identity with their academic staff as opposed to the 3.1% with peers. 28% at the **Secular** and 19.2% at the **Cathedrals Group** institutions felt the same.

**Figure 6.4** Students' sense of openness about their faith with peers and with staff, by university type



\*(SU) n=75; (TEU) n=64; (CGU) n=26

In the qualitative part of the survey, students used words and phrases such as 'fearful', 'scared', 'having to be careful', 'nerve racking', 'worry', 'feeling judged' when talking about difficulties about being a Christian at their institution, feelings which may have made them uneasy talking about their faith identity. One student even used the words 'oppression' and 'being silenced', although such strong language was not widespread. Dan (29WH, Riverside) situated this experience within the narrative of power struggles.

*I definitely feel like an intellectual minority and isolated because my beliefs on a lot of things... they're just sort of like non gratia, you can't... are not fair game to discuss because everything now is interpreted within this lens*

*of power relationships and the capacity of speech to do harm to people. And so, the great tradition of tolerance and freedom of speech has eroded under this progressive view.*

Dan's thoughts indicate that some students feel that faith and academic endeavours may have to be mutually exclusive in the eyes of their institutions.

### 6.6.1 No space for faith in academia

Many participants reported feelings and incidences which made it clear for them that faith had no place in academia, and which led them to conceal their faith identities in their academic environment. For some survey respondents this was the hardest thing about being a Christian at their university:

*Not feeling able to openly express faith for fear of work being disregarded*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*it can be helpful to talk through things with the people around you, experiencing the same things. I have tried to do this before but have been ridiculed by colleagues and peers for my spiritual beliefs. To be a Christian academic in a supposedly Christian university and an ever-changing society means we have to adapt, but also to a certain extent keep our faith a secret, else fear rebuttal, mockery, sneering and jibes.*

Survey respondent (CGU)

Being ridiculed for her faith by her colleagues led this survey respondent to hide her faith even from her peers. An area where the power relations can be even more intimidating is student-supervisor relationships, as seen above in **Figure 6.4**. Abigail (31AI) at **Riverside University** shared the following incident with me. (Note that the power-relation does not only affect the student, but the supervisor in the junior position also.)

*I remember one time during my supervision, my supervisor – he's like old white guy and he is really famous – and he said ... 'some people think that*

*there is a God, and they created religion because they want to use their power' ... he's not a Christian, obviously.*

*So, I didn't know how to react. If I said, "yes, you're right". I should... should I say that? Because I would say, you know, he is my supervisor... should have I said, "oh, yes", or should I say "No, I don't think so"? I didn't know how to react. So, I just didn't react. And I just stayed... I was being silent. And there was the other supervisor, [...] And he was just nodding like this, just like me not responding. ... but I realise now that my other supervisor is a Christian because I met him at [a Christian event].*

The lack of tact, and the fact that it did not even cross the supervisor's mind that his student might have faith exemplifies how secularity has become the standard point of view in academia for many. In fact, Abigail herself said that her "default belief is that academics here are not Christians, they are very rational, you know", as if the two were mutually exclusive. It was clear from her interview that her Asian culture also played a role in how she related to the "old, white and famous guy", another element which should be borne in mind in such unequal relationships. Importantly, the supervisor in the junior position seemed to be hiding his own faith as well, instead of taking a stand. This then created a situation, where the supervisee felt in an even weaker position, her beliefs that there is no space for faith in academia were reinforced, and the example of having to hide it set.

As the following quotes illustrate, respondents in all three institutions reported experiences and attitudes which spoke of a perception that academia and faith were incompatible.

*I don't tell people because I'm worried about my career. It's not something that I would hide. But I don't go out of my way actively to just say things are looked for. [...] So that might be another reason why, particularly can't talk about what I believe or that if I do, I'm going to face some repercussions. I'm going to get excluded from social groups or you know, I have a... have a black label on my name for the future.*

Dan (29WH, Riverside)

*I'll give you one example where somebody doing a law PhD mentioned some Catholic writers who would be writing in his particular fields.*

*Supervisor had kind of rolled his eyes: 'Are you engaging with **that** kind of thing?'*

Chris (Postgraduate student ministry leader, Riverside)

*I don't want to give the impression that I'm biased because of my faith. I'm trying to provide logic [sic] arguments, and **I'm trying to hide my faith, so that they will take me seriously...** Usually I have a cross, sometimes I'm trying to cover it, to hide it. But other times it's, it's out there so people can see. That's the only, the only, you know, sign that I'm a Christian.*

Xenia (36WI, Victoria, emphasis mine)

*What is shocking about that is that some of the top academics are, you know, people with, you know, religious faith and you just don't know about it. At least in science it's 'don't ask, don't tell'. And it's one of the things I discovered over time, the number of Christians in various departments and heads of department ... who I only found out through slightly strange coincidence that that was where they're at. Part of me says, it would have been nice to know and nice to have had their support in some way as a younger Christian going forward...*

Xavier (41WH, Minster)

The perception that faith and academia are mutually exclusive in the eyes of so many academics, and importantly, academics with power over the future of religious students, can have detrimental and lasting effects on students of faith. To put it into perspective, integrating their faith and academic identities was so important for many Christian postgraduates that it is a theme in itself in the next chapter about the benefits of faith. For something so dear to them being so disregarded was a difficulty for participants of this study and lead to dilemmas about whether they should or could be open about their faith identity.

### 6.6.2 Faith concealment

Faith concealment was one of the most populous codes in the thematic analysis and came out strongly in all three institution types.

*[The hardest thing about being a Christian at my university is] being clear about my faith in non-Christian groups. Walking the line between hiding my faith and feeling like I'm trying to proselytize is difficult.*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*Not feeling able to openly express faith for fear of work being disregarded*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*when [the professor] said that, it made me feel like, oh, I better not tell anybody that I'm Christian. Like, I got [sic] to keep that secret. Like I have to keep it a secret or I'm not going to be respected. People are going to... not listen or like they're going to immediately, like, think that I'm stupid.*

Zara (23WI, Victoria)

*I'm going to keep being me and being in me is my faith, but not to be super explicit about it, which I think is maybe less to do with the university individually and more with just an everyday culture that is very kind of anti-religion. And so just kind of living it quietly so that, you know, I think I don't stand out.*

Natalie (26WI, Minster)

To some students hiding their faith identity was a painful experience. Wendy (37BI) was in the first year of her PhD at **Victoria** at the time of our interview. She started crying when she described how she felt completely unable to talk about her faith with her peers, despite the fact that several were openly religious – but of another religion. This was due to both the general secular nature of her academic environment and also the specific way her university practiced religion related EDI, as described above. Although the interview was conducted towards the end of the academic year – thus ample time had passed to develop relationships – trust did not materialise:

*Szilvi: Did you say you were the only [Christian] in your cohort? As far as...*

*Wendy: I don't know, because we can't have that conversation.*

The feeling to have to hide – or even deny – her faith intensified for Wendy between her undergraduate years and her PhD. Furthermore, she clearly expressed that now it was actually more important for her to be able to own it openly than it was during her first degree – yet, she felt unable to do so.

For several other interviewees their reluctance to be open about their faith stance was rooted in their undergraduate experience. A number of students talked about having had negative experiences either with peers or with teaching staff during their first degree. Xenia described vividly how she felt when she was bullied for having faith in her undergraduate years and how that experience still affected her, more than 15 years on, having had a medical career, having had a family, and now working on a PhD in a medically related subject.

*when I was doing my undergraduate, an issue that I had – and it's not the same, but I still have the same fear ... So, I, since then I, I don't really... I don't really talk about my faith. Sometimes I pretend that it's not my part. It's not that I'm not faith [sic], but I'm not faithful [sic] because I feel that I will receive the same reactions or maybe I will be discriminated or maybe people will think that you're silly, especially in the... in the... in the environment that I'm in, the programme that I am in.*

Xenia (36WI, Victoria)

Bethany, the student ministry leader in a Pentecostal church near **Victoria University** said that about 60% of students she worked with would be open and 40% would keep their faith hidden in their academic environment. Rev. John, a chaplain at **Riverside** also talked about students concealing their faith:

*some Christian graduates will report that they feel a little awkward and out of place. Some even may be shy to admitting that they're Christians, or let alone engaging in debate as professing Christians, lest they be regarded as therefore instantly falling into some camps.*

Students feeling like they had to conceal their faith led to feelings of being invisible.

### 6.6.3 Invisibility

As seen earlier in **Figure 6.2** (p175), about a third of quantitative survey respondents in the **Traditional elite** (35.9%) and the **Secular** (28.4%) and one in seven at the **Cathedrals Group** institutions said they had at times felt invisible or ignored due to their faith identity. Some interviewees expressed this explicitly:

*Szilvi: How has it been being a Christian at Victoria?*

*Rich (61WH): I feel I'd been quite invisible, really.*

Feelings of invisibility were complex and related to several of the difficulties discussed so far. On the one hand, hiding one's faith inevitably results in its invisibility. However, it may also occur by no making of the individual experiencing it, but as a result of being stereotyped, or simply through the dominance of secular values. All of these ways of becoming invisible were evidenced in the data. Xenia (36WI, Victoria) hid her Christian values in her research and covered her cross pendant to become invisible and thus avoid her work being judged as biased. Zara (23WI, Victoria) felt invisible when her religion was mocked by a professor in class. Bella (26WI, Riverside) felt invisible when everyone around her talked casually about their sexual experiences and had no idea of her personal convictions. Francis (24WH, Riverside) felt invisible when everyone in his class treated ancient Christian texts as something no one believes in anymore. He said, "the invisibility comes from people acting like you're not there, or talking like your perspective is irrelevant". Other students felt second-rate and invisible when their institution recognised and openly supported other faiths – and rightly so – but ignored Christianity.

Christian students were also invisible, because they blended in. Several religions have customs which make many – although not all – of their followers visible through religious wear or actions. The vast majority of Christians, however, do not wear identifiable clothing and jewellery or perform rituals in public. This can result in going unnoticed and people not even having the chance to consider their values in their conversations, as acknowledged and well-illustrated by the following quote.

*I mean, if I had a pin dress and like, a nun habit, this conversation would have been very different. And people would have, like, assumed I would have had a different view and probably been quite curious about it and spoken in a generally more inclusive and respectful way... Because people aren't trying to be exclusive and like they just, they just think that everyone's the same.*

Bella (26WI, Riverside)

### Is there anybody out there?

Such blending in by looks and concealing their views and faith for fear of ridicule or exclusion made it difficult even for Christian students to identify one-another, limiting their opportunity to find like-minded people, making them feel they are the only one in the room and potentially isolating them further, illustrated by the following quotes

*Like people didn't feel comfortable in general expressing being Christians. And you sort of had to detect who could be a Christian. ... There are small signs you, you know, you like you experience personally, so you detect them. And that allows you to see that people are Christians and maybe to form relationships with them. But there's no structure to that or very little structure within the university.*

Bill (27WI, Riverside)

*[The hardest thing about being a Christian at my university is] not knowing how many other students and staff are also Christians.*

(Survey respondent, SU)

*I'm not actually aware if there are other postgraduate Christians. I assume there must be ...*

(Survey respondent, SU)

In all three institutions, students talked about hinting at going to church on Sunday as a 'code' for letting on their Christianity. However, if weekend activities did not come up in conversation, there were very few other ways of signalling about their faith identity. Furthermore, as discussed above, often students were not aware of staff being religious in their academic contexts. As a result, many students did not know if there were other Christians on their courses or in their departments, even though expressed the desire to connect.

## 6.7 Sparsity of Christian community

Lack of Christian community was a significant issue at **Victoria University** and was also present at **Minster**. However, it did not manifest as a difficulty in **Riverside** – quite the contrary, as will be discussed further in **Chapter 7**. Seven survey respondents in the **Secular** sample answered the question about what the most difficult thing was for them at their university by referring to their desire for Christian community or expressing their frustration about there not being one they could join. Students at the **Cathedrals Group** universities reported similar problems.

*No activities/opportunities for students with faith to get together and socialise.*

Survey respondent (SU)

*Lack of other Christian students on my course*

Survey respondent (SU)

*Not been able to find as associate with like minds (Christians) in class and campus*

Survey respondent (CGU)

At both universities it was clear that the lack of specifically postgraduate provision made it harder to find community. The local churches which did run student groups focussed on undergraduates, and it was the fact that I was asking these questions that made some of the leaders realise that postgraduates had specific needs. One exemption was the Roman Catholic chaplaincy at **Victoria**, where there used to be a postgraduate group for years, but was struggling to get traction again after the pandemic, primarily due to lack of resources. Many students pointed out that they wouldn't or didn't feel at home in the Christian Union (an undergraduate organisation), or in other undergraduate-focussed groups and they felt out of place in these.

*So the Christian Union is for the undergrads, even lots of chapel services are for the undergrads and some they don't mean to, but they can make it feel a bit strange if you go as a, as a postgraduate.*

Lewis (50WH, Minster)

Considering the difficulties described in the previous sections of this chapter, such as feeling counter cultural and facing prejudices, it is not surprising that Christian students longed for the company of other Christians. However, this was difficult to fulfil both due to the lack of postgraduate religious groups, and the fact that many students concealed their faith in academic environments, which hindered them from finding each other naturally. Churches would have been the obvious place to connect, but this was not always straight forward. Some students at the **Secular** university didn't find a church to belong to. Both Will and Wendy had been at the university for a year and found it a daunting task to seek out the

right church in a big city. For Will, the churches were too far from where he was living.

Wendy said that

*I don't have a Christian community here. Why is that? I don't know where to go. I don't know where to start.*

(Wendy 37BI, Victoria)

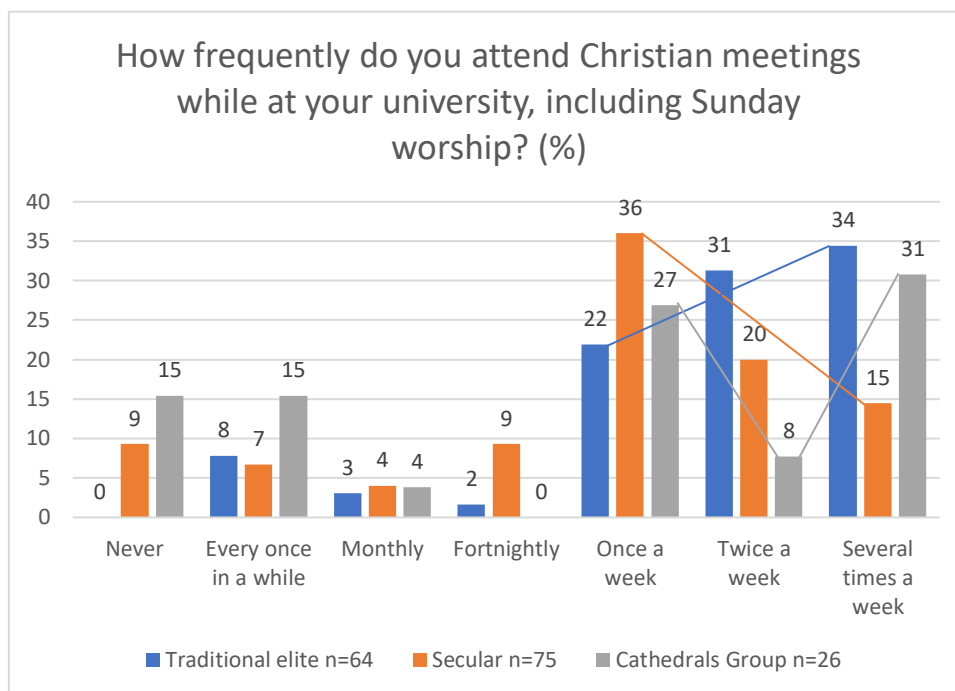
She was substituting church with online church from her home country, but was left isolated as a Christian at her university. Rita also struggled to find or create a community even within the Theology department:

*I invited the Jesuits, you know, to come to it: 'we're having a meeting. You get to eat and all'. They never came. Nor did my supervisors or the theology group invite [sic] them and, you know, ... no connection or don't know. Like. Oh, I would say no connection.*

(Rita 59AI, Victoria)

**Figure 6.5** illustrates the opposing tendencies of religious service attendance, especially between the **Traditional elite** and the **Secular** cases. At the **Traditional elite** case, attendance was very high, and highest at 'several times a week'. At the **Secular** case, it is highest at 'once a week' and sharply falling away at twice or more frequently a week. At the **Cathedrals Group** universities, whilst 'several times' is the highest, 'twice a week' is lower than 'once a week'. Overall attendance was highest at the **Traditional elite** institutions, with 87% of students attending once or more a week, 71% at the **Secular** and 66% at the **Cathedrals Group** universities.

**Figure 6.5** Frequency of religious group attendance (%) and the opposing tendencies in the Secular and the Traditional elite cases



The difference may be partially explained by the differences in study modes, and thus presence on campus. 63% of students in the **Traditional elite** case were studying in person only (i.e. not hybrid or online), while only 46% at the **Secular** and 42% at the **Cathedrals Group** institutions, lowering their opportunities of attending groups. Dr Jack, the Christian academic at **Minster** observed that there were very few postgraduates at their university and many of them were mature students. Of these, many could have lived at home and attended church there, one explanation for the relatively high level of non- and very low attendance in this group while at university.

Furthermore, the lack of communities to attend at the **Secular** and **Cathedrals Group institutions** would also hinder attendance. Whilst no statistical data were collected about the number of churches and/or postgraduate-focussed Christian groups, it was very clear in the qualitative data that there was an abundance of Christian communities at the **Traditional**

**elite** institutions, while the lack of them was a challenge strongest felt at the **Secular** case but also mentioned at the **Cathedrals Group** university.

## 6.8 Summary

In this chapter I presented data through five themes of challenges and difficulties Christian postgraduates reported as a result of their faith identity. First, I explored how students perceived their university environments when it came to fitting in, and potential negative attitudes towards them, demonstrating that students in the **Traditional elite** institutions reported the highest level of perceived hostility and difficulties with fitting in due to their religious identity. In all case institutions, there was evidence of Christians being stereotyped, and their values being assumed and assumed to be negative, partially due to the controversial history of the church. Students reported that their values and ethics were considered counter-cultural, especially in areas of human reproduction, premarital sex and issues around their relationship to the LGBTQ+ community. Many reported feeling like they were assumed to be homophobic by association of their faith. **Victoria University's** efforts for religious inclusion had counter effects and resulted in Christians feeling silenced and excluded. As a result of these difficulties many students chose to conceal their faith on campus and in their work, for a perceived incompatibility of faith and academia, resulting in feeling invisible. Finally, I presented findings that students at **Victoria University**, and to some extent at **Minster**, reported a lack of Christian communities they could belong to.

## Chapter 7

### **What benefits and advantages do Christian postgraduate students perceive as arising from their religious identity?**

#### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I address themes pertaining to the benefits and advantages of having faith as a postgraduate student. This chapter contains novel contributions to higher education research in England in that it specifically explores the potential positive relationship between the faith- and postgraduate student identities. As pointed out earlier, much more has been reported on the difficulties religious, and within that, Christian students encounter in their academic environment. There is also vast literature documenting the social and psychological benefits of faith (e.g. Chen et al., 2020; Klausli & Caudill, 2021; Koenig, 2012; S. Li, Okereke, et al., 2016). Yet, very little has been published about whether and if yes, how their faith positively contributes to students' university experience, and even less about this in the postgraduate setting.

I present findings of what benefits Christian postgraduates perceive as arising from their religious identity in three sections. First, I explore how students' personal faith in a loving God benefits their student experience and how their beliefs provide them with meaning and purpose. I then proceed to report on students' accounts of how Christian faith communities enhanced their student experience through providing a place to belong, where they found support from like-minded people. Finally, bringing both of these themes together, I examine how both personal faith and Christian community support students' mental health

## 7.2 Benefits of Christian faith in the student experience

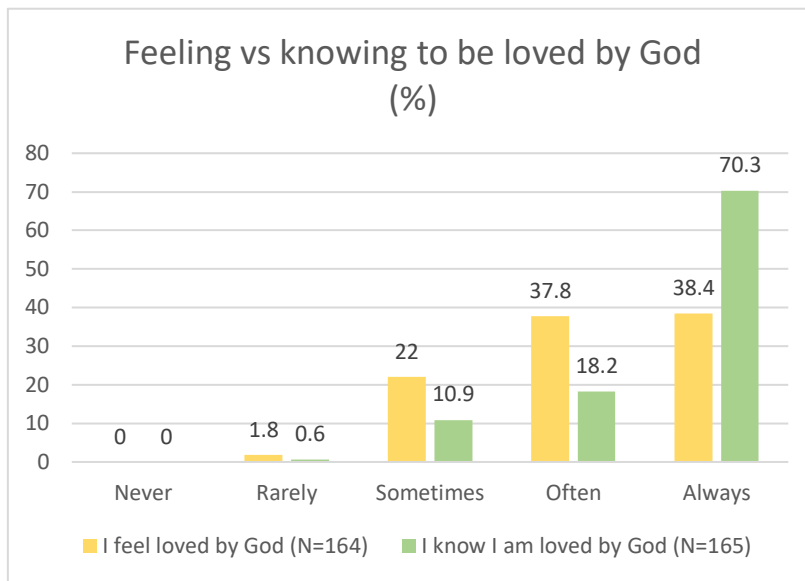
### 7.2.1 An external and eternal perspective

Christians believe in an eternal life, spent with a personal, loving God, who is immanent in this world. Their belief that God cared about them personally and was beyond this world helped students persevere through their academic challenges, as expressed here by Wendy (37BI, Victoria):

*And I also think that I am able to take on the pressures of school because I have someone to believe in, someone who I believe is alive, who created and controlled everything, and it's in his hands. So, like today, I was very nervous because it was the first time I was going to present a topic that I'm passionate about. It's my baby, and I was presenting it openly. I don't think I could have done it if I didn't pray like three times this morning. And last night. (Laughs.)*

This understanding, however, is more than just a feeling. Feelings can and do change from day to day (Koenig et al., 2020), and such fluctuation would not necessarily be beneficial to the peace and security students referred to in the survey and interviews, quoted below. In the original construct (Astin et al., 2011a) measuring religious commitment (see **Table 5.1** on p156), there was one question inquiring to what level participants felt loved by God. I added another question asking students to what level they *knew* to be loved by God, which I deemed a more robust way of measuring faith commitment. I compare these two measures in **Figure 7.1**.

**Figure 7.1** Students' perception of being loved by God



Whilst only a very small fraction of students chose “rarely” both in response to feeling and knowing to be loved by God, 70% always *knew* God loved them, compared to 38.4% always *feeling* it. The data thus indicate that students’ faith was not entirely based on emotions but had a more solid foundation. The qualitative data help in understanding how this assurance, along with other beliefs, helped alleviate the burdens of academic pressures. Some survey respondents reported that whilst the degree was important, it was not the ultimate goal: they found meaning in God. They said that the best thing about being a Christian at their university was:

*Not having to worry too much about grades, etc... since God has already given me the most important things.*

(Survey respondent, SU)

*Not having all the pressure of future on yourself, God is in control and always has been. Jesus draws near and knows what you go through.*

(Survey respondent, SU)

*I have peace. When everything goes wrong, when deadlines hit and stress builds, I know I can find rest in my faith. I know everything will be ok, because God guides us through the hard times.*

Survey respondent (CGU)

The peace, the lack of worry, the safety of having the most important things, knowing everything will be okay suggest that their trust in God enabled students to look beyond the pressures of the immediate, putting things into a wider perspective, alleviating some of the burdens of academic life. Students saw their studies as part of their lives but not as something that ultimately defined them. Interviewees also reported that this was a significant source of strength and hope for them, as illustrated by the quotes below:

*I haven't chosen to be a follower of Christ because it's an advantage to my life. But it is, it is helpful in so many situations and yeah. Just the perspective of my identity and the fact that I'm created and the fact that I have a Father in heaven who loves me, that really changes everything. ... I think even on the darkest days, when I wake up and don't feel like there's hope for my research or in life generally, I still know in the core of my heart that I do have hope, and I have eternal life. I have the most important thing that matters. And that's not to say that, like day-to-day things and the PhD isn't important, but it just gives me a different perspective that helps me. Um, yeah, it helps me to put it into perspective.*

Hazel (25MAH, Riverside)

*I really believe in God's providence. And so just trust that, hey, if this is what I'm meant to be, the opportunities will open. I honestly don't know how people who don't have faith do it, because I think the pressure is so intense that it would just, like, break people.*

(Will 28WI, Victoria)

*So 'all things work together for the good of those who love him'<sup>13</sup>; that actually [God] knows about the problem anyway. But by talking with him and giving it to him and knowing that he's in control, I don't have to worry*

---

<sup>13</sup> Reference to a verse from the Bible (Romans 8:28).

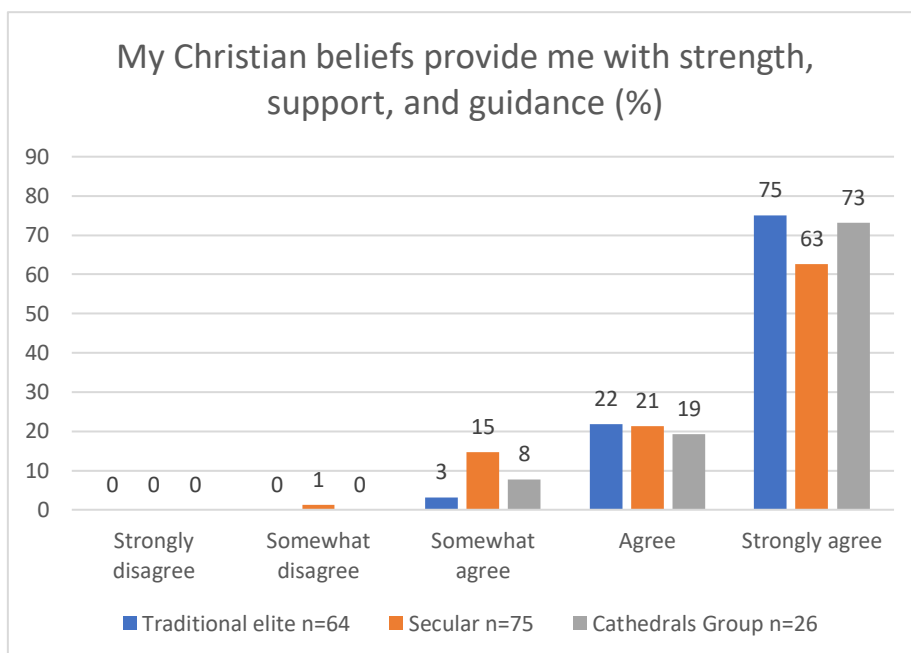
*as to what's going to happen because whatever happens... He's... It's going to be for his glory, but it's also going to be for my good.*

Lewis (50WH, Minster)

Ultimately, these students looked at life through another lens, an eternal perspective, which helped make sense of their lives through seeing the bigger picture. Rev George (Riverside) called this an “external reference point”, one which served as a source of strength and support for many Christian students. It is clear from the quotes displayed here and many more in the data that such an approach to difficulties and to their studies was freeing and beneficial to students’ resilience and mental health.

The survey data displayed in **Figure 7.2** is in line with the qualitative findings. Students in all three institution types reported to find their Christian faith to be a source of strength, support and guidance, the vast majority agreeing and strongly agreeing with this statement in all three institution types.

**Figure 7.2** Christian beliefs were a source of strength, support and guidance for postgraduates

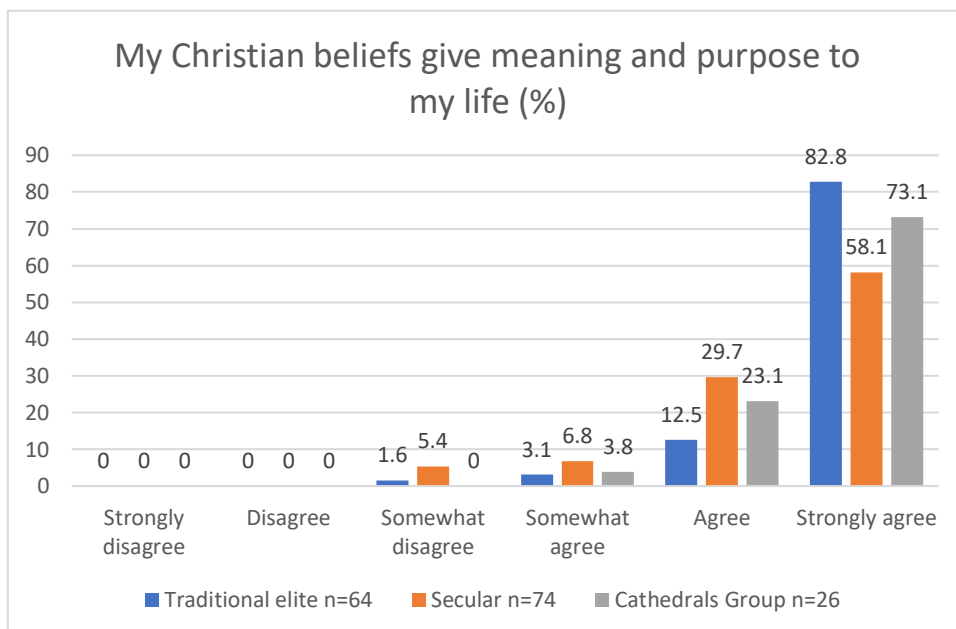


## 7.2.2 Faith gives meaning and purpose beyond academia

Having such an eternal perspective, knowing that they have value regardless of academic success, that God loved them, and the ultimately important things were present in their lives already, gave students meaning in everyday life and purpose to strive towards. This was apparent both in the surveys and interviews.

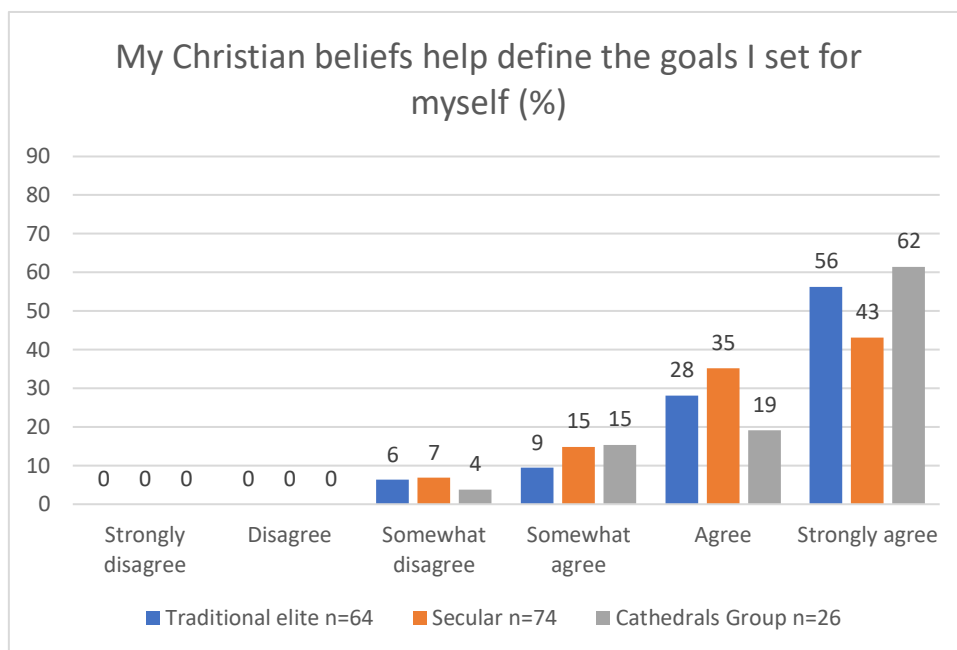
Data in **Figure 7.3** display how strongly students agreed with the statement “My Christian beliefs give meaning and purpose to my life” by institution type. 100% of quantitative survey respondents (N=164) agreed that their faith provided them with meaning and purpose in life. In all three cases, ‘agreed’ and ‘strongly agreed’ were overwhelmingly higher responses than any of the three lower categories, with the ‘strongly agree’ being by far the highest in each institution type (82.8% in **Traditional elite**, 58.1% in **Secular** and 73.1% in **Cathedrals Group** universities).

*Figure 7.3 The role of faith in providing meaning and purpose*



Furthermore, and more specifically, all survey respondents agreed that their faith helped them define their goals, as displayed in **Figure 7.4**, 'strongly agree' still the highest category - if not as outstandingly as with meaning and purpose – 56% in the **Traditional elite**, 43% in the **Secular** and 62% in the **Cathedrals Group** universities.

**Figure 7.4** The role of students' faith in defining their goals in life



The qualitative data strongly support these findings and give depth to the statistical numbers. Students reported that their faith gave them a purpose which pointed beyond the everyday, beyond obtaining a degree. Several qualitative survey respondents, especially in the **Secular** universities, reported that having such purpose was the best thing about being a Christian at their university:

*I feel kept by God. I know, deep down, even if I worry about my marks and whether I'll get through the degree, that I will be okay. And not only that I'll be okay, but that God will use this difficult experience for good. I feel that my struggle though the degree isn't in vain.*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*[being a Christian] has made me persevere and strive towards purpose*

(Survey respondent, SU)

*It gives a sense of purpose that goes beyond failing or succeeding at your studies.*

(Survey respondent, SU)

The interview data correspond with the survey findings about purpose and meaning. As in the qualitative survey responses, this theme was the strongest in **Victoria**. It did not come up in the **Minster** interviews, most likely due to the small number of them. Nonetheless, the following quotes illustrate just how central faith can be in meaning-making for Christian students:

*I'm trying to do the same things, but with different value and different meanings in my life. Yes, getting a job is important, but there is [sic] more important things in my life. Yes, of course I want to get a job in academia, but if God doesn't want me to do that, I should accept that. So, I think that makes a huge difference because when you have just that physical goal that you want to achieve, then you give everything that you have, which means it is the centre of your life and then the centre of your life will determine your choices in your life.*

Abigail (31AI, Riverside)

*my faith kind of defines my life. I think it's that which gives me meaning. It's that which gives me purpose. It's that which allows me to make sense of the world. It's that which gives me hope.*

(Will, 28WI, Victoria)

*I have a certainty that God loves me. He looks up on me and all that ... And I think it gives me also meaning.*

(Zac, 33WI, Victoria)

Abigail's words here illustrate well how the centrality of faith can be a determining factor in what drives the person. If faith is central, it will have bearing on decisions as well as a sense of what is important in one's life. It was their trust in God that afforded students to look

beyond the immediate and find meaning and purpose higher than their studies and careers.

Fr Victor, the Roman Catholic chaplain at **Victoria University** also talked about meaning and purpose, when he summarised the benefits of faith:

*I'd like to think the pluses are that it provides a kind of an anchor and a sense of purpose and meaning in your life, and a kind of a ready-made community in the sense of, you know, the worshipping community.*

Andrew (25AI, Riverside) talked about his degree being secondary on his course, but bringing love and hope to dark places, to other students, was what motivated him – a higher purpose than his studies, something more meaningful. He said,

*people get stressed over their studies. Like, I think it should be important to reaffirm them that their studies are not their identity or their worth. The degree isn't representative of how Christ loves them.*

Several other students also spoke of there being a higher purpose to their being at the university or the course they were on, and that God's purpose with their lives was what ultimately mattered (had meaning), because God loved them, and he knew better what was good for them. Many students expressed how this knowledge gave them hope, helped them not to be anxious, not focus on the here and now but on the more important and more permanent:

*But my work will not be the number one priority in my life. And there is something bigger and more ultimate going on.*

Ian (28WH, Riverside)

*But ultimately, this is just the degree. This is this is not the important part of life. So that's been very, very important. Just the calmness of 'this is not the end'. And there are bigger things are more important things. So personally, that's been very-very helpful.*

Karis (25WH, Riverside)

Having explored the relationship between their beliefs in and relationship with the Divine, I turn to presenting the benefits of community with other religious people in students' lives.

### 7.3 The benefits and importance of faith communities

Community is one of the most important building blocks of the Christian religion and forms a central role in the practice of faith. The most common way community is pursued is through church attendance. As described in detail in **Chapter 4**, the availability of churches and other faith-based groups, which cater to the specific needs of postgraduate students – such as Bible study groups, student organisations or faith-based academic conferences – was varied by institution. At **Riverside**, there was an abundance of both local churches and other Christian communities, with leaders specifically trained to work with postgraduate students. At **Victoria**, even local churches within walking distance were scarce, and none had specifically postgraduate focus work, nor were there any other meaningful Christian communities aimed at these students. Finally, at **Minster**, there were a few churches with student ministries, but nothing specifically postgraduate focussed, either at these churches, in the chaplaincy or elsewhere that I could identify. The fact that such lack of easily accessible Christian community was a difficulty for students indicates its importance to them. Furthermore, data displayed earlier in **Figure 6.5** (p211) also illustrate how important Christian postgraduates found their religious communities, with 88% of students at the **Traditional elite** institutions, 71% at the **Secular** and 65% at the **Cathedrals Group** universities attending Christian services at least once a week while on their courses.

The number of references within the qualitative survey responses to the importance of Christian communities also revealed its centrality to students of faith. 22 survey responses referred to the importance of Christian community in both the **Traditional elite** and the

**Secular** survey data respectively, with 10 responses also referring to it at the **Cathedrals Group** university. Survey respondents spoke of the importance of the regular worship services, of chapels and chaplaincies, of being able to share life with like-minded people – and specifically with other postgraduates/people in the same life stage -, the diversity of Christian traditions being enriching, and simply just fellowship and community being the best thing about being a Christian at their institutions, as some of the following quotes illustrate:

*The communities of Christians in [this university] are remarkable. I find it, in the grand scheme of things, easy to be a Christian here, because of the number of Christian students and active churches.*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*I have an immediate connection to a strong community of leaders and peers who can support and encourage me*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*[The best thing about being a Christian at my university is] the amazing community of other Christians at university and in church that are willing to support me in this period of great change in my life.*

Survey respondent (SU)

*Overcoming life challenges through my faith and trust in God, and sharing life experiences with fellow Christians*

Survey respondent (CGU)

Interviews were also woven through with a large amount of rich description of the importance of Christian community in students' lives. At **Victoria University**, 13 of the 17 and at **Riverside University**, 20 of the 24 interviewees referred to the importance of a Christian community, whether that was church or other faith-based community, corresponding well with both the qualitative and quantitative survey findings.

Interviewees at **Riverside University** described a plethora of opportunities for Christian postgraduates to connect and practice community. Some church-based, some university-based, and most allowing both the Christian and the student identity to coexist and grow, the importance of which was discussed in **Chapter 5**. Several leaders here spoke of the importance of community in students' lives, describing the high demand for it, discussing how it prevented isolation in postgraduate life, and provided like-minded others to connect with. Leaders pointed out the lack of national organisations, such as the Christian Union is for undergraduate Christians, thus the need for churches and others to provide such spaces. They also spoke of the importance of moral and spiritual growth in the postgraduate phase, with the growing responsibility of knowledge, leadership roles and the scale of ethical dilemmas. Importantly, these leaders were connected to and working specifically with *postgraduate* students, some of them for many years and understood their needs, unlike in the other two case universities.

Both at **Riverside** and at **Victoria**, several students talked about the importance of finding a Christian community being of paramount importance and a first port of call.

*I found a good church community and so, like I have family there. ... Establishing a Christian community is like number one importance. We're not meant to do this life for ourselves. I think the Bible's clear on that. So, um, having fellow Christian brothers and sisters do that walk with you, um, has been really important in growing my faith.*

Hazel (25MAH, Riverside)

*my first identity is that, like, I'm a Christian, if I go to a place, I find a church and then I'm not really looking for other things. ... I think for me, it was about having a sense of belonging and acceptance. I think my internal sense of belonging being accepted comes from my faith directly.*

Eva (27WI, Riverside)

*But it's a priority for me to go [to church] for loads of reasons. You know, selfishly, I feel better when I go, you know, and it puts my week in perspective, the things I've already said. But also, you know, I think it's important to go every week to kind of renew your faith and be part of a community, all kind of doing the same thing.*

Agnes (25WH, Victoria)

*I think that God designed us to be in community, and I think that although I have had in some cases, some, some isolating experience in academia itself, I feel like my work sort of inherently contributes to community. [actual topic undisclosed for data protection] I think all of those things foster community and I think that those things are to the glory of God, people supporting each other and being present for each other.*

(Petra, 29BI, Victoria)

One great advantage of being part of such an old and worldwide tradition is that communities are readily available in large parts of the world, including England – even if to varying degrees. This made it easier for students to find a place to belong as soon as they got to their universities, especially at **Riverside**, albeit, not necessarily directly in their institutional settings. Here, many students talked about the various postgraduate-focused Christian groups they were able to participate in. As Izzy (31BI, Riverside) described in her interview, being able to join a tailor-made community made a very big difference in settling in and belonging somewhere meaningful from the start of her course:

*I went there that week and as I, as I walked in, I was like, yeah... okay... So I stayed. And so, I immediately I went to, I joined the [postgraduate midweek group at church], which was **like an immediate community, and it made a world of a difference**. Yeah. So, I was plugged in from the start, with [this group] being the main thing.*

Christian students at **Riverside University** had the advantage of a variety of ready-made communities to join as soon as they arrived on their course, because these communities a.) existed, b.) were accessible and c.) students were aware of them. However, at **Victoria University**, there was a very limited number of local churches to belong to, no church-based

postgraduate group was identified and very little specific provision for postgraduates was available on campus. Will (28WI, Victoria) did his previous postgraduate degree at **Riverside**, and thus was able to compare the two. He described the richness of provision at his previous university and how easy it was to find the right communities “from day one”, whereas at **Victoria**, it was reduced down to internet searches (which surprised him), and the size of the city meant that many churches were out of reach for him. He also pointed out the lack of provision by these churches for postgraduate students. 9 months into his stay there, he was still not a regular part of a specific community.

### International students and Christian community

Readily available communities were especially beneficial for international students, who were without the network of family and friends, in a potentially unfamiliar culture. These students made up 60% of the postgraduate student population at **Riverside University** (48.4% in the survey sample)<sup>14</sup>, 54% at **Victoria** (35% in the sample) and 11% of the **Minster University** postgraduate population (31% in the sample). Many interviewees talked about the benefit and important role of Christian communities in their lives when trying to fit into their new university culture abroad. Most of these students sought out the specific tradition or denomination they belonged to in their home countries, and these provided an extra layer of familiarity, sense of belonging and shared values for them. The following quotes highlight some of the elements of this experience:

---

<sup>14</sup> These numbers refer to students who didn't have 'home domicile' status. As discussed in **Appendix D**, some students are non-UK citizens, but have home status. It was clear from the data that culturally many still identified closer with their birth-country and sought out Christian communities akin to their home cultures, some of them not even English-speaking groups. For comparability, here I employ 'home domicile' ratios of survey participants, not nationality.

*[My Christian faith] also gives me something that can connect me with many other students regardless of background, and as an international student that is especially significant.*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*[Belonging] has become more important, I think, for two reasons mainly. One is that I'm a foreigner. So, of course, you come to another country with the feeling that you don't belong. That you have to find a way of belonging with you. The starting point is that you don't. And being a Christian has helped immensely. And I didn't have such a strong drive to do that when it was an undergrad, ... because I was in my own country...*

Bill (27WI /Europe/, Riverside)

*My only prayer and concern was finding a good church, coming to such a secular country. It's really important to me, I really wanted a church community. We're not intended for isolation... In church, people understand you at a level of intimacy you cannot have with people who don't share your faith.*

Sally (33BI /Africa/, Riverside)

*And that was nice when you came from so far away and you found like-minded people straight away that you could get stuck in with, that this helped with, with getting going [in this city].*

Zac (33WI /South America/, Victoria)

Even for some home students, a familiar church tradition and community provided home away from home:

*I found a good church community and so like I have family there.*

Hazel (25MAH, Riverside)

*[I]t provides me with like a sense of home. ... Because [it is similar] to my church at home where you see young families with like little kids who are two, three, you see 12-13 year-olds as well. So, I would say in that way reminds me of home. The hymns ... remind me of the hymns we sing at home as well. And I am a sucker for good hymn.*

(Tara 23BH, Victoria)

One of the reasons why these communities were easy for students to slip into – even though they may have never met anyone from that church or group before – was the fact that members had a deep sense of shared values.

### 7.3.2 Shared values and like-minded people

In direct contrast with the theme discussed in section 6.4 *Clash of values and ethics*, shared values provided a bond and basis of association between Christian students. Many spoke of the importance of having found ‘like-minded’ people in churches and other faith-based communities. These shared values formed a basis for trust between the members of these communities, which Hank (58WI, Riverside) described as “pure synergy” which both binds people together and propels them forward together. He was quick to add that this did not mean a bubble-like existence, but rather a shared force for good.

Flora (22WI, Riverside) expressed this concept eloquently:

*I think it just was like a compass. So, I knew the people I wanted to... like the soul fabric of the people I wanted to be with. Like most of my friends, we're all studying different things. We're all from different backgrounds. But the thing that is **the same is this heart and this like orientation of the soul**. I think you spend a lot of time, maybe otherwise, wandering around trying to find the group of people that are like you. But when you already know, like, **this is something we have in common, it's like these foundational values**.*

As discussed earlier, their faith identity was central to many Christian students and sharing this with others, having a place to fully be able to live this identity was essential in their student experience. Many interviewees talked about the fact that their faith provided a shared base, which Kevin (24MAI, Riverside) talked about in the following words:

*Finding like-minded people, I think, was very important. Yeah, I think that was the key part of what institutionally speaking, being Christian played for me was **that I knew that I could step into places and have something in***

*common with everybody else and not just 'something' in common, but something really, really important and deep and substantial in common.*

Faith was found salient to most participants' identities, central to who they considered themselves to be. To share something so deep and intimate provided a special kind of bond between people of diverse backgrounds, ages, of various disciplines and overarching many other character traits. But this shared value went beyond an abstract shared concept, however deep. Students and leaders reported the significance of the support these communities provided in students' lives. In Flora's (22WI, Riverside) words:

*it is for me that anchoring because it's also... I'm practising real life skills of like charity, of humility, of creating community. And for me, that's... that is the point of of knowledge. If it doesn't help me love better, then it's not helping me at all.... I think part of it is not having to suffer alone, not having to learn alone and having to love alone. There's this sort of like... they are an extension of God to me, and I practise my love with them and then I practise receiving love from them.*

Flora's thoughts bring us back to the importance of love in the lived Christian experience within the community, often expressed and experienced through its encouragement and protection.

### 7.3.3 Support and safe space

An important element of being part of a Christian community was the support these groups provided for students. Again, this was something dominant at **Riverside**, where such communities were in abundance. Many survey respondents, even some at **Victoria**, referred to this in their responses to the question of what was best about being a Christian at their universities, as illustrated through a selection of quotes here:

*[The best thing about being a Christian at my university is] being supported and [having] the opportunity to support my brothers and sisters in Christ*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*The support of the church and the ability to have a separate valued identity from my academic work.*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*The amazing community of other Christians at university and in church that are willing to support me in this period of great change in my life.*

(Survey respondent, SU)

*[Being a Christian] also gives access to a group of people and support network that you can slide into when you get to a new place, which is great when you move a lot like I have.*

(Survey respondent, SU)

In light of the postgraduate student experience of isolation, non-belonging and the postgraduate mental health crisis (Levecque et al., 2017; Milicev et al., 2021; Morris, 2021), and the added pressures such as stereotyping, feeling out of place and hostile attitudes described in **Chapter 6**, support that comes from a place of deeply shared values and which many students described as a place of being able to be vulnerable and open, can be very beneficial. Several interviewees spoke of the depth they encountered in Christian relationships which they lacked in every-day peer interactions. The fact that they felt they didn't have to keep up pretences and were able to be open about their difficulties was seen as a great advantage students of faith had and were aware of. Furthermore, some of their postgraduate communities specifically facilitated such opening up and carrying each other's burdens. Bella (26WI, Riverside) explained this experience in the following words:

*it's like a more honest space than most... the whole point of a group like [our church-based mid-week postgraduate group] is that you're not all necessarily doing that well. You're there to support each other. And it is just a place where people can be a bit more honest about what's going on*

*in their lives. ... So, the regularity of it and the fact that like invariably there will be an opportunity to share if you're struggling with something as a... as a built-in part of the night, makes it a good place for mental health.*

She went on to compare this with going to the pub or the café, where time spent with others was about having fun, and it was harder to bring up the fact that one was struggling. Several other students also spoke about the experience of feeling safe in Christian spaces, which facilitated openness and vulnerability:

*So, when I can openly talk about my faith, I feel really safe to be vulnerable. And I feel safe to talk about what I'm struggling. It's okay. And then after, like, having conversation with my Christian friends, I feel much relieved because we pray together. And I know that, of course I'm suffering now, but it'll be okay.*

Abigail (31AI, Riverside)

*That also helps having like, a safe space. And it's like a family here, especially when I'm abroad... and I don't have a family here.*

(Zac 33WI, Victoria)

Leaders also spoke about the support these groups provided for students. The intentionality of providing support and community, how it fits into the academic experience, and how it directly meets the needs of postgraduates is striking in what Rev John shared with me:

*I do think that the churches themselves have become more hospitable to everybody. It's an odd thing to say, but graduates are people, too, and they can relax as humans in a fellowship group, or a prayer circle, or support one another with their children. Or, there's a really more... Not just what I call the straight study of the person as student, but the person, as a participant in a, in a, in a lovely church, which is really the **family of God**. And can I say, this is where people grow. They feel identity, belonging, compassion. There's a place where they can truly belong and not just survive, but thrive, and not flounder but flourish.*

Rev John (Riverside)

Interestingly, when students spoke of support in their survey responses and interviews, often they referred to also giving this support themselves to others, a reciprocal experience.

One survey respondent attending a secular university, for example, put “Being able to love and care for my friends” as the best thing about being a Christian at their university. Flora’s quote on p228 above further illustrates this phenomenon well. Rick at **Victoria** also spoke about his various ways of voluntary work – service – to others through Christian charities. Several interviewees spoke of ways in which they were proactive, looking out for the needs of others as well as having their own needs fulfilled. This may indicate that giving, as well as receiving support can be beneficial and enriching.

#### 7.3.4 Friendships formed through Christian communities

It follows naturally then that friendships form in communities where students spend time with like-minded people, with whom they share their deepest values and with whom they support each other. Indeed, 75% of survey respondents reported that friendship or fellowship was one of the motivations for attending church or Christian community. Several survey respondents reported that the best thing about being a Christian at their university was having been able to make friends through their faith communities. Interviewees both at **Riverside** and **Victoria** also spoke of friendships formed through faith-based communities.

*But the fact remains that my friends are not through my college. My friends are through religious communities.*

Kevin (24MAI, Riverside)

*I think I build friendships, again, on the basis of faith because this is where I feel I most easily connect with people because it's just so deep for me and like my structure as a person.*

Eva (27WI, Riverside)

*I made some of my first friends from church ... I'm still friends with one of my, one of the people who I met at chaplaincy in my first year and we're*

*friends for life pretty much. So. Yeah. Like I would say, it did help me to fit in. It helped to make a really, really good friend.*

(Tara 23BH, Victoria)

*Yeah, massively enriching. ... it's not a massive student church, but um, yeah, one of my closest friends I met at that church, and he doesn't live here anymore, but we still keep in really good touch, so I'm, uh. Yeah, definitely. Definitely community.*

(Agnes 25WH, Victoria)

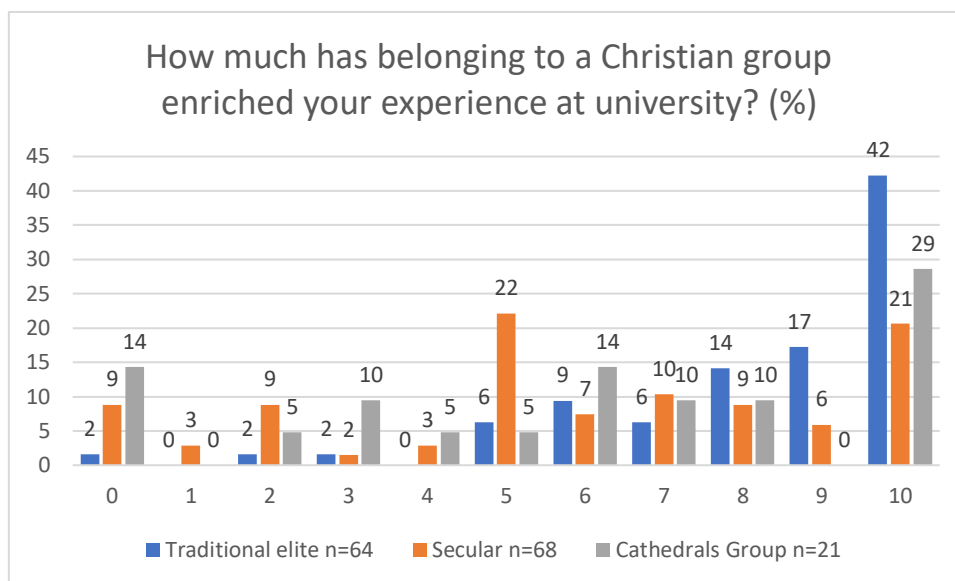
It must be noted that a few interviewees, including Kevin above, pointed out that part of the reason why a lot of their friendships were from religious rather than academic communities was the COVID-19 pandemic. Universities were forced to shut and churches were able to be open to some extent. Many of the students in this study started their courses during the pandemic, especially those on longer programs. Whether due to the pandemic or in a regular academic year, having been able to form deep friendships and sharing life with like-minded people was a vital factor of flourishing and belonging. And as Agnes pointed out, this was very enriching.

### 7.3.5 Christian community is enriching

The vast majority, 93.5% of survey respondents (N=153) reported that belonging to a Christian community enriched their university experience to some extent, with 82.4% putting this to level 5 or higher on a chart of 0-10. As shown in **Figure 7.5**, the level at which this was experienced was varied, and highest was the **Traditional elite** sample, where this number was 96.4%, with the single largest response by far being 10, at 42.2%. The **Cathedrals Group** sample had the highest proportion of students reporting no enrichment experienced due to religious group participation (14%), with a comparatively low 29% for 10, although this was still the most common response for this group as well, even if to a

lesser extent than for the **Traditional elite** case. For students at the **Secular** institutions, '5' was the highest response (22%) to level of enrichment gained through belonging to a Christian community, with only 21% of students choosing the highest score, making it the lowest ratio among the three institution types.

**Figure 7.5** The level to which students considered belonging to a Christian community enriching



There was a relatively high level of over 7% of missing answers to this question. Interestingly, all of them were missing from the **Secular** and the **Cathedrals Group** datasets, with 7 and 5 missing responses respectively, but none in the **Traditional elite** data, where positive responses were the highest by far. In fact, responses to this question show one of the starkest differences between the experiences of students at the three cases in the whole of the study.

It is important to note that it was the university experience, which was specifically enriched here, not personal faith or any other experience variable. As Bill (27WI, Riverside) pointed out:

*despite being a foreigner, being a member of our religious community of a recognisable and established religious community has helped me feel*

*more welcome or more accepted because I can immediately be part of a non-academic community. And that, of course, boosts your experience of the university too.*

Many of the concepts and experiences discussed in the present chapter contributed to the enrichment of the student experience. The sense of belonging, meeting people across disciplines through religious communities, the depth of relationships discussed by students, being able to combine religious and academic selves were all edifying factors. These experiences were not separate from the student experience but rather created an added layer. Interviews shed further light on what students meant by being enriched.

Diversity, for example, was pointed out by interviewees as an enriching factor, albeit in different ways at **Victoria** and at **Riverside**. At the former, several students spoke about the diversity of people at church, as compared to their student cohorts. Agnes (25WH, Victoria) pointed out that one's academic community, can be an insular place, and it may lead to a narrowed view of the world. Meeting people from all walks of life and of all ages on a regular basis, to whom one may not be exposed within the university environment may balance this one-sided experience. She summarised why she thought her Christian community enriched her university experience in the following words:

*So you're in this very, very small bubble of either young adults or kind of very well-educated older people. And I found that if... when I went to church, you kind of suddenly realise, oh my goodness, that's not all the people that are in the world. ... the realisation that the world is larger than your little undergrad group. And that's followed me into postgrad... it's an even smaller group because there's less of you. So, I've really found that that's kind of helped ground me in reality. ... You gain so much from being part of a diverse community than you do from being in the kind of more closed off community. ... I mean it's a very, very diverse, diverse community that you know, from those different parts of the world and I've learnt so much just about life elsewhere, you know, just from being in that community which I wouldn't have otherwise gained.*

At **Riverside**, it was the diversity of Christian traditions represented at the university, which many students spoke of as enriching and eye-opening. The majority of interviewees remarked on being enriched by meeting so many different kinds of Christians and even non-Christians in and around the university. Here I quote two of them:

*But in a sense that there's this repositioning due to the fact that they have different experience of, I don't know, liturgy or theology or pastoral activities, and that is enriching. And it's satisfying because you see different ways of loving Christ. At the same time, the same desire to do that. And and and that also widens the scope of your experience, the scope of and the number of communities you can belong to. ... But the enriching bit comes in through experiencing other forms of Christianity.*

Bill (27WI, Riverside)

*[in this city] you bring together all these people with different things that they believe, different ways of approaching God. And so, you have no choice but to be exposed and to learn about the breadth of God's love and kind of how you manifest his love through different people. And so, I think that's the biggest, the biggest pro of being a Christian here is that you just have a really full experience and you really get to see the kingdom in a broader way.*

Izzy (31BI, Riverside)

These bustling and diverse communities at **Riverside** were also enriching through providing a place to meet other Christian students and even academics, who were in different disciplines or at a different stage in their academic journey. This was enriching to the academic experience specifically, by learning from each other in an inter-disciplinary way, expanding the discipline-bound cohort relationships, and also provided a sort of awareness that people of all disciplines and levels of academia can be Christians. Eva (27WI, Riverside), for example, said that “I think I have a more educationally diverse group of friends than most of my friends from my lab. ... they are [mostly] friends with other engineers”.

## 7.4 Benefits of personal faith and Christian community on student mental health

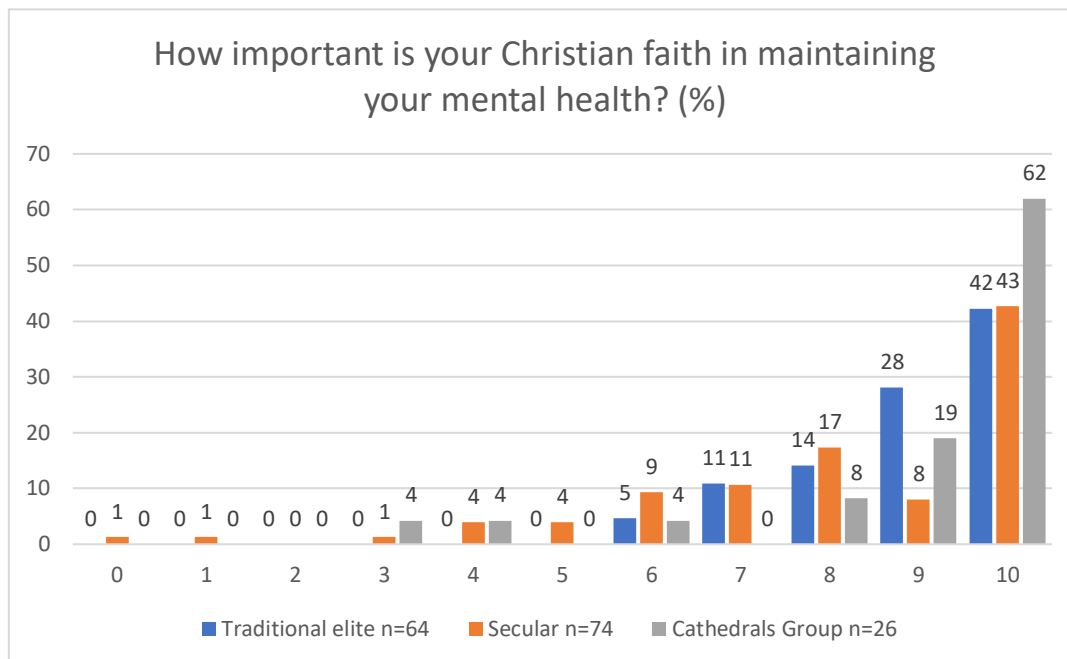
Many of the benefits and advantages described earlier contributed directly or indirectly to the mental health and well-being of Christian students. These were positive forces in their lives they could fall back on: having a more established faith provided confidence and brought stability; their eternal perspective – knowing they were loved by a benevolent and personal God, and that their value was more than the sum of their academic achievements – helped students see beyond the immediate pressures of the course and gave them hope; having meaning and purpose gave them drive and stamina to press on; communities provided them with a stable and diverse background of like-minded people, where they felt accepted and supported, and their university experience enriched.

In this section I present further findings of students *directly* linking their faith with their mental health. Based on the rich literature about the benefits of faith and religious social participation on mental health (Koenig, 2012; Spencer et al., 2016; VanderWeele, 2017a), and on findings of my MSc research (Appendix J), there was reason to explore evidence of this phenomenon manifesting in the lives of Christian postgraduate students specifically. Thus, both quantitative and qualitative questions investigating the relationship between students' faith and mental health were employed in the research. Here I present findings suggesting a relationship between students' mental health and their personal faith, faith practices and faith communities

#### 7.4.1 The positive role of personal faith in maintaining mental health

Quantitative survey respondents reported that their faith played a significant part in maintaining their mental health. On a scale of 0-10, 86.5% of respondents (N=164) reported that their faith was very important in maintaining their mental health (scores 7-10), with 10 being by far the highest category at 45%. Although the results varied by institution type, the highest score (10) was the most frequent in all three cases, as shown in **Figure 7.6**. In the **Traditional elite** institutions, there were no low scores (0-5) and the high scores were the most consistent of the three cases here. In the **Secular** institutions, although there was a greater spread, the number of low responses was still low (11% at 0-5) with 10 being the most frequent response at 43%, (more than double the second highest response, 8, at 17%). Finally, respondents attending **Cathedrals Group** universities showed varied results, skewed also to the very positive end of the scores, with only 8% scoring 0-5, and 62% of students choosing the highest score of 10 for the importance of their faith in supporting their mental health. (As throughout the findings, these numbers must be read with the low number of respondents (n=26) in mind.)

**Figure 7.6** The level of importance of faith in maintaining students' mental health



In line with the quantitative findings, many survey respondents spoke about the support their faith provided in maintaining their mental health and described it as one of the best things about being a Christian at their university. This was especially prominent within the **Secular** dataset. Students described how their faith gave them strength in hard times, spurred them on in their studies, helped them recover from harassment and stay afloat, as the following quotes illustrate:

*I feel kept by God. I know, deep down, even if I worry about my marks and whether I'll get through the degree, that I will be okay. And not only that I'll be okay, but that God will use this difficult experience for good.*

Survey respondent (TEU)

*Being Christian has helped me to be more emotionally and mentally strong, which is something that has helped me to overcome the hard times of my PhD.*

(Survey respondent, SU)

*Having a solid mental support was definitely the best thing a PhD can ask for. In my first year, I had to go through tremendous stress from going*

*through hearings for a sexual harassment case. Recovering from PTSD has not been easy and wouldn't have been possible without God's grace.*

(Survey respondent, SU)

*I have peace. When everything goes wrong, when deadlines hit and stress builds, I know I can find rest in my faith. I know everything will be ok, because God guides us through the hard times. The reason why I knew I could complete my PhD and work was because I knew I could find support in my faith and beliefs.*

Survey respondent (CGU)

The interview data further confirm the survey findings, with the positive effects of faith on mental health being one of the richest themes in each case institution. Students spoke of their faith helping to process problems and of finding peace, instead of panicking in difficult situations (some explicitly in the pandemic). Lorna (48WH, CGU), for example, spoke of finding strength in knowing that God called her to do the course and if so, he would help her get through it and hold everything else (job, family commitments, etc.) together in her life. Several students reported that knowing that they were personally valued and cared about by God supported their mental health and helped to overcome challenges. Prayer, hope and joy were mentioned several times as positive forces in mental health, derived from faith. Some students quoted Bible verses, which gave them comfort and assurance. Interviewees described the comfort and stability their awareness of God's constant and positive presence gave them, illustrated by quotes below:

*I've been through some life circumstances that a lot of people would view me as a victim or someone who's injured or broken or wounded. And what I appreciate about faith is that it doesn't leave you in this sort of space, that psychology like, you know, identifies. But [faith] like reverses that. It says you are healed, you're whole, you have a family. And I think those truth statements were very important for me. ... I could have been a very broken, depressed, bitter, angry person. But instead, I find peace and full of joy. And that's because those were things spoken over me by God.*

Flora (22WI, Riverside)

*Just the idea that you're supported at all times by something is massive for me. And I find it really, really helps with my mental health if I'm just feeling really rubbish or, you know, you've got like a major imposter syndrome.... But there's just something about the idea of ultimate, unconditional love and unconditional support that I find really helpful to think about when I'm feeling really low. Um, I also think it helps me kind of feel joy more.*

(Agnes, 25WH, Victoria)

*Szilvi: So how would you describe the role of your faith in maintaining your mental health?*

*Xavier: Um, vital, I would say. ... it has provided a sense of hope in terms of how I go about things. This sort of, you know, longer range hope so that even if things aren't going right now, I still have a greater hope going forward. There's always this element of being, you know, willing to sort of hope and trust. I would say even on occasion, I have been known to pray over experiments and things like that.*

Xavier (41WH, Minster)

Knowing that God loved them and was in control helped students stay standing in difficult circumstances. Interviewees spoke of aspects of their lives in which their faith was found essential in staying emotionally and mentally balanced, falling back on their faith in situations such as growing up as an orphan in Asia, going through several rounds of IVF, losing a spouse or other family members, or being diagnosed with cancer. Such issues are also reminders that students' lives are not on hold while they pursue their studies, and they have to face various life events even while on their course.

Other challenges were specifically in relation to their work, papers and presentations, or job prospects. Francis, for example, talked about the "rat race" of academia being overwhelming at times. For other students, severe competition, anxiety and uncertainty characterised the academic pathway. Many participants reported battling with imposter syndrome, particularly at **Riverside** and **Victoria** universities. Yet their faith provided peace,

through an awareness that their identity was not solely the academic identity, but a deeper, more salient religious identity as a child of God, illustrated by the following quotes:

*knowing that in the fullness of life there is a Being who is not just loving, but..., who IS love. And that my ..., my end value resides in that love rather than in my performance and my being rather than my doing. It eliminates a great deal of stress when there isn't a..., when value isn't associated with performance, that can remove a great deal of stress.*

Hank (58WI, Riverside)

*There are so many smart students at Riverside. And this imposter syndrome always come back to me. But that, but that feeling a long time ago, it was really... it... it affected me a lot. But nowadays, after I became a Christian, it's just a thought that comes and go.*

Abigail (31AI, Riverside)

*I'm able to manage the stress [of the course] knowing that I did my best, I prepared, I prayed, I have a relationship with God whichever way it goes, it's in his will and purpose for my life and I should not see it as negative.*

Wendy (37BI, Victoria)

*to me, my sense of identity is not made up of, you know, my academic success or my scientific success. And that still creeps in on occasion. I'm not sort of saying I'm immune to it. But once again, one of my postdocs is coming to an end and thinking, well, I've got to get another job in science. And the question did so I'm not... if I can't get a job as a scientist, I'm not a scientist. If I'm not a scientist, what am I? And then suddenly realise that science isn't my identity. So, I think that's significant part of how it sort of supported my mental health.*

Xavier (41WH, Minster)

### Faith combats loneliness

Loneliness, a characteristic of postgraduate life for many (Kalubi et al., 2020), was counterbalanced significantly in and through the communities students belonged to, as discussed throughout this thesis. Here, however, I specifically refer to Christian students' belief that God is both ever present and personally cares about them, leading to an

awareness that they were not alone, and did not have to fight their battles and struggles alone. These Christian tenets served as a source of comfort to many participants, already illustrated by quotes above and further highlighted through the following:

*And the article [about depression] was talking about just before Jesus dies, he actually cries in the garden because he's scared. And that's not a nice moment for him, you know? And that was a very, very important image for me; to be like Jesus himself was scared and sad and all that. But that does not mean he was alone ... So that was very meaningful to me, to know that Jesus kind of had the same experience as me and I did not have to be ashamed or feel guilty.*

Chloe (24WI, Riverside)

*I think, at times that can be tough and lonely being a student. And so, to have a sense that there is someone that you can pray to or call on for help, support with struggles with relationships is again really good for their emotional health and wellbeing. ... So I do think that faith is a huge resource in terms of people's health and well-being.*

Rev George (Chaplain, Riverside)

*The best thing about being a Christian, [is] having a God that created me, loves me, cares for me, cares for what happens to me. And I think that's the best thing about being a Christian. Yeah. And I think that's why it's not so lonely, because he's always with me. And I'm good.*

(Wendy, 37BI, Victoria)

*whatever happens to me, ... there's something ... bigger above and that's (she wells up with tears)... it's like it's a helping hand if... if you have no one, if you're all alone and you're suffering, you always have, you know, that there's something bigger above that will always be there for you.*

(Xenia, 36WI, Victoria)

These quotes illustrate how having a constant, caring and loving companion in God can be a significant source of strength in battling loneliness and non-belonging, such prevalent issues in the postgraduate population.

### Specific mental health issues and faith

Personal faith played a significant role in maintaining participants' mental wellbeing. It did not, however, fully prevent or cure mental health problems in and of itself. Although the level of crisis represented in the postgraduate mental health literature (Milicev et al., 2021; White et al., 2023) was not apparent in this study, there was evidence in each case institution of students dealing with mental health issues. This was most apparent at **Victoria** where Bethany, a student ministry leader at a local church said, for example, that they had more students on medication for mental health issues than ever before. She contributed this partially to the recent COVID pandemic at the time.

*I would say three of the postgraduates out of the five struggle and continue to struggle with mental health issues. And there's a lot of overload and burnout and. ... And to the postgraduate, who is 23, 24 and that they would struggle with 'I feel lonely, but I don't have enough energy to do my job, to do my masters, to show up with my friends, to show up at church. Like, that's it's too much to ask for me. And I feel overburdened.' I think that would be a comment specific to part-time masters when you want to be able to give everything to your studies. But financially you can't and say you have to self-fund.*

At least half of the student interviewees referred to their own mental health issues at **Victoria University**, to taking medication, to depression, to therapy, to OCD – pre-, during or post-pandemic. This was much less frequent at **Riverside**, despite the larger sample, and none of the student interviewees spoke of specific mental health conditions at **Minster University**.

Postgraduates spoke candidly about the ways in which their faith supported their mental health through the difficult times and challenges of a postgraduate degree, as referred to in many quotes displayed thus far. The following quotes further illustrate these dynamics:

*there are still people that struggle with depression, um, and clinical depression, things like that when they have faith. But for me, um. I don't know how to describe it... I think even on the darkest days, when I wake up and don't feel like there's hope for my research or in life generally, I still know in the core of my heart that I do have hope and I have eternal life. I have the most important thing that matters.*

Hazel (25MAH, Riverside)

*I think knowing that I am loved came from knowing that God forgave me and that allowed me to forgive myself. And then that allowed me to forgive the people who hurt me. It was like a very... like a necessary chain of faith.*

Flora (22WI, Riverside)

*that's just my mental health because I have like this... natural, like this underlying optimism that God is always going to be there. And. Yeah, I still do therapy and like take medicine and stuff, so it's not like that all my mental health is focussed on religion, but I think it does help a lot...*

(Zac, 33WI, Victoria)

*And I've been very burnt out and very... feeling very, very lost about the future and about everything. And I remember thinking, like, I haven't been to church for like a really, really long time. And I remember thinking actually just a couple of weeks ago, like, oh, I miss that kind of presence of like, stability, or like, I miss that... God, I guess, if you will, in my life, you know, and when I had that thought, I kind of like came to that realization, like, oh, I'm going with that. And it's that kind of grounding and stability, I think, when nothing else is stable around you.*

(Zara, 23WI, Victoria)

Leaders also spoke of the ways in which faith supported students' mental health. This was most apparent and specific at **Riverside University**, where several of the leaders had worked directly and for longer periods of time specifically with postgraduate students. Chris, leader of a church-based postgraduate ministry spoke of mental health issues, especially depression, having become more frequent recently. He spoke of the importance of rest (on Sundays), of prayer, of the community. Daisy, leader in a campus-based postgraduate-focussed Christian group, spoke at length about the complex structure students at **Riverside**

**University** can fall back on, referring to the GP, college welfare officers, chaplains, church and other pastoral care, which she considered “pretty unique” to the case university. She also has seen students struggle with depression or even suicidal thoughts, walked with them through serious crises of family deaths and their own illnesses. She pointed out the significant help that the above listed network can provide, as well as the importance of hope students have through their faith, even when medication doesn’t work. Furthermore, faith-related practices were also found to be beneficial to students’ mental health.

#### 7.4.2 Faith practices support mental health

Whilst students weren’t specifically asked about their faith practices in the interviews, the acts of prayer, thanksgiving, listening to Christian music and reading the Bible did come up in several conversations and it was clear that these practices provided a source of comfort, thankfulness and even joy. Janet (32AI, Victoria), for example, talked about reading her Bible every day, giving thanks every morning, which lowered her stress levels, listening to Christian music when she was anxious and talking to her friends about her faith to keep her mind straight, as seen earlier. She then said:

*Through these religious activities I felt more God's presence in my life. So, but I feel that I'm very full. The full of love and full of joy. So, so I think my mental get more stronger, stronger than before. So, every day I feel like every day I get more renewal of the energy. ... So, I always think okay, mental health issues is very important, but if we are very full, the joy if you feel before mind. Yeah, it's really joy.*

(Janet, 32AI, Victoria)

Izzy (31BI), at **Riverside**, who was dealing with significant health issues, also talked of how practicing her faith had a positive effect on her anxiety:

*I spend a lot of time... Well, each day I try to start with... spend some time praying or just meditating on a bit of scripture. And I find in times when I'm particularly anxious, that going back to certain scriptures – recently I have been really anxious for a couple of weeks – and just going back to certain scriptures; like in Isaiah, where God says that, “do not be afraid. I myself will help you, I will uphold you”. Those things really bring me peace in those times. I think like nothing else, that I know that this is truth, that this is absolute truth. And so I find that every time when I'm in that place of anxiety.*

Izzy (31BI, Riverside)

Janet and Izzy were studying at different universities, came from very different cultures thousands of miles apart, yet both relied on their Christian faith, scripture (“truth”) and prayer for their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Using specific spiritual disciplines such as the practice of the Examen<sup>15</sup> – a structured prayerful spiritual reflection at the end of the day, finding what went well and “*look about things that haven’t gone well, the things that have not gone as it should be, but leaving that and trusting it with God*” – were very helpful to Valerie (49WH, Victoria) with her mental health, especially as she was working in the NHS during the pandemic:

*it was almost a bit along the lines of CBT, almost integrated within that. But I found a really useful way, if I am facing situations that I think, oh, actually this is quite stressful, I'm becoming anxious to then take a step back and think about it in the light of faith.*

Daisy, postgraduate student ministry leader at **Riverside** said that „with mental health, spirituality, practically a lot of the students I speak to have found great comfort and, and, and actual relief through spiritual disciplines and practices”. Stuart (36WI, Victoria), for example, found mass a source of mental calm:

---

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/>

*I occasionally, I have some calls with, with a psychoanalyst, but in my case with what I mentioned, perhaps a period when I visited church, really very often at those periods, I was quite stressed and I would say that after the Sunday liturgy, I felt in a psychological sense – again, not in a religious sense, I'm talking with psychological sense – I felt really relaxed.*

(Stuart, 36WI, Victoria)

Prayer particularly was highlighted by several students, both as a personal practice and as a communal one. Praying with others and being prayed for by others was something they felt supported by. Personal prayer, a conversation with God, was a way of communicating with him. As was described previously, for Christian students God is a person, one they can have a relationship with, one who personally cares about them – and thus one they can talk to and has the will to listen and the power to act on those prayers. Many students spoke of being guided through prayer, feeling peace, being comforted or feeling relief after prayer, processing issues through talking to God about them or finding healing (mental and spiritual) through prayer.

In addition to prayer, several students described how reminding themselves of their inherent value in being loved by God through their “daily communion with God” (Dan, 29WH, Riverside) helped them mentally and emotionally. Note the element of reminding. It was clear from many of the conversations that both prayer and other religious practices which were found beneficial for mental health represented an iterative process of regularly coming back to the Bible, to prayer, to church. It was not a magic wand or a permanent state. Students had to have the discipline or will to return to their faith and refill and reconnect. They still went through difficult times, but their returning to God could stop the spiral, as described by Gwen (22WH, Riverside) below:

*I think it it really does help because at the end of the day, I can be panicking and panicking and panicking, but it doesn't really matter. And me failing*

*or whatever doesn't really matter, because God's got me, and it will be okay no matter what. And I think that that really, really helps.... Just that sense of calm that you sometimes get when you spend time in the presence of God, that I think is kind of the most important thing to me. And just being in touch with God makes me happier.*

A faith practice described by many students and several leaders referred to the importance of “sabbath”, a day of rest – typically Sunday for Christians. In light of the workload, impostor syndrome, level of competition, juggling of responsibilities and other challenges associated with a postgraduate degree, having a day of rest can be extremely beneficial for students, where they can recharge physically, mentally, spiritually and socially.

Finally, attending religious services was a faith practice especially highlighted as benefit of being a Christian student by postgraduates and leaders alike.

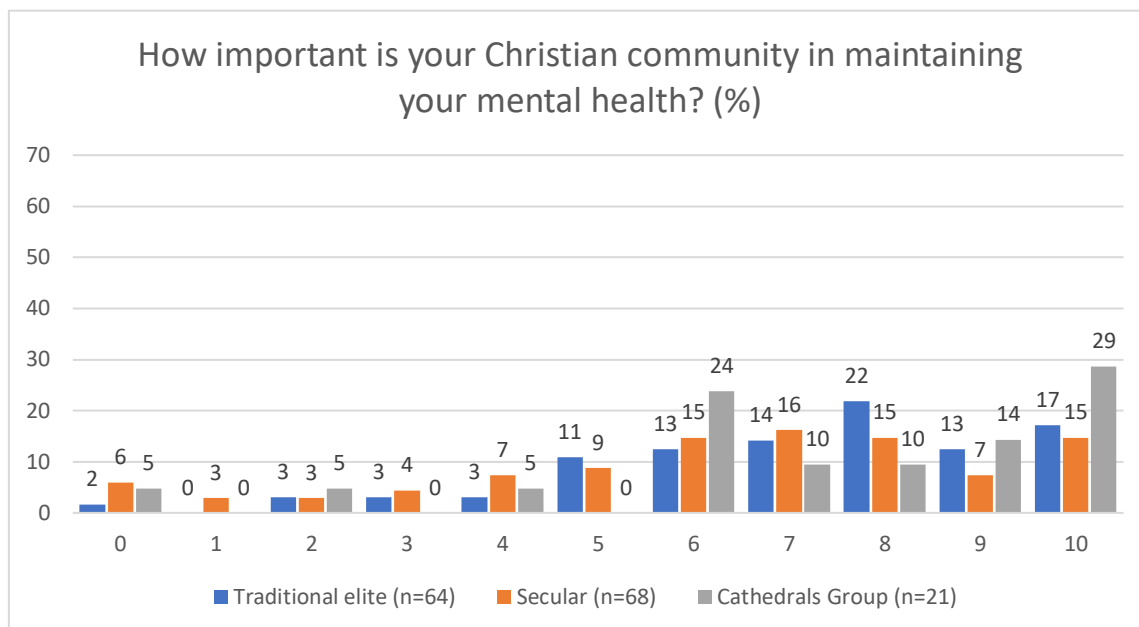
### 7.4.3 Religious community and mental health

This section, whilst builds on previously presented data (see particularly section 7.3 on the importance and benefits of Christian community), aims to display findings directly pertaining to the relationship between religious social participation and student mental health, as represented both in the quantitative and qualitative data.

In the quantitative survey students were asked about the role of their Christian communities in maintaining their mental health. 59.5% of participants (N=153) reported that their faith communities were very important in maintaining their mental wellbeing (7-10 on a scale of 0-10). **Figure 7.7** displays results by institution type. Responses are skewed to the higher end of the chart, although more evenly distributed than they were in the case of the importance of faith in maintaining mental health. (Note the similar level of missing answers

than described earlier regarding the level of enrichment of the university experience through the faith community.)

**Figure 7.7** The importance of Christian community in maintaining students' mental health



Students' responses varied by institution type, with postgraduate students attending **Traditional elite** institutions reporting the highest level of importance of their faith communities in maintaining their mental health, at 65.7% choosing scores between 7-10 (n=64). 53% (n=68) of students in the **Secular** sample considered their faith community very important in maintaining their mental health, with 61.9% (n=21) of **Cathedrals Group** respondents choosing the same. Students in all institution types contributed less importance to their faith communities in maintaining their mental health than they contributed to their personal faith.

The importance of faith communities in maintaining mental health was the strongest in **Riverside** in the qualitative findings. Here, communities were available to plug into from the beginning of a postgraduate course and all the benefits described earlier in this chapter

were tangible. Students reported having a place to belong, which may have had a role in preventing loneliness and isolation – major contributors to mental ill health. Spending time with like-minded people was also highlighted by many participants. Students reported that this sort of community facilitated deeper and more honest relationships, where they could fully be themselves, and where they were able to openly address difficulties, which they felt were not so straightforward to do with peers outside of their faith-based groups. This further facilitated belonging, and several students expressed being able to be vulnerable and honest. Their deeply shared, foundational values created a common base many students likened to family, the “family of God” (Rev John). Many participants talked about the support they received or in fact, gave in such communities.

A further factor which respondents at the universities of **Riverside** and **Minster** repeatedly highlighted as an element of support in their mental health from their religious communities was prayer. Prayer has already been referred to as a benefit of faith in section 7.4.2 above. Here, however, it was the care of others and the belief that God would listen to their joint plea that comforted students and gave them hope and strength, as has been seen in many quotes already displayed. I insert three more to further illustrate how students directly link the prayers of a community with their own mental health:

*I started looking for Christian friends, who would be my friends and pray for me, and we would pray together. And so, I mean, that meant everything to me. That's basically how I stayed, more or less sane throughout that season. ... It took me a lot longer to ask for help from counsellors, from a counsellor than from a priest. It was just a lot easier. Or just praying with a friend that that was like, the easiest, but that's kind of like my first thing.*

Eva (27WI, Riverside)

*So that community is very strong and it's uh, probably people of similar age to me, it's late twenties, early thirties.... But I think in general Christian*

*community is very important for carrying each other and carrying each other's burdens. When one is struggling, you have other people to lean on and pray for you, um, and to be accountable to as well.*

Hazel (25MAH, Riverside)

*I would say probably just being together with other like-minded ... people, certainly around faith and being... being able to feel that we are experiencing God together, which has a positive impact on my mental health... being able to, to share struggles, to share for people to see, because, because the Christian belief system around prayer and the impact of that... So, sharing and then having other people pray or knowing that you can ask them any other point that we maintain contact outside of the meetings. So, support and prayer outside of that I think has been... that would be key in terms of, again, not feeling isolated, not feeling alone.*

Lorna (48WH, Minster)

Leaders at each case university spoke to some extent of the importance of faith communities in the mental wellbeing of Christian postgraduates, pointing to elements such as students being able to reach out to leaders for help, being able provide such support to other students, rely on each other for prayer, communities being a source of friendship, a place where they can directly learn about and grow in their faith. Daisy, leader at **Riverside University**, summarised part of this in the following words:

*with mental health, spirituality, practically a lot of the students I speak to have found great comfort and, and, and actual relief through spiritual disciplines and practices, you know, whether it's, you know, prayer or simply having a really, really solid community on a weekly basis of people who are, hopefully people who also aren't going to judge them for it, you know. And I know every church community is different, but hopefully at least a handful of people out of a larger group, who can really check in and say, how are you doing? Let's be real about this. ... I think I'm saying that because like the community aspect, like the sense that people don't just turn a blind eye or don't just pretend that that's not a reality.*

Christian students' spiritual and community support can be a great asset for pastoral and mental health providers within the university. Fr Victor at **Victoria University** sensed a shift

within the leadership in recognising the important role the chaplaincy could play in the pastoral care of students:

*I've noticed a sort of... in terms of language, kind of a slight warming to chaplaincy. And I think the institution is beginning to understand it's part of what you need to do in terms of the support of students and their wellbeing, and in some cases their mental health. They, you know, chaplaincy is part of that support, and the university should be promoting a bit more. I do think that.*

Fr Victor (RC chaplain, Victoria)

He was the only leader talking about such a recognition on part of any of the institutions surveyed. My hope is that the findings of this thesis will bring attention to these beneficial elements of Christian students' faith at their universities, resulting in more cooperation between institutions and religious organisation for the benefit of the students.

## 7.5 Summary

Postgraduates in this study reported a great variety of benefits to being a student of faith. A very large majority found meaning and purpose in life through their faith, which also guided them in setting their goals. Trusting in a personal and loving God gave them comfort and ability to see the bigger picture, have a sort of eternal perspective of there being more to life than the everyday or the degree. It also gave them a perspective of themselves – of being more than the sum of their achievements but someone valuable even to God. Where available, ready-made communities provided spaces for students to plug into as soon as they arrived on their courses, expediting their belonging even within the university. They could find like-minded people, with whom they shared their fundamental values and with whom they could support one-another, enriching their university experience. The nature of friendships and pastoral care allowed for being vulnerable and to share struggles, which was

found to be beneficial to their mental health. Furthermore, believing in a personal God eased loneliness, and many students found their faith as well as faith practices, such as prayer or reading scriptures to directly support their mental health.

## **Chapter 8**

### **The Christian postgraduate experience**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

There are four main sections to the present chapter in which I draw on the above presented data and engage with existing knowledge to reflect on findings which speak to the research questions. First, I focus on the difficulties students perceive as arising from their faith identity in the university environment, in response to RQ1. In the second section I address RQ2 and discuss the benefits of the religious identity to postgraduate students. The third, comparative section summarises the similarities and differences between the Christian postgraduate student experience according to institution type, to answer RQ3. Finally, in the fourth section I briefly engage with theories of identity and identity development to aid a more nuanced answer to the overall research question.

#### **8.2 The difficulties and challenges of having faith as a postgraduate student**

In this section of the present chapter, I first examine how the lack of religious literacy leads to assumptions and stereotyping on campus, followed by the discussion of the value differences between Christian students and their liberal university environments, where I argue that tolerance is not the right answer to peaceful living together. I then reflect on difficulties which arise in relation to current sociocultural trends which sometimes perceive Christians at odds with issues of gender and sexuality, and the intersectional experiences of gay Christian students. After exploring how religion-related EDI measures can create tension rather than the intended inclusion, if they exist at all, I reflect on why students' faith

concealment is problematic and their invisibility harmful. The penultimate theme deals with the problem of sparsity of Christian community in two of the case institutions. Finally, I conclude by presenting how I understand these difficulties to arise from secularity and lead to what I call the cycle of 'religious fading'.

### 8.2.1 Stereotyping and hostile attitudes

The findings of this study suggest that Christian students experience hostility (bullying, ridicule, exclusion and being ignored) and stereotyping in their university environments, albeit to varying degrees. Looking at the wider picture first through the quantitative data, students in the **Cathedrals Group** universities report the least issues with negative attitudes towards them. Whilst this may be partially explained by the ethos of these universities providing a welcoming atmosphere and environment for Christian students, as with any of the quantitative findings regarding this case, these numbers must be read with caution due to the small sample size. Furthermore, the ratio of part-time and distance-learning students within the sample may also be informative: 58% of **Cathedrals Group** survey respondents studied part-time, as opposed to 27% in the **Traditional elite** and just 19% in the **Secular** sample. Part-time students spend significantly less time on campus, being exposed less to other people. A large proportion of negative attitudes seem to originate from *peers outside of class* in the other two cases (see **Figure 6.3**), which is the environment part-time and online students spend the least amount of time in. Thus, while the students in these universities reported the lowest level of hostility and the least difficulties with fitting in with peers as religious students, the results must be read with caution.

In contrast, the fact that students at the **Traditional elite** universities (n=64) report by far the highest level of hostility as well as the highest level of difficulty of fitting in due to their faith identity is an unexpected result. The Christian heritage of these universities is prominent and forms an environment which is still saturated with Christian symbolism. Furthermore, as was displayed in **Chapters 4 and 7**, the amount and quality of provision for Christian postgraduates is uniquely rich at **Riverside University** compared to the vast majority of universities in the country. Yet 68% of respondents feel out of place and an alarming 43% report having experienced ridicule, while one in three have felt excluded at some point for their faith. These findings indicate that although there may be traditions and architecture which represent a Christian past, these have been largely emptied of meaning in the 154 years which have passed since the 1871 Universities Tests Act abolished the religious requirement to enter these universities. In fact, – although impossible to tell without further research – it may actually be the presence of these now empty symbols which represent outdated and, as we will see, controversial values for many, and trigger a stronger reaction than even at the **Secular** universities, where such experiences were expected to be more pronounced. That is not to say that postgraduates at **Secular** institutions don't face negative attitudes, but they are less prominent than at the **Traditional elite** universities with one exception. Experiences of bullying are reported to be the highest, with 8% of the 75 respondents having experienced it. Unsurprisingly, postgraduates at **Cathedrals Group** institutions face the least hostility.

Findings of stereotyping in the qualitative data go a long way in explaining some of the dynamics behind the negative attitudes some students experience across the case institutions. Most interviewees expressed this through talking about assumptions people

have about them and some reporting experiences of prejudice. In Chloe's (24WI, Riverside) words: "we are seen as backward and old fashioned and also holding very hurtful views". What is difficult about these experiences for students comes from the very nature of assumptions – that people are not *exploring* but rather *supposing* who they are and how they think. It is difficult that they are not asked and not considered individual and intellectual human beings but rather part of a uniform and supposedly misguided group.

These findings support the conclusions of earlier studies in religious student experience, which reported students being othered and stereotyped for their faith and facing hostile attitudes from peers (e.g. Baratta & Smith, 2019; Burchett & Glanzer, 2020; Reid, 2017; Stevenson, 2014). The present thesis provides further understanding of some of the underlying dynamics of their marginalisation, and specifically for postgraduate students. The findings which unpack the projection of historical oppression and wrongdoing of churches onto students are significant in that they shed light on the lived experiences of Christian students and give insight into how such stereotyping effects individuals through – perhaps unconscious – collective blame. Indeed, these experiences are getting exacerbated as I write by the most recent scandals which resulted in the resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, a hitherto unprecedented event in the 1400 years of this office, as a consequence of the failings of the 'first among equals'. Christian students may feel they are personally associated with such failures, especially in the current focus on social justice within both society at large and academia itself (Scott, 2020). Several students and leaders referred to difficult historical aspects of the church being a reason why they feel people look at them differently and stereotype them. The decolonisation discourse, which permeates current academic debates and narratives – whether it is about curriculum, history, ethnic

minorities or other aspects and consequences of the dark colonial heritage of British history (e.g. Arday et al., 2021; Hayes et al., 2023; Jansen, 2019) – can also make Christian students feel that they personally are blamed by association and enhance the need to conceal their faith. Participants in this research did not agree with any of these historical events or support the perpetrators; on the contrary, several of them touched on the reconciliation that is needed for the church’s past wrongdoings. Yet, they feel affiliated with the shame and guilt by others.

It is important to notice the tone of recognition and responsibility from the two chaplains at **Riverside University**. Whilst students should not be blamed even subconsciously for the wrongdoings of other people, there certainly is a lot of work for the Church<sup>16</sup> to do in order to put things right, both for those its members hurt or failed to protect, and also for those who live in the shadows of those acts by association. At the same time, the tremendous good that is also done by the Church and local churches is often not considered newsworthy and thus the picture is necessarily skewed, re-confirming stereotypes and prejudices. Taken together, assumptions, stereotyping and prejudice are phenomena based on preconceived ideas about another person, without having actually taken steps to get to know the individual’s personal thoughts and convictions. Many of the students expressed a feeling of “they might think the group I belong to is like this, but I personally am not” when faced with this phenomenon, feeling that their values were superimposed on them by others, and they did not have a chance to give their own views or explain themselves, similar to what Reid

---

<sup>16</sup> ‘Church’ here represents Christian churches in general. Delving into specific failures of various denominations is beyond the scope of this paper.

(2014) reported through her study with Christian, Muslim and Jewish students. Such experiences marginalise religious students, who sometimes lack the courage or the opportunity to speak up, often becoming invisible and leaving stereotypes to grow.

Indubitably, stereotypes are necessary for us to be able to navigate through life. However, they can be harmful if used in a discriminatory way. Evidence shows that, *countering* and *unlearning* stereotypes is harder than *confirming* them. Cox et al. (2022) found in their trial with 467 undergraduate students that even merely leaving stereotypes unchallenged strengthens them, reporting that *unconfirmed* (i.e. unaddressed) assumptions lead to *more* stereotyping in people. Furthermore, in their study “confirmatory evidence carried up to three times the weight of ... disconfirmatory evidence” (p6). In other words, it is at least three times harder to disprove a stereotype than is it to reinforce it. Thus, with many students opting to stay silent in situations where their faith is challenged or misinterpreted, misconceptions are set to rise. Cox (ibid.) further concludes that stereotyping “restricts opportunities for members of stereotyped groups, and stereotypes are strongly linked to biases, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression” (p1), experiences expressed by students in the present research as well as in earlier literature both in the UK and the US (Baratta & Smith, 2019; Burchett & Glanzer, 2020; Reid, 2017a; Scott-Baumann & Perfect, 2021; Stevenson, 2013). There is a clear line thus from assumptions through stereotyping to marginalisation.

The need for assumptions may arise when there is a lack of knowledge (and thus understanding), or when that knowledge is either partial or misguided. Thus, the lack of religious literacy, (e.g. lack of knowledge and understanding of the Christian faith) leads to people ascribing undesirable qualities to Christianity and by association, to its adherents. As

Guest et al. (2013) put it in their book about the undergraduate Christian experience, “The lived reality of contemporary Christianity in the United Kingdom is under-researched and *commonly misunderstood*. Indeed, misconceptions surrounding the relationship between religion and education are mirrored by *widespread ignorance about what Christians actually believe*” (p9, emphasis mine). The facts that large parts of Western society, and especially the intellectual elite, have been secularised (Berger et al., 2008; Davie, 2012b), that this has been accepted as the ‘neutral’ and default position in academia (Guest, Aune, et al., 2013; Stevenson, 2013), coupled with the perceived incompatibility of religion and science (e.g. Dawkins, 2007) have lead to a lack of religious literacy in academia (Dinham & Francis, 2015; Walters, 2022), which can contribute to the culture of stereotyping Christian postgraduate students.

Such lack of religious understanding, and especially of Christianity in England may sound surprising, despite the secular nature of higher education, as established above. After all, England is a historically Christian country, where the population had been majority Christian until very recently (ONS, 2022). In school, religious education is a compulsory subject up to age 16 (Education Reform Act 1988), and although it is to reflect the religious make-up of the local communities, it is with the emphasis that Christianity is the main religion in England (Gearon, 2013). Yet, with the decline of religious participation and affiliation, in particular in generations under 50 (thus most university students) (Brierley, 2020; ONS, 2022), this knowledge is fading rapidly (Perrin, 2020), especially in higher education.

About a third of postgraduates identify as Christian at universities in England (HESA, 2023b) (although it is reasonable to assume that not all of them are practicing their religion), thus at least 70% of postgraduates do not have first-hand knowledge and understanding of the

Christian faith, even despite some learning about it in school. Notably, Peacock and Guest (2024) in a recent large-scale study found that only one in ten British (i.e. not international) university students have high religious literacy, while one third scored low and two thirds medium on their measure. Furthermore, and importantly for this research, the two questions measuring specifically Christian knowledge were the lowest (9%) and third lowest (31%) of a total of nine questions, and the four questions with the lowest scores all related to the Bible. To illustrate the difference, the top score was 77%.

The picture is further complicated by the fact that international students – a growing and significant section of the postgraduate population (67% in Riverside, 54% in Victoria and 11% at Minster University) – will not have necessarily had the same, even generic education regarding Christianity. In **Victoria**, for example, over a third of postgraduate students came from China and the Middle East, countries with very small (0-3.5%) Christian minorities (World Population Review, 2024). Some, however, will have come from less secular, even more Christian countries, such as the US or some African countries. Whilst the picture is thus varied, a general and educated understanding of who Christians are and what they believe is no longer a given and thus assumptions can easily arise.

A final important observation is that many of the quotes displayed in the findings about *assumptions and stereotyping* suggest an interesting phenomenon: Christians supposing what is supposed of them, and these assumed assumptions creating feelings of exclusion and marginalisation. In this way, relationships in society become a sort of vicious circle, whereby groups with conflicting views suppose that the other group is against them and thus feel themselves to be against the other group, forming a ‘them vs us’ dynamic. Abrams (2010) in his report to the EHRC about prejudice also talks about this phenomenon:

“people’s experiences do not always match others’ views about the extent of prejudice. For instance, few people express negative prejudice towards older people, yet older people report high levels of prejudice towards them (p.9)”. Whether in the case of Christian students it is assumed or real prejudice would be impossible to say without further and specific research into this phenomenon. However, in either case, the above, non-exhaustive consideration of factors potentially contributing to an experience of stereotyping goes some way to explain why such experiences may have at least some realistic base, further confirmed by findings relating to value differences.

### 8.2.2 Conservative values in a liberal environment

The evidence surveyed under this theme suggests that postgraduates in this study feel counter cultural in the academic environment for their moral and ethical stances on topics such as human reproduction, euthanasia, premarital sex and LGBTQ+ issues. Many students refer specifically to the secular culture around them as the source of value differences. These findings shed light on the extent to which Christian postgraduate students are in the minority in their academic and peer environments, especially in regards to their sexual and reproductive ethics.

Ethical and value differences are not limited to peer interaction but have consequences on students’ academic choices and on the richness of wider academic debates. For example, Xenia’s (36WI, Victoria) decision to stay clear of bioethical subjects – which are important to her but can be problematic in the dominant ethical debates if her Christian faith is exposed – illustrates how students may avoid certain academic topics. Such limitation on subject matter, however, does not only affect the student, whose opinion is thus silenced.

It also narrows the opportunity for critical thinking in the wider academic world through debating vital topics due to fear of being ostracised for having 'counter-cultural' views. The fact that some students expressed holding back their perspectives and beliefs in discussions "for fear of being misunderstood or misrepresented" (Survey respondent, SU) also points to the fact that entire viewpoints are being left out of academic debate. This is detrimental to the student, who experiences fear and is limited in self-expression, and reinforces dynamics of othering identified previously, potentially isolating students. Importantly, it is also detrimental to the fields where talent and richness is being lost to these fears.

Although the fact that their values and ethical stance on some prominent and contemporary issues may be a source of difficulty for students was not a surprise finding, it is significant. Whilst such differences are present in society at large and are part of the life of most Christians, the university is a micro-society in itself, both as 'academia' – a world-wide sector – and also as a local institution. As discussed in the literature review, the university is a space within which people of many backgrounds and convictions must coexist and "is continually made and remade in encounters between agents" (Marginson 2022, p1389). It is a space where our "throwntogetherness" (Massey, 2005) brings ever-changing and endless combinations of people and their values; these are to be further combined with the institutions' values, which are explicit in some universities, like those at **Minster**, displayed throughout campus, and implied at larger, more spread-out institutions. It is inevitable that values clash in such a confined environment. The task is then to accept these differences (within reasonable and legal boundaries) and live together peaceably in such a way that provides the flourishing of all members of the higher education community. A difficult task indeed.

To further illustrate the difficulties of value differences among “throwntogether” people at universities I point to findings about Christian students’ sexual ethics. Although issues such as abortion and euthanasia were discussed, these remained abstract for most participants. Abstinence from sex before marriage, however, is a commitment of many Christians which is confronted by the lives of most people around them on a daily basis. This lifestyle choice really set some of the participants of this study apart and they were keenly aware of it. To not be sexually active at university is almost unheard of in contemporary UK university culture. It is so trivial, that people casually talk about it, unawares that it makes Christian students feel like outsiders. They are probably unaware even of the presence of Christian students. To expect everyone to be mindful that there might be one student in the room who does not agree with sex before marriage would not be realistic. One cannot possibly think of every aspect of every view people around them may hold, and of the potential effects of their own views on others around them. This is especially true when those ‘others’ exhibit no visible sign of being different – and most contemporary Christians don’t wear religious clothing or obvious symbols and some even deliberately conceal their faith. Whilst the effect of such invisibility was felt by students, it was accompanied by an understanding that the exclusion was not deliberate and even acknowledged that if people around them knew about their religious convictions, they would probably be considerate of them. (The issue of feeling or being invisible is discussed further below.)

### **Tolerance vs pluralism**

Whilst expecting everyone to be aware of the presence or views and convictions of religious students among them is not realistic, an environment where they feel free to be themselves and feel free to express their different values without fear of ridicule or exclusion is

something we should certainly aim for in higher education. It was brave of Dan to boldly say in his interview that some of the differences people hold are actually irreconcilable. Paradoxically, accepting this can be a first step to peacefully living together. That we are not there yet is well illustrated by the fact that Dan's next sentence was about having been ridiculed for his values in his academic environment.

Tolerance has been the value contemporary Western society turned to in the last several decades to facilitate such peaceful living together, often done through promoting diversity and inclusion (Gebert et al., 2014; Scott, 2020) and in the UK, "British Values" (Department of Education & Lord Nash, 2014) to support the controversial "Prevent Duty" in schools and universities (Schneider, 2019; Scott-Baumann & Perfect, 2021). This research further confirms that a mere 'putting up with each other' has neither materialised despite decades of campaigning for diversity and inclusion, nor would it have been enough to enable *mutual respect* – the value accompanying 'tolerance' in the list of British Values.

Tolerance is a one-way concept. It inherently implies one group or person accepting the other, despite differences or disagreements. Ackroyd's (2023) study with RE teachers (tasked with teaching the above-mentioned "British Values", and as all teachers, expected to exemplify them) found evidence that teachers conceptualise tolerance as "accepting rather than embracing" (p152) and find it unsatisfactory, even negative and problematic. Indeed, there may be a sense of othering in tolerance, reinforcing differences and camps. Christian students in this study expressed a sense of being expected to be tolerant toward others who think or live differently to their values, yet many do not feel their own beliefs and values are tolerated in return. Secular values are seen as neutral and default in

university environments, similarly to what Guest et al. (2013) observed in their study with undergraduate students.

Reciprocal interest and recognition, i.e. mutual respect is needed in order for people whose values are fundamentally different to be able to peacefully exist together, inhabit spaces together, and flourish. Stewart et al. (2021, p21) state that

*[t]he persistent and inevitable fact of deep diversity lies at the heart of these challenges. 'Tolerance' of such diversity is noble and necessary—as far as it goes. But it is increasingly evident that tolerance alone is not sufficient as a pathway to solutions for the complex struggles we face. Problems of this nature and magnitude will not be overcome simply through earnest calls for everyone to 'co-exist' and 'celebrate diversity.' We will need more than pluralism-lite. That is, in a world of deep difference we need a normative philosophy of pluralism that does more than paper over the challenges of diversity with bumper-sticker slogans of tolerance.*

It may be concluded that tolerance as a value is lacking. It does not engage with the other person, does not correct assumptions, does not inform fully and is thus a hot-bed for stereotyping and othering, well-illustrated by the experiences of Christian postgraduates in this research. Excluding God from the public space, as per Taylor's (2007) secularity 2, excludes religious students (and staff). A co-existence, a secularity 3 type plurality, where religion is one of many choices is a better frame for everyone's flourishing.

The fact that there was no sense of Christian students trying to make others think the way they themselves thought of values and ethics, nor an expression of hope that people would change their views may cautiously be interpreted as a sign of willingness to or even readiness for such peaceful and respectful living together from their part. This is not to say that some students did not talk about sharing their faith with others, but none spoke of changing others' values and ethics (unlike in the US, where much of the public discourse involving religion is about those ethical values). Whether such an ideal is realistically

achievable is beyond the remit of this research. To encourage people to aim for it, however, is an explicit goal. Small signs of such mutuality, like Bella's surprise of "a lot of people engaging in a more balanced way about religious Christians ... people are more nuanced" are encouraging.

### 8.2.3 Gender, sexuality and Christianity

Such need for living respectfully together is highlighted in the area of gender and LGBTQ+ issues – a topic which was present in all three case institutions, albeit to varying levels and in different ways. It was most significant in **Victoria University**, where almost half of students and all leaders brought up the topic. Interestingly, five of the six students who addressed this issue were international students, having grown up in countries more conservative than the UK.

The fact that it was mostly international students who grappled with this matter sheds light on another aspect of the international student experience. As discussed earlier, the marketisation of higher education resulted in universities offering places to a large number of international students (Collini, 2012; Marginson, 2022), whose presence influences the religious landscape of universities. The present research reveals that international students' own experiences are also influenced by the post-Christian nature and liberal values of contemporary Britain in different ways. For example, Stuart – from Eastern Europe – was first shocked by Pride and felt intimidated by the open presence of people identifying as LGBTQ+. Over the years, however, he grew to view their experiences through the lens of marginalisation. Wendy – from the Caribbean –, however, felt the two groups were at odds with each other and her perception hadn't changed in 10 months. Janet, from East Asia,

changed her views and acceptance, and her parents were trying to make her come back home because of it. Each individual came from a different culture, a different kind of Christianity and reacted differently. But they were all forced to react and make up their own mind. Whilst learning the culture and values of another country is an important part of the international student experience, which enriches and helps developing an open mind, the nuances of their own culture and beliefs also play a part and must be respected.

The relatively low presence of this theme as contention at **Riverside University** is curious. In a previous project I conducted at a **Traditional elite** institution prior to the data collection of this research (Watson, 2025), the topic of LGBTQ+ issues was dominant. A sense of competition, the impression that concerns of gender and sexuality were much more important at institutional and pastoral level than those of religious students was obvious then and absent from interviews now. However, the same sense of competition was tangible in the present research at **Victoria**, as pointed out by many interviewees, such as Rita, who spoke of a lot of opportunities being on offer for other minority groups, including the LGBTQ+ community but not much for religious students. Whether the differences between the universities exist due to a developmental curve, on which **Riverside** and **Victoria** are at different points, or whether they are due to sampling, or simply occur by chance, would be impossible to tell without further and specific research, especially as both the present study and my previous research were cross-sectional.

Nonetheless, the general assumption that Christianity and LGBTQ+ issues are incompatible was palpable in the interviews at **Victoria**. These, differences, however, were not expressed through condemning the LGBTQ+ community but through assuming Christians were stereotyped as homophobic, thus confirming that value differences – whether perceived or

real – can lead to prejudices (Abrams, 2010). Prejudices then taint relationships, hinder trust and respect and bring us back to the point made earlier in this chapter, the need for religious literacy and true pluralism, essential in aiding the respectful living together of people of different values and worldviews.

Furthermore, the sense of competition for validation by the institutions exacerbated the feeling of being on opposing sides, and the lack of attention to Christian students, paralleled with perceived abundant attention to other communities made some participants in this study feel unvalidated and invisible. As discussed further in section 8.2.4 below, Christian students are experiencing a similar kind of competition for validation with other religious groups as well as with the LGBTQ+ community, increasing their feelings of invisibility.

Little is written about these dynamics in religious student experience literature, including studies which inspired and informed the present research. Although Weller et al. (2011) do highlight that “HEIs are faced with a complex task in ensuring that both LGBT and faith groups/individuals feel respected, while neither group feels unfairly treated or discriminated against” (p98), and there is some literature on the experiences of Christian LGBTQ+ students (Coley, 2018; Rêgo-Moreira et al., 2024), other studies are less forthcoming. Guest et al. (2013) mention LGBTQ+ issues twice and very briefly in their book, in relation to two interviewees having open attitudes or being bi-sexual themselves, but do not discuss the topic independently. Burchett & Glanzer (2020) in their article about religious and secular identity exploration of graduate students mention a couple of students who are Christians advocating for social justice for LGBTQ+ members. Baratta & Smith (2019) in their article about students’ confrontation of the academic and religious identities do not mention the topic. Barnes et al. (2021) collected data about students’ own LGBTQ+

identity for their study of Christianity as a stigmatised identity and posited that it is one of a handful of other identities which influenced the salience of Biology graduate students' religious identity. They mention only in one sentence the finding that "Christians are assumed to be socially conservative (anti-LGBTQ+, anti-abortion, and anti-feminism) and have anti-science attitudes" (p7). Thus, whilst the issue is certainly not new, relevant literature is extremely limited, and the findings of this study make a valuable contribution to this subject.

### **Intersectionality**

As stated, both for the religious and the non-religious, gender and LGBTQ+ issues often seem incompatible with Christianity – a stereotype in itself, but there is no space here to fully unpack the nuances of this topic. Nonetheless, there is a small minority of students who live with a doubly stigmatised, gay and Christian, identity, further complicating their student experience. There is an emerging body of literature exploring the experiences of Christians who live at this crossroads (e.g. Coley, 2018; Hugues & Rouse, 2023; Rêgo-Moreira et al., 2024). Previous studies in higher education suggested that for some students revealing the religious identity may be more challenging than revealing their sexual orientation or ethnicity (Baratta & Smith, 2019; Reid, 2014; Stevenson, 2013). The two gay participants in this study dealt with their minoritised identities differently.

Andrew concealed his sexuality in his religious environment almost completely. He was openly religious in his social media space, regularly posting religious quotes and Bible verses on his profile, allowing both his academic and performing art community to see this part of him. He did not, however, post relating to his sexuality, nor did he seek out a more accepting, gay-affirming religious community, where both of these conflicting selves could

have co-existed, as did Gwen. The religious self seems more salient in Andrew's case. It was clear from his interview that even in other countries and cities, where he attended churches more at ease with an openly gay lifestyle, he was not naturally forthcoming with this element of his identity.

Gwen, on the other hand, went a long way to try and reconcile her gay and religious identities. But she paid the painful price of losing the religious framework which was the basis of her life for many years and felt lost and unfulfilled in her new environment. This situation arose from a combination of a perceived lack of postgraduate spiritual provision in her new faith community – note that she studied at **Riverside**, where postgraduate Christian provision was high – and lack of support of her lifestyle in the faith communities where she would have felt at home.

Etengoff & Rodriguez (2020) explain that

*recent scholarship on LGBTQ populations from religious backgrounds has found that some address the conflict by rejecting an identity (religious or sexual), by compartmentalizing their conflicting identities, by creating a spiritual personal identity in the place of a religious social identity, or by integrating their identities. Extant scholarship suggests that LGBTQ individuals who maintain sexual and religious identity conflicts have significantly lower well-being scores than LGBTQ individuals who have addressed the conflict via integration or religious identity rejection.*

Interestingly, gay participants in this study did not fit Etengoff and Rodriguez's (ibid) summary. Gwen integrated her religious and LGBTQ+ identities, whilst Andrew compartmentalised them. Yet, Andrew was the happier, mentally healthier individual, with a vibrant faith life, vibrant art community and active academic life. On the other hand, Gwen, although engaged and preparing to marry, seemed disappointed and unfulfilled, grieving the life she lost. My conversations with them were, of course, just a snapshot at one point in time of their lives and both may find different ways of coping with the intersectionality of

two conflicting marginalised identities. But their different stories and paths illustrate well some of the dilemmas and difficulties postgraduates with two or more stigmatised identities face.

Importantly, whilst dealing with their conflicting identities differently, both Andrew and Gwen were open about their *religious* identity in their various communities. This is also in contrast to others' findings, especially in the US, where Barnes et al., (2021) Ecklund, (2019) and Scheitle & Dabbs (2021) all found that it is the *religious* stigmatised identity students (and scientists) tend to conceal when identities are in conflict, just as many participants of the present research also concealed their religious identity in their academic and peer environments.

Two students, however, comprise a very small sample and the present research did not set out to explore this specific area of the postgraduate student experience, thus explaining this phenomenon and its divergence from previous research findings cannot be comprehensive. However, highlighting the salience of the religious self and its various effects on different individuals contributes to our understanding of religious gay students' university experience. Gwen and Andrew's experiences are especially interesting in light of further findings of this study, which indicate that many students with a salient Christian identity choose not to reveal their faith in their academic environment, making them feel invisible. Paradoxically, this feeling of invisibility was exacerbated for some students through their university's EDI measures.

#### 8.2.4 Lack of religious equality and inclusion

Participants at **Victoria University** – uniquely within the three cases explored in this research – reported feeling excluded by their university based on their religion, and felt that other religions were better supported. Evidence displayed suggests that students felt marginalised and silenced through what to them seemed a deliberate exclusion of Christianity in an effort of recognising other religious members within the institution. Whilst there was an obvious shift from the staunch secularism of the 60s and 70s – as pointed out by Rev. Paul, head of the multifaith chaplaincy himself -, only religions other than Christianity seem to have been considered in the recognition of students of faith on campus.

The positive side of this finding is that efforts are being made by the university – and specifically by the *secular* university – to facilitate the inclusion and belonging of the diverse religious members of its staff and students. This is an important step forward in the institution's EDI provisions, even though I was not able to identify a specific EDI strand for religion and belief on **Victoria University's** website. Nonetheless, both from students' comments and the descriptions of the chaplains it was clear that efforts were being made to facilitate religious inclusion. Revd Paul told me specifically that the university are directly in conversation with him about designing religious EDI, a step many universities have not yet taken, as evidenced by the lack of material on religion related EDI in recent reports nationwide (Guyan & Oloyede, 2019; Sotiropoulou, 2022) or even in brand new strategic plans at large and prestigious institutions such as the one where this thesis is being written (Oxford EDU, 2024). Recognising and accommodating the religious identities of members of minority religions in the secular yet pluralistic academic space is extremely important and a welcome change to attitudes of the not-so-distant past. Both as a result of overall societal

changes and also the internationalisation of higher education (Collini, 2012; Marginson, 2022; Reid, 2017b) the make-up of religious members of the academic community has changed significantly in the last several decades (although data about this have only been collected since the 2017/18 academic year (HESA, 2023b)) and this is being recognised.

Something, however, has not gone quite right with these efforts in **Victoria** and through their attempt to include certain groups, they excluded others – a mistake easily made, as highlighted by Bendl et al. (2015) and Stears et al. (2024), who noted that EDI measures implemented wrongly can reinforce “us vs them” dynamics and reproduce exclusions. It must be clarified, that these findings do not so much pertain to inter-religious conflict on campus as to the university’s well-meaning efforts of the inclusion of religious minorities being ill-informed and resulting in the feelings of exclusion by the largest of the religious minorities (i.e. not a minority religion). This study recorded no indication of inter-religious conflict at the case institutions, nor did it set out to explore such conflicts. However, differential treatment may hinder inter-faith and worldview relations, which are often complex, and universities would do well to encourage positive relationships in this area (Peacock et al., 2023; Peacock & Guest, 2024; Rockenbach et al., 2020). The attempts on the part of the university to make members of other religions feel included and valued on campus are vital. Doing it in such way that is not exclusionary for the members of the largest religious group, however, is essential as well.

Although exploration of the dynamics of religion in higher education within the EDI framework may be a novel approach, the feeling among Christian students at universities in England that Christianity is the religion which can be treated disrespectfully is not new. Guest et al. (2013) mention a similar experience for undergraduates a decade ago. Although

it is not a main theme in their work, they do talk about “tensions, especially concerning how Christianity might be perceived in relation to other religions” (p121) among the challenges students faced. Similarly to what Zara, Xenia, Stuart and others in the present study referred to, some of their interviewees reported feeling that it was okay to mock Christianity, while other religions “you can’t criticise at all” (ibid). Similarly, some of Stevenson's (2013) participants reported that “Christians, unlike those from other religious groups, are ‘fair game’ for staff and students to make derisory and offensive comments about” (p36). Findings of the present thesis may also explain some of the quantitative findings of Peacock et al.'s (2023) recent large-scale study about interfaith relations on UK campuses. The researchers found that after Jewish students, it was Christians who felt the most “mistreated on campus” (11%) and “silenced from sharing their experiences of prejudice and discrimination because of their religion” (13%, p21). The same study also found that as opposed to other worldview groups, it was Christians (and Hindus) who frequently encountered “insensitive comments about their worldview from others on campus” (ibid). The qualitative findings of this study resonate with and give further insight into large-scale findings of studies such as Peacock et al.'s, highlighting the importance of considerate and informed approaches to inter-faith and worldview relations on campus.

The above studies, in line with the present research, reveal that the former hegemony of Christianity does not, in fact, protect or privilege Christian students in their present minority positions (Spencer, 2008), unlike in the United States, where Christians are still the worldview majority and studies often consider them to be of privileged status on campus (e.g. Bowman & Small, 2010; Harter et al., 2018; Mayhew et al., 2014). Fr. Victor's (Victoria) thoughts bring attention to this curious dynamic, elements of which are played out in many

parts of this research. He repeatedly talks about gaining recognition by association and hoping that through the deliberate normalising of the presence of other religions on campus, the presence of Christians will be also re-normalised in a very different sociocultural and religious higher education environment. *“That’s how we get in on the kind of inclusion kind of ticket, so to speak.”* There is a clear shift of power-relations.

Treating all religions on an even keel is thus important for the sake of inter-group relations. As seen in the previous section, Christian students feel stereotyped and the conflict and competition for validation between other minority groups (e.g. LGBTQ+) and Christians is something they are already dealing with. This phenomenon is highlighted by Wolbring and Nguyen (2023), who state that hierarchy between various EDI groups “contains the danger of conflicts between [them]” (p185). To feel that they have to also compete with other religious groups for care and attention can be harmful for Christian students’ wellbeing, and affect campus climate and student satisfaction. Peacock et al. (2023) report that

*experiences of coercion (i.e. feeling pressure to silence, modify or police the expression of one’s worldview) and insensitivity towards matters of worldview diversity on campus are negatively associated with interfaith learning and development (in other words, these seem to discourage it)(p5).*

Although this theme is confined to **Victoria University**, it is a significant empirical contribution to our extremely limited understanding of religion as an EDI factor in higher education. As discussed, religion has been largely neglected as a protected characteristic and EDI focus both in higher education practice and literature (Guyan & Oloyede, 2019; Sotiropoulou, 2022; Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023), and more research is desperately needed to identify both best practices and mistakes to avoid. Furthermore, as Wolbring and Nguyen (2023) point out, the lack of mention itself can be disempowering.

These experiences of exclusion can be informative when institutions consider their EDI provisions. Prince and Francis (2023) emphasize the importance of including members of the underrepresented group the inclusion framework is being developed for. The first step, however, is for institutions to consider religion as a legitimate EDI area and a relevant element of campus relations. It is important to give a voice, acknowledgement and validation for minority religions. It is also important, however, that institutions recognise that Christians are no longer the majority, even if the largest among religious groups, and they themselves are dealing with many of the issues other minority groups are dealing with – although they were dominant even in higher education for a long time. They also need to feel included, as “inclusion is firmly embedded in wellbeing, the environment and a sense of belonging, requiring us to nurture feelings of acceptance, connection and value” (ibid. p3).

The question of *why has religion as an EDI factor not been taken up more widely and more seriously* is inevitable. Firstly, part of the explanation may come from the differentiated nature of academia and the way religion has been sidelined as irrelevant to the creation of knowledge within its walls, a sentiment the presence of which was evidenced through the findings of this research. Second, it may have been simply overlooked or further down the agenda. Thirdly, however, it may be so sensitive and complex in nature that it keeps institutions from tackling religious diversity and inclusion as a priority area. However, recent and present international events have shown that it is both urgent and imperative that these matters are considered in depth on campuses in the UK. The growing national diversity as well as the internationalisation of higher education means that international affairs and conflicts have very real domestic consequences, which often manifest in heightened

reactions within the micro-cosmos of universities. Recent examples of such religiously fuelled events include the Israel-Gaza conflict resulting in students camping out in British university campuses (Mohamed, 2024) and even going as far as breaking into the vice chancellor's office, as happened at the University of Oxford, for example (Havergal, 2024).

The fact that this topic only manifested as a challenge in the **Secular** university may be the result of many factors. The best-case scenario is that the other two universities are doing such a good job with religion-related EDI that it is not an issue. The worst case is that they are not doing anything at all. The truth is probably somewhere in between, although the discrepancy between their webpages on various other EDI fields and the one on religion would suggest that religion as an equality, diversity and inclusion focus seriously lags behind. However, as this issue was not specifically surveyed, and is desperately under-researched, further research would be needed to answer this question.

### 8.2.5 Faith concealment and invisibility

Many students in this study referred to ways in which they hide their concealable stigmatised identity (Christian faith) from others in their academic and peer environments (a concept further discussed in section 8.5 below). That it is perceived by students as a *stigmatised* identity was clear from comments such as people feeling like being a Christian is treated as being a 'white middle-aged man', comparing the status of being religious to other minoritised groups, or describing ways their faith is being mocked or dismissed by lecturers and supervisors. The ways in which students navigated their faith identity and how and what sort of concealment took place varied between individuals and institutions. Some participants felt they specifically had to keep it a secret, like Zara in **Victoria**, while others,

like Natalie in **Minster**, were living their faith “quietly” so as not to “stand out”. Xenia in **Victoria** would hide her cross and avoid contentious topics in her work, while Abigail at **Riverside** stayed quiet in the presence of her supervisor, afraid to declare her faith position. Izzy, in the same university built her relationships outside her department, similarly to students in Stevenson's (2014) study, hindering her belonging to her academic community. Whilst a large proportion of participants in this research felt free to be open about their faith with their peers (49%), or at least with some of them (47%), about one in four (26%) did not feel so with academic staff, or with just some of them (39%). These results resonate with Perfect et al.'s (2019) findings, who report that a minority of religious undergraduates nationwide (especially those with conservative views) felt the need to self-censor. It is also revealing that both with students and staff the ‘with some of them’ was the most popular answer, pointing to a complex picture. Freedom of speech has been given a lot of attention lately in higher education, legislation and the media (Adams, 2023b). A new question regarding freedom of speech was included in the annual National Student Survey in 2023 (and subsequently pulled in 2024), which, despite fears, revealed that the vast majority (86%) of students felt free to express their views. Much of the media attention following the initial NSS results focussed on the fact that “almost nine in ten” students felt free to express their opinions (e.g. Adams, 2023a; Patrick, 2023). However, the 14% who did not feel free to do so represent 400,000 students (undergraduate and postgraduate), if expressed in numbers (HESA, 2023b), hardly a negligible population. (There are currently no large-scale data available for postgraduate students’ experiences of freedom of speech on campus, and I cautiously project the undergraduate statistics on the postgraduate population until such day that better data are available). The focus on the 86% in itself can make the 14% feel

invisible. More work is needed to better understand their experiences and subsequently create an environment where fewer and fewer students feel the need to self-censor the expression of their beliefs. Many of the findings in this thesis provide qualitative meaning to the NSS numbers by exploring in depth why students of this specific minority may feel a lack of freedom of speech, including the stereotyping some students experience, the hostile attitudes they face, being counter-cultural, fear of ridicule and exclusion, etc.

Scott-Baumann and Perfect (2021), working with Muslim students, describe two camps when it comes to freedom of speech, and both were represented at the case universities. The camp who believes that freedom of speech is an *absolute right*, without regard to the consequences to others is exemplified in the professor ridiculing Christianity in Zara's class or Abigail's supervisor, who feel they can talk about religion in derogatory terms without consequences. The other group, those who may self-censor out of fear is well represented in this research by the student participants. While Scott-Bauman and Perfect categorised the latter as those who self-censor *for fear of offending others* and those who self-censor *to avoid being a security threat*, I extend this category: students in this study did self-censor out of fear, but it was due to fear of exclusion, fear of ridicule, fear of their work being downgraded, fear of being stereotyped or fear of being regarded unintellectual. If looking at it from the light of Dan's observation, that everything is interpreted in view of power-relations, then some of those in power (such as atheistic professors) seem to have felt free to speak their views with no regard to others, whilst those in a minoritised position (i.e. religious students) felt hindered to do so. Although these data are not representative and cannot be generalised, they are informative and illustrate the need for better awareness and respect of religious diversity in the classroom.

The fact that students felt more open with peers than with academic staff points to the unequal relationship between them. Naturally, teacher and student are not on equal footing in higher education. But tact, respect and care need to be exercised over such sensitive topics. This was particularly apparent at **Riverside**, where the difference between students' openness about their faith with peers and staff was highest (see **Figure 6.4**, p200), and where several interviewees highlighted the power structures in supervisory relationships. This issue did not manifest in the other two institutions. It being a particular concern in **Riverside** could be the result of both the elite status of the university (and thus its academics) and also its structures of the emphasis and reliance on supervisory relationships. However, as this study was not concerned with the nature of supervisory relationships for postgraduate students, on which there is rich literature (e.g. Breunig & Penner, 2016; Eley, 2005; Koh, 2020), it must suffice to point out that even here, a level of religious literacy and awareness is required.

The example of the more junior Christian supervisor concealing his own faith and not saying anything in response to the senior professor's dismissive comment about religion at **Riverside** indicates that even someone in a tenured position may fear the consequences of being openly religious in their academic environment. Xavier's (41WH, Minster) comments about only finding out through random incidences that several leading academics he worked with or was taught by throughout his own academic journey were Christians, and the sense of missed opportunities to learn from and being mentored by them due to their own faith concealment further strengthens this assumption. There is very little work done on the experiences of Christian or religious academics in the UK, apart from Weller et al.'s 2011 report. Whilst the present study is about postgraduate students, the experiences and

attitudes of religious academic staff also influence the student experience, including by examples they set about their own ways of hiding or owning their religious identity in the educational space.

The present research not only confirms findings of faith concealment and invisibility in previous research, such as Scheitle and Dabbs' (2021) study with science postgraduates, Barnes et al.'s (2021) study with biology postgraduates, Ecklund's work with scientists around the world (2010, 2019) or Google et al.' (2023) work with black Christian biology postgraduates, but further expands it. These studies largely focussed on the experiences of religious postgraduates and academics in the natural sciences, where the perceived conflict between science and faith is supposed to be strong, especially in the United States. This thesis furthers our understanding of faith concealment and religion as a stigmatised identity in other disciplines, as 38.3% of participants were studying in the social sciences and 41.4% in the arts and humanities, indicating that the issue may be much wider than previously reported.

### **Invisibility**

Faith concealment is one the factors which can lead to invisibility, an experience reported by 36% of students in the **Traditional elite** and 28% in the **Secular** universities, although this number was significantly lower in the **Cathedrals Group** sample (see **Figure 6.2**). Several interviewees talked about their own experiences of feeling invisible both with peers and in class throughout the interviews. These feelings were often the result of derogatory remarks by others or lack of recognition and support by the institution (see section above on EDI and religion). Feeling invisible or ignored is demeaning, disempowering and further marginalises students.

One might argue, especially at the **Traditional elite** and **Cathedrals Group** universities, that as signs of centuries of Christian tradition surround students, it should be students of *other faiths* and *no faith* who feel invisible in such an environment. Yet, it is in **Riverside** where feelings of being ridiculed (48.2%), excluded (34.4%), invisible (29.4%) and out of place were (68.2%) were the strongest (**Figure 6.2**). This is also despite the fact that this university had such an abundance of provision for Christian postgraduates that it is one of the positive findings in this thesis. Unlike students of minority religions, some of whom may be instantly recognisable due to their religious wear, Christian students do not stand out in a Western country shaped by Christianity for over 1500 years. Such blending in is probably helpful in everyday life at the university; on the other hand, it makes Christian students physically invisible as well as institutionally unrecognised. Stevenson (2013) also points out this anomaly when she writes about similar treatment of Christian students:

*unlike the Muslim students who are marked out as visible, but treated as invisible, [Christian] students feel wholly invisible. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that some of the Christian students ... elect not to be open about their religious beliefs but to 'pass' as non-religious, recognising that they are already 'different enough'. Thus, they choose to become 'invisible' rather than be openly religious and face the opprobrium of the university and their peers (p37).*

Such complete invisibility in their academic environment not only reinforces the perception of complete differentiation but has the inadvertent consequence of Christian students being invisible to each other outside of their faith communities. Students have to resolve to dropping hints of church attendance as a clue to recognise one another. Some spoke of 'suspecting' that there is another Christian student in their cohort, others reported simply feeling isolated and alone, wondering whether there was anyone else on their course or in their departments who is a Christian, making them feel even more out of place. Frable et al. (1998) "speculate that ... people with concealable identities have a difficult time finding

similar others and/or do not receive support from others in their environment because the identity is not known” (p920). Community is an essential element of the practice of Christian faith. Not being able to find the like-minded people on their course – and identify the Christian academics, as discussed above – limits Christian students’ opportunities to belong within their academic environments.

### 8.2.6 Sparsity of Christian community

Having established the importance of belonging in postgraduate students’ lives (section 2.3.4 ) and having explored throughout the present chapter how hard it can be for some Christian students to belong in their academic and even peer environments, it is no surprise that the need for Christian communities is high. Yet, finding them can be challenging. As discussed in the **Methodology** chapter, even after having spent days researching local, postgraduate-focussed groups, I failed to find almost any both at the **Secular** and at the **Cathedrals Group** universities, even though they can be vitally important for students, especially for those who feel excluded and marginalised in their academic environment. Such lack of provision may be the result of several factors. One, religious communities may not realise that there are postgraduate students among them or that they have different needs to those of undergraduates, as evidenced in several leader interviews. Two, postgraduate students are often mature students, some are also either part-time or study on online courses, thus don’t have the time to or are not present physically on campus enough to take up opportunities if these existed. Three, there might not be enough postgraduate students, as in the **Cathedrals Group** case, for this need to even be recognised by those in pastoral roles.

Yet, the fact that churches, chaplaincies and student organisations are not catering to this need is lamentable. The findings of this research shed light on the importance of Christian communities where postgraduate students may wear their academic and religious selves simultaneously (as further discussed in section **8.3.2** below), and how the presence of such groups can be extremely enriching to students, as found at **Riverside University**. The conversations I had with leaders made several of them realise that there may in fact be a need for postgraduate groups. Indeed, I am aware of some taking steps to form such communities after I had left the field, suggesting that the lack of awareness does not equal lack of intention and with the right information made available, the lack of community could potentially be addressed to some extent.

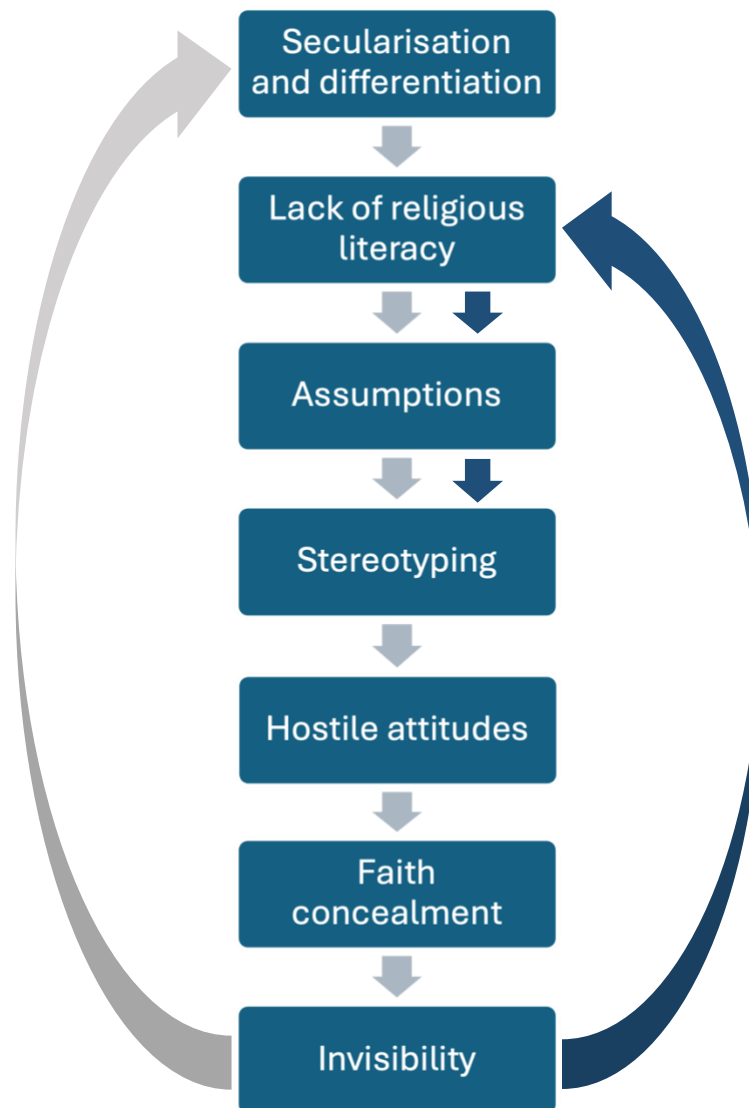
The fact that students expressed a desire to be in fellowship with other postgraduates is significant and further illustrates that the undergraduate and postgraduate needs and life stages are different – not in the fact that they desire religious communities on their campuses, but in that they desire a different kind of fellowship than undergraduate groups can provide. This must be born in mind by leaders of churches and university chaplaincies. Furthermore, these findings shed light on the results of the secondary effects of invisibility, whereby Christian students struggle to recognise each other outside of specifically Christian communities, further limiting their ability to belong in their academic environments. Finally, it must be noted that the fact that postgraduate students are at a different stage of life does sometimes mean that their need for or ability to belong to a Christian community at or near their university may be limited. However, the desire seems to still be strong and may mean that if such communities existed within departments or even online, students would be able to find ways of recognising one another and form supportive relationships within their

academic environments. Based on the qualitative data it may be reasonably assumed that the relatively low level of religious service attendance at the **Secular** universities compared to the **Traditional elite** institutions is at least partially due to the lack of opportunity and not to lack of need or importance. This section is well complemented by sections on the benefits of religious communities discussed below, where its importance in Christian students' lives and their sense of belonging to and through faith communities is further evidenced and discussed as a contrast to the experiences of failing to find it.

### 8.2.7 From secularisation to invisibility – The process of religious fading

I conclude the exploration of the difficulties and challenges Christian postgraduates face in their university environments by discussing “the process of religious fading”, illustrated in **Figure 8.1** below. Throughout this chapter it became increasingly obvious that the difficulties and dynamics described are intertwined and a self-propelling process takes shape as one examines their influence on one another.

*Figure 8.1 The process of religious fading as it affects the individual*



The vast majority of postgraduate students in England enter a secular higher education institution. Apart from the **Cathedrals Group** universities, which host 3% of all postgraduates in England (HESA, 2023b), all higher education is secular, and even **Cathedrals Group** institutions are not religious. **Traditional elite** universities, while having religious foundations and retaining some historical aspects, for all educational and academic intents and purposes have been secularised in the 150 years since the abolition of all religious tests. The rest of

English universities – redbrick, 1960s glass plate and post-1992 – universities were founded on non-sectarian values and charters, assuming and enacting the differentiation of the secular from the sacred, leaving little to no room for religion within their walls, and especially as pertaining to academic pursuits. Even theology departments have increasingly become ‘religious studies’ faculties (Thomas, 2019). With the exclusion of religion from academia, and its general decline in society, religious memory and literacy eroded (Perrin, 2020), resulting in “a widespread ignorance about what Christians actually believe” (Guest et al., 2013, p9). The lack of understanding necessitates assumptions. This is especially true in a society like England, where due to the strong historical and cultural links people think they know what Christianity is, when they actually don’t (Watson, 2025). These assumptions subsequently lead to Christians being othered and stereotyped based on misunderstood and partial information, resulting in some hostile attitudes of ridiculing and excluding Christians for their faith in academic circles, as evidenced by this research. As a result, some Christian students feel stigmatised and opt to/feel forced to conceal their faith from academic staff and peers. They then become invisible either by their own faith concealment or by being ignored by their institutions, which assume (or insist) that the academic space ought to be separate from the sacred. Finally, their invisibility reinforces these processes, whereby a.) because they are not seen, differentiation seems even more complete (represented by the left-side arrow), b.) because they are not seen or heard, religious illiteracy persists, assumptions go unchallenged, and stereotypes are reinforced (represented by the right-side arrow).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that this is not the full picture. What I consider the main contribution of this research, the exploration of the benefits and advantages of having a

religious identity, shine light on other, salutary processes within the Christian postgraduate experience at English universities and these two sides of the coin together provide a more complex and more comprehensive picture.

### 8.3 The benefits of having faith as a postgraduate student

*I'd like to think the pluses are that it provides a kind of an **anchor** and a **sense of purpose and meaning in your life**, and a kind of a ready-made **community** in the sense of, you know, the worshipping community.*

Fr Victor, RC Chaplain, Victoria

This study set out to contribute to the religious student experience literature through providing a balanced picture of the experiences of Christian postgraduate students by examining not only the difficulties they face, but also of the benefits and advantages their faith identity may provide these students with. In this section, I first discuss the theological foundations of students' faith, which were found to benefit their student experience, including finding meaning and purpose through the love of God. I then move to reflections on the religious-social benefits of belonging to a faith community while at university, closing the section with the positive psychological processes Christian postgraduates experienced as a result of their faith identity, such as religious coping and flourishing.

Whilst there is no way to measure whether the benefits of being a student of faith on a postgraduate course in England outweigh the above discussed difficulties, evidence presented through this research suggests that these benefits play a vital role in religious students' lives and may counterbalance difficulties postgraduates in general, and Christian postgraduates specifically face on their courses as a result of their faith identity. Although there is a great body of literature exploring the benefits of religion (e.g. Koenig, 2012; Koenig et al., 2020; Lucchetti et al., 2021; Spencer et al., 2016; VanderWeele, 2017a), this thesis contributes to it a novel understanding of how this plays out in the lives of postgraduate students and will be a valuable resource for universities and religious organisations.

Students in this research report that their belief in a loving and powerful God gives them a different, external and eternal perspective, through which they interpret their lives, and which is beneficial in alleviating some of the stress related to their studies. They also find meaning and purpose through their faith in a loving God, which supports them and helps them persevere through their university courses – findings which will be the first to be discussed below. In the second part of this section, I discuss the benefits religious communities provided for students, such as a place to belong while on their courses and establishing meaningful social relationships with like-minded people. Finally, I focus on the contribution of students' personal faith, faith practices and communities on their mental health and flourishing.

### **8.3.1 Theological benefits – The positive influence of Christian beliefs**

It is pertinent to start discussing how their Christian beliefs benefit postgraduate students from a theological point of view, as it is their Christian faith which is at the heart of their religious identity and thus forms the core of this exploration. 75% of students in this study strongly agree and 14% agree (N=165) that their Christian beliefs were one of the most important things in their lives (**Figure 5.2**). Two beliefs in particular seem to influence students' way of experiencing and interpreting their lives at university. They talk of a God who is a.) loving ("I have a certainty that God loves me. ") and b.) greater than them ("God is in control"). Several other concepts flow from these two beliefs.

#### **The love of God**

Postgraduates draw an image of God throughout their accounts, which have a direct influence on their approach to and attitudes towards their studies and their relationships at

university. They talk of a God who is personal and who personally cares about them (“Jesus draws near and knows what you go through” “God knows about the problem”). God not only cares about them, he has the power to do something for them (“he is in control” “I really believe in God’s providence”) and what he does do is good (“It’s going to be for his glory, but it’s also going to be for my good”). Students’ theological beliefs in an all-powerful (omnipotent) God, who is all good (omnibenevolent), who is with them at all times and places (omnipresent), is personal and caring (providence) come up throughout the interviews and qualitative survey responses. Several participants also refer to an eternal life, beyond this physical world (“I do have hope, and I have eternal life”). They have an “external reference point” (Rev George, Riverside). Students report that through believing in such a God they find peace, joy, hope, strength, purpose, meaning, perseverance, alleviate stress and generally get through their courses – as well as other challenges in life.

The quantitative data support the qualitative findings regarding students’ perception of God being loving. **Figure 7.1** on p215 illustrates how much students perceive being loved by God – measuring both how often they *felt* loved and *knew* they were loved by God. The latter question was added by me to the original list of constructs assessing religious commitment by Astin et al. (2011a). The introduction of the new question to the measure was useful and provides a more nuanced picture. Although the data suggest that the vast majority of students in this study felt loved by God (98.2%) and also knew they were loved by God (99.4%), there are substantial differences between the frequency. For example, over 70% reported they always *knew* God loved them, compared with 38.4% saying they always *felt* loved by God. Indeed, 88.5% report to often or always know that God loves them. These differences indicate that students may be able to rely on their belief in the love of God even

when they do not feel it. This is pertinent because of the volatility of emotions and even one's mental state (Koenig et al., 2020). Furthermore, it also may suggest that the benefits which flow from this belief have a relatively solid foundation.

Will (28WI, Victoria), for example, said that his faith defines his life, stating "it's that which gives me meaning. It's that which gives me purpose. It's that which allows me to make sense of the world. It's that which gives me hope." His faith thus provides an existential and epistemological framework within which everything else exists and through which everything is interpreted. Other students also see their studies as part of their lives but not as something that ultimately defines them. They have an understanding that whilst their degree is important, there are even more important and meaningful things in their lives. Their belief in God's loving care provides students with an all-acompassing umbrella, under which everything else belongs and which is bigger than anything else in their lives. It makes them feel loved (**Figure 7.1**), shapes their identity (**Figure 5.1**), guides their decision making (**Figure 7.4**) and gives them meaning and purpose (**Figure 7.3**). Abigail (31AI, Riverside) spoke of faith being "the centre of your life [which] will determine your choices in your life" when she explained that both her academic- and life choices are guided by her faith. Having such a framework to rely on is a substantial benefit Christian students can and do operationalise while on their degree courses.

Very little empirical research explores the benefits of believing in a loving God. Most studies concerned with these dynamics work with rather narrower concepts, largely with the relationship between the images of a loving God and physical and mental health. Since mental health has been identified as a particularly pertinent issue for postgraduates, such studies are relevant to Christian students' university experience and will be explored in more

detail below in section **8.3.3** where I discuss the relationship between participants' faith and mental health specifically. Now I turn to another beneficial element of the Christian postgraduate experience which flows from students' beliefs, their ability to find meaning and purpose through their faith.

### Meaning and purpose beyond academic success

Meaning and purpose did not form a core topic of exploration of this study originally, yet, the theme organically surfaced from the qualitative data, indicating that it is closely related to students' religious identity. The quantitative question about meaning and purpose (**Figure 7.3**) was included as part of a construct measuring students' religious commitment (**Table 5.1**), adapted from Astin et al. (2011a). Students were not directly asked about what gave them meaning and purpose, but rather about the benefits of/best things about being a student of faith. Students talk about meaning and purpose in response to this question in various ways. Several participants in **Riverside** and **Victoria**, for example, referred to there being *and* them already having much more important things in life than their studies. For some, this is God's love and companionship, for others it is having eternal life<sup>17</sup>, yet others want to pass on God's love and give hope to fellow students – everything else comes secondary. Hazel (25MAH, Riverside), for example said that: "I have the most important thing that matters. ... it just gives me a different perspective that helps me to ... put [the PhD] into perspective." Secondary here does not mean unimportant. Rather, a higher level of meaning and purpose provides students with an "eternal perspective" and everything

---

<sup>17</sup> Christians believe in an eternal life after earthly death, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

else flows from this. They are still striving toward their degrees, living their lives as students, but they have peace, hope and even joy, words several participants used when talking about their faith in relation to their student experience, in line with Galek et al.'s (2015) observation of how Christians “put life experiences in the context of future spiritual salvation, which provides a sense of purpose in life” (p2).

The influence of their belief in a loving God and in an eternal life on students’ attitude to their studies is clearly detectable here. Its centrality and priority are also obvious. The ultimate meaning and purpose are in the eternal, which has a profound effect on all areas of students’ lives – relationships, studies and mental health. Importantly, instead of this priority diminishing the importance of the degree, it supports students in completing it in at least two ways. One, by making the degree more meaningful, because it is seen as given and guided by God; two, the joy, hope and lowered level of anxiety flowing from these beliefs bolster students’ mental health and resilience throughout the degree, essential to be able to complete it.

Studying for a postgraduate degree supposes a certain level of purpose already, given it is something one has to work hard for to start, to get through and to finish. Furthermore, a postgraduate degree tends to be more purposeful, deliberately chosen and personal, illustrated by phrases students used when calling their research ‘my baby’, for example. The sheer level of difficulties, such as financial commitment, the toll on mental health and the problems of non-belonging demand a high level of purposefulness to make it worthwhile to put oneself through such and experience. Indeed, Stroope et al.'s (2013) study showed that students are up to four times more likely to have meaning and purpose than any other segment of the population (although they did not differentiate between undergraduate and

postgraduate students). Thus, non-Christian postgraduates probably also have higher sense of meaning and purpose than the general population. The importance of meaningfulness in the life of postgraduate students was identified by Milicev et al. (2021) as well, who found in their study with 479 postgraduate researchers in the UK that

*[t]he fact that eudaimonic wellbeing was higher than hedonic implies that PGR welfare may be grounded in psychosocial functioning and the sense of meaningfulness, rather than happiness. ... meaningfulness increases when one focuses on identity and the expression of self. ... while the engagement with postgraduate research might provide a deeply meaningful self-realisation opportunity, its demands may cause stress and stand in the way of work-life balance and needs satisfaction, thus potentially diminishing positive emotions (p12276).*

Milicev et al.'s findings indicate that meaning and purpose have an important role to play in the wellbeing of postgraduate students in general. The authors also suggest that meaningfulness increases with focus on identity and expression of self – themes, which were found to be important for participants in this research: both their faith- and student-identities play an important part in Christian students' self-concept and they have a desire to express both. However, Milicev et al. (ibid.) argue that the meaningfulness gained from the postgraduate identity and experience may not prove enough to counterbalance the factors which contribute to the elevated level of mental ill health in this population. Participants in the present research report meaning and purpose beyond finding meaning in one's studies or career. Christian students may benefit from finding the eudaimonic meaningfulness needed to balance out the diminishing effects of the pressures of the degree course in their faith. Indeed, the high scores in **Figure 7.2** and **Figure 7.3** indicate the centrality of faith in meaning making and goal setting in many Christian students' lives.

The findings that faith and meaning/purpose are interconnected are in line with a number of quantitative studies (Galek et al., 2015; Mallery & Mallery, 2022; Stroope et al., 2013).

These, however, cannot explain the dynamics of how and why meaning and purpose are related to religion. There has been very limited qualitative work in this area, thus the present thesis contributes to this literature as well. A rare exception is Callister et al.'s 2019 study exploring religious people's perspectives on meaning in life through 172 interviews (80% Christian). Similar to quantitative studies, their research also indicates that religious people mostly find meaning and purpose through connection with others and with God, serving and loving others and serving and loving God, as well as being aware of God's love for them, - very similar to the theological and social benefits of faith for students identified in this research. Stroope et al.'s (2013) findings, whilst quantitative (and representative), did measure substantively the relationship between people thinking of God as loving as opposed to not loving, and confirm the qualitative findings discussed above: those who believed in an all loving God scored twice as high on meaning and purpose scales. Interestingly, students in their study were found to be four times as likely to have meaning and purpose than those in employment. Future research into student religiosity may explore these dynamics further. Importantly for the population this research is concerned with, having meaning is associated with lower depression and anxiety, and higher levels of life satisfaction (Koenig et al., 2012). By extension then, if students find meaning and purpose in their religion, it may have a positive effect on their mental health while at university. It is important to note that Galek et al., (2015) indicate that individuals who have a strong religious identity but lack meaning and purpose are more likely to suffer with anxiety and depression. Although the vast majority of students in this study reported high levels of meaning and purpose arising from their faith, the sample is not representative and it is thus important that those with pastoral

responsibilities for religious students keep in mind to encourage them in their seeking of meaning and purpose.

Finally, several studies indicate that one way people gain meaning and purpose in their lives is through relationships: including with family, with friends and, for religious people, with God (Callister et al., 2019; McNamara Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014; Nelson et al., 2021). Accordingly, many students in this research report having more meaningful relationships with fellow Christians than with other peers, a topic which will be discussed as part of the next section devoted to community and relationships.

### 8.3.2 Religious-social benefits – Ready-made communities and belonging

*The uniqueness of a positive social group, grounded in a belief system that offers epistemological and ontological certainty, lends religious identity a twofold advantage for the promotion of well-being.*

(Ysseldyk et al., 2010, p60)

In line with the rich literature around religious social participation (Li, Stampfer, et al., 2016; Spencer et al., 2016; VanderWeele, 2017c; Wormley et al., 2023), this study also found that belonging to faith communities has substantial benefits for Christian students (Aune et al., 2024; Perfect et al., 2019). Postgraduates find friendship, support and enrichment in these communities, where available. Both the quantitative and qualitative data suggest that participation in faith communities is important and beneficial for Christian students, even as it pertains to their university experience.

Participation in religious groups was highest in the **Traditional elite** institutions (see **Figure 6.5**), where the availability and variety of Christian communities was the greatest, and lower in the other two institutions, where the sparsity of such communities was a challenge – as

discussed in **Chapter 6**. Whilst no causal relationship may be established statistically, the qualitative data suggest that the wide availability of Christian communities contributed to the high attendance rate as well as to the wider positive experience of Christian students at the **Traditional elite** institutions, 65% of whom attended religious gathering twice or more a week and for whom one of the most enriching experience at university was the wide variety of Christian communities. On the other hand, the lack of easily accessible religious communities limited students' opportunities to attend services, events and groups both at **Victoria** and even **Minster** universities, narrowing students' chances to fully benefit from all that religious communities have to offer.

It might be argued that low availability of suitable Christian communities was perhaps due to lack of demand in the **Secular** and **Cathedrals Group** universities. However, religious student ratios suggest otherwise. Christian students constituted 26% of the postgraduate population in **Riverside**. This was only one percent less at 25% in **Victoria**, where the lack of such provision was felt the most acutely. (This ratio may actually be higher or lower, as the case institution only collected data about religiosity from UK domicile students, thus international students are not included in this statistic.) The highest proportion amongst the case institutions, 33% of students in **Minster** identified as Christian, yet the provision for them was still inadequate. Thus, lack of students to participate in such groups cannot fully explain the lack of provision, although the situation at the **Cathedrals Group** universities may be unique in this.

The comparatively low levels of participation at the **Cathedrals Group** universities may be partially explained by the large proportion of postgraduate students studying part time (47% at **Minster University** overall, and 58% of survey participants), who live at home and often

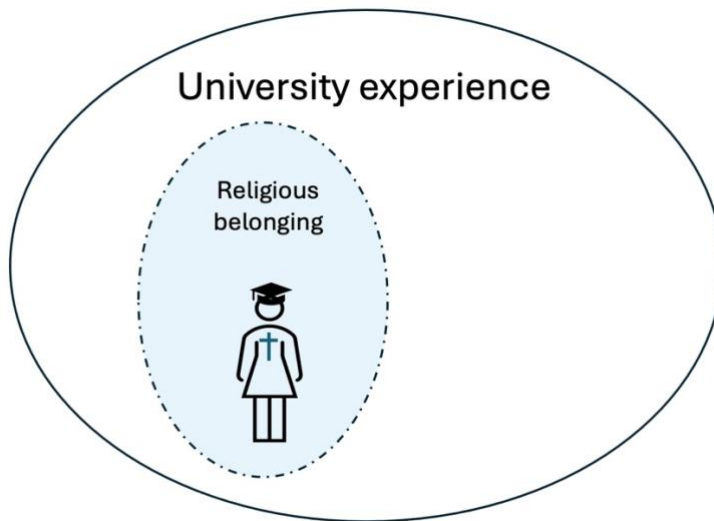
in other nearby towns. Thus, the relatively high ratio (30%) of participants attending 'never' or 'every once in a while' may be a result of many students not living at or near the university. At **Minster**, for example, only one of the five students interviewed lived in the town, the one international student interviewee. Part time students may not have the time to attend religious services while on campus, they may not be aware of such opportunities even if they would wish to attend, may not even come to campus, or may be content with attending in their hometowns and not at university. Thus, for distance and part time students, belonging takes a different form and their everyday priorities may revolve around work or family, and the student identity must fit around these, as posited by McChesney et al. (2024). The authors point out that distance learning doctoral students, for example, can be invisible in several ways, including simply by being a *doctoral* student, being distant learners and by the fact that many may be carers. It follows then that a.) their needs may not be recognised, as they are invisible; b.) these students' need for belonging must be met in different ways, and engagement with them has to be tailored in such a way that they can make use of it.

In contrast, students at the **Traditional elite** universities reported the highest level of religious service attendance, and also the highest level – by far – of feeling like their university experience has been enriched by their Christian communities (**Figure 7.5**). Whilst the survey data do not meet the requirements for statistical analysis of correlation, the qualitative data support the assumption that being able to attend such communities does indeed promote religious students' flourishing and enriches not only the religious but also the university experience. Students find near-immediate belonging, a place that is familiar and which supports their religious identity and allows them to feel 'normal' among like-

minded people with whom they share fundamental values and beliefs. Where postgraduate-focused groups exist, this extends to being able to share both the religious and the student identity together, thus strengthening not only the religious but also the institutional belonging. Furthermore, in religious communities, students build informal relationships and friendships which go beyond the walls of churches, and are sustained in student and peer environments, creating a protective yet penetrable membrane, in potentially difficult environments.

**Figure 8.2** illustrates how the religious community may serve the dual function of aiding institutional belonging whilst also providing resilience in a sometimes unwelcoming environment. The religious community/sacred space/counterspace is situated within the university/public space – through churches on/near campus, postgraduate Christian groups, student-run Bible studies, etc. The sacred and the public are trans-liminal in this way (Van de Tol & Gorski, 2022). As the Christian student flourishes within the religious community while at university, so she is still also within the academic environment, and thus the belonging is associated with the university experience. Without the religious community the negative experiences may hinder belonging. This might explain why Christian students at **Riverside** and other **Traditional elite** universities report the highest positive experiences, growth in faith, enrichment of university experience, etc. whilst *also* reporting the highest level of negative attitudes towards them.

*Figure 8.2 Religious belonging is part of the overall university experience*



It is imperative to understand that students' religious experiences at university are not isolated or compartmentalised. Having a positive experience as religious person influences the overall university experience. Just as students don't leave their religious identity outside when entering the classroom (Guest et al., 2013), so also they do not leave the student identity outside when entering the church building or other Christian gathering on campus, even if one or the other identity may be more salient in the given environment (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Willetts & Clarke, 2014), they overlap. Thus, belonging to religious communities may be beneficial for the university experience and overall sense of belonging while on one's course, especially in light of findings relating to students' desire for integrating the religious and academic self. This is particularly pertinent for international students in their new environment.

### **Integration of international students**

International Christian students especially benefit from Christian communities on and around campus. On the one hand, some may be surprised by the different culture in England in its relationship to Christianity (as discussed, for example, in section 6.4.2 on p186). On

the other hand, finding ready-made Christian communities – even similar ones to their own at home – may counter-balance those experiences through providing an immediate sense of belonging and a source of relationships with like-minded people they could relate to, even in an unfamiliar foreign culture. Many of the international participants reported finding their religious community to be one of their first port of call at their new universities. This indicates the importance of their religious identity as well as the potential religious communities around campus hold in expediting student belonging. Weng et al. (2021) point out that “[i]nternational students often connect with international students or ‘same-culture’ groups to navigate their place and belonging in the host society”(p40), pointing to various religious groups welcoming and helping immigrants of the same religion. Whilst this study is not comparative of the religious and non-religious student experience, it may be reasonably assumed, that such ready-made Christian communities, welcoming people who share some fundamental values world-wide, would be an advantage for Christian international students. The religious identity bridges over the national differences.

The high ratio of international students in UK higher education has economic reasons, and thus can even be contentious (Marginson, 2022; Reid, 2017b). Indeed, the previous government limited access to UK student visas for families of non-research postgraduates (Bhardwa, 2024) in their efforts of trying to clamp down on net migration. Nonetheless, international students make up a large proportion of the postgraduate population (over half in the two larger case institutions, for example) and their needs, including their religious needs, have to be met. As discussed previously, international students are often more religious than their UK counterparts (Guest, Aune, et al., 2013; Reid, 2014; Weng et al.,

2021) and this has motivated universities to meet their needs and brought some attention to religion as a student welfare factor. However, these efforts are problematic in two ways. First, steps taken to cater for international students' religious needs often focus on the facilitating of religious practices only and do not address the overall university culture towards religious students. Whilst creating prayer rooms, multifaith chaplaincies and catering to special religious diets are vital and welcome efforts, if these remain tick-box exercises and attitudes towards students of faith remain negative, if religious literacy remains low and stereotyping continues, mutual respect and acceptance – as argued above – will not be achieved. Second, such efforts are usually aimed at students of minority religions, and I have seen no evidence of support for international Christian students on behalf of the case universities through this research. International Christian students' integration into their host institution may be expedited if they are able to become part of religious communities, where they can share their religious and even their student identity with fellow Christians near their universities. The university would also benefit from international students' belonging to such religious groups for all the reasons discussed in this chapter, such as social and pastoral support, sense of belonging and a source of meaningful relationships, all contributing to expedited integration.

### **Deeper interpersonal relationships**

The deeply shared values students describe with words such as 'foundational', 'deep and substantial', 'really-really important', create a special bond between them, which facilitates a level of vulnerability and deeper friendships. Several participants compared their Christian and non-religious relationships, noting the former being formed quicker, going deeper, being more honest and meaningful, due to the shared values and beliefs. These friendships

are often formed in religious communities. The fact that in **Riverside** several postgraduate-focused mid-week groups are attended by dozens of students each on a regular basis indicates the need for such spaces. Here, students share both their religious and academic identities. Students are encouraged to share struggles with others, providing them with pastoral support, and they themselves also provide support to others. Thus, the lack of organisations which work with Christian postgraduates and the lack or little recognition of their presence or understanding of their needs in the local churches at **Victoria** and **Minster** are regrettable.

Although it may be assumed that it is only natural that students in frequent social contact with similar interests forge close supportive friendships, studies have shown that relationships in a religious context have a higher positive effect on wellbeing and life satisfaction than either personal religious practice (e.g. prayer or Bible reading) or regular social (non-religious) participation (Lim & Putnam, 2010; VanderWeele, 2017a; Wormley et al., 2023). Lim and Putnam (2010) posit that the salience of the religious identity plays a central role in these dynamics, and that the reinforcement of the shared religious values during religious service attendance also contribute to the positive effect. Indeed, Li et al. (2016) found that the *social* element only accounts for a quarter of the positive effects of religious social participation, which is a stronger predictor of longevity and health than any other social support variable. Most studies about the benefits of social religious participation are quantitative enquiries, thus limiting the depth of understanding of how these dynamics work. The present research contributes to the depth of our insight into the positive influences of religious social participation through thick qualitative data. These

positive impacts are considerable despite the difficulties experienced in the academic contexts due to students' religious identity.

Curiously, little provision for postgraduate students provided by chaplaincies was evidenced in this study. I researched the websites of dozens of university chaplaincies and reached out via email to over 40 chaplains. The vast majority did not work with postgraduates, with two notable exceptions: the Roman Catholic Chaplaincy in **Victoria**, where the postgraduate ministry used to be a vibrant part of their work, although was dwindling at the time of data collection; and a para-university protestant chaplaincy in **Riverside** with a very active group of chaplains and high numbers of student attendees. According to my wider research, however, it is clear that these organisations at the case universities are the exception to the rule, and I only managed to identify one or two others nationwide. A few **Traditional elite** survey respondents and one interviewee mentioned college chaplaincy as something they benefitted from. Neither the multi-faith chaplaincy in **Victoria** (which employed several staff), nor the chaplaincy at **Minster** had any group or other form of community for postgraduates.

Aune et al. (2019) describe the student-facing work of chaplains at universities in their nationwide study as 71% of chaplains reporting pastoral work/counselling as one of their top four activities, 38% saying that building community, and 18% that running social activities are also part of their priorities. A lot of the work of chaplains with students consists of "being there" and hospitality (ibid. p65), with Catholic chaplaincies providing the most

social activities<sup>18</sup>. Aune et al. (2023) further report that the perception of a good chaplain was found to be what they describe as “relational presence” – the good and effective chaplain being “available, accessible and visible” (p206), “warm hearted”, “understanding”, “approachable” and “compassionate”. Many of these characteristics lend a somewhat reactive role to chaplains. Without question, they carry out essential work with students and staff, but the focus is on pastoral and counselling work, which does not necessarily facilitate community. It does, however, support student mental health, and being able to do such work with an understanding of students’ faith will be shown vital in our discussion of mental health in later sections. Building religious community for postgraduates, however, is patchy.

It seems then that both many chaplaincies and many local churches either are not aware of the need for religious groups for postgraduates, or do not have the capacity to facilitate them. Even though there is evidence in this research that students do not only benefit through specifically postgraduate groups, but also through generally attending church services, the data also suggest that having such groups enhances and expedites the benefits of belonging to faith communities as a student. Furthermore, Christian postgraduate groups can aid a sense of belonging to the institution as well, through sharing two important and salient identities, the student and the religious identity. Finally, having neither church, nor chaplaincy or other group readily available, as for many in **Victoria** and some in **Minster**, may

---

<sup>18</sup> Over 80% of university chaplains in England are Christian. Aune et al. (2019, 2023) found that many chaplains carry out most of their work within their own faiths, thus Christians are well over-represented in this ratio.

leave Christian students without the opportunity to form the friendships, give and receive the support and care described by those who have such opportunities.

### Counterspaces

Although belonging in the academic environment can be limited by perceived or real negative attitudes towards Christian students, this is strongly counterbalanced in **Riverside** where a plethora of Christian communities provide ample opportunity for students to belong. Moreover, many of these communities are places connected with their academic identities as well. A specifically student-related benefit identified in this research, is the crossroads these communities provide between the academic and the religious self. In **Victoria**, on the other hand, the lack of belonging in the academic environment is coupled with direly limited places to belong as a Christian, especially as a Christian academic. This is exemplified by the experiences of Wendy and Rita, who felt isolated and did not have the opportunity to counterbalance the negative experiences in their non-religious environments with a community where they could be fully themselves both as a Christian and as a student.

Although on most campuses there are religious student organisations, they are overwhelmingly geared to undergraduate students. Postgraduates in all three case institutions reported difficulties with integrating into these groups. The postgraduate phase of life is a very specific one, with both the religious and student identities differing to those of undergraduates', as described in **Chapter 5**. Students in specifically postgraduate focussed groups are able to relate better to people in the same life stage. Students who are able to find supportive religious communities are thriving, despite negative experiences, even in **Victoria**. This phenomenon, however, was most apparent at the University of

**Riverside**, where students reported the highest level of hostile attitudes towards them, yet they also reported the highest level of religious service attendance, meaning and purpose, strength through their faith, being enriched through their religious communities at university and scored consistently high on positive measures, results displayed throughout **Chapter 7**. The concept of 'counterspaces' is useful here to explain these seemingly contradicting findings.

Aune et al. (2024) apply Case and Hunter's (2012) concept of counterspaces in their recent article about religious student organisations in the UK. Although it was first developed through the original authors' study of African American sororities and fraternities in colleges with a white majority, it is transferrable to religious student contexts. Case and Hunter (ibid.) define counterspaces as "settings, which promote positive self-concepts among marginalized individuals [...] through the challenging of deficit-oriented dominant cultural narratives and representations concerning these individuals" (p261). Christian postgraduates who feel marginalised for their religious identity through stereotyping or exclusion in their academic environments (where the 'dominant cultural narrative' is so different to their own) encounter positive self-concepts and associations in their counterspaces of religious communities. Here they can interact with like-minded people who hold similar values to theirs and often share in their academic identity as well. Aune et al., (2024, p11) argue that

*[c]ounterspaces exist because of enduring patterns of inequality and discrimination, and SROs [student religious organisations] remain important for religious minority students partly because they promote their identity and well-being. [...] It is also about providing support and safety to students whose religious needs can be marginalised in universities, in classrooms where some fear discussing their faith will lead*

*to ridicule, or in student spaces focused on getting drunk<sup>19</sup>, which students often feel contravenes their religion.*

Places of positive input then are even more important in light of the difficulties students face. Indeed, students' religious identity and shared values can be reinforced in religious communities, evidenced through this study as well. The fact that counterspaces are described as promoting positive self-concept rather than merely 'safe spaces' is welcome, although the need for them is regrettable. Encouragingly, participants in the present study used the concept of a 'place of support' to describe their religious communities a lot more than the phrase 'safe space', indicating an input-focussed experience rather than self-protection and isolation.

Aune et al. (ibid) describe religious student organisations as creating home away from home for students, much like churches were described by students in **Victoria**. Student groups in Aune et al.'s study provide opportunities to build friendships, strengthen religious identity and faith, much like **Riverside** postgraduates experienced in the present study. However, religious student organisations hardly exist for postgraduate Christian students in universities in England. The groups identified in **Riverside** were local initiatives, either run by churches or para-university organisations, which – apart from one other **Traditional elite** university – were not found at universities surveys for this research, as discussed above. The lack of counterspaces may leave students without communities where their religious and student identities could be supported together. This need not be so. The example of **Riverside** shows that even without organised nation-wide student networks it is possible to

---

<sup>19</sup> In this study, premarital sex, rather than the drinking culture was what students felt contravened their religion. This is probably due to the differences between the postgraduate and the undergraduate student cultures.

create spaces in which Christian students can flourish, enhance their belonging and enrich their university experience.

An additional benefit of churches, as highlighted by both students and leaders is their ready-made-ness. The fact that these communities exist already, and students relatively effortlessly can become part of “an immediate community ... [makes] a world of a difference” (Izzy, 31B, Riverside). Local churches and chaplaincies may be able to make up for the lack of religious postgraduate organisations – if aware of the need. This is especially true for institutions where part-time and distance learners do not make up the majority of the postgraduate population. Even at **Victoria**, students who manage to find local churches to plug into, as did Agnes or Tara, for example, are able to benefit from their religious communities, despite them not running specifically postgraduate groups. Churches in the vicinity of higher education institutions should thus consider reaching out to the postgraduate community and providing spaces to meet and forming groups for students. Similarly, chaplaincies could consider facilitating such groups and events. It must be recognised, however, that both churches and chaplaincies may lack the resources for such a ministry, whether in personnel or space.

I note that the benefit of student religious organisations for postgraduate students is limited to those who can access such groups and inability to do so is not only caused by the lack of such groups. Part-time students, those working alongside the degree and/or having caring responsibilities, such as a family or ailing parents, may not have the opportunity or even feel the need to be part of such communities. These students will not be able to form these types of supportive relationships within the university setting and benefit from a counterspaces. Indeed, there is evidence even within this research that they may not be

recognised as postgraduate students in their church communities either. For these students, change in the academic environment is essential to be able to belong and flourish as religious individuals.

Finally, it is important to note that community does not only manifest in organised religious activities, such as church services, student groups or conferences. Often students talk about their friends or Christian flatmates forming a caring community around them, where they can share their deepest struggles and find support. Yet, the organised religious events and groups play a vital role in finding such friends. This is a salient point in light of the invisibility discussed earlier as a barrier for Christian students in identifying one another. In organised groups they have the opportunity to connect with one another and subsequently create less formal communities. Thus, the fact that students especially at the **Secular**, but also at the **Cathedrals Group** universities struggle to find Christian communities does not only result in the lack of belonging to organised, ready-made groups, but also of the ability of forming more informal, close-knit caring communities around themselves. It is thus in the best interest of both the university and the religious students to find belonging while a student through a religious community.

### Mutual benefits

On the one hand, peer and pastoral support provided by postgraduate-focussed religious communities are especially beneficial for students. On the other hand, – although often unrecognised – these communities are also highly beneficial resources for universities, for at least three reasons.

Firstly, these communities provide much-needed and ‘free’ pastoral care for students in a population overburdened by mental-health issues (Evans et al., 2018; Levecque et al., 2017;

Milicev et al., 2021), relieving the university of some of their responsibility (and cost) of care for the welfare of their students. Many participants in **Riverside** talked about their faith communities providing support through being a space where they could be vulnerable, sharing difficult experiences which are well understood by people who share their identities (religious and student) and receive support from leaders, all of which were reported to have been highly beneficial.

Second, postgraduate Christian groups provide ready-made communities, without the university having to create these through programmes of their own. These communities provide instant places to belong to, directly answering the problem of endemic non-belonging in postgraduate populations (Morris, 2021; Neves, 2023), and enhance the university experience of students – benefitting the university’s reputation by extension. Furthermore, belonging through expedited social participation may directly affect student retention (McChesney et al., 2024; O’Keefe, 2013), again, beneficial both for student and institution.

Finally, religious communities enrich the student experience through exposing students to diversity in several ways. In **Victoria**, students spoke of how their church communities opened their eyes to the fact that their postgraduate cohorts create silos – i.e. people of similar age, similar interest, similar educational level, etc. –, which are counterbalanced by regularly being exposed to people of all ages and walks of life, keeping them closer to the real world. In **Riverside**, two types of diversity enrich Christian students’ university experience. Educationally, their postgraduate-focussed communities expose Christian students to other academic disciplines and scholars, where they can expand the breadth of their views and interdisciplinary networks, not dissimilar to college dining halls but with the

added benefit of the immediate rapport through shared values. On the other hand, the diversity of the myriad active Christian traditions and communities on and around campus opens students' eyes to the many ways of approaching their own faith, facilitating respect for different traditions and creating a small-scale interfaith openness.

Thus, there is a strong argument for universities to acknowledge, support and collaborate with religious communities such as churches and para-university Christian student groups both for the benefit of the institution and the individual. Such recognition could be the beginning of bridge-building, which could ultimately lead to the normalisation of religious members within the higher education community.

### 8.3.3 Psychological benefits – Faith and mental health

It would be reasonable to assume that Christian postgraduates suffer with significant mental health issues. First of all, they are subject to all the same pressures the overall postgraduate population encounters, such as the immense workload and competition (Metcalf et al., 2018), precarious career outlook (Levecque et al., 2017), significant levels of stress (Hazell et al., 2020), resulting in depression and anxiety (Evans et al., 2018) and even suicidality (Akram et al., 2020). To make matters worse, Christian students face *additional* challenges due to their faith identity, such as feeling stereotyped, excluded, silenced, invisible, countercultural and marginalised – as evidenced by this research and by others (e.g. Aune et al., 2020; Barnes et al., 2021; Stevenson, 2013, Watson, 2024) – experiences which have the potential to exacerbate mental health challenges. Yet, no evidence for such effects was found in this study. On the contrary: the benefits of faith seem to counterbalance the negative effects listed above for many of the participants and support even specific mental

health conditions, although it does not replace traditional therapy or counselling. Personal faith is one of *many* pillars students can rely on when scaffolding their mental health, as well summarised by Daisy, the student ministry leader in **Riverside** in section 7.4.3 .

Three limitations must be born in mind as I discuss the relationship between student mental health and religiosity. First of all, although mental health was identified as a major issue in the postgraduate population and was thus pertinent to include in this study, participants' mental health was not measured, being beyond the scope of this research. Yet, somewhat unexpectedly, most – if not all – benefits of Christian students' faith identity seems to be beneficial to their mental health and thus it must be discussed at greater depth than anticipated. Second, those who struggle more with their mental health may have refrained from participation, even as a result of the very mental health issues that their Christian and/or postgraduate status may have triggered or worsened, such as depression or anxiety. Thus, any conclusions are only applicable to the participants of this study. Nonetheless, these are informative of how their faith identity might positively influence and support Christian postgraduates' mental health. Third, the subject of mental health, and including the field of 'religion and mental health' within it is immense and this study cannot do justice to it. Nonetheless, the findings of this study contribute meaningfully to the postgraduate mental health literature through identifying and exploring several aspects of Christian students' religious identity which were reported to have been influential on their mental health – the vast majority being positive influences.

Ultimately, all the benefits of being a religious student identified in this thesis – their theological framework of a loving God, having meaning and purpose and the various benefits religious communities provide – support Christian student's mental health and

wellbeing. This section merely synthesises and focusses these benefits onto the area of mental health. It is important to note before I proceed, however, that mental health and wellbeing are *not* the ultimate end of religion or the goal of its adherents. VanderWeele (2017b) put this thought eloquently regarding the benefits of participating in religious communities, which I extrapolate to other benefits of faith:

*Of course, neither health nor worldly satisfaction is the primary focus of the world's major religious traditions. Instead, a vision of or communion with God or the transcendent, or the living life as God intended, or a restoration to complete wholeness, are often central in the primary ends of religious communities. [...] Many religious communities teach that ultimate well-being extends beyond flourishing in this life and that these final ends of religion are to be given greater value. Given the focus of religion on the transcendent, it is thus perhaps remarkable that participation in religious communities affects so many human flourishing outcomes in life, here and now, as well (p480).*

### **Beliefs and mental health**

It has been evident throughout this research that students' beliefs in a personal, loving God are beneficial for their mental health. The knowledge, that such a God is in control of their circumstances (including their studies) provides a sense of security. Phrases such as "not having to worry too much", "not having the pressure of future on yourself", "knowing everything will be okay, because God guides us through hard times" are evidence of faith acting as a buffer for stress. Many students speak of having peace, hope and comfort because of their belief that God takes care of them, because he loves them, and he is omnipotent. Agnes (25WH Victora), for example, said that there is "something about the idea of ultimate, unconditional love and unconditional support that I find really helpful to think about when I'm feeling really low". Belief in the transcendent also gives students an eternal perspective, which seems to lessen stress by lowering the comparative control of

the academic achievement over one's life and placing that control into the hands of a benevolent, eternal and caring person.

Christian postgraduates attribute high level of importance to their beliefs in maintaining their mental health and in providing meaning and purpose to their lives, something Nelson et al. (2021) found to be present significantly higher in the lives of believers than in atheists'. The theological framework discussed in earlier sections of this chapter is in line with Stroope et al.'s (2013) assertion that "beliefs about God's character are uniquely salient to mental health outcomes" (p35) and perceiving God as 'loving' (as opposed to 'not loving') predicts meaning in life. Furthermore, images of a loving God have positive effects on mental health through reducing stress and 'buffering the effects of low self-esteem' (p36), both of which factors are particularly important for postgraduate students in light of their course pressures and the oft mentioned impostor syndrome. It may be observed in the qualitative data of the present research that postgraduates' beliefs of a loving God led to a sense of personal value, which was self-contained within the person's being, not dependent on the academic achievement. Other studies also found that positive images of God covary with positive self-esteem (Kellogg, 2021; Kosarkova & Roubalova, 2023).

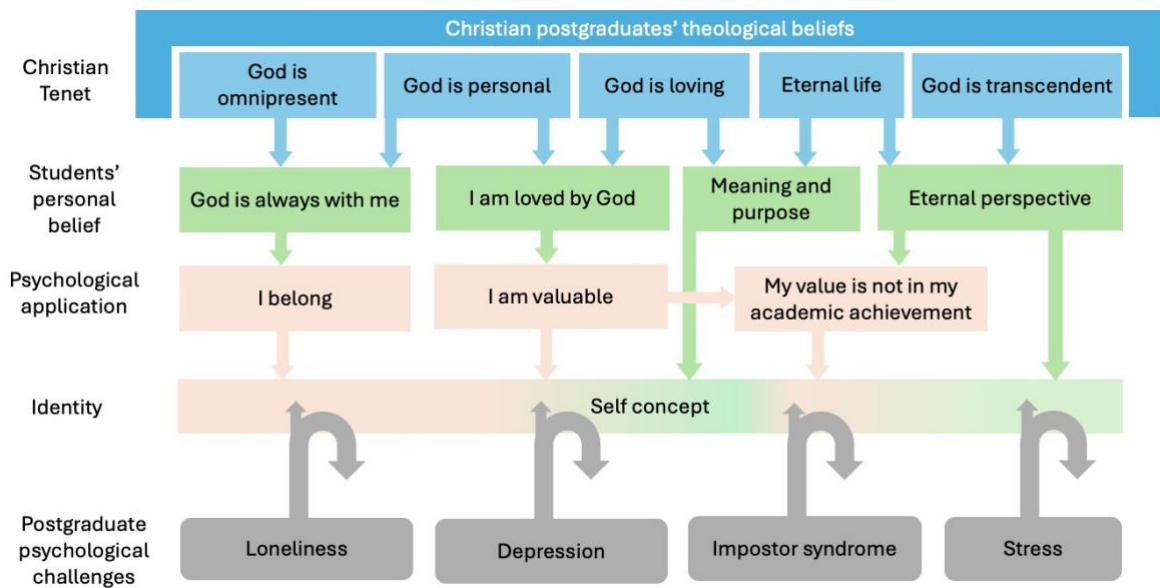
Richards et al. (2005) identified three major factors in theistic spiritual therapy which increase religious clients' wellbeing: believing in a loving God, self-acceptance (loving self) and love of others. All three have been evidenced in this research. In a similar vein, Jauncey and Strodl (2018) claim that love of God, self and others, combined with the presence of meaning lead to psychological advantages, such as lower levels of depression and anxiety. Findings of other scholars then confirm that elements of the Christian faith postgraduate students in this study reported to be beneficial to them have been found to support religious

people's mental health, and thus may either have protective effects or be applied by mental health professionals working with Christian postgraduate students.

Additionally, belief in God's omnipresence may also have psychological benefits. The data suggest that 'never aloneness' combats loneliness and provides a sense of belonging to God and to "God's family". It is not only community, but their sense of communion with God which also helps postgraduates' sense of belonging. Students report that their faith counteracts their potential loneliness, or rather, provides a sense that one's never alone, and particularly never alone in difficult circumstances. Indeed, God's omnipresence is such a deeply rooted belief for Christians, that studying attachment theory in relation to God is limited, as separation from him is seen as impossible (Jauncey et al. 2018).

**Figure 8.3** illustrates how various Christian beliefs may positively influence postgraduates' mental health based on participants' accounts and some of the literature discussed on the psychology of religion. The figure illustrates how Christian teachings, such as God being loving and personal, influence students' personal beliefs of being loved and not alone, for example, which then result in psychological applications such as feeling valuable as a person. These feed into students' self-concept, which acts a protective barrier against psychological stressors. It must be noted that although there is an element of protection, Christian students are not immune to pressures of postgraduate life. The grey arrows indicate that the various issues postgraduates in general grapple with do penetrate the 'protective barrier' but are partially or fully repelled.

**Figure 8.3** The influence of Christian beliefs on students' mental health



As stated before, a more in-depth exploration of these dynamics is beyond the scope of this research. Nevertheless, these initial findings indicate that Christian postgraduates may have psychological resources beneficial to their university experience. As such, these are important to further explore and if found true, to be utilised in their pastoral and welfare provisions, even within institutional contexts. One already well-researched such element is religious coping, which might also benefit Christians in the higher education environment.

### Religious coping

Religious coping can be particularly beneficial as an additional way of dealing with the challenges of a postgraduate course for Christian students. Participants report many ways in which their faith provides coping mechanisms through their beliefs (God's love and provision), practices (individual and shared prayer, reciting scriptural truths, attending services) and connection with others (deep relationships and vulnerability with Christian friends, pastoral care and looking after others). The theological framework of the personal

care of a loving and powerful God acts as a lens through which difficult experiences can be interpreted in a meaningful and even positive way. Failing at or struggling with academic goals or dealing with the stress or with difficult academic relationships can all be interpreted through the lens of one's faith. For example, this means that God is in control even of difficulties, and that "he will use it for good" and the "struggle through the degree isn't in vain", as some students put it. Stroope et al. (2013), posit that "a loving view of God operates to boost a sense of meaning through [...] confidence in God's concern and care" (p28). Such a perspective takes away or lessens the meaninglessness of difficult experiences or failures through the academic journey. Believers may rely on their theological beliefs of a benevolent and personal God to help make sense of suffering and alleviate stress (Davis & Kiang, 2016). Through interpreting the undesired outcomes as part of God's "broader purposes", difficult events remain meaningful.

Pargament et al. (2011) posit that a "benevolent worldview" forms an important part of positive religious coping. Furthermore, Abu-Raiya and Pargament (2015) conclude in their meta-analytic review of the field that "positive religious coping activities reflect a secure relationship with God, a belief that there is a greater meaning to be found, and a sense of spiritual connectedness with others" (p25). Strikingly, these are the very elements identified in this research as beneficial for Christian postgraduates in their university experience: students were found to have a grounded faith; they repeatedly pointed to their trust in a loving God and the fact that "Jesus draws near and knows what you go through"; found meaning and purpose beyond academic success, and deep relationships in their communities based on shared values and beliefs. These elements of religion can be clinically significant for religious people experiencing stressful life events if applied as positive

religious coping strategies (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). As established, doing a postgraduate course can be very stressful and many postgraduate students are struggling with ill mental health. Klausli and Caudill (2021) suggest that counsellors should utilise positive religious coping strategies with religious students, such as prayer, religious social participation or spiritual meditation to deal with stress and enhance self-efficacy, emphasising the importance of social support. Importantly, it is largely positive religious coping, which is evidenced amongst the participants of this research, yet negative religious coping must not be overlooked.

The phrase 'negative religious coping' is sometimes used interchangeably with spiritual struggle, and whilst accounts for a relatively small proportion of religious coping overall, is associated with negative mental health outcomes (Lucchetti et al., 2021). Klausli and Caudill (2021), for example, found direct correlation between undergraduate Christian students' depression and negative religious coping. They caution that practitioners must pay attention to signs of potential negative religious coping and eliminate it, if possible. The authors express several times that the undergraduate phase of life can be characterised by spiritual struggles for religious students, which can exacerbate depression and negative religious coping. Little literature is available about the spiritual struggles or maturity of religious postgraduates. Although a more grounded faith forms one of the findings of this research, it is small scale and is non-representative. Indeed, **Figure 5.3** does evidence the presence of spiritual struggle in this sample, with the highest proportion of 20% being at the **Secular** case institutions. Although no evidence of actual negative religious coping was identified through the interviews, it does not mean it was not present in participants' lives. Whilst the findings of a more grounded faith may mean that many Christian postgraduates are better

able to utilise elements of their faith to the effect of positive religious coping, more and specific research is needed to establish whether this is true in the wider population.

It is curious that the well documented benefits of religiosity on many mental health conditions have not been operationalised more widely in student welfare practices, especially in light of the present global mental health crisis within the postgraduate population, even though over half of postgraduates are religious. Whilst researchers' conclusions about the level of positive effect of religion may vary (Garsen et al., 2021; VanderWeele, 2021), there is widespread agreement that they are statistically significant. In their recent review of the field, Lucchetti et al. (2021) report that higher religiosity is associated with lower levels of depression, lower suicidality, lower substance abuse, better outcomes in bipolar disorder, and it also was found to serve as buffer against PTSD, supporting psychological growth, although results on anxiety and OCD were mixed. Milicev et al. (2021) found "high prevalence of mental ill-health and low levels of wellbeing" (p12267) among postgraduate research in the UK, when investigating "anxiety, depression, sleep problems, subjective mental wellbeing and suicide behaviours" (ibid.). The parallels are striking. There is thus a strong argument in exploring and utilising religious coping as a resource in the care of religious students, which can be further enhanced through their religious social participation.

### **Religious community and mental health**

*[the church] is where [postgraduates] grow. They feel identity, belonging, compassion. There's a place where they can truly belong and not just survive, but thrive, and not flounder but flourish.*

Rev John (Riverside)

Findings of this research confirm previous studies in that participating in religious communities is a source of meaningful social relationships (Lim & Putnam, 2010), encourages prosocial behaviour (Wormley et al., 2023) and through these provides meaning and purpose (Callister et al., 2019) and supports mental health (Koenig, 2012). Many of the benefits of faith communities discussed above, such as having counterspaces, deeply meaningful relationships, an immediate place to belong, community support, etc., can bolster students' mental health who also speak of carrying each other's burdens and praying together being salutary.

The quantitative measure of the relationship between religious participation and mental health, however, yielded different results to previous quantitative studies. Li, Stampfer, et al. (2016) and VanderWeele (2017a), among others, found that religious social participation is the single most beneficial factor of all religion-related benefits to mental health and flourishing. Conversely, survey respondents in this research do not report that religious social participation benefits their mental health more than all other factors. When explicitly asked how important their faith (**Figure 7.6**) and their Christian communities (**Figure 7.7**) were in maintaining their mental health, students chose much higher scores for personal faith in all three institution types, even in the **Traditional elite** sample, where the benefits of religious service attendance and community participation were the highest. There may be at least two explanations as to the difference.

First, in both the **Secular** and **Cathedrals Group** sample a relatively high number of students (9% and 21% respectively) chose not to respond to the question enquiring about the role of *faith communities* in maintaining their mental health, the lowest response rate among all Likert-scale questions in the survey. Comparatively, there was only one missing response in

the whole of the sample (N=165) to its sister question, enquiring about the role of *faith* in students' mental wellbeing. Whilst there is no way of determining the reason for the level of missing data, it may be cautiously assumed, that the question was not applicable to some students. The relative sparsity of communities to belong to at **Victoria**, and the number of part-time and distance students in the **Cathedrals Group** sample may have resulted in students not belonging to any religious communities at their universities, and thus these students' mental health did not benefit from religious service attendance.

Second, neither the research instruments nor the samples are comparable to other, large-scale and fully quantitative studies. This study had one quantitative question measuring how students perceived the relationship between their mental health and religious community. Participants may not have made the direct connection between their religious communities and their mental health, because it is the compound effect of several elements of faith communities such as support, pastoral care, communal prayer and belonging, which together contribute to their members' mental wellbeing. Thus, the instrument with which this was measured was likely too blunt. Notably, leaders who had more of an overarching view, did identify aggregate factors of the religious community which add up to a positive influence on student's mental health.

Although the instruments used in this study to measure the relationship between religious service attendance and postgraduate students' mental health were not adequate to make significant claims, the qualitative data do suggest that religious service attendance supports students' mental health through providing meaningful relationships with people who share their religious identity and thus can relate to at a fundamental level; it provides regular respite through the practice of Sunday worship and rest where their values and faith identity

are regularly confirmed; it provides both peer and pastoral support and a sense of belonging so many postgraduate students otherwise lack. As Zara (23WI, Victoria) put it, “it's that kind of grounding and stability, I think, when nothing else is stable around you”.

The benefits and role of faith communities in the wellbeing of Christian postgraduate students cannot be ignored. Other studies found that religious service attendance can be a protective factor against depression, for example, with some longitudinal studies showing as much as 30% less depression than among individuals who do not attend religious services regularly (Li, Okereke, et al., 2016). Other longitudinal studies suggest that suicide rates may have a 2 to 5 times lower incident rate amongst those who regularly attend religious services (Kleiman & Liu, 2014; VanderWeele et al., 2016). VanderWeele (2017) goes as far as suggesting that these effects are causal. Further research of whether and how religious service attendance benefits postgraduate students are essential. If such effects would be shown in this population, encouraging and facilitating religious service attendance among religious postgraduate students can potentially make a real-life difference in their mental health. As pointed out previously, however, both the religious community and mental health are but parts of a complex picture of how the benefits of Christian students' religious identity contributes to their overall flourishing.

#### **8.3.4 The flourishing of Christian postgraduates**

In this final section about the benefits of the religious identity on the Christian student experience I turn to the concept of flourishing: “the relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good including the contexts (community and environment) in which that person lives”. (VanderWeele and Lomas 2020, p38). According to the authors

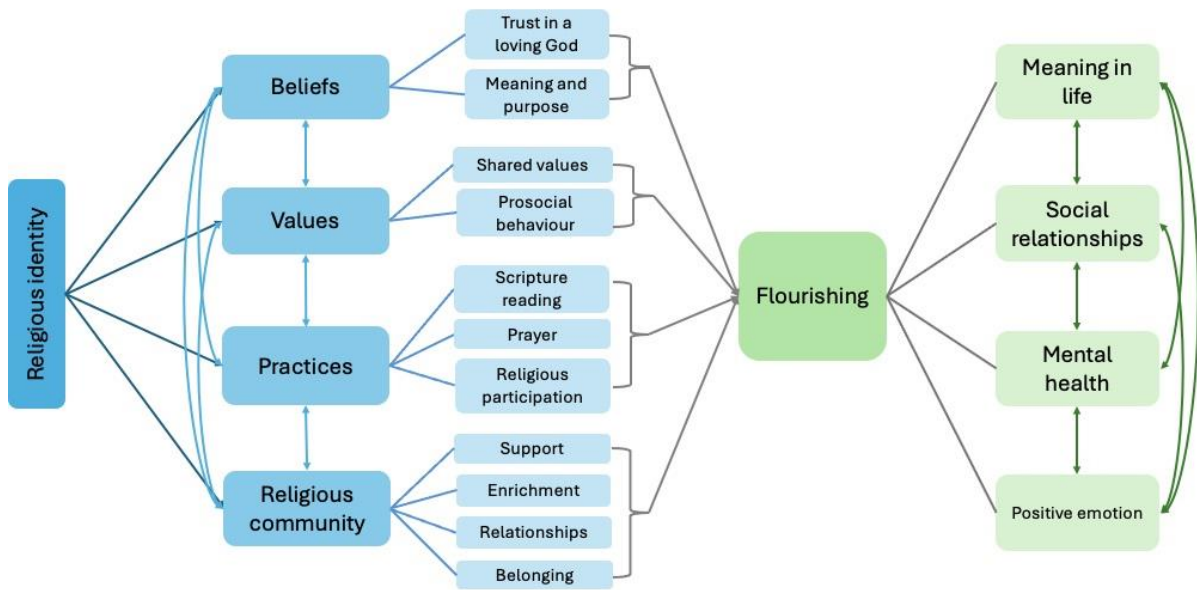
of this definition, the role and importance of one's 'community and environment' is what elevates flourishing beyond the concept of well-being.

Data presented in **Chapter 7** strongly indicate that well-being, the first element of flourishing, is supported and facilitated through several elements of students' religious identity, which is a source of tremendous good. As for the second element of flourishing, the context, two overlapping communities and environments were identified within which the participants of this research are situated: the university environment/academic community and the church or faith environment/religious community. Findings presented in **Chapter 6** paint a sometimes hostile university environment, where many Christian students feel out of place and some even report being ridiculed and excluded for their faith – experiences which do not facilitate flourishing. Yet, the religious community within the university context was shown to have highly salutary effects. Thus, I return to **Figure 8.2** above and argue that the religious environment and community is able to facilitate the elevation of Christian postgraduates' well-being to flourishing at their universities despite a potentially negative environment. This is not to say that students, including religious students, only have difficulties and cannot or do not flourish in their university environments. However, for those who struggle, the religious community can be the environment where flourishing can be achieved and for those who do not struggle, it can be enhanced. Findings that belonging to a Christian community enriches the university experience (see section and **Figure 7.5** on p234) support this point.

It is admittedly beyond the scope of this study to fully examine the flourishing of Christian students within the university environment. Nonetheless, there is strong evidence presented in this thesis that such flourishing can take place and be the Christian student

experience, when various elements of wellbeing are also supported by belonging to the Christian community. In **Figure 8.4** I adopt Wormley et al.'s (2023) model (see **Figure 2.1** on p82) to summarise and illustrate how the various elements of students' religious identity manifested in the findings of this research and ultimately support Christian students' flourishing. All the elements of the religious identity – beliefs, values, practices and religious communities – are evidenced to play a positive role in postgraduates' university experience. Themes identified through this study as supportive of student wellbeing are mapped onto the four elements of beliefs, values, practices and community. Not all elements of flourishing in Wormley's model were evidenced in this research, hence 'character and virtue' is not part of this figure. This research was not, however, concerned with all elements of flourishing and it was only after its completion that the remarkable resemblance to Wormley's model illustrating the relationship between religion and human flourishing became obvious. Other elements of flourishing, such as meaning in life, social relationships, mental health and positive emotions (the latter not at theme level, hence the smaller lettering) were directly and indirectly evidenced.

*Figure 8.4 Students' religious identity and flourishing at university*



In conclusion, the manifold benefits of their religious identity bolster Christian postgraduate students' wellbeing. In order for them to fully flourish, however, belonging to faith communities may be vital until such time that the university environment becomes (more) accepting and respectful of their religious identity.

#### 8.4 The role of the university environment in the Christian postgraduate university experience

This research set out to explore how Christian postgraduate students describe the relationship between their religious identity and their university experience. Based on earlier studies of the religious student experience (e.g. Guest et al., 2013; Aune et al., 2019) and on the historical processes which influenced the characters of universities from their foundation – detailed in the literature review – it was deemed pertinent to explore whether institutional differences influence the Christian postgraduate university experience. This

section is intended to summarise and compare the findings discussed throughout these pages in a succinct manner and thus synthesise the evidence in answer to all three sub-research questions. Triangulation of datasets (qualitative and quantitative survey collected across several institutions and interview data collected at one case university per institution type) indicates that findings in the individual case institutions represent their 'type' relatively well. Thus, it may be accepted that there is a general comparability among the three cases, both within the wider and the locally collected data, with one caveat referred to throughout this thesis: the low amount of data in the **Cathedrals Group** sample. In short, results indicate that there are elements of the university experiences of Christian postgraduates which seem universal, and others differ by institution type.

Results which describe students' internal qualities and identifiers show similar tendencies in all three institution types. Religious commitment is high in each, as well as religious engagement, and the individual measures within these constructs are largely skewed to the high end of the scale in each institution type. Thus, no comparative table will be drawn for these results.

Findings which are related to external factors and interaction with the environment, however, show a different picture. I compare these factors by institution type within the 'difficulties' (RQ1) and 'benefits' (RQ2) frameworks. There are both difficulties to and benefits of being a student of faith which are present across the three cases, although they may vary in intensity or variation. In addition, there are experiences which are quite different in one institution compared to another, indicating that the university environment does make a difference to the religious student experience by institution type. Both the similar and contrasting experiences have been presented and analysed throughout this

thesis, and are summarised below in a final matrix by theme and institution type in **Table 8.1** (difficulties) and **Table 8.2** (benefits).

**Table 8.1** Comparing the Christian postgraduate experience by institution type – difficulties and challenges

Difficulties	Traditional elite universities 64 survey responses, 23 interviews	Secular universities 75 survey responses, 17 interviews	Cathedrals Group universities 26 survey responses, 8 interviews
<b>Hostile attitudes and fitting in</b>	Students report the highest levels of hostile attitudes due to their faith identity, with 44% having felt ridiculed and 34% excluded for it. Almost 70% of students feel out of place at times. Students at Traditional elite institutions report both the most positive (37%) and most negative (33%) influence of their faith identity on fitting in.	Perceived negative attitudes toward Christians are relatively high at Secular universities: 36% of students report being ridiculed and 8% having been bullied for their faith, with over half feeling out of place at times. Faith plays a more neutral role in fitting (45%), but there are more reported negative experiences due to the religious identity than positive.	Very few students report difficulties fitting in due to their faith identity, over 30% reporting that it helps. Christians in Cathedrals Group universities also report the lowest levels of hostile attitudes towards them.
<b>Assumptions and stereotyping</b>	Assumptions about who Christians are and stereotyping them as homophobic or presumed association with church scandals and colonial history is present at all three institution types and is felt strongly by students and observed by leaders as well. A general lack of religious literacy contributes to this problem.		
	Students in all three institution types feel a strong sense of their ethical and moral values being counter cultural. The specific issues these revolve around show some variation.		
<b>Countercultural values and ethics</b>	The promiscuous culture of universities in England (Guest et al. 2013) is very open and Christian students can feel as outsiders, because many hold different views about premarital sex than those around them. Although reproductive ethics do come up, fear of being considered and labelled homophobic is stronger.	Students report conflict between personal convictions and studies around bioethical issues such as abortion and euthanasia. Topics of gender and sexuality, socio-cultural pressures (e.g. personal pronouns) and relationships with the LGBTQ+ community are on students' minds. Christians feel that religion is ignored compared to other protected characteristics.	Gender and sexuality are mentioned in survey responses as issues but are less of a focus in interviews. Secular values and individualism within field of study can be challenging. Small number of interviews limits data.

Difficulties	Traditional elite universities 64 survey responses, 23 interviews	Secular universities 75 survey responses, 17 interviews	Cathedrals Group universities 26 survey responses, 8 interviews
<b>Negative effect of EDI</b>	N/A	Victoria University is the only one of the three cases with evidence for regard to EDI of religion. However, their efforts for inclusion of students who identify with a minority religion resulted in the perceived exclusion of Christians, leading to the undesirable results of a sense of competition between the religious groups, and some Christian students feeling silenced.	N/A
<b>Faith concealment and invisibility</b>	Academia and faith are seen as incompatible at universities, an indication of secularity instead of neutrality or plurality. In all three institution types, students conceal their faith identity in fear of losing academic credibility. Concealing their faith hinders institutional belonging for students and can sometimes lead to strong emotional reactions. Students experience invisibility by their own faith concealment, by being subjected to openly negative comments and by blending in for lack or religious wear. Invisibility further hinders their ability to find and support one another in academic settings.		
<b>Sparsity of Christian community</b>	N/A	There are no postgraduate-focused Christian organisations nationally or church groups locally catering to this cohort. There are only a few local churches nearby and no outreach from them to postgraduates. The postgraduate group at the Catholic Chaplaincy did not restart after COVID. There is a general lack of understating from other chaplaincies and local churches that postgraduates need communities tailored to their life stage as they find it difficult to belong to undergraduate groups. Students have no means of recognising or finding one another and feel isolated in their academic environments.	Despite the Christian ethos, there are no postgraduate focussed church or chaplaincy groups, and postgraduates struggle to fit into undergraduate ones. There is only one local church nearby, with only undergraduate focus. Many of the postgraduates are mature and part time learners, and thus there is only a very small group who feel the need for community on or around campus but those who do, would probably make use of it based on religious engagement results for this type of university.

**Table 8.2** Comparing the Christian postgraduate experience by institution type – benefits and advantages

Benefits	Traditional elite universities 64 survey responses, 23 interviews	Secular universities 75 survey responses, 17 interviews	Cathedrals Group universities 26 survey responses, 8 interviews
<b>Meaning, purpose and strength</b>	Postgraduates across the three institution types report that having an external reference point/eternal perspective gives them comfort and strength and they find intrinsic value beyond their academic achievement. Their faith provides meaning and purpose, which support eudaimonic wellbeing (Milicev et al. 2021) and religious coping through the stress and competition of the postgraduate degree.		
<b>Christian community</b>	The importance of faith communities was expressed by students in all three institution types, both through reporting of its tremendous benefits and the strong desire to have it where it was not available. Religious groups provide ready-made communities, counterspaces, sources for friendship, pastoral and peer support, enrichment of the university experience and are particularly helpful for international students. These communities also benefit the university by doing a lot of the pastoral and belonging work for them.		
	The plethora and diversity of religious communities and denominations Christian students in Riverside have access to is incomparable to the other two institutions and is emphasised and highly utilised by students. Religious service attendance level is highest with almost 88% of Traditional elite students attending once a week or more. Highest level of growth in faith and enrichment of the university experience through religious belonging.	Although limited in availability, students who do find Christian community in Victoria benefit through being able to form friendships, through the rhythm and rest Sunday provides and through the diverse age and type of people who form church communities. 71% of Secular survey respondents attend religious services at least once a week. International students seek out churches corresponding to their own traditions, helping them feel at home in a foreign culture.	The Cathedrals Group sample had the lowest level of service attendance at university, 65% attending at least once. Many students are distance or part-time learners and attend religious services in their hometowns and do find it beneficial. The one interviewee who lives on campus switched to and stayed with online services since COVID. No postgraduate-focussed religious work was identified even in chapel.

Benefits	Traditional elite Universities 64 survey responses, 23 interviews	Secular Universities 75 survey responses, 17 interviews	Cathedrals Group Universities 26 survey responses, 8 interviews
	<p>Students across all institution types report that their faith strongly supports their mental health. Beliefs about a benevolent and personal God and in an eternal life alleviate stress, support self-esteem and students’ sense of value beyond their academic achievements (or failures). There is rich evidence of positive religious coping while on the degree course. Belonging to Christian communities is also beneficial to students’ mental health, for those who can find them. Other faith practices, particularly prayer, also support students’ mental health. Across all three institution types, students’ beliefs, values, practices and faith communities contribute to their flourishing.</p>		
<p><b>Psychological benefits, flourishing</b></p>	<p>Students report that their faith helps combat impostor syndrome and loneliness, both prevalent with postgraduate students. Traditional elite universities have the widest selection of support, including religious support, available for students to rely on for pastoral care and flourishing (churches, chaplaincies, Christian postgraduate groups and events, collegiate system, etc.)</p>	<p>Of the three institutions, the highest number of students mention having mental health issues and receiving some type of treatment for it in their interviews. For most, faith played one important element in a selection of ways their mental health was supported. Similarly to the Traditional elite universities, faith helps combat impostor syndrome and loneliness.</p>	<p>No institutional variation due to low number of participants.</p>

### Short institutional summary

The **Traditional elite** universities provide the most mixed experience for Christian students. While steeped in Christian symbolism, the institutional ethos of **Riverside University** does not promote the Christian faith. Indeed, students reported the highest level of hostility towards their faith in these universities, both in peer and staff interactions. Interestingly, the positive experiences are also the strongest here. However, these are largely not due to the institutional attitudes but rather facilitated through the various local churches and postgraduate-focussed student groups and organisations. Students report a high level of growth of their faith while on their courses, and enrichment through religious service attendance – thus, both their student and faith identities are supported and they flourish. History here seems to have an effect not directly through the institutions' own culture, but rather the space it shares with ancient religious buildings and their occupants – churches dotted around town amongst and even in buildings of the university itself. Although there are dozens of chapels as well in the colleges, students report very little influence of these. Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches among others work actively with students, including specifically postgraduate students, providing them with belonging which they positively associate with their university experience.

At the **Secular** universities the presence of Christianity is much less visible to the eye. Whilst there is a multifaith and a Catholic chaplaincy at **Victoria University**, its campus is built in a more industrial- rather than medieval city centre, typical of its kind and era. Churches thus are not dotted around its buildings. There seems to be a disconnect between the local churches and postgraduate students, some of whom thus lack counterspaces, enrichment and belonging. The secular character of the university is clear, and negative attitudes are

also present here. When the institution turns to the needs of religious students, Christians are excluded from these efforts, exacerbating their marginalisation and creating a sense of competition with other religious groups, instead of encouraging interfaith work – a paradox, given this is the only institution in the sample with an EDI agenda for religion. Regardless of their environment, students report that their personal faith provides them with meaning and purpose, and gives them strength.

**Cathedrals Group** universities provide the least controversial experience for Christian postgraduates. However, this statement has to be regarded with caution, both due to the small sample of participants and to the low numbers of postgraduates in general at these institutions, and even lower living at or near the university. The small campus with its positive values on display throughout provide a welcoming experience at **Minster**, but the SU is not religion friendly. Whilst the chaplaincy is in a central spot on campus, it is not very well attended by postgraduate Christians (if at all) nor is there any activity or group geared towards them. Whilst the Cathedral is in the name, as a church it seems to have no influence on the university culture or provide pastoral or other provisions to its students. The campus being on the edge of town, there is only one nearby church. Most students' institutional experience was not hostile, although some respondents reported secular and even anti-Christian experiences. Fitting in as a Christian was the most positive across institution types. In conclusion, the institution type does make a difference in the Christian student experience. Where para-university Christian community is available in proximity and variation, potentially negative experiences can be balanced out by the positive belonging in counterspaces.

## 8.5 Theories of religious identity and the university experience

Throughout the present thesis I have considered many ways in which their religious identity interacts with Christian students' university experience. I used a double perspective to obtain a fuller, more nuanced picture. Through these rich and illuminating discoveries much information was imparted by students which pertains to the difference between the postgraduate and undergraduate life stages, as well as about the centrality and salience of their religious identity in various environments while completing their degrees. In this section, I discuss these elucidative data, using the lenses of the two theories identified as potentially informative to better understand how the religious identity interplays with the university experience: Erikson's theory of development (Erikson, 1980) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Whilst neither identity development, nor salience were explicitly measured in this research, discussion of the findings through these theoretical lenses is presented below to further aid our understanding of the religious student experience and answer the overarching research question.

### 8.5.1 Identity development in the Christian postgraduate experience

Although this research is not comparative and did not collect data from undergraduate students, it is against that better-researched life stage I situate the postgraduate university experience. Guest et al. (2013), for example, document that Christian undergraduates are challenged by their home-to-university transition, 'fitting into' student life, excessive drinking of peers, classroom experiences (including academic content), social class differences and making their faith their own. Although there is some overlap with the findings of this research, several of the above listed challenges pertain to the very specific

life stage of being an undergraduate. Most pertinent to this section of the present discussion is the authentication of undergraduates' faith, which other studies also report regarding this time in students' lives (Astin et al., 2011b; Klausli & Caudill, 2021; McNamara Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014; Small & Bowman, 2012). Such authenticating corresponds well with Stage 5 in Erikson's model (Erikson, 1980) as displayed in Table 2.1.

Stage	Approximate Age Range	Developmental task of that stage	Dialectic	Significant others	Virtue arising from successful passage
1	0–1.5 years	Attachment to primary caregiver	Trust vs. mistrust	Mother	Hope
2	1.5–3 years	Gaining some basic control over self and environment	Autonomy vs. shame and doubt	Parents	Will
3	3–6 years	Becoming purposeful and directive	Initiative vs. guilt	Family	Purpose
4	6 years–puberty	Developing social, physical and school skills	Self-esteem vs. inferiority	School	Competence
5	Adolescence	Experimentation and exploration of ideals and social contexts	Identity vs. role confusion	Peer groups, role models	Authenticity
6	Early adulthood	Establishing intimate bonds of love and friendship	Intimacy vs. isolation	Partner / spouse, friends	Love
7	Middle adulthood	Fulfilling life goals that involve concern for future generations	Generativity vs. stagnation	Children, younger generation	Caring
8	Late adulthood	Looking back over life and accepting its meaning	Integrity vs. despair	Mankind	Wisdom

Although described as “adolescence”, we have seen that age ranges have shifted within these categorisations (Arnett, 2006; Perrin, 2020). The conflict between ‘identity’ and ‘confusion’ is recognisable in this stage, through which ‘authenticity’ is reached (Robinson,

2013). Findings which point to participants' maturity and centrality of faith suggest that many postgraduate Christians have successfully completed this phase.

An interesting indicator of a more mature faith is the number of students reporting to have been growing in their faith during their postgraduate years. As seen in section 5.4.3 (p162), over 60% of participants reported to have done so, a four times higher proportion than in Guest et al.'s (2013) undergraduate sample reported to have become more religious. Although not directly comparable for reasons stated before, the trends are revealing. The fact that a proportion of students did struggle with their faith may have been a potential indicator of 'emerging' adulthood (Arnett, 2012; Hood & Chervallil-Contractor, 2022; MacLean & Riebschleger, 2021), although this short question is not sufficient to reveal the nature of such struggles, which may or may not be part of an authenticating process. There were only two students in the whole interview sample – one at **Victoria** and one at **Riverside University** – who spoke of deconstructing their faith as an ongoing exploration. As faith struggles may manifest at any stage of life, I cannot make any claims as to whether delayed authenticating was evidenced. The rest of student participants and the observation of leaders both supported a picture of a more settled, mature faith, as described above.

The next stage in Erikson's (1980) model is characterised by "establishing intimate bonds of love and friendship" (Robinson, 2013, p130), and the conflict is between 'intimacy' and 'isolation', to obtain the virtue of 'love'. These concepts have been detected in various ways through participants' accounts. The importance of God's love in the theological framework in section 8.3.1 , the importance of the love of others in 8.3.2 , the depth and honesty of relationships with fellow Christians pointed out by students all speak to the importance of 'intimacy'. The strength of difficulties of feeling excluded and out of place for their faith, or

even the general level of sense of isolation and non-belonging in the postgraduate population also point to a struggle against 'isolation'.

This is significant in the university experience because students' faith identity may aid them in the successful completion of this important life stage through both human (social) and transcendent (eternal) relationships, potentially also addressing specifically postgraduate problems. Some elements of personal faith may promote 'intimacy' in this life stage conflict. For example, spiritual maturity is associated with deeper intimacy with God (Frederick et al., 2016); 'intimacy' thus may be experienced by Christian students beyond their human interpersonal relationships with the transcendent, who is omnipresent, i.e. is always with them. 'Love', the virtue to be reached, is the main tenet of their faith, and it is their love *for* God and belief in the love *of* God, which provide them with meaning and purpose, and a framework which facilitates religious coping, utilised in the stressful university environment. Naturally, these are wide strokes with which this picture is painted, and the age-range of postgraduates is much less homogenous than that of undergraduates, to address just one potential criticism of such application of developmental theory. Nonetheless, the themes identified in this research and the overarching issues identified by Erikson in Stage 6 do overlap. Understanding the role of these developmental stages may have the potential to inform Christian postgraduates' overall and religious pastoral care about their specific needs. In fact, it may even be useful in understanding the general (i.e. non-religious) postgraduate experience, as Erikson's theory is not a religious one.

I failed to identify any studies engaging with postgraduate religious student experience through the lens of identity development within the sparse literature exploring the religious

identity of postgraduate students. The few studies which do engage with religious identity in the postgraduate phase do so through identity theory.

### 8.5.2 Identity theory and the postgraduate student experience

The successful completion of authentication and a more secure faith can be expected to play a part in the centrality and salience of Christian postgraduates' religious identity. I anticipated for the centrality of faith – “the extent to which one defines oneself in relation to one's religious beliefs” (Davis & Kiang, 2016, p533) – to be varied between participants of this research. However, measures which formed the part of the religious commitment and engagement constructs, as well as the qualitative data indicate that the majority of students' faith is central to their identity. Whilst this is partially due to the sampling of self-selection, the data are nonetheless informative. Survey participants reported that their Christian faith helped develop their identity (see **Figure 5.1**) and it is one of the most important things in their lives (see **Figure 5.2**), both measures extremely skewed to ‘strongly agree’ (66% and 74.5% respectively). Qualitative data corroborate these results, with some students saying that “my first identity is that, like, I'm a Christian” Eva (27WI, Riverside), or “my faith kind of defines my life ... my faith is the most central part of who I am” (Will, 28WI, Victoria).

The centrality of students' faith influences its salience, thus social identity theory can be particularly pertinent to this research:

*Identity salience refers to the likelihood that a given identity will be active across situations. Identities get ranked in a hierarchy. Identities that are higher on the salience hierarchy are more likely to be enacted. The structure of the hierarchy directly relates to the elements of commitment. Greater identity commitment results in greater identity salience (Morris, 2013, p24).*

Whilst there was no quantitative measure of what is more or less important, the religious or the student identity, a large proportion of the qualitative data and some quantitative measures indicate that the religious identity is at the forefront of students' thinking and decision making in various environments within the university context. For example, the importance of religious community at the university points to the salience of the religious identity. Many participants expressed that finding a Christian community takes precedence when they arrive on their courses. When students say that "My only prayer and concern was finding a good church, coming to such a secular country. It's really important to me" Sally (33BI, Riverside); "I think that God designed us to be in community" (Petra, 29BI Victoria); "Establishing a Christian community is like number one importance" Eva (27WI, Riverside), they express that even within the 'student world' of university – which they enter to study, not to practice their faith– the religious identity takes precedence. The observation that students in most situations interpret their experiences through the theological framework of God's love and an 'eternal perspective' also indicates the salience of their religious identity.

The level of influence their religious identity had on students varied, and its salience played a role in different ways. To illustrate this, I compare the experiences of three participants at **Victoria**. Tara (23BH) scored low on the scale used to measure religious commitment and engagement (**Table 5.1** and **Table 5.2** on p160) and even said in her interview that she wasn't "super Catholic". Accordingly, she reported that she blended in well, experiencing little conflict between the religious and student identities, even though her Christian faith did inform some of her academic choices and decisions. Conversely, Will (28WI) and Wendy (37BI) both had the highest score of Christian identification, and the centrality of their faith

came across very strongly in their interviews. Nonetheless, they handled their faith identity very differently in their academic environments. On the one hand, Wendy had one of the most difficult times of all participants at **Victoria University**. She felt she had to keep her faith a complete secret in her academic environment and cried about this in her interview. She was clearly conflicted between the religious and academic self, in line with Barnes et al.'s (2021) conclusions, who posited that the higher the salience of the religious identity, the stronger the sense of conflict between the two may be. For Wendy, this situation resulted in anxiety, isolation and lower satisfaction, as suggested by Hirsh and Kang (2016) and Scheitle and Dabbs, (2021). On the other hand, Will reported no need to conceal his faith and disclosed no such struggles, despite being decidedly counter cultural and openly Christian. But for him, his highly salient religious identity counterbalanced the difficulties and caused less distress, in line with what Ysseldyk et al. (2010) posited can happen with highly religiously identified individuals who experience conflicting identities. These examples demonstrate how complex and individually variable the religious student experience may be.

Findings also suggest that students' religious identity is often salient even within the directly academic space. First, the fact that many students expressed a desire to integrate their faith and academic work (regardless of discipline) suggests that the religious self is not turned off or put out of mind when entering academic spaces, both physically and intellectually. Second, the findings which point to struggling with negative reflections of Christianity in class or in supervisory meetings suggest that even though they may be afraid to enact it publicly (see discussion of concealed stigmatised identity below), students' religious identity is active in these environments. Similarly, the high ratio of postgraduates feeling out of place

(see **Figure 6.2**) indicates that the student identity may not rank higher in salience when postgraduates are in university spaces, and unlike undergraduates, they do not put it into an 'identity lockbox' to return to it a later stage (Clydesdale, 2007).

The centrality and salience of the religious identity can have mixed effects on the religious student experience. On the one hand, it can enhance the positive influences of faith such as the eternal framework and religious coping, as well as belonging to a community of like-minded people. On the other hand, it can exacerbate the sense of being out of place and other challenges. Both of these effects are well illustrated throughout this thesis, although the latter is much more thoroughly documented in the religious student literature.

Particularly pertinent to Christian postgraduate students' social identity is the concept of concealable stigmatised identity (CSI). In line with Barnes et al.'s (2021) findings with American postgraduate Christians, there is evidence presented in this thesis that Christianity is a concealable and concealed identity. Findings of assumptions and stereotyping point to it also being stigmatised. Quinn and Earnshaw (2013) posit that

*"[a]n identity that is stigmatized is socially devalued with negative stereotypes and beliefs attached to the identity. Moreover, stigma results in lowered power. [...] anticipated stigma is a strong predictor of psychological distress (increased depression and anxiety) among people with a variety of different CSIs. (pp42-43)*

These words ring true with the experiences of many students in this research, through experiences of stereotyping, feelings of being invisible and marginalised, and assumed stereotyping, as discussed earlier. Scheitle and Dabbs' (2021) findings regarding religion as a CSI among religious biology graduate students in a large-scale quantitative study also echo many of the themes discussed in this chapter when they assert that

*the more a student attends religious services, the more strongly they believe in God, and the more strongly they think of themselves as a religious person, the more likely they are to say that they conceal their religious identity from others in their graduate program. ... students should not feel a need to conceal important parts of their identity in graduate programs, whether it is their racial identity, sexual identity, or religious identity. Such concealment indicates that there is a concern about the consequences of others knowing that an individual identifies in a particular way, which should be concerning from a policy standpoint (p9).*

Barnes et al. (2021) also conclude that the more central the religious identity for Christian biology postgraduates, the higher the conflict between the religious and the academic identity, which then results in lower identification with their scientific field. Although the level of concealment was not measured in this research, it was clearly present in the qualitative data; if the consequences of their faith being central exacerbates postgraduates' faith concealment, it may be problematic in their academic identification and needs further attention. Nonetheless, it must be noted that the above studies were conducted in the United States, where the conflict between science and religion, and particularly between biology and religion, is stronger than in the UK (Peacock & Riggers-Piehl, 2023), thus these results may not be the same in England. Yet, the evidence of faith concealment in the present study warrants further investigation, not least because, as Newheiser and Barreto (2014) highlight, concealing a stigmatised identity can have the opposite effect of its intended avoidance of bias and exclusion, and ironically result in decreased belonging. Concealing part of one's self hinders authenticity and lowers intimacy within relationships in the social environment where the acceptance through concealment is sought. This research has presented data of postgraduates' departmental and peer relationships being less meaningful and authentic than their relationships with fellow Christians on campus. Whether their faith concealment plays a part in this is beyond the remits of this research.

It may then be concluded that concealing the salient identity can be harmful for Christian postgraduate students in their university environments not only in that they are potentially suppressing the more dominant, and arguably more permanent identity (Baratta & Smith, 2019) but also in that it may hinder their institutional belonging in their university environments: Scheitle and Dabbs (2021) point out that students' perception of their faith being a CSI can affect their long-term identification with and retention in their fields. This is problematic both for the student personally and also for the institutions. If religious students struggle to identify with their academic field due to their religious identity and subsequently leave, universities may lose out on talent as well as on diversity, and subsequently on a variety of perspectives contributing to debates and discussions, essential for the furthering of knowledge. It is only through external, cultural change that these effects can be eliminated, and religious students can feel free to fully be themselves in their university environments. On the other hand, the centrality of the religious identity can enhance the positive effects identified as salutary through this research, and thus should be encouraged and facilitated.

## Chapter 9

### Conclusion

This research aimed to explore Christian postgraduate students' university experience as it pertains to their religious identity at three types of universities in England. I operationalised a mixed methods multiple case study design through online surveys and semi-structured interviews to identify ways in which students' religious identity interacts with their university experience.

The overarching research question was defined as: *How do Christian postgraduate students in England describe the relationship between their university experience and their religious identity?* The following three sub-questions informed the answer to the overarching research question:

RQ1 What difficulties and challenges at university do Christian postgraduate students perceive as arising from their religious identity?

RQ2 What benefits and advantages at university do Christian postgraduate students perceive as arising from their religious identity?

RQ3 What differences are there, if any, between the Christian postgraduate experience by institution type?

In this final chapter I first revisit the research questions and reflect on how the present thesis contributes to knowledge through answering them. I then discuss limitations identified during this project, before moving on to implications for higher education policy makers regarding their inclusion frameworks. Turning to practitioners working with postgraduate students and researchers exploring their experiences, I present a summary of

recommendations. Finally, I offer a short personal reflexion on the research journey and its findings.

## 9.1 Contribution to knowledge

This thesis furthers our knowledge of the religious student experience in multiple original ways. First of all – contributing to the field of religion in higher education –, it is the first in England, as far as I'm aware, to work specifically with Christian postgraduate students and sheds light on distinct differences between the undergraduate and postgraduate Christian student experience. Second, it brings a fresh perspective by adopting a double lens through which the benefits of the faith identity in the academic environment are explored alongside the difficulties. Examining the challenges of being a student of faith through the cycle of the *process of religious fading* (**Figure 8.1**) contributes to the field of sociology of religion in education through theorising that the effects of secularisation and differentiation in academia ultimately lead to the invisibility of Christian students, and their invisibility reinforces the impression that faith has no place in higher education. This process takes place through a series of steps, as secularisation leads to lack of religious literacy, which results in assumptions about and stereotyping of Christians. Students subsequently conceal their faith to avoid perceived hostility, which results in their silence and invisibility, reinforcing the vicious cycle as it furthers the appearance of differentiation and lack of religious literacy in academia.

The double lens of looking at both the benefits and difficulties arising from the faith identity, however, provides a more comprehensive picture, suggesting that these benefits can and do counterbalance its challenges on campus under the right circumstances. Finally, the thesis brings together various internal (e.g. personal faith) and external (e.g. religious

community) factors of the Christian student identity which support better postgraduate mental health and resilience, contributing to the field of psychology of religion in education. Acknowledging and utilising these benefits together may have the potential to significantly help up to a third of the postgraduate student population to better flourish in the pressured postgraduate environment. Thus, higher education policy makers, welfare officers, as well as religious leaders of student organisations and local churches may find the results of this research useful in their work. Prospectively, researchers may build on these findings in future studies in comparative and international education specifically but not limited to religion and culture in university settings, and the role of religion in higher education experience.

### 9.1.1 Revisiting the research questions

In answering the **first research question** – *What difficulties and challenges at university do Christian postgraduate students perceive as arising from their religious identity?* – I argued that despite an obvious shift to welcoming various minority communities, Christian postgraduate students can face hostility and stereotyping on their campuses as a result of their faith identity, which eventually leads to faith concealment and invisibility. Perceived or real hostility limits freedom of expression and may also limit the rich benefits of being religious to be fully utilised in their lives. For example, students' closeted faith leads to invisibility and limits their ability to find and identify one another within their academic settings, hindering their belonging.

Current sociocultural trends further complicate Christian students' university experiences, including their relationship with the LGBTQ+ community. Many students perceive

themselves to be stereotyped as homophobic due to their Christian identity. Uneven EDI focus creates a sense of competition in some institutions, where both historically minoritised groups and students with a religious identity other than Christian receive support and recognition, while some Christians feel neglected and silenced.

Developing the theory of the *process of religious fading* (p288) is significant in that it illustrates that the experiences of hostility and stereotyping do not start at the individual or even institutional level, but are part of a cycle which starts with a secularity 2 type differentiation (Taylor, 2007) of excluding God from 'public spaces', which erodes religious literacy and acceptance, eventually resulting in the marginalisation of some Christian students. I argued that a paradigm shift is needed at the root of the spiral, moving beyond notions of tolerance to pluralism for students of all faiths and none to be able to flourish, enrich critical thinking and respectfully live and learn together.

Addressing the **second research question** – *What benefits and advantages at university do Christian postgraduate students perceive as arising from their religious identity?* – I posited that despite various challenges, Christian students flourish even in secular environments, due to theological, religious-social and psychological benefits their religious identity provides.

Theological benefits are rooted in postgraduates' Christian beliefs in a loving and omnipotent God, which serve as a source of meaning and purpose as well as bolster self-esteem, both beyond/independent of students' academic achievements. These novel findings are significant because they indicate that students' beliefs aid religious coping, which in turn has the potential of helping Christian postgraduates not only to cope with the above-described pressures and difficulties arising from the religious identity, but also with

the general and well-documented postgraduate mental health pressures (Levecque et al., 2017; Milicev et al., 2021) and issues of non-belonging (Morris, 2021). Thus these findings point to the psychological benefits of religious identity in the university experience.

Social-religious benefits include having immediate access to counterspaces (Aune et al., 2024), where students' deepest values and beliefs are reinforced, providing peer support and pastoral care, a place where Christian postgraduates' central identity can be fully lived out. Religious communities on or near campus can facilitate a sense of institutional belonging through association of positive experiences of belonging while at university. In conclusion, their personal faith (beliefs), values, practices and communities have positive psychological impact on Christian students and aid their flourishing.

In answering the **third sub-question** – *What differences are there, if any, between the Christian postgraduate experience by institution type?* – I demonstrated that the university environment and institutional ethos does make a difference in the Christian university experience, but not in all aspects. Internal factors and religious commitment were not influenced in this sample by the type of institution. There are external factors also which are present regardless of institution type, such as assumptions and stereotyping of Christian students, their values being counter-cultural, faith concealment and experiencing invisibility.

Other factors do differ. For example, students perceive hostile attitudes towards Christianity at different levels by university type. Surprisingly, these are not the strongest at the Secular but rather at the Traditional elite universities, despite them being steeped in Christian history and tradition. Importantly, however, the presence of vibrant religious communities at these same universities seem to counterbalance such difficult experiences. In this sense,

the history may, after all, have an effect, albeit, not through the university itself but rather through the space created throughout centuries of Christian presence woven through the carpet of the streets of university buildings alongside a number of churches. Whilst their function has been differentiated from the university entirely, their physical presence remains. Importantly, these churches are keenly aware of the students and actively engage with them, in stark contrast with the situation at the Secular universities where despite Victoria University being the only institution in this comparative study making some effort in the area of religious EDI, its secularity and the limited availability of Christian communities (both on and near campus) limit students' access to counterspaces. Students in Cathedrals Group universities have the least controversial experience compared with the other two institution types, yet still struggle with finding faith communities and places to belong to.

To answer the **overarching research** question then – *How do Christian postgraduate students in England describe the relationship between their university experience and their religious identity?* – I concluded that Christian students describe the relationship between their university experience and religious identity as a.) mixed: postgraduates have both positive and negative experiences as religious members of their institutions; b.) salient: religious students' faith identity plays a role in most experiences at their universities, whether institutional, educational, social or psychological and thus must be accommodated and validated within their university experience.

## 9.2 Limitations

Whilst care was taken during this project to create original contributions to knowledge in a rigorous way, as with all research, it is not perfect. A handful of methodological limitations

have already been discussed in section 3.6.1 . I address below some overarching reflections as I draw this endeavour to an end.

Firstly, this study took an explorative approach to uncover the experiences of an under-researched population. As such, the decision was made to allow themes to emerge relatively freely from the ground up, and not to apply a theoretical framework. This resulted in a wonderfully colourful and exciting picture which is one of the main strengths of this work. At the same time, fully exploring all of them was impossible by a lone researcher. This was especially true because the individual themes spoke to various range of disciplines, such as education, theology, sociology of religion, psychology of religion and positive psychology. The number of themes and fields which emerged from the data brought with them two challenges in particular. First, I had to limit the number of themes presented. I managed to reduce this exclusion to one theme: difficulties which arose from within the church or religious organisations. This was the smallest theme and least dependent on the university environment, but its existence is noted here for transparency. The other, perhaps more significant limitation is that I, a theologian and teacher by training, cannot be an expert in all of the fields listed above and had to educate myself in each to be able to intelligently engage with them. This took up considerable time and bore limited knowledge, but I hope that the results do justice to the rainbow and depth of students' lived experiences.

Second, the volume of data collected was also a strength as well as a limitation. Analysing over 165 responses to over 40 questions, and transcribing 53 interviews and analysing 48 took a tremendous amount of time – but yielded rich data, which strengthen the findings and claims. Furthermore, there are demographic data which I collected, at the expense of participants' time, such as financial situation and accommodation, particularly to compare

whether the class differences reported by Guest et al. (2013) are present in the postgraduate population, but had no space to include these findings, especially as they did not at all transpire in the qualitative data.

Finally, the double lens applied, whilst widens the focus and approach to the minority experience of Christian postgraduates, it does still concentrate on two extremes, which cannot encompass the full lived experience. During interviews, however, the conversations were not limited to these two viewpoints, and much information was imparted which was nuanced and layered. Furthermore, quantitative survey questions were based on scaled rather than yes-or-no questions, allowing for more refined answers (Muijs, 2012). Indeed, the constructs adopted from Astin et al. (2011a) were themselves widened from 3 to 5 or even 7 possible responses, thus the overall picture gained is not limited to 'best' and 'most difficult', but rather, these helped participants focus and impart specific information.

### **9.3 Policy implications**

This study identified major caveats in institutional inclusion policies for religious members of the academic community. Findings presented in this thesis make it clear that there is a lack of effective and well-informed equality, diversity and inclusion framework for religious students and staff at universities in England, lagging far behind several other, equally important EDI areas. This oversight is regrettable and filling this gap has become ever more urgent in light of current national and international events which relate to religious groups, churches and even nations, all represented within the academic community.

The fact that students are not hindered from going to church, or that there are no exams on days of Christian religious observations is an advantage Christian students do admittedly have over students of minority religions in a country with a Christian heritage. Yet, this study

highlighted that merely not hindering religious practice, or even accommodating for them, does not amount to equality and inclusion. Institutions may be trying to address the *diversity* of religion, as we saw in Victoria University, but there must be a pluralistic approach to any such efforts, with all groups equally included, facilitating interfaith relations and mutual respect.

It may be that EDI is not the right home for such cultural change, especially in light of the current seismic shifts away from such programmes in powerful countries like the United States, which will undoubtedly influence other countries to follow suit, as is already evident in Eastern Europe. Tension between competing EDI agendas (Weller et al., 2011) may have even been part of the reason why this unequal situation has occurred in the first place. Moreover, as discussed in section **8.2.7**, the root of the problem is not at an individual level but rather rests in the fundamental (mis)understanding that religion and knowledge must be differentiated, and the resulting lack of religious literacy. As I argued, a cultural shift is needed for such root problems to start to turn.

In the meanwhile, universities should individually and actively consider, based on their student and staff population *and* working with their religious members, how to best foster inclusion and mutual appreciation and respect, and move beyond tolerance, regardless of whether they do this within or without their EDI frameworks. Institutions should bear in mind that religious inclusion has the potential to enhance and expedite institutional belonging, student satisfaction and retainment. Thus, it is in the best interest of the universities to develop comprehensive frameworks and start to acknowledge as well as normalise the presence of religious individuals within their walls.

## 9.4 Recommendations for practice

### 9.4.1 For universities

University is the primary environment Christian postgraduates spend their studies in and one of the main focusses of this research was their influence on the religious student experience. The university, regardless of its historical relationship to Christianity, has a responsibility to enable its students' flourishing. In addition to the above-discussed policy-level thinking (and action), I identify below five practical steps institutions may consider in their efforts of creating an inclusive culture for religious students. Although this research was concerned with Christian postgraduates specifically, some of these recommendations may be expanded for the flourishing of students of other religions as well.

First, universities should aim to create awareness of religious members among staff and students. As some participants in this study pointed out, people would probably not say certain (offensive) things if they were aware of the presence of religious students among them. This one step could potentially prevent some hostile attitudes and create a more inclusive environment. Practically, short recommendations within induction materials or videos to new staff and students should highlight the fact that for many members of the academic community their religiosity is invisible; institutions should expect considerate and respectful conduct in and outside of class as a first step in the right direction.

Second, induction materials for students, and especially international students could include a list of religious student organisations and local churches they can join. Such practices could a.) expedite postgraduate belonging; b.) start building bridges between institutions and religious organisations/churches; c.) start to normalise religion within universities.

Third, university and college chaplaincies are well situated for filling the need of Christian postgraduates to belong to religious communities within their university environments. It became evident through my conversations with chaplains that many of them do not realise that the need for postgraduate provision is there but understand it when brought to their attention. Organising specifically Christian postgraduate groups which meet on a regular basis can help students identify one-another within their academic environments, resulting in mutual support and friendships with like-minded people.

Fourth, universities should recognise and utilise the often-positive role of religion in mental health, as they grapple with the postgraduate mental health crisis. Scholars have suggested that faith-based counselling is beneficial for religious clients, including specifically students (Callister et al., 2019; Jauncey & Strodl, 2018; Ross, 2016). Findings of this research point to several ways in which their religious faith scaffolds postgraduates' mental health, and these areas should be further explored by mental health professionals working with religious students.

Finally, university welfare officers may start building relationships with local churches and religious student organisations to facilitate cooperation in the pastoral care of Christian students (and potentially those of other religions). This way they can share resources and support the student in the most appropriate and effective way. Furthermore, building such bridges can potentially alleviate some pastoral work thus carried out by the religious community instead of the university. "Developing Christian's love of God, others, and self could improve their well-being" (Jauncey & Strodl, 2018, p253) thus it is in the best interest of the university to encourage these relationships.

#### 9.4.2 For churches and religious student organisations

The importance of a ready-made community to belong to when students arrive in a new place cannot be overstated. Churches and religious organisations near universities are thus particularly well placed to facilitate students' belonging.

Religious student organisations should consider developing ministries for postgraduate students specifically, where their religious and student identities can coexist and grow. There are some encouraging examples of such initiatives taking traction since the data collection was finished for this project, such as UCCF developing materials for postgraduate Bible studies and the Association of Christian Postgraduate Groups being formed, to mention two. As these networks and materials are not yet well known, it will take time for such groups to be accessible on a wider scale, but their existence is promising.

Churches in the vicinity of higher education institutions should consider reaching out to postgraduate students to enable them to find the right religious community. This could be done in the form of creating a brochure of local churches and ministries, asking institutions to upload to relevant websites and include in their induction materials for new students (see recommendations for universities). This simple step can expedite students' finding a community and make them feel welcome as religious members of their universities.

Churches could also consider how they can create spaces specific to postgraduate students. It must be recognised that not all churches will have the resources, especially staff resources for such a ministry, however, providing space for self-organised groups may be a way of deliberately supporting the belonging of Christian postgraduates.

Finally, both churches and religious student organisations may consider focussing on and strengthening Christian beliefs which were found to be beneficial to students' wellbeing, when engaging with postgraduate students pastorally and doctrinally.

## 9.5 Recommendations for researchers

It is my hope that finishing the present study is just the beginning of the next step in broadening our understanding of religious postgraduates on campuses in England and it will serve as inspiration for further exploratory and explanatory research. The following section points out areas which I believe would most benefit Christian and religious members of the academic community through further research.

As already discussed, religious inclusion and equality practices lag behind other EDI fields and this needs urgent attention. Indeed, these findings demonstrate both the importance and the timeliness of more extensive and well-developed religion-related EDI research and practices in higher education across England to then facilitate the development of best practice materials. Such research and frameworks could potentially contribute to better religious literacy in higher education. As both Scott (2020) and Dinham and Jones (2012) point out, universities are in the unique position of being able to simultaneously research, teach and inform others about EDI. I would add that they can and should also practice EDI based on such research, notwithstanding the above-discussed recent shifts in this area of focus.

Furthermore, I see great potential impact in exploring the psychological benefits uncovered by the present study, especially as these would be addressing real, acute and well-documented problems and could make a difference to a relatively large proportion of the postgraduate student population. Religious coping in particular could be a promising

potential new field of research within the religious postgraduate experience for interdisciplinary work, which could inform both university and religious practitioners involved in the pastoral care of religious postgraduates. As the field itself is well developed, adapting it to the higher education context could be relatively quick and impactful.

Exploring the experiences of religious academics and university staff should be an area of priority in this field. Not only is it reasonable to assume that religious staff have similar experiences to those of postgraduates, there is evidence of academics concealing their faith even in the present study, which affected religious students. Such findings indicate that while academics' experiences are an important topic of exploration in themselves, they potentially also have a wider effect.

Finally, specific research into Christianity as a concealable stigmatised identity – expanding beyond the natural sciences – could be valuable in informing universities of how inclusive their general culture feels for religious students as well as informing practitioners working with religious students on how to help them be open and fully themselves in their academic environments.

## **9.6 Final reflections**

Having spent years working as an interpreter, there are particular meetings I translated, which I still treasure and am secretly proud to have been part of. Even though I was only a vessel in the proceedings, the outcome of those meetings make a tangible positive difference in people's lives even now, decades on. I see myself as a similar intermediary in the present research process, facilitating the voice of a group of wonderful and everyday people who were generous enough not only to give their time to this project, but giving me the privilege of interpreting and sharing with others some of their innermost joys and

struggles about something as intimate as their faith. I hope, when I look back, I will be able to say that it made a difference. It has, of course, already made a difference to me. Having spent the last several years learning about the experiences of my participants has naturally made me examine my own experience as a Christian postgraduate student. In these final paragraphs I offer some of my own thoughts to the reader through a handful of vignettes and interactions which particularly stayed with me along this research journey.

First, I refer to an exchange I had with the dean of a chaplaincy in a prestigious college in one of the Traditional elite institutions (an academic as well as clergy) and who mistakenly sent me an email intended for his colleague about my research – speculating that it had a ‘Christian persecuted minority’ agenda (see Appendix N). I imagined him roll his eyes as he was writing. It struck me then that if this was what another Christian, one in a pastoral role of Christian students, thinks about researching Christian students, what must others in the secularised and differentiated academic world think? Is my work akin to trying to claim free school meals for Eaton students? Whilst acknowledging that there must be such individual cases, I find the two extremes of Christians in England being either victimised or privileged unhelpful. I hope that through having shone a light on the prism of the lived religious postgraduate experience I was able to show a spectrum of realities and add more nuanced tones to the discourse. By amplifying the voices of Christian students, I did not only highlight the difficulties but also the benefits which are part of their religious and academic selves. This balance is important, and the two parts of the journey are inseparable.

Another conversation comes to mind, interviewing a student in an empty classroom in her department within the social sciences. She kept talking in a low voice for a while and then said she could not believe she was *actually* talking about her faith in *this* building – she had

been a student there for almost 3 years at that point. Faith concealment is real. It was important for me to give a voice to students who were afraid to speak for themselves.

A third vignette is about myself, smiling as I read interview transcripts and survey responses to the question *What is the best thing about being a Christian at your university?* Pages full of experiences of hope, joy, meaning, purpose, support, perseverance and love. These experiences are also real and having been able to learn about them and convey them to others was the best thing for me about being a Christian at my university.

As I was working on pulling these strands together, trying to paint a balanced picture of how Christians experience their lives at contemporary universities, the Makin Report<sup>20</sup> was published and it hit me hard. Another church scandal of appalling acts against vulnerable children, a national and international outcry in the news for weeks and resulting in the resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury. To make things worse, I knew some people whose names were mentioned in the report and a few months later one of them was found to have been an abuser himself, resulting in another public scandal. Shock, anger, grief, shame and a host of other emotions were swirling inside me and paralysed my work for days. I felt pain for the victims and an instant feeling of injustice for my participants and other Christian students who would even then be associated with these heinous acts, reinforcing processes I was writing about in Chapters 6 and 8. It made some of the students' experiences all too real and personal. Christian students are not only subject to the secular culture of their universities, but even their own institutions fail them. Of course, with my

---

<sup>20</sup> Not citing the report is part of my personal dilemma: making it easy to access adds to these processes and goes beyond the vulnerability and reflexivity I feel able to offer.

research topic, there is no concealment for me but for days, I did feel like hiding. In the end, this experience reinforced in me the importance of the work I was doing. To paint a balanced, evidence-based picture, to encourage the good and minimise the bad.

I have always intended to close this thesis on a positive remark and let the reader take away what is the most important contribution in my view: Christian students may have become a minority on campus and face challenges but they also have hope, joy, community and an eternal perspective; through these they are able to flourish and do flourish on many university campuses in England. Furthermore, Christian communities carry out vital work with students, directly benefitting their universities. Whilst there is room for improvement, I hope that ways I offered to reach these conclusions are positive and edifying, pointing to a peaceful and respectful (if utopian) living together rather than fighting for rights and justices. I acknowledge that these are important in situations, but the former may bring more healing and advancement at this point in history.

For this reason, I intend to keep focussing my research on religious communities in academia, promote the building of bridges and highlight all that such diverse 'throwntogether' people have to offer one another.

## References

- Abrams, D. (2010). *Processes of prejudice: Theory, evidence and intervention* (56; Equality and Human Rights Commission Research Report Series, p. 118). Equality and Human Rights Commission.
- Abu-Raiya, H., & Pargament, K. I. (2015). Religious coping among diverse religions: Commonalities and divergences. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 7(1), 24–33. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037652>
- Ackroyd, Rebekah (2023). *Tolerance and mutual respect in three secondary schools in England: how teacher of Religious Education working with 11-14 year olds construct and promote these concepts*. [Doctoral thesis, University of Cumbria]. Insight Home, University of Cumbria. <https://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/7397/>
- Adams, R. (2022, December 15). Higher education regulator to make freedom of speech priority next year. *The Guardian*.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/dec/15/higher-education-regulator-to-make-freedom-of-speech-priority-next-year>
- Adams, R. (2023a, August 10). Almost nine in 10 students in England feel free to express their views – survey. *The Guardian*.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/10/almost-nine-in-10-students-in-england-feel-free-to-express-their-views-survey>
- Adams, R. (2023b, October 9). England's university free speech tsar says role is not to conduct 'culture wars'. *The Guardian*.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/oct/09/englands-university-free-speech-tsar-says-role-is-not-to-conduct-culture-wars>

Advance HE. (2020). *Athena Swan Charter* | Advance HE. Athena Swan Charter.

<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan-charter>

AdvanceHE. (2023). *Equality in higher education: Statistical reports 2023*.

<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/equality-higher-education-statistical-reports-2023>

Ahmed, A. (2025, February 27). *Update on Freedom of Speech Act*. Office for Students.

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/blog/update-on-freedom-of-speech-act/>

Akram, U., Ypsilanti, A., Gardani, M., Irvine, K., Allen, S., Akram, A., Drabble, J., Bickle, E.,

Kaye, L., Lipinski, D., Matuszyk, E., Sarlak, H., Steedman, E., & Lazuras, L. (2020).

Prevalence and psychiatric correlates of suicidal ideation in UK university students.

*Journal of Affective Disorders*, 272, 191–197.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JAD.2020.03.185>

Aksoy, O., Bann, D., Fluharty, M. E., & Nandi, A. (2022). Religiosity and mental wellbeing

among members of majority and minority religions: Findings from understanding

society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study. *American Journal of Epidemiology*,

191(1), 20–30. <https://doi: 10.1093/aje/kwab133>

Alisat, S., & Pratt, M. W. (2012). Characteristics of young adults' personal religious

narratives and their relation with the identity status model: A longitudinal, mixed

methods study. *Identity*, 12(1), 29–52.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2012.632392>

- Andersson, J., Sadgrove, J., & Valentine, G. (2012). Consuming campus: Geographies of encounter at a British university. *Social & Cultural Geography, 13*(5), 501–515.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2012.700725>
- Ano, G. G., & Vasconcelles, E. B. (2005). Religious coping and psychological adjustment to stress: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 61*(4), 461–480.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20049>
- Arday, J., Zoe Belluigi, D., & Thomas, D. (2021). Attempting to break the chain: Reimagining inclusive pedagogy and decolonising the curriculum within the academy. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 53*(3), 298 – 313.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1773257>
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist, 55*(5), 469–480.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469>
- Arnett, J. J. (2006). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. Oxford University Press.
- Arnett, J. J. (2012). *Adolescence and emerging adulthood: A cultural approach*. (M. Hughes, Ed.). Pearson Education.
- Arthur, R. (1997). *'Nasty forward minxes': A history of women at Cambridge University, 1897–1997*. CUSU Women's Campaign.
- Astin, A. W., Astin, H. S., & Lindholm, J. A. (2011a). Assessing students' spiritual and religious qualities. *Journal of College Student Development, 52*(1), 39–61.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2011.0009>

- Astin, A. W., Astin, H. S., & Lindholm, J. A. (2011b). *Cultivating the spirit: How college can enhance students' inner lives*. Jossey-Bass.
- Asztalos, M. (1991). The faculty of theology. In H. de Ridder-Symoens (Ed.), *A history of the university in Europe: Volume 1: Universities in the Middle Ages* (Vol. 1). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511599507>
- Aune, K., Guest, M., & Law, J. (2019). *Chaplains on campus: Understanding chaplaincy in UK universities*. Coventry University; Durham University; Canterbury Christ Church University. <https://repository.canterbury.ac.uk/item/94z2q/chaplains-on-campus-understanding-chaplaincy-in-uk-universities>
- Aune, K., Peacock, L., Cheruvallil-Contractor, S., & Weller, P. (2020). *Religion and hate incidents in higher education: A research and evaluation report*. Coventry University. <https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/en/publications/religion-and-belief-related-hate-incidents-in-higher-education-a->
- Aune, K., Peacock, L., Guest, M., & Law, J. (2023). University chaplaincy as relational presence: Navigating understandings of good and effective chaplaincy in UK universities. *Journal of College and Character*, 24(3), 197–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2023.2224573>
- Aune, K., Perfect, S., & Ryan, B. (2024). Building bridges or holy huddles? Student religious organizations in British universities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000595>
- Baik, C., & Kahu, E. R. (2023). What is 'the student experience'? In *Research handbook on the student experience in higher education* (pp. 2–12). Edward Elgar Publishing.

<https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/book/9781802204193/book-part-9781802204193-8.xml>

- Baird, J., & Gordon, G. (2009). Beyond the rhetoric: A framework for evaluating improvements to the student experience. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 15(3), 193–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13583880903072976>
- Bale, I., Broadhead, S., Case, K., Hussain, M., & Woolley, D. (2020). Exploring the black, Asian and ethnic minority (BAME) student experience using a community of inquiry approach. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 22(1), 112–131. <https://doi.org/10.5456/wpll.22.1.112>
- Banazadeh, N., Sabahi, A., Ziaadini, H., Jalali-Khalilabadi, A., & Banazadeh, M. (2019). The relationship between extrinsic and intrinsic religious orientation with perceived stress and cigarette addiction among university students. *Addiction & Health*, 11(2), 73–80. <https://doi.org/10.22122/ahj.v11i2.226>
- Baratta, A., & Smith, P. V. (2019). The confrontation of identities: How university students manage academic and religious selves in higher education. *Educational Studies*, 45(6), 771–786. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2018.1534084>
- Barnes, M. E., Maas, S. A., Roberts, J. A., & Brownell, S. E. (2021). Christianity as a concealable stigmatized identity (CSI) among biology graduate students. *CBE Life Sciences Education*, 20(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.20-09-0213>
- Barnett, R. (2000). University knowledge in an age of supercomplexity. *Higher Education*, 40(4), 409–422. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1004159513741>

Barnett, R. (2004). The purposes of higher education and the changing face of academia.

*London Review of Education*, 2(1), 61–73.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1474846042000177483>

Barnett, R. (2015). *Thinking and rethinking the university: The selected works of Ronald*

*Barnett*. Routledge.

Barry, K. M., Woods, M., Warnecke, E., Stirling, C., & Martin, A. (2018). Psychological

health of doctoral candidates, study-related challenges and perceived

performance. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 37(3), 468–483.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1425979>

Barther-Gordrey, S., & Taket, A. (2009). Othering, marginalisation and pathways to

exclusion in health. In A. Taket, B. R. Crisp, A. Nevill, G. Lamaro, M. Graham, & S.

Barther-Godfrey (Eds.), *Theorising Social Exclusion*. Routledge.

Bazeley, P. (2018). *Integrating analyses in mixed methods research*. SAGE Publications.

<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526417190>

Beals, K. P., Peplau, L. A., & Gable, S. L. (2009). Stigma management and well-being: The

role of perceived social support, emotional processing, and suppression.

*Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35(7), 867–879.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167209334783>

Beard, M. (2017). *Women & power: A manifesto*. Profile Books Ltd.

Bebbington, D.W. (1992). The secularization of British universities since the mid-

nineteenth century. In G. M. Marsden & B. J. Longfield (Eds.), *The secularization of*

*the academy*. Oxford University Press.

- Bebbington, D. W. (2011). Christian higher education in Europe: A historical analysis. *Christian Higher Education*, 10(1), 10–24.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15363750903526969>
- Beddard, R. A. (1997). Restoration Oxford and the remaking of the Protestant establishment. In N. Tyacke (Ed.), *The history of the University of Oxford: Volume IV: Seventeenth-century Oxford* (pp. 803 – 862). Oxford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199510146.003.0018>
- Beloff, M. (1968). *The plateglass universities*. Secker & Warburg.
- Bendl, R., Bleijenbergh, I., Henttonen, E., & Mills, A. J. (2015). Introduction: Mapping the field of diversity in organizations. In *The Oxford handbook of diversity in organizations* (pp. 1–12). Oxford University Press.
- Berger, P. L. (1967). *The sacred canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion*. Doubleday.
- Berger, P. L., Davie, G., & Fokas, E. (2008). *Religious America, secular Europe?: A theme and variations*. Ashgate.
- Bhardwa, S. (2024, January 4). *International students no longer able to bring dependants on UK student visas*. THE Student.  
<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/news/international-students-no-longer-able-bring-dependants-uk-student-visas>
- Bhopal, K., & Henderson, H. (2019). Competing inequalities: Gender versus race in higher education institutions in the UK. *Educational Review*, 73(2), 153–169.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2019.1642305>

- Bird, E. L. (2017). Student and staff perceptions of the international postgraduate student experience: A qualitative study of a UK university. *Journal of International Students*, 7(2), 329–346. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i2.384>
- Bird, W. R. (2023). *Religious speech and the quest for freedoms in the Anglo-American world*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bowman, N. A., & Small, J. L. (2010). Do college students who identify with a privileged religion experience greater spiritual development? Exploring individual and institutional dynamics. *Research in Higher Education* 51(7), 595 – 614. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-010-9175-2>
- Brannick, T., & Coghlan, D. (2007). In defence of being ‘native’: The case for insider academic research. *Organizational Research Methods*, 10(1), 59 – 74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428106289253>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., & Terry, G. (2019). Thematic analysis. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (pp. 843 – 860). Springer Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5251-4\\_103](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5251-4_103)
- Breunig, M., & Penner, J. (2016). Relationship matters: Duo-narrating a graduate student/supervisor journey. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 4(6), 18 – 27. <https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v4i6.1330>
- Brierley, P. W. (2020). *UK church statistics number 4: 2015 to 2025*. ADBC Publishers.

- British Educational Research Association [BERA]. (2024). *Ethical guidelines for educational research* (5th ed.). [www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethicalguidelines-for-educational-research-2024](http://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethicalguidelines-for-educational-research-2024)
- Brown, P. (2020). Research into student mental health: Where have we come and how can we improve? *Journal of Public Mental Health, 19*(1), 9–12.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JPMH-11-2019-0097>
- Bruce, I. (2022). Universities in the twenty-first century: Structures, funding, management and governance. In I. Burce & B. Bond (Eds.), *Contextualizing English for academic purposes in higher education* (pp. 9 – 26). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bruce, S. (2002). *God is dead: Secularization in the West*. Blackwell.
- Bruce, S. (2011). *Secularization: In defence of an unfashionable theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Bryant, A. N. (2006). Exploring religious pluralism in higher education: Non-majority religious perspectives among entering first-year college students. *Religion & Education, 33*(1), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15507394.2006.10012364>
- Bryman, Alan. (2012). *Social research methods*. Oxford University Press.
- Burchett, M., & Glanzer, P. (2020). How student affairs education limits spiritual, religious, and secular identity exploration: A qualitative study of graduate students' educational experiences. *Journal of College and Character, 21*(4), 281–300.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587x.2020.1822877>

- Calhoun, C. (2014). Conclusion: The Robbins Report and British higher education past and future. In N. Barr (Ed.), *Shaping higher education – 50 years after Robbins* (pp. 65 – 86). The London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Callister, A., Galbraith, Q., & Kelley, H. (2019). Constructing meaning through connection: Religious perspectives on the purpose of life. *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, 9(3), 15–31. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v09i03/15-31>
- Campbell, B. & Manning, J. (2018). *The rise of victimhood culture microaggressions, safe spaces, and the new culture wars*. Springer International Publishing.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70329-9>
- Cartwright, K. (2021). Delivered from the temptation of smoking: An examination of religion and health behaviors of new US immigrants. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 60(3), 1739–1759. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-019-00843-5>
- Casanova, J. (1994). *Public religions in the modern world*. University of Chicago Press.
- Casanova, J. (2007). Rethinking secularization: A global comparative perspective. In P. Beyer & L. G. Beaman (Eds.), *Religion, Globalization, and Culture* (Vol. 6, pp. 101–120). <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004154070.i-608.39>
- Casanova, J. (2009). The secular and secularisms. *Social Research*, 76(4), 1049–1066.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2009.0064>
- Case, A. D., & Hunter, C. D. (2012). Counterspaces: A unit of analysis for understanding the role of settings in marginalized individuals' adaptive responses to oppression.

*American Journal of Community Psychology*, 50(1–2), 257–270.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-012-9497-7>

Casey, C., Harvey, O., Taylor, J., Knight, F. & Trenoweth, S. (2022). Exploring the wellbeing and resilience of postgraduate researchers. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(6), 850–867 <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.2018413>

*Education*, 46(6), 850–867 <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.2018413>

Chen, Y., Koh, H. K., Kawachi, I., Botticelli, M., & VanderWeele, T. J. (2020). Religious service attendance and deaths related to drugs, alcohol, and suicide among US health care professionals. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 77(7), 737–744.

<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.0175>

Chen, Y., & VanderWeele, T. J. (2020). Chen and VanderWeele respond to ‘Religion, spirituality, and health’. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 189(8), 759–761.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwaa021>

Claeys-Kulik, A. & Jørgensen, T.E. (2018). *Universities’ strategies and approaches towards diversity, equity and inclusion: Examples from across Europe*. European University Association.

Clark, V. L. P., & Ivankova, N. V. (2018). *How to expand the use of mixed methods research?: Intersecting mixed methods with other approaches*. SAGE.

Clark, W. H. (1958). *The psychology of religion: An introduction to religious experience and behavior*. Macmillan.

Clouder, L. (2009). Improving student retention in higher education: The role of teaching and learning. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(1), 121–122.

- Clydesdale, T. T. (2007). *The first year out: Understanding American teens after high school*. University of Chicago Press.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (8th ed.). Routledge.
- Coley, J. S. (2018). *Gay on God's campus: Mobilizing for LGBT equality at Christian colleges and universities*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- Collini, S. (2012). *What are universities for?* Penguin Books.
- Collini, S. (2017). *Speaking of universities*. Verso.
- Collins, K. M. T. (2016). Advanced Sampling designs in mixed research – Current practices and emerging trends in the social and behavioral sciences. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddlie (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research* (2nd ed., pp. 353 – 372). SAGE.
- Coneyworth, L., Jessop, R., Maden, P., & White, G. (2020). The overlooked cohort? Improving the taught postgraduate student experience in higher education. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 57(3), 262–273.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2019.1617184>
- Copeland, W. E., McGinnis, E., Bai, Y., Adams, Z., Nardone, H., Devadanam, V., Rettew, J., & Hudziak, J. J. (2021). Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on college student mental health and wellness. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 60(1), 134–141.e2. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2020.08.466>
- Cornell, B. (2020). *PhD life: The UK student experience*. Higher Education Policy Institute.
- Cote, J. E., & Levine, C. G. (2002). *Identity formation, agency, and culture: A social*

*psychological synthesis*. Erlbaum.

- Cox, W. T. L., Xie, X., & Devine, P. G. (2022). Untested assumptions perpetuate stereotyping: Learning in the absence of evidence. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 102*, 104380. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104380>
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. SAGE.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Davie, G. (1994). *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without belonging*. Blackwell.
- Davie, G. (2012a). Belief and unbelief: Two sides of a coin. *Approaching Religion, 2*(1), 3–7. <https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.67487>
- Davie, G. (2012b). From believing without belonging to vicarious religion: Understanding the patterns of religion in modern Europe. In D. Pollack & D. V. A. Olson (Eds.), *The Role of Religion in Modern Societies* (pp. 165–176). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203942239>
- Davis III, R. F., & Kiang, L. (2016). Religious identity, religious participation, and psychological well-being in Asian American adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 45*(3), 532–546. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-015-0350-9>
- Dawkins, R. (2007). *The God delusion*. Black Swan.

Department for Education, & Lord Nash. (2014, November 27). *Guidance on promoting British values in schools published*. GOV.UK.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/guidance-on-promoting-british-values-in-schools-published>

Department for Education, & Phillipson, Bridget. (2024, July 26). *Government watchdog to help stabilise university finances*. GOV.UK.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-watchdog-to-help-stabilise-university-finances>

Dinham, A., & Francis, M. (Eds.). (2015). *Religious literacy in policy and practice* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press.

Dinham, A., & Jones, S. H. (2012). Religion, public policy, and the academy: Brokering public faith in a context of ambivalence? *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 27(2), 185–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2012.675687>

Dobbelaere, K. (2002). *Secularization: An analysis at three levels*. P.I.E.-Peter Lang.

Dyvik, E. H. (2023). *Share of global population by religion 2022*. Statista.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/374704/share-of-global-population-by-religion/>

Ecklund, E. H. (2010). *Science vs. religion: What scientists really think*. Oxford University Press.

Ecklund, E. H. (2019). *Secularity and science: What scientists around the world really think about religion*. Oxford University Press.

- Ecklund, E. H., & Scheitle, C. P. (2007). Religion among academic scientists: Distinctions, disciplines, and demographics. *Social Problems, 54*(2), 289–307.  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2007.54.2.289>
- Economic Secretary to the Treasury, Secretary of State for Scotland, & Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. (1999). *The 2001 Census of Population*.
- Education Reform Act 1988 (1988).  
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/section/202>
- EHRC. (2019). *Freedom of expression: A guide for higher education providers and students' unions in England and Wales*. Equality and Human Rights Commission.  
<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/freedom-expression-guide-higher-education-providers-and-students-unions-england-and-0>
- Eley, A. R., & Jennings, R. (2005). *Effective postgraduate supervision: Improving the student/supervisor relationship*. Open University Press.
- Elliott, K. M., & Shin, D. (2002). Student satisfaction: An alternative approach to assessing this important concept. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 24*(2), 197–209.
- Elliott, V. (2018). Thinking about the coding process in qualitative data analysis. *Qualitative Report, 23*(11), 2850–2861.
- Elsevier. (2023). *Scopus content coverage guide*. Elsevier.  
<https://www.elsevier.com/solutions/scopus/how-scopus-works/content>
- Equality Act (2010). <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. Faber & Faber.

- Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle*. Norton.
- Etengoff, C., & Rodriguez, E. M. (2020). Religious identity. *The Encyclopedia of Child and Adolescent Development*, 1–10.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171492.wecad458>
- Evans, J. H., & Evans, M. S. (2008). Religion and science: Beyond the epistemological conflict narrative. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 34(1), 87–105.  
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.34.040507.134702>
- Evans, T. M., Bira, L., Gastelum, J. B., Weiss, L. T., & Vanderford, N. L. (2018). Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education. *Nature Biotechnology*, 36(3), 282–284.  
<https://doi.org/10.1038/nbt.4089>
- Fainga'a-Manu Sione, I., Faleolo, R., & Hafu-Fetokai, C. (2024). Finding harmony between decolonization and Christianity in academia. *Art/Research International*, 8(2), 519–546. <https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29764>
- Fairweather, I. (2012). Faith and the student experience. In M. Guest & E. Arweck (Eds.), *Religion and knowledge: Sociological perspectives* (pp. 39–55). Ashgate.
- Ferrer-Wreder, L., & Kroger, J. (2019). *Identity in adolescence: The balance between self and other* (4th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315165806>
- Field, A. P. (2013). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS statistics: And sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll*. SAGE.
- Field, A. P. (2013). Correlation. In *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS: And sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll* (pp. 262–292). SAGE.

- Flatt, K. N. (2020). The secularization of Western universities in international perspective: Toward a historicist account. *Review of Faith and International Affairs*, 18(2), 30–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2020.1753944>
- Flatt, K. N. (2023). Secularization theory's differentiation problem: Revisiting the historical relationship between differentiation and religion. *Religions*, 14(7), Article 7. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070828>
- Fosnacht, K., & Broderick, C. (2020). An overlooked factor? How religion and spirituality influence students' perception of the campus environment. *Journal of College and Character*, 21(3), 186–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587x.2020.1781660>
- Fossland, T., & Habti, D. (2022). University practices in an age of supercomplexity: Revisiting diversity, equality, and inclusion in higher education. *Journal of Praxis in Higher Education*, 4(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.47989/kpdc355>
- Fowler, J. W. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. Harper & Row.
- Francis, L. J. (2000). The relationship between Bible reading and purpose in life among 13–15-year-olds. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 3(1), 27–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670050002072>
- Francis, L. J., & Evans, T. E. (1996). The relationship between personal prayer and purpose in life among churchgoing and non-churchgoing twelve-to-fifteen-year-olds in the UK. *Religious Education*, 91(1), 8–21.

- Francis, L. J., Jewell, A., & Robbins, M. (2010). The relationship between religious orientation, personality, and purpose in life among an older Methodist sample. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 13* (7-8), 777–791.
- Frankl, V. E. (1992). *Man's search for meaning: An introduction to logotherapy*. Beacon Press.
- Frederick, T., Purrington, S., & Dunbar, S. (2016). Differentiation of self, religious coping, and subjective well-being. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 19*(6), 553–564. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2016.1216530>
- Fukuyama, F. (2019). *Identity: Contemporary identity politics and the struggle for recognition*. Profile Books Ltd.
- Furushima, R. Y. (1985). Faith development in a cross cultural perspective. *Religious Education, 80*(3), 414–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408850800307>
- Galek, K., Flannelly, K. J., Ellison, C. G., Sifton, N. R., & Jankowski, K. R. B. (2015). Religion, meaning and purpose, and mental health. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, 7*(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037887>
- Garssen, B., Visser, A., & Pool, G. (2021). Does spirituality or religion positively affect mental health? Meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 31*(1), 4–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2020.1729570>
- Gearon, L. F. (2012). European religious education and European civil religion. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 60*(2), 151–169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2012.671929>

- Gearon, L. F. (2013). *Masterclass in religious education: Transforming teaching and learning*. Bloomsbury.
- Gearon, L.F., Kuusisto, A., Poulter, S., Auli, T., & Ubani, M. (Eds.). (2024). *Religion and worldviews in education: The new watershed*. Routledge.
- Gebert, D., Boerner, S., Kearney, E., King, J. E., Zhang, K., & Song, L. J. (2014). Expressing religious identities in the workplace: Analyzing a neglected diversity dimension. *Human Relations, 67*(5), 543–563. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726713496830>
- Gecas, V. (1982). The self-concept. *Annual Review of Sociology, 8*, 1–33.
- Gilliat-Ray, S. (2009). *Religion in higher education: The politics of the multi-faith campus*. Routledge.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: psychological theory and women's development*. Harvard University Press.
- Google, A. N., Bowen, C. D., Brownell, S. E., & Barnes, M. E. (2023). Isolation, resilience, and faith: Experiences of Black Christian students in biology graduate programs. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 61*(3), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.21898>
- Gorski, P. S. (2000). Historicizing the secularization debate: Church, state, and society in late medieval and early modern Europe, ca. 1300 to 1700. *American Sociological Review, 65*(1), 138 – 167. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657295>
- Gorski, P. S., & Altinordu, A. (2008). After secularization? *Annual Review of Sociology, 34*(1), 55–85. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.34.040507.134740>

- Graebner, M. E., Knott, A. M., Lieberman, M. B., & Mitchell, W. (2023). Empirical inquiry without hypotheses: A question-driven, phenomenon-based approach to strategic management research. *Strategic Management Journal*, *44*(1), 3–10.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.3393>
- Grant, E. (1981). *Much ado about nothing: Theories of space and vacuum from the Middle Ages to the scientific revolution*. University Press.
- Gravett, K., & Ajjawi, R. (2022). Belonging as situated practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, *47*(7), 1386–1396.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2021.1894118>
- Greene, R.G. (2008) Psychosocial theory. In B. A. Thyer (Ed) *Comprehensive handbook of social work and social welfare* (pp 229-256). Wiley.
- Gregory, J. (2024, March 11). £117m to protect UK mosques and Muslim schools from hate attacks. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-68529601>
- Grubic, N., Badovinac, S., & Johri, A. M. (2020). Student mental health in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic: A call for further research and immediate solutions. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, *66*(5), pp517 – 518.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764020925108>
- Guest, M. (2015). Religion and the cultures of higher education: Student Christianity in the UK. In L. G. Beaman & L. Van Arragon (Eds.), *Issues in Religion and Education* (1st ed., pp. 346 – 366). Brill.
- Guest, M., Aune, K., Sharma, S., & Warner, R. (2013). *Christianity and the university experience: Understanding student faith*. Bloomsbury Academic.

- Guest, M., Sharma, S., Aune, K., & Warner, R. (2013). Challenging 'Belief' and the Evangelical Bias: Student Christianity in English Universities. *Journal of Contemporary Religion, (28)2*, 207–223.
- Gummesson, E. (2000). *Qualitative methods in management research*. SAGE.
- Guyan, K., & Oloyede, F. D. (2019). Equality, diversity and inclusion in research and innovation: UK review. *Advance HE*.
- Habermas, J. (2008). Notes on post-secular society. *New Perspectives Quarterly, 25*(4), 17–29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5842.2008.01017.x>
- Halevy, G., & Gross, Z. (2023). Toward an integrative theory of identity formation: Three components of the religious identity formation process. *Pastoral Psychology, 0123456789*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-023-01100-z>
- Harrison, R. L., Reilly, T. M., & Creswell, J. W. (2020). Methodological rigor in mixed methods: An application in management studies. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 14*(4), 473–495. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689819900585>
- Harter, J., Castor, M., Seigler, C. P., & Abrahams, D. (2018). Navigating identity and privilege in multifaith engagement on a college campus. *Journal of College and Character, 19*(1), 4–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587x.2017.1411281>
- Havergal, C. (2024, May 23). *Police arrest 16 as pro-Palestinian sit-in cleared at Oxford*. Times Higher Education (THE). <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/police-arrest-16-pro-palestinian-sit-cleared-oxford>

- Hayes, A., Lockett, K., & Misiaszek, G. W. (2023). *Possibilities and complexities of decolonising higher education: Critical perspectives on praxis* (1st ed.). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003373827>
- Hazell, C. M., Chapman, L., Valeix, S. F., Roberts, P., Niven, J. E., & Berry, C. (2020). Understanding the mental health of doctoral researchers a mixed methods systematic review with meta-analysis and meta-synthesis. *Systematic Reviews*, 9(1), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1186/S13643-020-01443-1/TABLES/3>
- Heelas, P., & Woodhead, L. (2004). *The spiritual revolution: Why religion is giving way to spirituality*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Hellawell, D. (2006). Inside-out: Analysis of the insider-outsider concept as a heuristic device to develop reflexivity in students doing qualitative research. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11(4), 483–494. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510600874292>
- HESA. (2019a). *Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2017/18 – Student numbers and characteristics*. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/sb252/figure-3>
- HESA. (2019b). *The Higher Education Classification of Subjects (HECoS)*.  
<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/hecos>
- HESA. (2021). *Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH) | HESA*.  
<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/hecos/cah>
- HESA. (2022a). *Students by HE provider. Where do HE students study?*  
<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-study#provider>
- HESA. (2022b). *Who's studying in HE?* <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he#characteristics>

- HESA. (2023a). *All staff (excluding atypical) by personal characteristics*. Who's working in HE?: Personal characteristics. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff/working-in-he/characteristics>
- HESA. (2023b). *Who's studying in HE? | HESA*. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he>
- Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 (2023). <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/16/enacted>
- Higher Funding Council of England. (2021). *Units of Assessment – REF 2021*. Higher Education Funding Council for England. <https://www.ref.ac.uk/panels/units-of-assessment/>
- Hirsh, J. B., & Kang, S. K. (2016). Mechanisms of identity conflict: Uncertainty, anxiety, and the behavioral inhibition system. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 20*(3), 223–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868315589475>
- Hoare, C. (2009). Identity and spiritual development in the papers of Erik Erikson. *Identity, 9*(3), 183–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283480903344497>
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (2000). *The age of revolution: Europe, 1789–1848*. Phoenix.
- Hood, R. W., & Cheruvallil-Contractor, S. (2022). *Research in the social scientific study of religion. Volume 32, Lesser heard voices in studies of religion* (R. W. Hood & S. Cheruvallil-Contractor, Eds.). Brill.
- Hopkins, P. (2011). Towards critical geographies of the university campus: Understanding the contested experiences of Muslim students. *Transactions – Institute of British Geographers, 36*(1), 157–169. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2010.00407.x>

- Horwitz, I. M. (2021). Religion and academic achievement: A research review spanning secondary school and higher education. *Review of Religious Research, 63*(1), 107–154. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S13644-020-00433-Y/TABLES/1>
- Hoskins, K. (2023). Unleashing the ‘undergraduate monster’? The second-order policy effects of the 1988 Education Reform Act for higher education in England. *Journal of Educational Administration and History, 55*(2), 165–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2022.2040451>
- Hugues, J. C., & Rouse, S. V. (2023). Everyone belongs here: How affirming and non-affirming church messages and imagery cause different feelings of acceptance in LGBTQ+ Christians. *Journal of Psychology and Theology, 51*(4), 523–536. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00916471231185811>
- Jackson, A. (2008). *Mormonism explained: What Latter-day Saints teach and practice*. Crossway Books.
- Jackson, R. (1999). The universities, government and society. In *The idea of a university*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- James, H. D. (1913). *Humboldt’s ideal of humanity*. University of Illinois.
- Jansen, J. D. (2019). *Decolonisation in universities: The politics of knowledge*. Wits University Press.
- Jauncey, T., & Strodl, E. (2018). Love of God, others, and self and their association with satisfaction with life and mental health for Christians. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health, 20*(3), 239–260. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2017.1419839>

- Joint Committee on Human Rights [JCHR] (2018). *Freedom of Speech in Universities* (HC 589; HL Paper 111; Session 2017-2019). House of Lords/House of Commons.  
[https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201719/jtselect/jtrights/589/589.pdf&ved=2ahUK EwitmPrTubqFAX9VUEAHfQJBmUQFnoECBYQAQ&usg=AOvVaw2jBuAzyvYlw97s\\_1knGk4](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201719/jtselect/jtrights/589/589.pdf&ved=2ahUK EwitmPrTubqFAX9VUEAHfQJBmUQFnoECBYQAQ&usg=AOvVaw2jBuAzyvYlw97s_1knGk4)
- Johnson, B. R., & VanderWeele, T. J. (2022). *The Global Flourishing Study: A new era for the study of well-being*. SAGE Publications.
- Johnson, D. R., Scheitle, C. P., & Ecklund, E. H. (2021). Beyond the in-person interview? How interview quality varies across in-person, telephone, and Skype interviews. *Social Science Computer Review*, 39(6), 1142–1158.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439319893612>
- Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14–26.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033007014>
- Johnson, R. B., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Turner, L. A. (2007). Toward a definition of mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1(2), 112–133.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689806298224>
- Jones, B. (2023). *Reimagining Fowler's stages of faith: Shifting from a seven stage to a four step framework for faith development*. Routledge.
- Jung, J. H. (2015). *Sense of divine involvement and sense of meaning in life: Religious tradition as a contingency*. Wiley-Blackwell.

- Kalubi, J., Bertrand, Y., Dagenais, B., Houde, R., Marcoux, S., & Bujold, M. (2020). Graduate students' mental health: Exploring experiences of isolation and loneliness. *European Journal of Public Health, 30*(Supplement 5).  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckaa165.340>
- Karellaia, N., & Guillén, L. (2014). Me, a woman and a leader: Positive social identity and identity conflict. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 125*(2), 204–219. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2014.08.002>
- Kaushal, A. (2018). *Mental health and wellbeing: Associations with religion across the life course*. [Doctoral thesis, University College London]  
<https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10059297>
- Kellogg, L. M. (2021). *Self-esteem, God image, and their effect on the relationship between attachment to significant persons and attachment to God*. [Doctoral thesis, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary] ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.  
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2638299303?pq-origsite=primo&accountid=13042>
- Klausli, J. F., & Caudill, C. (2021). *Discerning student depression: Religious coping and social support mediating attachment*. Brill.
- Kleiman, E. M., & Liu, R. T. (2014). Prospective prediction of suicide in a nationally representative sample: Religious service attendance as a protective factor. *British Journal of Psychiatry, 204*(4), 262–266. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.113.128900>
- Koenig, H. G. (2012). Religion, spirituality, and health: The research and clinical implications. *ISRN Psychiatry, 2012*, 278730. <https://doi.org/10.5402/2012/278730>

- Koenig, H. G., Hill, T. D., Pirutinsky, S., & Rosmarin, D. H. (2020). Commentary on 'Does spirituality or religion positively affect mental health?' *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2020.1766868>
- Koenig, H. G., King, D. E., & Carson, V. B. (2012). *Handbook of religion and health*. Oxford University Press.
- Koh, K. (2020). The role of intercultural competence on graduate supervisor – supervisee relationship and well-being. *Journal of Educational Thought*, 53(2), 125–154. <https://doi.org/10.11575/jet.v53i2.71717>
- Kosarkova, A., & Roubalova, M. F. (2023). I am young, religious and/or spiritual – Is it beneficial to me? Association of religiosity, spirituality and images of God with meaning in life and self-esteem in adolescents. *Religions*, 15(1), 17. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010017>
- Kurantowicz, E., & Nizinska, A. (2013). How students 'stay the course': Retention practices in higher education. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 45(2), 135–147.
- Kwiek, M. (2008). Revisiting the classical German idea of the university: On the nationalization of the modern institution. *Polish Journal of Philosophy*, 2(1), 55–78. <https://doi.org/10.5840/pjphil2008215>
- Layton, E., Hardy, S. A., & Dollahite, D. C. (2012). Religious exploration among highly religious American adolescents. *Identity*, 12(2), 157–184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2012.668728>
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Ed.). Blackwell.

- Leman, J. (2020). *2020 Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey*. AdvanceHE.  
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/reports-publications-and-resources/postgraduate-research-experience-survey-pres>
- Leung, L. (2015). Validity, reliability, and generalizability in qualitative research. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, *4*(3), 324. <https://doi.org/10.4103/2249-4863.161306>
- Levecque, K., Anseel, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J., & Gisle, L. (2017). Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy*, *46*(4), 868–879. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2017.02.008>
- Li, A., Nguyen, C., & Choi, J. (2019). 'Because of the Christian fellowship, I decided to stay': How participating in a Christian community shapes the social experiences of Chinese international students. *Social Sciences*, *8*(8), 234–251.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8080234>
- Li, S., Okereke, O. I., Chang, S.-C., Kawachi, I., & VanderWeele, T. J. (2016). Religious service attendance and lower depression among women – A prospective cohort study. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, *50*(6), 876–884. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12160-016-9813-9>
- Li, S., Stampfer, M. J., Williams, D. R., & VanderWeele, T. J. (2016). Religious service attendance and mortality among women. *JAMA Internal Medicine*, *176*(6), 777 – 785. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2016.1615>
- Lim, C., & Putnam, R. D. (2010). Religion, social networks, and life satisfaction. *American Sociological Review*, *75*(6), 914–933. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122410386686>

Liu, C., Wang, L., Qi, R., Wang, W., Jia, S., Shang, D., Shao, Y., Yu, M., Zhu, X., Yan, S., Chang, Q., & Zhao, Y. (2019). Prevalence and associated factors of depression and anxiety among doctoral students: The mediating effect of mentoring relationships on the association between research self-efficacy and depression/anxiety. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management, 12*, 195–208.

<https://doi.org/10.2147/prbm.s195131>

Losh, S. C. (2010). Stereotypes about scientists over time among US adults: 1983 and 2001. *Public Understanding of Science, 19*(3), 372–382.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662508098576>

Lucchetti, G., Koenig, H. G., & Lucchetti, A. L. G. (2021). Spirituality, religiousness, and mental health: A review of the current scientific evidence. *World Journal of Clinical Cases, 9*(26), 7620–7631. <https://doi.org/10.12998/wjcc.v9.i26.7620>

Lund, T. (2012). Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches: Some arguments for mixed methods research. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 56*(2), 155–165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2011.568674>

MacLean, S. M., & Riebschleger, J. (2021). Considering Catholics: An exploration of the literature available on religious identity development. *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work, 40*(4), 395–419.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2021.1910612>

Major, L. E., & Banerjee, P. (2019). *Social mobility and elite universities*. Higher Education Policy Institute.

- Mallery, S. T., & Mallery, P. (2022). Centers of value and the quest for meaning in faith development: A measurement approach. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 975160–975160. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.975160>
- Marginson, S. (2016). *Higher education and the common good*. Melbourne University Publishing.
- Marginson, S. (2018). *Higher education as self-formation*. UCL Institute of Education Press.
- Marginson, S. (2022). Space and scale in higher education: The glonacal agency heuristic revisited. In *Higher Education, 84*, 1365–1395. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00955-0>
- Massey, D. B. (2005). *For space*. SAGE.
- May, J. O., & Looney, S. W. (2022). On sample size determination when comparing two independent Spearman or Kendall coefficients. *Open Journal of Statistics, 12*, 291–302. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojs.2022.122020>
- Mayhew, M. J., Bowman, N. A., & Rockenbach, A. B. (2014). Silencing whom? Linking campus climates for religious, spiritual, and worldview diversity to student worldviews. *The Journal of Higher Education, 85*(2), 219–245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2014.11777325>
- Mayrl, D., Oeur, F., & Mayrl, D. (2009). Religion and higher education: Current knowledge and directions for future research. *Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 48*(2), 260–275. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40405616>

- McChesney, K., & Aldridge, J. (2019). Weaving an interpretivist stance throughout mixed methods research. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 42(3), 225–238. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2019.1590811>
- McChesney, K., Burford, J., & Frick, L. (2024). Living the best way possible: Distance doctoral students navigating care for others and themselves. *Access: Critical Explorations of Equity in Higher Education*, 12(1), 106–125.
- McGrath, A. E. (2018). *Theology: The basics*. John Wiley & Son.
- McLean, K. C., & Syed, M. (Eds.). (2014). *The Oxford handbook of identity development*. Oxford University Press.
- McLeod, S. A. (2025, March 12). *Erik Erikson's stages of psychological development*. Simply Psychology. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html>
- McNamara Barry, C., & Abo-Zena, M. M. (2014). The experience of meaning-making: The role of religiousness and spirituality in emerging adults' lives. In J. J. Arnett (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of emerging adulthood* (pp. 464–480). Oxford University Press.
- McNamara, C. (2023). *General guidelines for conducting interviews*. Management Library. <https://managementhelp.org/businessresearch/interviews.htm>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Merriman, P. (2022). *Space*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003004813>
- Mertens, D. M. (2012). Transformative mixed methods: Addressing inequities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 56(6), 802–813. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764211433797>

- Mertens, D. M. (2021). Transformative research methods to increase social impact for vulnerable groups and cultural minorities. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 1 – 9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211051563>
- Metcalfe, J., Wilson, S. W., & Levecque, K. (2018). *Exploring mental health support for postgraduate researchers*. Vitae. [https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/wellbeing-and-mental-health/HEFCE-Report\\_Exploring-PGR-Mental-health-support/view](https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/wellbeing-and-mental-health/HEFCE-Report_Exploring-PGR-Mental-health-support/view)
- Micklethwait, J. & Wooldridge, A. (2010). *God is back: How the global rise of faith is changing the world*. Penguin.
- Milicev, J., McCann, M., Simpson, S. A., Biello, S. M., & Gardani, M. (2021). Evaluating mental health and wellbeing of postgraduate researchers: Prevalence and contributing factors. *Current Psychology*, 42(14), 12267–12280. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02309-y>
- Miller, J. J. (2011). Impact of a university recreation center on social belonging and student retention. *Recreational Sports Journal*, 35(2), 117–129. <https://doi.org/10.1123/rsj.35.2.117>
- Mohamed, E. (2024, May 9). *UK students at elite universities join mushrooming pro-Palestine protests*. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/5/9/uk-university-protests>
- Moosavi, L. (2023). *Turning the decolonial gaze towards ourselves: Decolonising the curriculum and ‘decolonial reflexivity’ in sociology and social theory*. *Sociology*, 57(1), 137–156.

- Moran, C. D. (2007). The public identity work of evangelical Christian students. *Journal of College Student Development, 48*(4), 418–434.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2007.0040>
- Morgans, J. (2023). Emerging Christian women at uni: Intersection of gender and faith identities on campus. In R. W. J. Hood & S. Cheruvallil-Contractor (Eds.), *Research in the social scientific study of religion, Volume 32* (pp. 147–163). Brill.  
[https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004505315\\_009](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004505315_009)
- Morris, C. (2021). ‘Peering through the window looking in’: Postgraduate experiences of non-belonging and belonging in relation to mental health and wellbeing. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education, 12*(1), 131–144.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-07-2020-0055>
- Morris, R. C. (2013). Identity salience and identity importance in identity theory. *The Sociological Quarterly, 43*(4), 647–667.
- Muijs, D. (2012). Validity, reliability and generalisability. In *Doing quantitative research in education with SPSS*, (pp. 64–84). SAGE Publications.  
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209014.n4>
- Muijs, D., & Bokhove, C. (2017). Postgraduate student satisfaction: A multilevel analysis of PTES data. *British Educational Research Journal, 43*(5), 904–930.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3294>
- Mulrooney, H. M., & Kelly, A. F. (2021). Belonging, the physical space of the university campus and how it is perceived by students: A quantitative analysis among a diverse student group. *Journal of Learning Spaces, 10*(2), 1.

- Nelson, T. A., Abeyta, A. A., & Routledge, C. (2021). What makes life meaningful for theists and atheists? *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 13(1), 111–118.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000282>
- Neves, J. (2022). *2022 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey*. AdvanceHE.  
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/postgraduate-research-experience-survey-2022>
- Neves, J. (2023). *Experience Survey 2023: Sector results report*. Advance HE.  
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/postgraduate-research-experience-survey-2023>
- Neves, J., & Hewitt, R. (2021). *Student Academic Experience Survey 2021*. AdvanceHE and HEPI. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2021>
- Neves, J., & Leman, J. (2020). *Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2019*. AdvanceHE.  
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/PTES-2019>
- Newheiser, A.-K. K., & Barreto, M. (2014). Hidden costs of hiding stigma: Ironic interpersonal consequences of concealing a stigmatized identity in social interactions. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 52(C), 58–70.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2014.01.002>
- Newman, J. H. (1976). *The idea of a university* (I. T. Ker, Ed.). Clarendon Press.
- Newman, J. H. (1996). *The idea of a university*, F.M. Turner, Ed., (1st ed.). Yale University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300153460>

Nisbet, J., & Watt, J. S. (1978). *Case study*. University of Nottingham School of Education.

Ochsner, A. (2015). Structures of prolonged adolescence. In *Lad trouble: Masculinity and identity in the British male confessional novel of the 1990s* (Vol. 35, pp. 275–338). transcript Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839411612-008>

Office for Students [OfS]. (2025). *Welcome to the Office for Students*. Office for Students. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/>

Office for Students [OfS]. (2023, August 10). *National Student Survey data 2023 – Office for Students*. Office for Students. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/national-student-survey-data/nss-data-archive/nss-2023-results/>

Office for Students [OfS]. (2024, March 19). *Consultation on proposed regulatory advice and other matters relating to freedom of speech*. Office for Students. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-proposed-regulatory-advice-and-other-matters-relating-to-freedom-of-speech/>

Office for National Statistics [ONS]. (2015). *Harmonised concepts and questions for social data sources: Primary principles: Ethnic groups*. Office for National Statistics. <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20160105160709/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/harmonisation/primary-set-of-harmonised-concepts-and-questions/ethnic-group.pdf>

Office for National Statistics [ONS]. (2022). *Religion, England and Wales*. Office for National Statistics. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion>

- Office for National Statistics [ONS]. (2023). *Religion by age and sex, England and Wales: Census 2021*. Office for National Statistics.  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/religionbyageandsexenglandandwales/census2021#religion-by-age>
- O’Keefe, P. (2013). A sense of belonging: Improving student retention. *College Student Journal*, 47(4), 605–613.
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Leech, N. L. (2005). On becoming a pragmatic researcher: The importance of combining quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 8(5), 375–387.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570500402447>
- Oswick, C., & Noon, M. (2014). Discourses of diversity, equality and inclusion: Trenchant formulations or transient fashions? *British Journal of Management*, 25(1), 23–39.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2012.00830.x>
- Oxford EDU. (2024). *Everyone belongs – Equality, diversity and inclusion strategic plan, 2024–2027*. University of Oxford.
- Pallant, J. (2020). *SPSS survival manual: A step by step guide to data analysis using IBM SPSS* (7th ed.). Routledge.
- Pargament, K. I. (1997). *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. Guilford.
- Pargament, K. I. (2007). *Spiritually integrated psychotherapy : understanding and addressing the sacred*. Guilford.

- Pargament, K., Feuille, M., & Burdzy, D. (2011). The Brief RCOPE: Current psychometric status of a short measure of religious coping. *Religions, 2*(1), 51–76.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel2010051>
- Pargament, K. I., Koenig, H. G., & Perez, L. M. (2000). The many methods of religious coping: Development and initial validation of the RCOPE. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 56*(4), 519–543. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1097-4679\(200004\)56:4<519::AID-JCLP6>3.0.CO;2-1](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1097-4679(200004)56:4<519::AID-JCLP6>3.0.CO;2-1)
- Park, C. L. (2007). Religiousness/spirituality and health: A meaning systems perspective. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 30*(4), 319–328. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-007-9111-x>
- Park, C. L., & Edmondson, D. (2012). Religion as a source of meaning. In P. R. Shaver & M. Mikulincer (Eds.), *Meaning, mortality, and choice: The social psychology of existential concerns*. American Psychological Association.
- Park, C. L., Holt, C. L., Le, D., Christie, J., & Williams, B. R. (2018). Positive and negative religious coping styles as prospective predictors of well-being in African Americans. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, 10*(4), 318–326.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000124>
- Parmaksız, U. (2018). Making sense of the postsecular. *European Journal of Social Theory, 21*(1), 98–116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431016682743>
- Patrick, J. (2023, August 10). National Student Survey 2023: Positive data on freedom of speech. *Times Higher Education (THE)*.

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/national-student-survey-2023-positive-data-freedom-speech>

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*. SAGE.

Peacock, L., & Guest, M. (2024). *Worldviews, religious literacy and interfaith readiness: Bridging the gap between school and university*. Coventry University.

<https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/en/publications/worldviews-religious-literacy-and-interfaith-readiness-bridging-t>

Peacock, L., Guest, M., Aune, K., Rockenbach, A. N., Staples, B. A., & Mayhew, M. J. (2023).

*Building student relationships across religion and worldview difference*. Coventry

University, Durham University, North Carolina State University, Ohio State

University. [https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/en/publications/building-student-](https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/en/publications/building-student-relationships-across-religion-and-worldview-diff)

[relationships-across-religion-and-worldview-diff](https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/en/publications/building-student-relationships-across-religion-and-worldview-diff)

Peacock, L., & Riggers-Piehl, T. (2023). *STEM and belief: UK university STEM students'*

*engagement in belief diversity, with comparisons across the US higher education*

*context*. Coventry University; University of Missouri – Kansas City.

[https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/en/publications/stem-and-belief-uk-university-](https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/en/publications/stem-and-belief-uk-university-stem-students-engagement-in-belief-)

[stem-students-engagement-in-belief-](https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/en/publications/stem-and-belief-uk-university-stem-students-engagement-in-belief-)

Pearson, M. (2012). Building bridges: Higher degree student retention and counselling

support. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 34(2), 187–199.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2012.662743>

Pelaez, M., Gewirtz, J.L., Wong, S.E. (2008) A critique of theories of human development in

- Thyer, B.A. (Ed) *Comprehensive handbook of social work and social welfare* (pp 503-510), Wiley.
- Perfect, S., Ryan, B., & Aune, K. (2019). *Faith and belief on campus: Division and cohesion: Exploring student faith and belief societies*. Theos.
- Perrin, R. H. (2020). *Changing shape: The faith lives of millennials*. SCM Press.
- Peters, M., Barnett, R., & Heraud, R. (2018). *The idea of the university*. Peter Lang.
- Ploner, J., & Nada, C. (2020). International student migration and the postcolonial heritage of European higher education: Perspectives from Portugal and the UK. *Higher Education*, 80(2), 373–389. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00485-2>
- Polome, E. (1998). *The Oxford dictionary of world religions* (Vol. 26, Issues 3–4). Oxford University Press.
- Prince, L. R., & Francis, S. E. (2023). Barriers to equality, diversity and inclusion in research and academia stubbornly persist. So, what are we doing about it? *DMM Disease Models and Mechanisms*, 16(7). <https://doi.org/10.1242/dmm.050048>
- Punch, K. (2014). *Introduction to social research: Quantitative & qualitative approaches*. SAGE.
- Punch, K., & Oancea, A. (2014). *Introduction to research methods in education*. SAGE.
- Quinn, D. M., & Earnshaw, V. A. (2013). Concealable stigmatized identities and psychological well-being. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 7(1), 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12005>
- Rêgo-Moreira, C., Rocha-Silva, T., Rodrigues, L., & Nogueira, C. (2024). Being lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI) and Christian: A scoping review of

- theories and constructs in psychological research. *International Journal of Sexual Health*, 36(4), 439–463. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2024.2331806>
- Reid, L. (2014). *'The secular delusion'?: How religious students negotiate their faith in a university context*. [Doctoral thesis, University of Manchester]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.
- Reid, L. (2017a). *How religious students negotiate the secular culture of a state university: A sociological study of the University of Manchester*. Edwin Mellen Press.
- Reid, L. (2017b). Navigating the secular: Religious students' experiences of attending a redbrick university. In K. Aune & J. Stevenson (Eds.), *Religion and higher education in Europe and North America* (pp. 157–170). Routledge.
- Richards, P. S., Smith, T. B., Schowalter, M., Richard, M., Berrett, M. E., & Hardman, R. K. (2005). Development and validation of the Theistic Spiritual Outcome Survey. *Psychotherapy Research*, 15(4), 457–469. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10503300500091405>
- Rios, K., Cheng, Z. H., Totton, R. R., & Shariff, A. F. (2015). Negative stereotypes cause Christians to underperform in and disidentify with science. *Social Psychological & Personality Science*, 6(8), 959–967. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550615598378>
- Robinson, O. (2013). *Development through adulthood – An integrative sourcebook*. Macmillan.
- Robson, C., & McCartan, K. (2016). *Real world research*. John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

- Rockenbach, A. B., & Mayhew, M. J. (2014). The campus spiritual climate: Predictors of satisfaction among students with diverse worldviews. *Journal of College Student Development, 55*(1), 41–62. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2014.0002>
- Rockenbach, A. N., Mayhew, M. J., Giess, M. E., Morin, S. M., Staples, B. A., Correia-Harker, B. P., & Associates. (2020). *IDEALS: Bridging religious divides through higher education*. Interfaith Youth Core. <https://www.interfaithamerica.org/research/bridging-religious-divides-through-higher-education/>
- Rose, T. R., & Markowski, K. L. (2023). The importance of where: The role of place in identity theory. In J. E. Stets, A. V. Reichelmann, & K. J. Kiecolt, (Eds.), *Advancing identity theory, measurement, and research. Frontiers in sociology and social research*, vol 10 (pp. 35–58). Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32986-9\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32986-9_3)
- Rosmarin, D. H., & Leidl, B. (2020). Spirituality, religion, and anxiety disorders. In D. H. Rosmarin & H. G. Koenig (Eds.), *Handbook of spirituality, religion, and mental health* (pp. 41–60). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-816766-3.00003-3>
- Ross, A. (2016). Spirituality in therapy. *Therapy Today, 27*(4). <https://www.bacp.co.uk/bacp-journals/therapy-today/2016/may/spirituality-in-therapy/>
- Russell, J. C. (1943). The early schools of Oxford and Cambridge. *The Historian, 5*(2), 61–75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6563.1943.tb01019.x>

- Ryan, B. (2017). *Christianity and mental health: Theology, activities, potential*. Theos.
- Sabri, D. (2011). What's wrong with 'the student experience'? *Discourse*, 32(5), 657–667.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2011.620750>
- Sabri, D. (2013). Student evaluations of teaching as 'fact-totems': The case of the UK National Student Survey. *Sociological Research Online*, 18(4).  
<https://www.socresonline.org.uk/18/4/15.html>
- Sabri, D. (2017). Do religion and faith have a place in 'the student experience'? In K. Aune & J. Stevenson (Eds.), *Religion and higher education in Europe and North America*. Routledge.
- Sabri, D., Rowland, C., Wyatt, J., Stavrakopoulou, F., Cargas, S., & Hartley, H. (2008). Faith in academia: Integrating students' faith stance into conceptions of their intellectual development. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(1), 43–54.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510701794043>
- Santoro, N. (2014). Using a multiple perspectives framework: A methodological approach to analyse complex and contradictory interview data. *Ethnography and Education*, 9(2), 127–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2013.839387>
- Saroglou, V. (2011). Believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging: The Big Four religious dimensions and cultural variation. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 42(8), 1320–1340. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022111412267>
- Saunders, B., Kitzinger, J., & Kitzinger, C. (2015). Anonymising interview data: Challenges and compromise in practice. *Qualitative Research*, 15(5), 616–632.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794114550439>

- Sawyer, S. M., Azzopardi, P. S., Wickremarathne, D., & Patton, G. C. (2018). The age of adolescence. *The Lancet. Child & Adolescent Health*, 2(3), 223–228.  
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642\(18\)30022-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(18)30022-1)
- Schachter, E., & Ben Hur, A. (2019). The varieties of religious significance: An idiographic approach to study religion's role in adolescent development. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 29(2), 291–307. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12479>
- Scheitle, C. P., & Dabbs, E. (2021). Religiosity and identity interference among graduate students in the sciences. *Social Science Research*, 93, 12503–12508.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2020.102503>
- Scheitle, C. P., Kowalski, B. M., Hudnall, E. B., & Dabbs, E. (2021). Religion, family, and career among graduate students in the sciences. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 60(1), 131–146. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12693>
- Schneider, L. (2019). Dynamics of securitization: An analysis of universities' engagement with the Prevent legislation. In L. F. Gearon (Ed.), *The Routledge international handbook of universities, security and intelligence studies* (1st ed., pp. 312–325). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203702086-23>
- Schneider, R. C., Mabute-Louie, B., Howard Ecklund, E., & Daniels, D. (2024). 'Take it to the Lord': Religion and responses to racial discrimination in the workplace. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 10(2), 177–191. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23326492241231766>
- Scholz, R. W., & Tietje, O. (2002). *Embedded case study methods: Integrating quantitative and qualitative knowledge*. SAGE.

- Schwadel, P. (2016). Does higher education cause religious decline?: A longitudinal analysis of the within- and between-person effects of higher education on religiosity. *Sociological Quarterly*, 57(4), 759–786. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tsq.12153>
- Schwartz, S. J., Luyckx, K., Vignoles, V. L. (2011). Handbook of Identity Theory and Research. In *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research* (1st ed.). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9>
- Scott, C. (2020). Managing and regulating commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education. *Irish Educational Studies*, 39(2), 175–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2020.1754879>
- Scott, D. (2021). Identity and consciousness. In *On learning: A general theory of objects and object-relations* (pp. 140 – 147). UCL Press.
- Scott-Baumann, A. (2017). Ideology, utopia and Islam on campus: How to free speech a little from its own terrors. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 12(2), 159–176. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197917694183>
- Scott-Baumann, A., & Perfect, S. (2021). *Freedom of speech in universities: Islam, charities and counter-terrorism*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429289835>
- Seale, C. (2018). *Researching society and culture*. SAGE.
- Seifert, T. (2007). Understanding Christian privilege: Managing the tensions of spiritual plurality. *About Campus*, 12(2), 10–17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/abc.206>
- Sharma, S., & Guest, M. (2013). Navigating religion between university and home: Christian students' experiences in English universities. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 14(1), 59–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2012.735691>

- Shaughnessy, J. J., Zechmeister, E. B., & Zechmeister, J. S. (2012). *Research methods in psychology*. McGraw-Hill.
- Sheavyn, P. (2016). *Higher education for women in Great Britain*. The International Federation of University Women. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/50840>
- Shore, L. M., Randel, A. E., Chung, B. G., Dean, M. A., Ehrhart, K. H., & Singh, G. (2011). Inclusion and diversity in work groups: A review and model for future research. *Journal of Management*, 37(4), 1262–1289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206310385943>
- Silverman, D. (2017). *Doing qualitative research*. SAGE.
- Simpson, T., & Kaufmann, E. (2019). *Academic freedom in the UK*. Policy Exchange Think Tank. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/academic-freedom-in-the-uk/>
- Sinha, J. W., Cnaan, R. A., & Gelles, R. J. (2007). Adolescent risk behaviors and religion: Findings from a national study. *Journal of Adolescence*, 30(2), 231–249. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2006.02.005>
- Small, J. L., (2012) *Understanding college students' spiritual identities: Different faiths, varied worldviews*. Hampton Press.
- Small, J. L., & Bowman, N. A. (2012). Religious affiliation and college student development: A literature review and synthesis. *Religion and Education*, 39(1), 64–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15507394.2012.648586>
- Smart, N. (2000). The nature of religion: Multiple dimensions of meaning. In N. M. Martin & J. Runzo (Eds.), *The meaning of life in the world religions* (pp. 31–50). Oneworld.
- Smith, D. C., & Langslow, A. K. (1999). *The idea of a university*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

- Smith, G. A., Cooperman, A., Alper, B. A., Mohamed, B., Rotolo, M., Tevington, P., Nortey, J., Kallo, A., Diamant, J., & Fahmy, D. (2025). *Decline of Christianity in the U.S. has slowed, may have levelled off – Findings from the 2023–24 Religious Landscape Study*. Pew Research Centre.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/religious-landscape-study-executive-summary/>
- Smith, J. K. A. (2014). *How (not) to be secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Sorell, G. T., & Montgomery, M. J. (2001). Feminist perspectives on Erikson's theory: Their relevance for contemporary identity development research. *Identity, 1*(2), 97–128.  
[https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532706XID0102\\_01](https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532706XID0102_01)
- Sotiropoulou, P. (2022). *Literature review on EDI barriers to postgraduate research relevant to funding*. Advance HE.
- Spencer, N. (2008). *Neither private nor privileged: The role of Christianity in Britain today*. Theos.
- Spencer, N., Madden, G., Purtil, C., & Ewing, J. (2016). *Religion and well-being: Assessing the evidence*. Theos.
- Srivastava, P. (2006). Reconciling multiple researcher positionalities and languages in international research. *Research in Comparative and International Education, 1*(3), 210–222. <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2006.1.3.210>
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. SAGE.

- Stark, R. (1999). Secularization, R.I.P: The secularization debate. *Sociology of Religion*, 60(3), 249–273.
- Starkey, C., & Tomalin, E. (Eds.). (2022). *The Routledge handbook of religion, gender and society*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429466953>
- Stears, M., Soutphommasane, T., Tryl, L., & Rajah, A. (2024). *Finding a balance: How to ensure Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is for everyone*. UCL, University of Oxford. <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/our-work/research/finding-a-balance/>
- Steger, M. F., Pickering, N. K., Adams, E., Burnett, J., Shin, J. Y., Dik, B. J., & Stauner, N. (2010). The quest for meaning: Religious affiliation differences in the correlates of religious quest and search for meaning in life. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 2(4), 206–226. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019122>
- Stevenson, J. (2013). Discourses of inclusion and exclusion: Religious students in UK higher education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 14(3), 27–43. <https://doi.org/10.5456/wpll.14.3.27>
- Stevenson, J. (2014). Internationalisation and religious inclusion in United Kingdom higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 68(1), 46–64. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12033>
- Stewart, W. C., Seiple, C., & Hoover, D. R. (2021). Covenantal pluralism – Toward a world of peaceable neighborhoods. In C. Seiple & D. Hoover (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of religious literacy, pluralism, and global engagement* (pp. 21 – 37). Routledge.

- Stone, A., & Schauer, F. F. (Eds.). (2021). *The Oxford handbook of freedom of speech*. Oxford University Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research – Techniques and procedures for developing Grounded Theory*. SAGE.
- Streib, H. (2001). Faith development theory revisited: The religious styles perspective. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 11(3), 143–158.  
[https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1103\\_02](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1103_02)
- Stroope, S., Draper, S., & Whitehead, A. L. (2013). Images of a loving God and sense of meaning in life. *Social Indicators Research*, 111(1), 25–44.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-011-9982-7>
- Sullivan, L. E., & Vries, H. de. (2006). *Political theologies: Public religions in a post-secular world* (1st ed.). Fordham University Press.
- Tajfel, H. (1982). *Social identity and intergroup relations*. Cambridge University Press
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *The psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7–24). Nelson Hall.
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (2010). *SAGE handbook of mixed methods in social & behavioral research*. SAGE.
- Taylor, C. (2007). *A secular age*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Temple, P. (2018). Space, place and institutional effectiveness in higher education. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 2(2), 133–150.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2018.1442243>

- Thomas, D. (2019). *What is religious studies?* The British Academy.  
<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/fellows/section/theology-and-religious-studies/>
- Thomas, L. (2012). *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*, Paul Hamlyn Foundation. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/building-student-engagement-and-belonging-higher-education-time-change-summary>
- Tight, M. (2023). Measuring and reviewing the student experience. In C. Baik & E. R. Kahu (Eds.), *Research handbook on the student experience in higher education* (pp. 89–101). Edward Elgar Publishing.  
<https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/book/9781802204193/book-part-9781802204193-14.xml>
- Tix, A. P., & Frazier, P. A. (1998). The use of religious coping during stressful life events: Main effects, moderation, and mediation. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 66*(2), 411–422. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.66.2.411>
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight ‘big-tent’ criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 16*(10), 837–851.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- Trigg, R. (2010). *Free to believe? Religious freedom in a liberal society*. Theos.
- Tschannen, O. (1991). The secularization paradigm: A systematization. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 30*(4), 395–415. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1387276>

- Turnbull, T., & Atkinson, S. (2024, April 15). Sydney church stabbing was a 'terrorist' attack, police say. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-68823240>
- Uecker, J. E., Regnerus, M. D., & Vaaler, M. L. (2007). Losing my religion: The social sources of religious decline in early adulthood. *Social Forces*, *85*(4), 1667–1692.
- Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Bhanot, R., & Shin, N. (2006). Ethnic identity formation during adolescence: The critical role of families. *Journal of Family Issues*, *27*(3), 390–414. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X05282960>
- University of Oxford. (2019). *Student numbers*. University of Oxford <https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/facts-and-figures/student-numbers?wssl=1>
- University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee [CUREC]. (2020a). *Conducting research interviews* (1.0). CUREC. <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/files/bpg10conductingresearchinterviewsv10pdf>
- University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee [CUREC]. (2020b). *Management and Protection of Data Collected for Research Purposes* (BPG09). CUREC. <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/files/bpg09datacollectionandmanagementpdf>
- University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee [CUREC]. (2020c). *Payments and incentives in research* (BPG05). CUREC. <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/files/bpg05paymentsandincentivesinresearchv10pdf>

- University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee [CUREC]. *Handling distress or mental health problems in participants* (BPG080) CUREC.  
<https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/sitefiles/bpg-08-handling-distress-in-participants>
- Van der Tol, M., & Gorski, P. (2022). Secularisation as the fragmentation of the sacred and of sacred space. *Religion, State & Society*, 50(5), 495–512.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2022.2144662>
- VanderWeele, T. J. (2017a). Causal effects of religious service attendance? *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 52(11), 1331–1336.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-017-1434-5>
- VanderWeele, T. J. (2017b). On the promotion of human flourishing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences – PNAS*, 114(31), 8148–8156.  
<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1702996114>
- VanderWeele, T. J. (2017c). Religious communities and human flourishing. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26(5), 476–481.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417721526>
- VanderWeele, T. J. (2021). Effects of religious service attendance and religious importance on depression: Examining the meta-analytic evidence. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 31(1), 21–26.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2020.1748932>

- VanderWeele, T. J., Case, B. W., Chen, Y., Cowden, R. G., Johnson, B., Lee, M. T., Lomas, T., & Long, K. G. (2023). Flourishing in critical dialogue. *SSM – Mental Health, 3*, 100172-. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2022.100172>
- VanderWeele, T. J., Li, S., Tsai, A. C., & Kawachi, I. (2016). Association between religious service attendance and lower suicide rates among US women. *JAMA Psychiatry, 73*(8), 845–851. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2016.1243>
- Vignoles, V. L., Schwartz, S. J., & Luyckx, K. (2011). Introduction: Toward an integrative view of identity. In S. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & K. Vignoles (Eds.), *Handbook of identity theory and research* (pp. 1–27). Springer New York. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9_1)
- Vock, I. (2024, April 15). Israeli war cabinet meets to discuss response to Iranian attack. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68820959>
- Vogl, S., Schmidt, E. M., & Zartler, U. (2019). Triangulating perspectives: Ontology and epistemology in the analysis of qualitative multiple perspective interviews. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 22*(6), 611–624. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2019.1630901>
- Wallace, A. F. C. (1966). *Religion; an anthropological view*. Random House.
- Walters, J. (2022). Religious literacy and higher education. In C. Seiple & D. R. Hoover (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of religious literacy, pluralism, and global engagement* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 165–176). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003036555-15>

- Watson, S. (2024). The other side of the coin: Do the benefits of being a Christian postgraduate at a secular university in England contribute to student wellbeing? *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 1–16.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2024.2380222>
- Watson, S. (2025). Struggle, strength and support. In L. Gearon & A. Kuusisto (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of religion and education*. Oxford University Press.
- Web of Science. (2023). *Getting started with Web of Science core collection*. Web of Science Group. <https://clarivate.com/webofsciencigroup/support/wos/wos-core-collection/>
- Weber, M. (1978). *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie, Band 1*. Mohr.
- Weller, P., Hooley, T., & Moore, N. (2011). *Religion and belief in higher education: The experiences of staff and students*. Equality Challenge Unit.  
<https://repository.derby.ac.uk/item/94422/religion-and-belief-in-higher-education-the-experiences-of-staff-and-students>
- Weng, E., Halafoff, A., Barton, G., & Smith, G. (2021). Higher education, exclusion, and belonging: Religious complexity, coping and connectedness among international students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. *Journal of International Students*, 11(S2), 38–57. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11iS2.3553>
- White, N., Milicev, J., Bradford, D. R. R., Rodger, A., & Gardani, M. (2023). The mental labyrinth of postgraduate research: A qualitative study of postgraduate mental health and wellbeing and the impact of the supervisory relationship. *Higher Education*, 0123456789. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01061-5>

- Whyte, W. (2015). *Redbrick: A social and architectural history of Britain's civic universities*. Oxford University Press.
- Willen, S. S. (2022). Flourishing and health in critical perspective: An invitation to interdisciplinary dialogue. *SSM – Mental Health*, 2, 100045.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2021.100045>
- Willetts, G., & Clarke, D. (2014). Constructing nurses' professional identity through social identity theory. *International Journal of Nursing Practice*, 20(2), 164–169.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ijn.12108>
- Williams, G. (1998). Current debates on the funding of mass higher education in the United Kingdom. *European Journal of Education*, 33(1), 77–87.
- Willis, J. (2007). *Foundations of qualitative research: Interpretive and critical approaches*. SAGE.
- Wilson, E. K. (2023). *Religion and world politics*. Routledge.
- Wolbring, G., & Nguyen, A. (2023). Equity/equality, diversity and inclusion, and other EDI phrases and EDI policy frameworks: A scoping review. *Trends in Higher Education*, 2(1), 168–237. <https://doi.org/10.3390/higheredu2010011>
- Wolterstorff, N. (2019). *Religion in the university*. Yale University Press.
- Wong, B. (2023). Exploring the spatial belonging of students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2243285>
- Woodhead, L., & Catto, R. (2012). *Religion and change in modern Britain*. Routledge.

- World Population Review. (2024). *Most Christian countries 2024*. World Population Review. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/most-christian-countries>
- Wormley, A. S., Vornlocher, C., Aglozo, E. Y., Jayawickreme, E., Johnson, K. A., Moon, J. W., Van Cappellen, P., Verma, A., & Cohen, A. B. (2023). Religion and human flourishing. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 20*(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2023.2297208>
- Worsley, J. D., Harrison, P., & Corcoran, R. (2023). Accommodation environments and student mental health in the UK: The role of relational spaces. *Journal of Mental Health, 32*(1), 175–182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2021.1922648>
- Yazan, B. (2016). Three approaches to case study methods in education: Yin, Merriam, and Stake. *The Qualitative Report, 2*(20), 134–152. <https://doi.org/10.22347/2175-2753v8i22.1038>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. SAGE.
- YouGov. (2019). *Universities free speech poll*. Theos.
- Ysseldyk, R., Matheson, K., & Anisman, H. (2010). Religiosity as identity: Toward an understanding of religion from a social identity perspective. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 14*(1), 60–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868309349693>

## Appendix A

### Recruitment materials

#### A.1 Recruitment email to gatekeepers

Dear... ,

My name is Szilvi Watson. I am a PhD student at the University of Oxford, researching the experiences of Christian postgraduate students at universities in England. As a Christian postgraduate myself, I feel it is very important to explore the experiences of this cohort of students in today's higher education culture – both in regards to the advantages of being a student of faith, and the difficulties that may result from various factors.

My hope is that the results of this study will benefit the students by eventually being recognised as a large minority, and will also help institutions and ministry leaders in having a better picture of their needs. The study has been reviewed by the University of Oxford's ethics committee and deemed ethical and appropriate for its purposes. The research consists of two main elements – an online survey, and interviews with those who would be willing to tell me about their experiences in more detail.

The ... University has been chosen as one of nine research sites for this nation-wide study. As you might work with Christian postgraduate students, I would like to ask for your help with the project by telling your students about the survey, and/or by putting me in touch with other leaders who work with them. The more responses I get, the more credible the picture we can together build and bring to the attention of others.

The survey is open to students of all denominations. If you could share information about it on your mailing list, social media page or in your next newsletter, and/or announce it at your next meeting, it would be extremely helpful. I am including a short pre-written paragraph for this, with a potential email template at the bottom of this email, for your use. Equally, I am happy to send paper handouts or flyers/posters, or social media posts, if you think these would be more effective.

You can find information about my research at [www.christianpostgrads.org](http://www.christianpostgrads.org). The link to the survey can be found on the webpage as well. I would also happily chat more about the project with you, should you have the time and interest to do so.

Thank you so much for reading my message and I really look forward to hearing from you.

All best wishes,

Szilvi Watson

Paragraph:

All **Christian postgraduate students** are kindly invited to participate in a nation-wide research study about the experiences of Christian postgraduates at universities in England. You can win a £100 gift card if you fill in the survey at [www.christianpostgrads.org](http://www.christianpostgrads.org). The project is based at the University of Oxford and will help us better understand this cohort of students, and how to meet their needs. Please pass on the link to fellow Christian students! Further information can be found on the website.

Email:

Dear Postgraduate Students,

You are kindly invited to participate in a nation-wide research study examining the **experiences of Christian postgraduate students** at universities in England. The project is based at the University of Oxford and aims to explore who this cohort of students are, and what their perceptions of being a student of faith Christian in academia in 21<sup>st</sup> century England have been.

Please follow the link [www.christianpostgrads.org](http://www.christianpostgrads.org) and fill in the survey if you are happy to contribute. It will take approximately 15 minutes and you can win a **£100 gift card** if you finish the questionnaire.

Please feel free to pass this information on to fellow postgrads who might be happy to share their experiences. You can find more information on the website or get in touch with Szilvi Watson at [szilvi.watson@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:szilvi.watson@education.ox.ac.uk) with any enquiries.

## A.2 Recruitment email to potential interviewees

Students who indicated willingness to interview in their survey were sent the following email:

Dear ... ,

Thank you so much for taking the time to fill in the survey regarding your experiences as a Christian postgraduate student at Oxford.

You indicated that you would be willing to spend some more time talking to me about your experiences a little deeper. I would be delighted to invite you for a coffee or tea next week and listen to your thoughts in an interview. I find that in-person conversations are often more meaningful.

If you prefer to talk online, however, I can certainly accommodate this as well, but I won't be able to treat you to a drink, sadly.

Finally, if you're happy to meet but are not in ... until ..., do let me know and I'll get back in touch then.

Please let me know your preference and then we can work out what the best way will be for us to meet.

Many thanks for your help in advance.

All best wishes,

Szilvi

## Appendix B

### Examples of recruitment issues

#### B.1 Cathedrals Group recruitment issues

Due to their religious affiliations, I expected recruitment to be easiest in the Cathedrals Group universities. The opposite was true. I only managed to secure 25 survey responses and 12 interviews from a mixture of four of these universities.

One reason for the low number of participants in the Cathedrals Group is the fact that these institutions are very small compared to the other cases, making up only 3% of the total postgraduate population in England. The case institution's postgraduate population is 12.25% of the Traditional elite university's numbers and only 9.4% of the Redbrick university's. If compared this way, the recruitment numbers are not as disappointing, and even somewhat in line with actual student number ratios.

There are 6 Cathedrals Group institutions with larger, some even twice as large of a postgraduate population than the case institution, but I was unsuccessful in establishing fruitful relationships in any of these. In one of the three originally chosen institutions to be surveyed, for example, I reached out to 17 gatekeepers, received two responses and no survey was filled in. The response of the senior chaplain after my follow-up email may shed light on some of the issues chaplaincies have been facing, and explain some of the low numbers:

*"Szilvi -*

*Thanks for your emails.*

*Unfortunately we do not feel in a position to help with your research at the moment. Coming out of the Covid situation we find that we are not at the moment in touch with postgraduate students. Our Chaplaincy is also stretched with being in a major reorganisation and also having a member of staff short. We wish you well with your research and trust that it will be productive.*

*With best wishes"*

This Cathedrals Group university has one of the highest postgraduate numbers in the group and is – as all in this group – a church affiliated university, yet their chaplaincy is not in touch with postgraduate students. In the few responses I did receive from chaplains of Cathedrals Group universities, similar issues were pointed out.

## B.2 Traditional elite university gatekeeper exchange

I had an exchange with the lead chaplain of a college at a traditional elite university, who supposed by the nature of the study that I was driving an “Evangelical agenda”. He mistakenly responded to me instead of his chaplain in an email, saying “I suspect that it’s very evangelical, perhaps even ‘Christian persecuted minority’ in focus.” I responded politely to his message and provided him with the survey questions and further information. We exchanged a few messages and parted amicably. But these two examples illustrate how the question of personal standing in one’s research topic is a sensitive and not all together straightforward issue which needs careful consideration and tactful action.

## Appendix C

### Doctrinal issues of inclusion in research project

#### C.1 Introduction

Christianity is a very diverse religion with a history of over 2000 years. During this time, many debates took place over the essence of doctrine and several branches of the main church have formed as a result of theological disagreements, resulting in a multitude of denominations within the branches of the three main branches of the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant churches. Yet, despite disagreements there is more that connects than separates them – fundamental doctrines such as that of the nature of the Trinity and the person of Jesus Christ. The Niceo-Constantinapolean Creed of 381AD (Nicene Creed) is a summary of beliefs Christians have used since the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

Yet, throughout the two millennia, groups whose teaching differ to varying extent from the mainstream and deny or complement that which has been accepted in the Bible and summarised in the Creed, have also formed, many considering themselves Christian. Indeed, the need for the Creed arose from the controversial teachings of such groups from the very beginning of the Church.

Such groups still exist today and for theological clarity, they will not be included in this study. To illustrate the issue at hand, an example of such a group and a short summary of the difference in their teaching is described below, after which I explain how such respondents will be identified.

#### C.2 An example: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormons) were founded by Joseph Smith (1805-44) in the United States. According to Smith, the angel Moroni revealed the holy books of lost tribes of Israel to him. The angel went to North America and buried golden tablets of God's message. Smith supposedly translated these and they now form the basis of the Book of Mormon (Polome, 1998).

Latter-day Saints consider themselves Christian, because they believe in Jesus. Most mainstream Christian churches do not accept them as such, due to significant differences to essential Christian doctrine. Some of these are summarised in **Table C.1**.

**Table C 1** Comparison of Christian and Mormon beliefs

Christian Teaching	Mormon Teaching
Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three persons in one God. God is transcendent and eternal. God has always existed and will always exist.	Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three separate Gods. The Father and the Son have physical bodies. Both of them are within the Universe. God was once mortal, and there is another god above him.
The Bible is God's Word. It is complete – cannot be taken away from or added to. It is breathed and inspired fully the Holy Spirit.	The revelation of God is not complete but ongoing. The Bible is part of this revelation and the Book of Mormon also. Revelation is still ongoing through prophets.
God is the one and only God. Humans are created by God. When people die, they go to heaven or hell, and will be resurrected on Judgement Day.	Humans may become gods themselves. When people die, they go on to live in a spirit world in various forms, according to their faith and good deeds in life.

*Note:* Christian doctrine based on *Theology: The basics* by McGrath, A. (2018). (Fourth ed.). Oxford. Mormon doctrine based on *Mormonism explained: What Latter-day Saints teach and practice* by Jackson, A. (2008), Wheaton.

## Appendix D

### Student statistics and demographic information

#### D.1 Statistics

*Table D. 1 Demographic data by whole sample and by institution type*

		Total (N=165)		Traditional elite (n=64)		Secular (n=75)		Cathedrals Group (n=26)	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age	range	21-77		21-65		21-77		24-73	
	mean	34		31.1		33.8		41.69	
	median	28		26.5		29		42.5	
	mode	25		25		26		24*	
	missing	1		0		1		0	
Sex	Female	90	54.9%	37	57.8%	37	49.3%	17	65.4%
	Male	74	45.1%	27	42.2%	38	50.7%	9	34.6%
Ethnicity	Arab	1	0.6%	0	0.0%	1	1.3%	0	0.0%
	Asian	22	13.4%	9	14.1%	12	16.0%	1	3.8%
	Black	16	9.8%	3	4.7%	9	12.0%	4	15.4%
	White	108	65.9%	44	68.8%	45	60.0%	20	76.9%
	Mixed	15	9.1%	7	10.9%	7	9.3%	1	3.8%
	Other	2	1.2%	1	1.6%	1	1.3%	0	0.0%
Nationality	UK	81	49.4%	26	40.6%	39	52.0%	17	65.4%
	Non-UK	83	50.6%	38	59.4%	36	48.0%	9	34.6%
Student status	Home	99	60.4%	33	51.6%	49	65.3%	18	69.2%
	International	65	39.6%	31	48.4%	26	34.7%	8	30.8%
Degree Type	Certificate or Diploma	9	5.5%	3	4.7%	4	5.3%	2	7.7%
	Master's	52	31.7%	25	39.1%	21	28.0%	6	23.1%
	MPhil	9	5.5%	7	10.9%	1	1.3%	1	3.8%
	PhD	93	56.7%	29	45.3%	49	65.3%	15	57.7%
	Other	1	0.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	7.7%
Mode of Study	Full Time	120	73.2%	52	81.2%	58	77.3%	11	42.3%
	Part Time	44	26.8%	12	18.8%	17	22.7%	15	57.7%

		Total		Traditional elite		Secular		Cathedrals Group	
		(N=165)		(n=64)		(n=75)		(n=26)	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Relationship status	Single	75	45.7%	34	53.1%	31	41.3%	10	38.5%
	In a relationship	18	11.0%	11	17.2%	6	8.0%	2	7.7%
	Co-habiting	9	5.5%	2	3.1%	5	6.7%	2	7.7%
	Engaged	10	6.1%	4	6.3%	5	6.7%	1	3.8%
	Married	51	31.1%	13	20.3%	27	36.0%	11	42.3%
	Other	1	0.6%	0	0.0%	1	1.3%	0	0.0%
Children <18	Yes	23	14.0%	5	7.8%	11	14.7%	7	26.9%
	No	140	85.4%	59	92.2%	64	85.3%	18	69.2%
Other caring responsibilities	Yes	14	8.5%	4	6.3%	4	5.3%	6	23.1%
	Part of the time	10	6.1%	5	7.8%	3	4.0%	2	7.7%
	No	140	85.4%	55	85.9%	68	90.7%	18	69.2%

\* Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

## D.2 Analysis of demographic findings

### Age

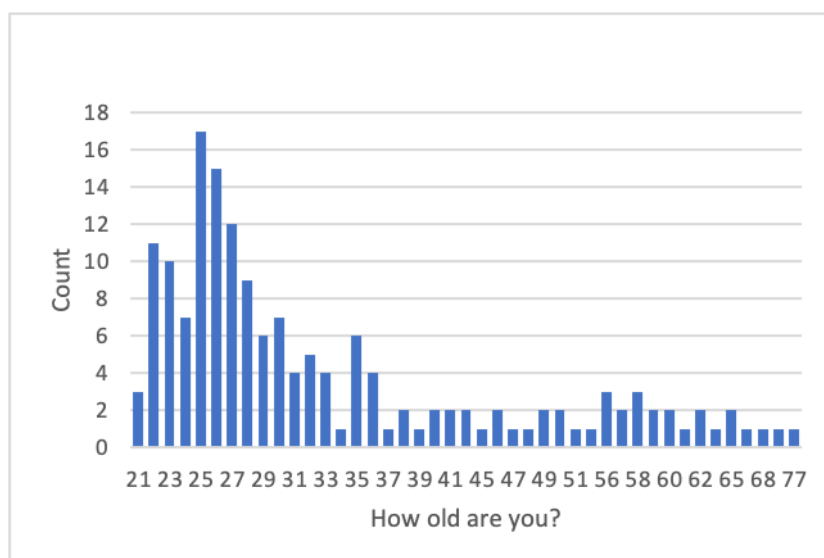
As expected, the age range among postgraduate students was large in the overall sample and in each individual case as well, with an up to two generations (56 years) gap between the youngest and the oldest participant, as shown in **Table D.1**. This is not unlike the spread in the case universities themselves, where this gap goes up to 61 years (17-78) in **Riverside**, 65 years (20-85) in **Victoria**, and 58 years (20-78) in **Minster** University.

**Table D. 2** Age of student respondents in each case

		Total	Traditional elite	Secular	Cathedrals Group
		(N=165)	(n=64)	(n=75)	(n=26)
Age	range	21-77	21-65	21-77	24-73
	mean	34	31	34	42
	median	28	27	29	43
	mode	25	25	26	24*

\* Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

**Figure D.1** shows the age distribution of postgraduate students in the whole sample (N=164). The largest proportion of students were in their 20s. The second biggest group were in their 30s. For these students, this may have been a tumultuous life stage – building a career and even starting and/or raising a family, while others on the other side of the spectrum would be returning to education after a long career or changing careers, and many other walks of life.

**Figure D.1** Histogram of quantitative survey respondents' age (N=164)

## Gender

Fighting for gender equality is the oldest of all such causes, spanning back all the way to suffragists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although far from over, much has been achieved for the place of women in society. In higher education also, it is relatively recently that women can read for degrees and become academics, given the centuries old history of England. The first ever degree awarded to a woman was in 1878 at the University of London, with Oxford only following suit in 1920 and Cambridge as late as late as 1948 (Arthur, 1997; Sheavyn, 2016). By 2022, women outweighed men by 14% (57% vs 43% respectively) for all students in England, and by 16% (58% vs 42%) for postgraduates (HESA, 2022b). Of all academic staff,

49% were women and 51% men in England (HESA, 2023a). Whilst these are crude numbers and conceal other inequalities, the level of change is significant.

The gender<sup>21</sup> ratios in the case institutions were varied. 48% of postgraduate students at the **Riverside** university were female; this grew to 60% at **Victoria** and 72% at **Minster** universities. The survey sample were somewhat different to those in the case institutions but not so significantly that this would risk the findings' validity by this characteristic. Gender ratios at an institutional and sample level (both survey and interviews) are displayed in **Table D.3**.

Ratios of interviewees differed to the ratios of the case universities to a larger extent, especially at **Minster** University, where more male students were interviewed than females, whereas the institutional average of women is much higher than men. However, as the samples are small, they are not representative and thus the gender ratios also can only be treated as informative.

**Table D.3** Sex of participants and postgraduate students at case institutions

		N	Female (%)	Male (%)
Total Sample		165	54.9%	45.1%
Traditional elite	Case institution	*	47.7%	52.3%
	Survey participants	64	57.8%	42.2%
	Interviewees	18	50.0%	50.0%
Secular	Case institution	*	60.0%	40.0%
	Survey participants	75	49.3%	50.7%
	Interviewees	13	69.0%	31.0%
Cathedrals Group	Case institution	*	72.0%	28.0%
	Survey participants	26	65.4%	34.6%
	Interviewees	6	40.0%	60.0%

\* Student numbers for case institutions are not shown for data protection

Whilst this study did not set out to explore how much one's gender influences the student experience, it did not identify any significant issues for the students in this sample. There were no references in the interviews or the qualitative survey responses to gender gaps or differences in the way students were treated at their universities in. I did ask and probe interviewees whether their religion *and/or* anything else made them feel different, and no one mentioned their sex. The lack of references to gender inequality in the qualitative

<sup>21</sup> Gender here is used in the traditional sense of male-female equality (etc. women in the workplace or science, gender pay gap, etc.), rather than the sexuality and gender issues, which have been dominating much of the media and some social research in recent years. I am consciously steering away from these issues in the presentation of this study so as to avoid any misrepresentation or misunderstanding. The relationship between such issues and religion can be controversial as well as wide-ranging and other studies are already engaging with these topics in depth.

data may be indicative of the universities having done a good job at creating gender equality. However, each institution's EDI pages were different. Only Riverside University's EDI page displayed links to gender equality and specifically to the Athena Swan Scheme (Advance HE, 2020) and also to racial equality and disability inclusivity measures, among other initiatives (but not religion). The other two universities emphasised sexuality as an equality and inclusivity highlight on their websites and finding other causes, such as Riverside University listed was not straight forward even after following some links displayed.

The only reference to gender equality in the interviews was in a way positive for the case of, where Wendy contrasted her positive experience as a black woman with her negative experience as a Christian.

*I think it's easier for me to be associated with being [Caribbean] and woman and black than it is to associate with being Christian.*

(Wendy, 37BI, SU)

## Ethnicity

Ethnicity is a personal and protected characteristic, which has received relatively significant attention in the last few decades as measure of equality and inclusion. This is not to say that equity has been reached but efforts are being made and awareness has been raised considerably. Most workplaces, schools and higher education institutions have been taking steps to make sure no one of any ethnicities represented in the UK is or feels discriminated against on grounds of their racial backgrounds, with varying success. Whilst it is not the aim of this paper to address this issue, one's ethnic identity can influence both their religious and their student experience. Furthermore, ethnic marginalisation may exacerbate other negative experiences as a student.

Each case university had different ethnic ratios, reflecting some their other characteristics. The two larger universities each had a relatively large Asian student population, as displayed in **Table D.4**. At **Victoria** University, Asian students made up 48% of the postgraduate population, whilst 40% were white. This overrepresentation is a result of the marketisation and internationalisation discussed in the Literature Review – 54 of postgraduates were, indeed, international students. This ratio was 25% Asian at **Riverside**, and only 4% at the **Minster** University. This important in regards to the study sample, as a significant proportion of Asian students at the case universities came from countries where Christians make up a very low percentage (1-5%) of the general population<sup>22</sup>. Although such refined data were not available to me, it may be reasonably assumed that the ratio of Christians in the Asian student population is not entirely different in ratios to that of their home countries. Thus,

---

<sup>22</sup> No direct references to countries and citations to data are included here in order to protect the identity of the institution.

Asian students were bound to be underrepresented in the present study as to overall university populations, but probably not in the actual Christian postgraduate population. This meant that white students were somewhat over-represented in the Traditional Elite and Secular universities, but somewhat underrepresented in the Cathedrals Group sample.

**Table D.4** *Ethnicity of participants and postgraduate students at the case institutions*

Ethnicity	TE Case Univ.	Traditional elite sample		Secular Case Univ.	Secular sample		CG Case Univ.**	Cathedrals Group sample	
		Survey	Intevs		Survey	Intevs		Survey	Intevs
Arab	1.9%	0.0%	.	4.3%	1.3%	.	.	.	.
Asian *	25.2%	14.1%	11.1%	47.8%	16.0%	15.0%	4.3%	3.8%	.
Black	4.0%	4.7%	11.1%	3.9%	12.0%	23.0%	3.4%	15.4%	.
Mixed	5.8%	10.9%	11.1%	3.1%	9.3%	.	3.26%***	3.8%	.
White	55.8%	68.8%	66.6%	39.8%	60.0%	62.0%	87.8%	76.9%	100.0%
Other & unknown	7.3%	1.6%	.	1.3%	1.3%	.	1.2%	0.0%	.

\* Asian is the sum of Chinese and other Asian categories for the sake of data protection

\*\* No ethnicity data were collected for international students. Percentages shown are for UK domicile students, 89.2% of the total postgraduate population

\*\*\* Includes any other

### (Inter)nationality

In line with student statistics, a fairly large proportion of students in the **Traditional Elite** and **Secular** universities were international students. I differentiate here between home-international student status and nationality. There is a proportion of students who may be legally classed as a home student – legacy EU students, those with settled status, etc. – but are citizens of other countries, born and probably raised there, with a cultural and by extension religious background different to that of England. It is reasonable to assume that such differences may have influence on postgraduates' student and religious experience. I demonstrate this through the data displayed in **Table D.5** showing the number of "home vs international" respondents by student status and the ratio of nationalities for each case.

*Table D.5 Home student status vs UK nationality in the sample*

Case	n	Survey participants		Interviewees	
		Home student	UK national	Home student	UK national
Traditional elite	64	33	26	9	7
Secular	75	49	39	7	4
Cathedrals Group	26	18	17	4	4
Total	165	100	82	20	15

## Appendix E

### Website and participant information

#### E.1 Pages of the website

The following screenshots show the website created to host the project and recruit participants: [www.christianpostgrads.org](http://www.christianpostgrads.org).

*Figure E. 1 Website landing page 1/2*



Figure E. 2 Landing page 2/2

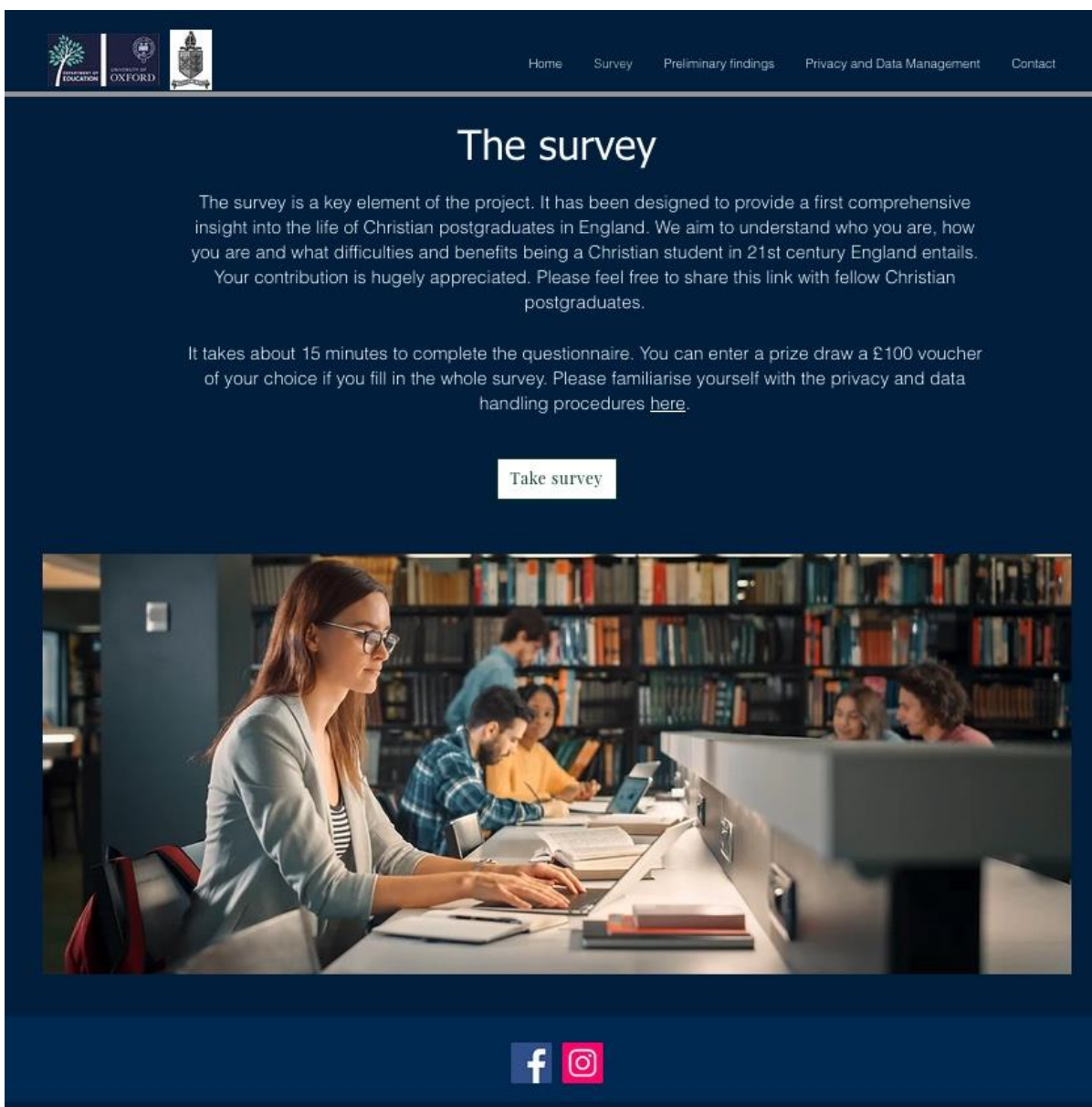
There are two main elements to the project. A quantitative element - through the [survey](#) you can find on this website; and a qualitative element - through dozens of interviews with Christian students and their leaders. These will aim to reach students at three types of institutions: **ancient universities** with religious foundations; **secular universities**; and universities presently affiliated to a church - the so called **Cathedrals Group**.

This project is conducted by Szilvi Watson, as her PhD research at the University of Oxford. It is funded by generous scholarships from the University and from the St Matthias Trust. For any further enquiries, please contact Szilvi [here](#).

[Go to survey](#)



Figure E. 3 Website survey page



The screenshot shows a website survey page with a dark blue background. At the top left, there are three logos: a tree for 'UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION', the University of Oxford crest, and another crest. To the right, a navigation menu includes 'Home', 'Survey', 'Preliminary findings', 'Privacy and Data Management', and 'Contact'. The main heading is 'The survey' in white. Below it, two paragraphs of text describe the survey's purpose and the prize. A white button labeled 'Take survey' is centered. A photograph of students in a library is shown below the text. At the bottom, there are social media icons for Facebook and Instagram.

UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD


Home Survey Preliminary findings Privacy and Data Management Contact

## The survey

The survey is a key element of the project. It has been designed to provide a first comprehensive insight into the life of Christian postgraduates in England. We aim to understand who you are, how you are and what difficulties and benefits being a Christian student in 21st century England entails. Your contribution is hugely appreciated. Please feel free to share this link with fellow Christian postgraduates.

It takes about 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. You can enter a prize draw a £100 voucher of your choice if you fill in the whole survey. Please familiarise yourself with the privacy and data handling procedures [here](#).


Take survey






f

Instagram

Figure E. 4 Participant information page 1/3



[Home](#)
[Survey](#)
[Preliminary findings](#)
[Privacy and Data Management](#)
[Contact](#)

# The Christian Postgraduate Experience

## Information for participants

### Privacy and Data Management

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study about the experience of postgraduate students as Christians at universities in England. It has been reviewed by the Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford (reference number: ED-CIA-21-232).

Before you decide, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read this information, and discuss it with others if you wish. If there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like more information, please ask me.

The study consists of an online survey and of qualitative interviews. My intention is to interview in-person where possible. However, Covid-19 regulations, or participants' personal preference might affect this, and some interviews may be carried out online.

**What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of the study is to understand how Christian students navigate their faith and relationships in the university environment. I would like to understand how they fit into the wider culture of the University, whether they experience negative treatment as a result of the religious identity, and what positive effects their faith might have on their student experience.

**Do I have to take part?**

- No. Taking part is entirely voluntary.
- You may withdraw at any point if you have changed your mind, without giving a reason.

**What will happen to me if I decide to take part?**

- You will fill out the online survey included on this site. This will take about 15 minutes.
- You will be given the chance to take part in a prize draw for a £100 book voucher. (The prize draw took place in June 2022)
- You may decide to further participate through an interview.
- You will be offered a hot or cold drink of your choice at interview.

Figure E. 5 Researcher contact page

Home Survey Preliminary findings Privacy and Data Management Contact

## Get in touch

Thank you for taking the time to learn about the project! Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or comments.

Name

Email

Subject

Write a message

Submit

## E.2 Participant information

As the picture resolution for the website pictures makes it difficult to read in this format, I attach the 'Information for participants' section in simple text format below.

### Information for participants

-

### Privacy and Data Management

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study about the experience of postgraduate students as Christians at universities in England. It has been reviewed by the Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford (reference number: ED-CIA-21-232).

Before you decide, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read this information, and discuss it with others if you wish. If there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like more information, please ask me.

The study consists of an online survey and of qualitative interviews. My intention is to interview in-person where possible. However, Covid-19 regulations, or participants' personal preference might affect this, and some interviews may be carried out online.

#### What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to understand how Christian students navigate their faith and relationships in the university environment. I would like to understand how they fit into the wider culture of the University, whether they experience negative treatment as a result of the religious identity, and what positive effects their faith might have on their student experience.

#### Do I have to take part?

- No. Taking part is entirely voluntary.
- You may withdraw at any point if you have changed your mind, without giving a reason.

#### What will happen to me if I decide to take part?

- You will fill out the online survey included on this site. This will take about 15 minutes.
- You will be given the chance to take part in a prize draw for a £100 book voucher. (The prize draw took place in June 2022)
- You may decide to further participate through an interview.
- You will be offered a hot or cold drink of your choice at interview.

### **Are there any possible disadvantages or risks from taking part?**

There are no known disadvantages or risks from taking part in the study. Your information will be kept strictly confidential and encrypted. You will not be identifiable in any of the material that is going to be analysed or published.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

- You may feel like you have been able to share your thoughts and feelings about a subject matter potentially important for you. You will have contributed to our knowledge and understanding of the Christian student experience which might benefit future students in their university experience.

### **Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?**

- All audio recordings – in case of interviews – will be stored on an encrypted drive. They will not be uploaded into a cloud or server. Transcriptions will be stored on the internal server of the University of Oxford, not accessible to anyone apart from the researcher.
- All files – recorded and written – will be saved under pseudonyms. Identification will be kept confidential on a separate, securely stored drive with no access to it (password encrypted) for anyone apart from myself. This information will be kept for three years after the publication of the findings of this research, according to University of Oxford guidelines. The identifiers will be kept up to this point in order to be able to contact participants for clarification or consent, should it be deemed necessary at a later stage in the study.
- Responsible members of the University of Oxford may be given access to data for monitoring and/or audit of the study to ensure that the research is complying with applicable regulations.

### **Will I be reimbursed for taking part?**

- There is no financial reimbursement available for your participation.
- However, you may enter a £100 book voucher prize draw if you fill in the survey if you filled it in before June 2022.
- If you are interviewed in person, you will be offered a hot or cold drink to make your time more enjoyable at interview.

### **What will happen to my data?**

- As stated above, your data will not be identifiable and will be destroyed upon relevant deadlines have passed. It will not at any point be shared with a third party.
- You may update your personal data at any time by contacting the researcher of this study.
- Research data will be deleted after 3 years of completion/publication of the study. It must be retained for a minimum of 3 years for potential checks of integrity, due to regulation and for potential further research. Should the project be extended, data may be kept for longer, but only as long as absolutely necessary.

**What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?**

- Your participation is voluntary and you may change your mind at a later stage.
- If you decide to withdraw, information collected from you may still be used, unless you specify otherwise.
- Deleting the data you provided from the study will not be possible after the 31st of August, 2022.

**What will happen to the results of this study?**

Any report or publication of the results of this study will be strictly anonymous and you shall not be identifiable in any way.

The research findings might be published in academic journals and potentially be presented at conferences.

If you are interested in the results of the study, please provide your email address so I can contact you later and provide you with a link or document.=

**What if there is a problem?**

- The University of Oxford, as Sponsor, has appropriate insurance in place in the unlikely event that you suffer any harm as a direct consequence of your participation in this study.
- If you wish to complain about any aspect of the way in which you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, please contact me through the form on this website. If you are not satisfied with the response, you may turn to Departmental Research Ethics Committee at [student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk).

**Who has reviewed the study?**

This study has been reviewed and given favourable opinion by Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (SSH IDREC)

**Further information please contact Szilvi Watson through the form on this website.**

Thank you for reading this information.

## Appendix F

### Religiosity scales

#### Adopting questions and determining scores

##### F.1 Adopting the questions from Astin et al.'s study

*Religious Commitment* and *Religious Engagement* were measured adopting 2 of five scales developed by Astin et al. (2011a). In the original study, all religions were surveyed at UCLA, at the beginning and the end of undergraduate students' time at the university. I replaced these general 'spirituality' questions by specifically Christian wording (e.g. Higher Power was replaced by God, etc.).

Furthermore, some questions were left out, replaced or added to suit the present study better. Scales were extended from mostly 3- and 4-step scales to 5- and 6-step scales to gain more fine-tuned results. Following these I checked internal consistency to ensure the items are reliable even after modification. Cronbach Alpha for the religious commitment scale showed high internal validity through an excellent reliability level ( $\alpha=.91$ ), while religious engagement showed internal validity through an acceptable reliability level ( $\alpha=.79$ ) (Field, 2013).

**Table F.1** displays the original questions with their individual scales and the modified (or unmodified) questions and their scales as used in the present study.

**Table F.1** Adapting Astin et al.'s (2011a) original religious commitment and engagement scales to the present study

Original	Scale	Present study	Scale	Notes
<b>Personal goal</b>				
Seeking to follow religious teachings in my everyday life	4-point scale from 1 (not important) to 4 (essential).	Seeking to follow God in my everyday life is	6-point scale from 1 (irrelevant) to 6 (essential).	
<b>Self-rating: religiousness</b>	5-point scale from 1 (lowest 10%) to 5 (highest 10%)	missed by error		This question was missed from the survey due to editing error
<b>Belief</b>	4-point scale from 1 (disagree strongly) to 4 (agree strongly)			It was determined that these questions whilst add to the load do not provide more information than the combination of other questions
I find religion to be personally helpful		Did not use		
I gain spiritual strength by trusting in a higher power		Did not use		
<b>Self-description</b>			5-point scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always)	
feeling a sense of connection with god/Higher power that transcends my personal self	3-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 3 (to a great extent)	I feel a sense of connection with God		

Original	Scale	Present study	Scale	Notes
<b>Experience: felt loved by God</b>	3-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 3 (frequently)	I feel loved by God  I know I am loved by God	5-point scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always)	This question was added to provide nuance between <i>feeling</i> loved and <i>knowing</i> to be loved
<b>My spiritual/religious beliefs</b>	4-point scale from 1 (disagree strongly) to 4 (agree strongly)	<b>My Christian beliefs</b>	6-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree)	
Are one of the most important things in my life		Are one of the most important things in my life		
Provide me with strength, support, and guidance		Provide me with strength, support, and guidance		
Give meaning/purpose to my life		Give meaning/purpose to my life		
Lie behind my whole approach to life		Lie behind my whole approach to life		
Have helped me develop my identity		Have helped me develop my identity		
Help to define the goals I set for myself		Help to define the goals I set for myself		

Original	Scale	Present study	Scale	Notes
<b>Experience</b>				
Attended a religious service	3-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 3 (frequently).	How frequently do you attend Christian meetings while at your university, including Sunday worship?	7-point scale from 1 (never) to 7 (several times a week)	
Attended a class, workshop, or retreat on matters related to religion/spirituality		did not include		Such activities were not deemed to be very accessible in UK higher education and this measure was left out in order not to skew results
<hr/>				
<b>Activity</b>	6-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 6 (daily)	<b>While at university, how often do you</b>	7-point scale from 1 (never) to 7 (every day)	
Reading sacred texts		Read the Bible		
Religious singing/chanting		Listen to Christian music or sing/play Christian music		
Other reading on religion/spirituality		Read other Christian/spiritual literature (books, websites, magazines, etc.)		

Original	Scale	Present study	Scale	Notes
<b>Prayer</b>		Pray		
Do you pray?	2-point scale, 1 (no) or 2 (yes)			
Hours per week: prayer/meditation	8-point scale from 1 (none) to 8 (over 20)			Added to activity
<b>Close friends: go to church/temple/other house of worship</b>	4-point scale from 1 (none) to 4 (all)	Did not include		

## F.2 Determining scores for overall measures

Setting the scores for the two religious identity scales was an arbitrary process. Each item was carefully considered as to what would constitute a high or low score, as Astin et. al (2011a; p45) describe in their paper describing the original development of the scales.

I illustrate the decision-making process through the item "*Seeking to follow God in my everyday life*". This was a 6-point Likert-scale question with the following choices:

1. Irrelevant
2. Not that important
3. Somewhat important
4. Important
5. Very important
6. Essential

If a respondent chose 'Irrelevant' or 'Not that important' it was considered that following God in their everyday life was not a priority or played no part in their decision making, and thus these scores were categorised as low. On the other hand, 'Very important' and 'Essential' convey high priority of this notion in students' lives, and thus were chosen as the high scores. 'Important' and 'Somewhat important' fell in between.

I considered including 'Important' as a high score, as clearly, it carries some weight in the respondent's life. However, with the more fine-grained response choices (as opposed to Astin et al.'s 4-point scale), students had an opportunity to express the level of importance and with two more scores above 'Important', I decided that it would be more rigorous and beyond any potential bias to include this score in the medium, rather than the high range.

'Religious commitment' was defined by 10 items. Such considerations were given to each item and scores displayed in **Table F.2**. Three items were measured on a scale of 1-5, seven items on a scale of 1-7. Thus, the maximum score was  $3 \times 5$  (15) +  $7 \times 4$  (28) = 43. The minimum score was  $1 \times 10 = 10$ . High and low cut-off points were determined and scores added up for the overall scale.

'Religious Engagement' was defined by 5 items. Although all scored 1-7, the last item, 'How frequently do you attend Christian meetings?' was measured by slightly differently to other items, such as prayer, as this type of engagement is subject to availability of such meetings, whereas praying or reading the Bible is an independent activity. Possible scores and cut-off points are displayed in **Error! Reference source not found.**

**Table F.2** Determining high and low scores of students' religious commitment

	Minimum	Low	High	Maximum	Scores
Seeking to follow God in my everyday life is	1	2	5	6	Low: Irrelevant, Not that important Medium: Somewhat important, Important High: Very important, Essential
I know I am loved by God	1	2	4	5	Low: Never, Rarely
I feel a sense of connection with God	1	2	4	5	Medium: Sometimes
I feel loved by God	1	2	4	5	High: Often, Always
My Christsian beliefs:					
Are one of the most important things in my life	1	3	5	6	Low: Strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree
Provide me with strength, support, and guidance	1	3	5	6	Medium: Somewhat agree
Give meaning/purpose to my life	1	3	5	6	High: Agree, Strongly agree
Lie behind my whole approach to life	1	3	5	6	
Have helped me develop my identity	1	3	5	6	
Help to define the goals I set for myself	1	3	5	6	
<b>Cut-off points</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>57</b>	

**Table F. 3** Determining high and low scores of students' religious engagement

	Minimum	Low	High	Maximum	Scores
Bible reading	1	2	4	7	Low: Never, Occasionally
Reading other Christian/ spiritual literature	1	2	4	7	Medium: Once a month
Listening to Christian music or sing/play Christian music	1	2	4	7	High: Once/A few times/Several times a week, Every day
Prayer	1	2	5*	7	
How frequently do you attend Christian meetings?	1	2	4	7	Low: Never, Every once in a while Medium: Monthly High: Fortnightly, Once/ Twice/ Several times a week
<b>Cut-off points</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>35</b>	

\*Prayer was scored high if practiced at least a few times a week

## Appendix G

### The survey

#### THE EXPERIENCES OF POSTGRADUATE CHRISTIANS AT UNIVERSITIES IN ENGLAND

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this survey.

It will take approximately 15 minutes to complete and will greatly enrich our understanding of the experience of Christian postgraduate students.

The data you provide will be stored securely and never passed on to any third party. It may be used for research purposes within this project. It will be anonymised, stored safely and will be kept only as long as legally required (for three years after reporting or publication). The information you provide might be used in publications, but I will make sure you will not be identifiable. There is no requirement for you to complete this questionnaire and you may quit at any time by closing your browser window. For further information on privacy procedures, please click [here](#).

**1. If you have read the information above and agree to participate with the understanding that the data (including any personal data) you submit will be processed accordingly, please check the relevant box below to get started.**

- Yes, I agree to take part.

A: Demographics<sup>23</sup>

**2. How old are you?**

**3. What is your ethnic group? Choose one answer that best describes your ethnic group or background.**

White

- English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British
- Irish
- Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- Any other White background

---

<sup>23</sup> These section titles were not displayed in the actual survey. They have been inserted here for the benefit of the reader of the thesis, to aid description in Chapter 3 - Methodology.

Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups

- White and Black Caribbean
- White and Black African
- White and Asian
- Any other Mixed or Multiple ethnic background

Asian or Asian British

- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- Any other Asian background

Black, African, Caribbean or Black British

- African
- Caribbean
- Any other Black, African or Caribbean background

Other ethnic group

- Arab
- Any other ethnic group

#### **4. What is your sex?**

Female

Male

#### **5. What is the country of your nationality?**

(see list at the end of the document here: [List of countries:](#))

#### **6. Are you classed as a home or as an international student?**

Home

International

#### **7. Do you identify as a Christian?**

Yes

No -> close survey with polite message

**8. How do you pay for your tuition and living expenses? Tick all that applies.**

I have a university scholarship

I have a scholarship outside of my university

I work full time

I work part time

I took the full graduate student loan (SFE)

I took some of the available graduate student loan (SFE)

I took another kind of loan (bank, parents, etc.)

My parents are contributing

My partner or other relative are contributing

Out of my savings

My employer is paying for it

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**9. On a scale of 0-10, how anxious are you about your finances during your course?****10. What is your relationship status?**

Single

In a relationship

Co-habiting

Engaged

Married

Divorced

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**11. Do you have children under the age of 18?**

Yes

No

**11.a Yes-> Are they living with you?**

Yes

No

Part of the time

**12. Do you have other caring responsibilities while doing your course?**

Yes

No

Part of the time

B: Academic**13. What university are you at?**

(See list at the end of the document: List of universities:)

**14. What is the discipline of your studies?**

01 Medicine and dentistry

02 Subjects allied to medicine

03 Biological and sport sciences

04 Psychology

05 Veterinary sciences

06 Agriculture, food and related studies

07 Physical sciences

08 General and others in sciences

09 Mathematical sciences

10 Engineering and technology

11 Computing

12 Geographical and environmental studies (natural sciences)

12 Geographical and environmental studies (social sciences)

13 Architecture, building and planning

14 Humanities and liberal arts (non-specific)

15 Social sciences

16 Law

17 Business and management

18 Communications and media

19 Language and area studies

20 Historical, philosophical and religious studies

21 Creative arts and design

22 Education and teaching

23 Combined and general studies

**15. What degree are you studying for?**

Postgraduate certificate or diploma

Master's

MPhil

PhD/DPhil

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**16. Are you a part-time or full-time student?**

Part Time

Full Time

**17. What year of your current postgraduate study are you in?**

1

2

3

4

5

6

7+

**18. How many years did you spend out of education since finishing secondary school/high school?**

0

1-2

2-5

6-10

10+

20+

**19. Are you doing your course/fieldwork online or in person?**

In person

Hybrid

Online

**20. Where do you live while on your course?**

On or near campus

5-10 miles from campus

10+ miles from campus

50+ miles from campus

Abroad

**21. Did you move to attend your course?**

Yes, I moved to student accommodation at/near the university

Yes, I moved to private accommodation at/near the university

Yes, I moved closer to the university

No, I am doing my course online

No, I commute to the university

**22. Who do you live with while on your course?**

I live by myself

I live with my partner/spouse

I live with other students

I live with my parents

I live with my children (under 18) and my partner/spouse

I live with my children (under 18) as a single parent

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

C: FaithBeliefs**23. What denomination do you identify with the closest?**

Anglican

Roman Catholic

Baptist

Methodist

Orthodox

Pentecostal

Evangelical

Reformed

Nondenominational/Free Church

None

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Please choose the answer that best describes your faith:****24. Jesus is:**

A good man

A moral exemplar

A great teacher

A prophet

The saviour

All of the above

**25. The Trinity is:**

One God in three forms, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

A myth

Blasphemy – God is only one person

None of the above

(Religious commitment)

**26. My Christian beliefs:**

- a.) Are one of the most important things in my life**
- b.) Provide me with strength, support, and guidance**
- c.) Give meaning/purpose to my life**
- d.) Lie behind my whole approach to life**
- e.) Have helped me develop my identity**
- f.) Help to define the goals I set for myself**

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Somewhat agree

Agree

Strongly agree

**27. Seeking to follow my faith in my everyday life is:**

Irrelevant

Not that important

Somewhat important

Important

Very important

Essential

**28. Thinking about your relationship with God...****a.) I feel a sense of connection with God****b.) I feel loved by God****c.) I know I am loved by God**

Never

Rarely

Sometimes

Often

All the time

**29. On a scale of 0-10, how important is your Christian faith in maintaining your mental health?****30. On a scale of 0-10, how important was/is your Christian faith in maintaining your mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

(Religious engagement)

**31. While at university, how often do you:****a.) Read the Bible****b.) Read other Christian/ spiritual literature (books, websites, magazines, etc.)****c.) Listen to Christian music or sing/play Christian music****d.) Pray**

Not at all

Occasionally

Once a month

Once a week

A few times a week

Every day

**32. How frequently do you attend Christian meetings while at your university, including Sunday worship?**

Several times a week

Twice a week

Once a week

Fortnightly

Monthly

Every once in a while

Never -> Go to Q33

**33. Why do you not attend any Christian meetings while on your course? Tick all that applies.**

I don't have the time

It's not important for me

There aren't any groups for postgraduates at this university that I know of

I don't identify with the groups that are available

I have been disappointed in the group I was attending

Other

**34. What is your main reason/motivation to attend Christian groups? Tick all that applies.**

Fellowship/Friendship

Support

Worship

Spiritual growth

Familiarity

Accountability

Habit

They help with my mental health

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**35. On a scale of 0-10, how much has belonging to a Christian group enriched your experience at university?**

**36. On a scale of 0-10, how important is your Christian group in maintaining your mental health?**

D: University experience

**37. How important is it for you to be able to integrate your faith with your studies/research? This may be at a theoretical, topical, ethical or other dimension.**

Not important

Somewhat important

Important

Very important

Essential

**38. Has your faith helped you to 'fit in' with your peers at university?**

My faith helped significantly

My faith played a positive role in fitting in

It made no difference

Having faith made it slightly more difficult to 'fit in'

Being a Christian made it extremely difficult to 'fit in' with peers

**39. Do you feel free to be open about your faith with your peers?**

Yes

With some of them

No

**40. Do you feel free to be open about your faith with university teaching staff (supervisor, tutor, etc)?**

Yes

With some of them

No

**41. How well supported have you felt by your university as a student of faith?**

The University has made it very difficult for me to be Christian on campus/has been very unsupportive of Christian students.

The University has been somewhat unsupportive.

The University has been neither supportive nor unsupportive.

The University has been somewhat supportive.

The University has been extremely supportive of Christian students.

**42. Have you ever felt bullied, ridiculed, or excluded at your university for being a Christian?**

**a.) Bullied**

**b.) Ridiculed**

**c.) Excluded**

**d.) Ignored/Invisible**

**e.) Out of place**

Never -> Go to Q44

Sometimes

Regularly

Most of the time

Always

**43. Where have you felt bullied, ridiculed, or excluded for your faith? Tick all that applies.**

At my place of accommodation (roommates, etc.)

In class by peers

In class by teaching staff

By friends

Peers outside of class setting

By academic content

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**44. How has your faith changed – if at all – during your postgraduate studies?**

My faith has grown significantly

I have been growing in my faith

My faith remained the same

I have been struggling with my faith

I lost my faith

E: Qualitative questions

**45. What has been the most difficult thing about being a Christian at your university?****46. What has been the best thing about being a Christian at your university?**

If you would be willing to further discuss your experiences in an interview, please fill in your name and email address, so I may contact you in due time. You will be offered a hot or cold drink of your choice in appreciation of your time. Otherwise, please move forward to enter prize draw.

Thank you so much for taking the time to fill in the questionnaire. Your contribution to the project is hugely appreciated and valued.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions at [szilvi.watson@education.ox.ac](mailto:szilvi.watson@education.ox.ac).

**List of countries:**

Afghanistan	Chad
Albania	Chile
Algeria	China
Andorra	Colombia
Angola	Comoros
Antigua and Barbuda	Congo (Democratic Republic)
Argentina	Costa Rica
Armenia	Cote d'Ivoire
Australia	Croatia
Austria	Cuba
Azerbaijan	Cyprus
Bahamas	Czech Republic
Bahrain	Denmark
Bangladesh	Djibouti
Barbados	Dominica
Belarus	Dominican Republic
Belgium	Ecuador
Belize	Egypt
Benin	El Salvador
Bhutan	Equatorial Guinea
Bolivia	Eritrea
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Estonia
Botswana	Ethiopia
Brazil	Fiji
Brunei	Finland
Bulgaria	France
Burkina Faso	Gabon
Burundi	Gambia
Cambodia	Georgia
Cameroon	Germany
Canada	Ghana
Cape Verde	Greece
Central African Republic	Greenland

Grenada	Lithuania
Guatemala	Luxembourg
Guinea	Macedonia
Guinea-Bissau	Madagascar
Guyana	Malawi
Haiti	Malaysia
Honduras	Maldives
Hong Kong (special administrative region of China)	Mali
Hungary	Malta
Iceland	Marshall Islands
India	Mauritania
Indonesia	Mauritius
Iran	Mexico
Iraq	Micronesia
Ireland	Moldova
Israel	Monaco
Italy	Mongolia
Jamaica	Montenegro
Japan	Morocco
Jordan	Mozambique
Kazakhstan	Myanmar (Burma)
Kenya	Namibia
Kiribati	Nauru
Korea (North)	Nepal
Korea (South)	Netherlands
Kosovo	New Zealand
Kuwait	Nicaragua
Kyrgyzstan	Niger
Laos	Nigeria
Latvia	Norway
Lebanon	Oman
Lesotho	Pakistan
Liberia	Palau
Libya	Panama
Liechtenstein	Papua New Guinea

Paraguay	Sweden
Peru	Switzerland
Philippines	Syria
Poland	Taiwan
Portugal	Tajikistan
Puerto Rico	Tanzania
Qatar	Thailand
Romania	Togo
Russia	Tonga
Rwanda	Trinidad and Tobago
Samoa	Tunisia
San Marino	Turkey
Sao Tome and Principe	Turkmenistan
Saudi Arabia	Tuvalu
Senegal	Uganda
Serbia	Ukraine
Seychelles	United Arab Emirates
Sierra Leone	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
Singapore	United states of America
Slovakia	Uruguay
Slovenia	Uzbekistan
Solomon Islands	Vanuatu
Somalia	Vatican City
South Africa	Venezuela
South Sudan	Vietnam
Spain	Yemen
Sri Lanka	Zambia
Sudan	Zimbabwe
Suriname	
Swaziland	

**List of universities:**

- Anglia Ruskin University
- Arts University Bournemouth
- Aston University
- Bath Spa University
- BIMM Institution
- Birkbeck
- Birmingham City University
- Bishop Grosseteste University
- Bournemouth University
- Brunel University London
- Buckinghamshire New University
- Canterbury Christ Church University
- City, University of London
- Coventry University
- Cranfield University
- De Montfort University
- Durham University
- Edge Hill University
- Falmouth University
- Goldsmith's College
- Guildhall School of Music and Drama
- Harper Adams University
- Hartpury University
- Institute of Cancer Research (UoL)
- Keele University
- Kingston University
- Lancaster University
- Leeds Arts University
- Leeds Beckett University
- Leeds Trinity University
- Liverpool Hope University
- Liverpool John Moores University
- Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine

- London Metropolitan University
- London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine
- London South Bank University
- Loughborough University
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- Middlesex University
- Newcastle University
- Newman University
- Northumbria University
- Norwich University of the Arts
- Nottingham Trent University
- Open University
- Oxford Brookes University
- Plymouth College of Art
- Plymouth University
- Queen Mary
- Ravensbourne University London
- Roehampton University
- Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance
- Royal Agricultural University
- Royal College of Art
- Royal Holloway
- Royal Veterinary College
- Sheffield Hallam University
- Southampton Solent University
- St Mary's University Twickenham
- Staffordshire University
- Teeside University
- The London Inst. Of Banking and Finance
- University College Birmingham
- University College London
- University College of Estate Management
- University College of Osteopathy
- University for the Creative Arts
- University of Bath

- University of Bedfordshire
- University of Birmingham
- University of Bolton
- University of Bradford
- University of Brighton
- University of Bristol
- University of Cambridge
- University of Central Lancashire
- University of Chester
- University of Chichester
- University of Cumbria
- University of Derby
- University of East Anglia
- University of East London
- University of Essex
- University of Exeter
- University of Gloucestershire
- University of Greenwich
- University of Hertfordshire
- University of Huddersfield
- University of Hull
- University of Kent
- University of Leeds
- University of Leicester
- University of Lincoln
- University of Liverpool
- University of London: Birbeck
- University of London: City
- University of London: Courtauld Institute of Art
- University of London: Goldsmith's College
- University of London: Imperial College
- University of London: King's College London
- University of London: London Business School
- University of London: London School of Economics & Political Science
- University of London: London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

- University of London: Queen Mary
- University of London: Royal Academy of Music
- University of London: Royal Central School of Speech and Drama
- University of London: Royal Holloway
- University of London: Royal Veterinary College
- University of London: SOAS
- University of London: St George's
- University of London: University College London
- University of Manchester
- University of Northampton
- University of Nottingham
- University of Oxford
- University of Portsmouth
- University of Reading
- University of Salford
- University of Sheffield
- University of Southampton
- University of St Mark & St John
- University of Suffolk
- University of Sunderland
- University of Surrey
- University of Sussex
- University of the Arts London
- University of the West of England
- University of Warwick
- University of West London
- University of Westminster
- University of Winchester
- University of Wolverhampton
- University of Worcester
- University of York
- Writtle University College
- York St John University

## Appendix H

### Place of questions for eligibility

At the beginning of the survey, question 7 asks about participants' self-identification as a Christian:

#### **Do you identify as a Christian?**

Yes

No

This was the first filter and as many as 15 students did not pass this point and the survey ended for them with a polite message.

Due to the structure of the survey collecting demographic and academia/university related information first and religion-related questions in the second half of the questionnaire, it would have been odd to ask in-depth, almost theological questions at the beginning of the survey and then revert back to demographics. Thus, two questions regarding the eligibility criteria (explained in detail in Appendix H) were left fairly late in the survey, as questions 24 and 25:

#### **Please choose the answer that best describes your faith:**

##### **24. Jesus is:**

A good man

A moral exemplar

A great teacher

A prophet

The saviour

All of the above

##### **25. The Trinity is:**

One God in three forms, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

A myth

Blasphemy – God is only one person

None of the above

The survey did not terminate for students who chose answers considered not to be in line with the Nicene Creed because it would have been insulting for those who did consider themselves Christians but did not adhere to some of the most basic teaching of the faith. Thus, whether these question would have been asked at the beginning or in line with the survey structure, it would not have terminated and so the placement of this question did not make a difference in this sense.

Participants who filled in the survey and wanted to be included in the prize draw were all included, regardless of being excluded from the final data.

## Appendix I

### Semi-structured interviews

Interviews were conducted with a set of questions designed to yield comparable data – both with the survey data (qualitative and quantitative) and within the interview cohort. Furthermore, the leader and student interview schedules were created to be answering similar if not identical questions for the same reason. I include both preliminary interview schedules below. For students, I very often used the survey questionnaire with their own responses as a guide as well as the interview schedule. This helped to further homogenise the data.

#### I.1 Student interviews

##### Prospective questions for student interviews

1. Fill in survey ahead of interview.
2. Fill in consent forms ahead of interview.
3. Double check (and record) orally about consent at beginning of interview.

##### Icebreaker:

- What is your undergraduate degree? What university did you study at for your undergraduate degree?
- What is your area of study now?
- Do you have other responsibilities (work, children, etc.)? How are you balancing them with your studies?

##### Religiosity:

- \_ On a scale of 0-10, how religious would you say you are? How important is your faith for you?
- How has the pandemic affected your faith or what role did it play in dealing with it?

##### Religious engagement:

- How does your faith manifest in everyday life at university for you?

Probes: Do you pray? Do you read the Bible or other texts? Does it help with stress?

– Do you attend any Christian meetings at your university? What kind of meetings? How often?

– Why do you go?

– What is the role of that community in your life?

### Studies

– Does your faith influence your studies? Does it affect the way you approach your research? In what way?

-Does your area of study or field contradict your faith in any way?

– Do you feel free to talk about the fact that you are a Christian in your academic environment, e.g. in class, seminars or tutorials? With academic staff?

– Are there Christian teaching staff or are you aware of their religious affiliation? What significance does it have if they are Christian? How does this influence your relationship?

### Peers

– Do you feel free to talk about the fact that you are a Christian with other students? On your course? At your accommodation?

– Does your faith influence what kind of activities you participate in at the university?

### University experience:

– Do you ever feel ‘different’ because of your faith? If yes, why and how?

– Is there anything else that makes you feel different? Your ethnicity, nationality, financial status, etc? How do these relate, if at all, to your religion?

– Do you feel, in any way advantaged or disadvantaged for being a Christian?

– What is the most difficult thing about being a Christian at your university?

How could it be made easier (if applicable) to be openly Christian at the University?

– What is the best thing about being a Christian at your university?

## I.2 Leader interviews

### Prospective questions for leader interviews

1. Fill in consent forms ahead of interview.
2. Double check (and record) orally about consent at beginning of interview.

#### Icebreaker:

- How long have you been in this role?
- What made you want to work with postgraduate students?

#### About the students:

- Do many postgraduate students have other responsibilities (work, children, etc.)? How do you think they do at balancing them with their studies?

#### Religiosity:

- Do you the Christian postgraduates you know consider their faith important? How religious would you say they are?
- How has the pandemic affected student' faith or what role did it play in them dealing with it?

#### Religious engagement:

- As far as you are aware, how does their faith manifest in the everyday life of postgraduate Christians?

Probes: Do they pray? Do they read the Bible or other texts? Does it help with their stress?

- Do many attend Christian meetings at the university? What kind of meetings? How often?

- Why do you think they go?

- What is the role of that community in their life?

Studies

– Does their faith influence Christian students in their studies? Does it affect the way they approach their research? In what way?

-Which areas of study/field do you see, if any, as contracting students' faith?

– Do students feel free to talk about the fact that they are Christian in their academic environment, e.g. in class, seminars or tutorials? With academic staff?

– Are there Christian teaching staff or are you aware of their religious affiliation? What significance does it have if they are Christian? How does this influence students' relationship with them?

Peers

– In your opinion, do students feel free to talk about the fact that they are Christian with other students? On their course? At their accommodation?

– Does their faith influence what kind of activities they participate in at the university?

University experience:

– Do you think students tend to feel 'different' because of their faith? If yes, why and how?

– Is there anything else that makes you them different? Their ethnicity, nationality, financial status, etc? How do these relate, if at all, to their religion?

– Do you think Christian students feel, in any way advantaged or disadvantaged for being a Christian?

– What is the most difficult thing about being a Christian at this university?

How could it be made easier (if applicable) to be openly Christian at the University?

– What is the best thing about being a Christian at this university?

## Appendix J

### Summary of Master's research (pilot)

Short Summary of the Experience of Postgraduate Christians at the University of Oxford  
An MSc Research Project by Szilvi Watson (2019)

#### J.1 The postgraduate university experience

There were 566,555 postgraduate students studying in the UK in the 2017/18 academic year (HESA, 2019a). Yet, research regarding their experiences and needs is scarce. Almost half of Oxford students (48.7% – 11,687 in 2017) are postgraduates, a 238% rise between 1999 and 2017 (University of Oxford, 2019). This mixed methods study is based on 13 interviews and 45 surveys conducted in Trinity term of 2018, with students of a diverse background of faith traditions, disciplines, degree types and colleges.

The experience of postgraduate students is different to that of undergraduate students in general, due to living in a different stage of life and the different nature of postgraduate courses. Postgraduate study is more isolating as a result of more independent work – especially for research students – and much less contact time with other postgraduates. Masters' students, while might spend more time in class, are only here for one year, which can be insufficient time to form meaningful relationships. Studies have found (Kurantowicz & Nizinska, 2013; O'Keefe, 2013) that student retention is a particular issue in postgraduate courses, and that social engagement and a sense of belonging are effective in improving the number of students who stay on course (Clouder, 2009; Miller, 2011).

In line with Erikson' life stages (Erikson, 1980), participants of this study were found to be at a life stage of seeking 'intimacy' and fighting against 'isolation', as opposed to undergraduates, who are going through a phase of finding 'identity' and trying to avoid 'confusion'.

Christian students are not only at a different stage of life in general, but also at a different stage of their faith journeys. Whilst in undergraduate years they struggle with the questions regarding their faith (Guest, Aune, et al., 2013), in postgraduate years faith seems to have been established. 90% of survey respondents said their faith remained the same, grew or significantly grew, with 64% saying their faith has grown while at Oxford.

A desire to integrate faith with academic work was a strong theme in this study. Oxford students seem to be utilising their faith communities as academic networks beyond the traditional faith-functions of these communities. They also have a number of opportunities to network with fellow Christian academics and students through conferences and organisations specifically formulated for them. This has been found to enrich not only their faith but also their academic experience. No such networking is reported in undergraduate studies.

## J.2 The challenges of being a Christian postgraduate

However, postgraduate Christians at Oxford face a higher than expected level of challenges due to their faith.

According to numbers acquired through a Freedom of Information Request, 27% of all postgraduates self-report as Christian at Oxford. They form a large minority, however not one of the trendy minorities whose cases are on the agenda.

Students reported academics mocking religious/spiritual ideas; being made feel as an inferior logician; feeling as the odd one out; bullied into unwanted conversation due to wearing a cross pendant, among other experiences.

Several respondents reported that they feel their academic environment, and sometimes their social environment is hostile against their faith. People seem to assume rather than explore what Christian students believe, and some have experienced exclusion from communities due these assumptions.

36% of survey respondents reported to have experienced bullying or ridicule because of their faith, with a worrying 12% saying that it happens regularly, most of the time or always.

Both survey respondents and interviewees expressed worries about being open about their faith, thinking that it can lead to being considered an inferior or biased academic.

There was an impression that whilst other minorities are not to be criticised, and their cases are in the limelight, the Christian faith can be subject to ridicule without any consequences.

Students experienced a diminished freedom of speech and felt there were issues they were not supposed to talk about. This was especially apparent in regards to the LGBTQ community. Students perceived a contrast between the case of other minorities, and especially of the LGBTQ being visibly advanced and loudly expressed, while Christians were being ridiculed and silenced. This perception was a source of feeling marginalised for several participants, who felt like their case did not matter.

When asked about whether they feel free to express their views or beliefs openly, words such as 'fear', 'cautious', 'keeping quiet', 'being misunderstood', 'risk', 'dominance', 'ridicule', 'socially ostracized', 'safe space', 'agenda', 'not palatable', 'compromise', 'secular hegemony' were used.

The combination of being an almost unseen minority and people not understanding what their actual beliefs are creates an environment where many students experience some form of hostility against their faith. Students felt they were prejudiced against – considered to be people who are prejudiced against others; especially against the LGBT community.

Christian students live in a paradox – a society, which claims to be multicultural, open and tolerant (Trigg, 2010), but which is not accepting the values of a large minority living among them. As one survey respondent pointed it out, 'some people are more equal than others'.

## J.3 The advantages of being a Christian postgraduate

However difficult it might be for some students, the advantages outweigh the difficulties.

The fact that their base value is in God and his love and not in their academic performance gives a certain inner peace and stability to Christian students, which they are aware of, and

compare themselves to students of no faith. Their Christian identity is a source of strength. They consciously seek out communities, which was found to be one of the major retaining factor on postgraduate courses (O'Keefe, 2013).

Friendships with Christian peers can be deeper and more open due to shared values. Mentor relationships form through faith communities.

68.4% of survey respondents said that being part of a Christian group in Oxford has enriched their university experience at a level of 7 or higher on a scale of 0-10.

The benefits of religious social participation are well evidenced in the literature (Ryan, 2017; Spencer et al., 2016), with positive effects on mental health and overall life satisfaction. Communities provide a safe space, a place of belonging and a place of personal and spiritual growth.

70% of survey respondents said that the significance of the role their Christian community plays in maintaining their mental health in Oxford is 7 or higher out of 10, with 28% saying it was 10 out of 10.

Overall, the benefits of being a student of faith seem to outweigh the disadvantages, yes the presence of bullying and marginalisation cannot be disregarded. Both aspects have the potential of informing universities and student organisations of how to best provide pastoral care and advance equality for this student population.

## Appendix K

### Grouping the 24 categories of academic disciplines

The survey collected data on the different disciplines in which participants were studying for a postgraduate degree. Categorisation was based on the Higher Education Classification of Subjects (HECoS), used by HESA, UCAS and the Student Loans Company (HESA, 2019b).

The 24 categories used in data collection were as follows:

1. Medicine and dentistry
2. Subjects aligned to medicine
3. Biological and sports science
4. Psychology
5. Veterinary sciences
6. Agriculture, food and related sciences
7. Physical sciences
8. General and other in sciences
9. Mathematical sciences
10. Engineering and technology
11. Computing
12. Geographical and environmental sciences (natural sciences)
13. Geographical and environmental sciences (social sciences)
14. Architecture, building and planning
15. Humanities and liberal arts (non-specific)
16. Social Sciences
17. Law
18. Business and management
19. Communications and media
20. Language and area studies
21. Historical, philosophical and religious studies
22. Creative arts and design
23. Education and Teaching
24. Combined and General studies

As 24 categories make data analysis impractical, these categories were collapsed into 5 larger discipline groupings. As there is no unified grouping system for different academic disciplines, and these can be highly individual by institution as well, I considered several existing academic and assessment organisations' way of organising the various academic disciplines within their data bases and units. Particularly, the UK's Research Excellence Framework (Higher Funding Council of England, 2021), Web of Science (Web of Science, 2023) and Scopus (Elsevier, 2023) were influential. The following categories were created and subsequently used for quantitative data analysis:

### Physical and Exact Sciences

Physical Sciences

Mathematical Sciences

Engineering and Technology

Computing

### Health and Life Sciences

Medicine and Dentistry

Subjects Aligned to Medicine

Veterinary Sciences

Biological and Sports Science

Agriculture, Food and Related Sciences

Geography and Environmental Sciences (natural sciences)

### Social Sciences

Psychology

Geography and Environmental Sciences (social sciences)

Architecture, Building and Planning

Social Sciences (non-specific)

Law

Business and Management

Education and Teaching

Arts and Humanities

Humanities and Liberal Arts (non-specific)

Communications and Media

Language and Area Studies

Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies

Creative Arts and Design

Other (General and Combined Studies)

Combined and general Studies

General and Other Sciences

## Appendix L

### Correlations used

Although these statistics were later abandoned, I present here the methods with which I attempted to draw correlations from the data.

To check whether correlations exist between age and ordinal religiosity variables, **Kendall's tau-b** correlation coefficient (KCC) was employed, as the data are non-parametric. KCC is considered to be more precise than Spearman's rho with smaller samples. With the Cathedrals Group sample being only 26 responses, this was an important consideration and Kendall's tau fit this size (May & Looney, 2022). Furthermore, KCC works better for a large number of tied ranks and is also considered less sensitive to error (Field, 2013) thus it was chosen over the more commonly used Spearman's rho test, despite the fact KCC tends to result in smaller values (ibid).

For correlations with dichotomous identity variables, such as gender or part-time/full-time study modes, **point-biserial correlations** were run, using Pearson's correlation (Field, 2013).

**Appendix M**

**Central University Research Ethics Committee**  
**(CUREC) ethical approval**

**From:** Joshua McGrane  
**Sent:** Tuesday, May 11, 2021 12:44  
**To:** Szilvi Watson  
**Cc:** Student CUREC; Liam Gearon; Alis Oancea  
**Subject:** Re: DPhil Education CUREC application for Szilvia Watson

Dear Szilvia,

Title: "The experiences of Christian postgraduate students at universities in England"

The above application (reference number ED-CIA-21-232) has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been granted.

If your research involves participants whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question (this includes those under 18 and vulnerable adults), then it is advisable to read the following NSPCC professional reporting requirements for cases of suspected abuse [http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/questions/reporting\\_child\\_abuse\\_wda74908.html](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/questions/reporting_child_abuse_wda74908.html)

Should there be any subsequent changes to the project which raise ethical issues not covered in the original application you should submit details to [research.office@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:research.office@education.ox.ac.uk) for consideration.

N.B. Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date [COVID-19 fieldwork risk assessment](#) in place. Please refer to the guidance at <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/coronavirus> as the [University's position on conducting in-person research may change](#).

Good luck with your research study.

Yours sincerely,  
Joshua McGrane  
Member of DREC

## Appendix N

### Data management plan

#### Data Collection

##### What data will you collect or create?

#### Interviews

It is expected that 60-70 interviews will take place, creating significant amount of audio recordings and transcription text.

If interviews will be conducted in person (preferred choice), they will be recorded on my telephone hard disc. If limited by Covid restrictions, interviews will be conducted through Teams or other safe platform and audio-recorded within the app. In this case, a Data Protection Impact Assessment may need to be carried out<sup>24</sup>. Recordings (mp3) will be transferred to an end-to-end encrypted transcribing software. No public wifi will be used for such transfers. Transcriptions will be downloaded, saved as Microsoft Word (.docx) – as accepted by UK Data Services guidance – and stored on the University's OneDrive365 Server and on a password-protected external hard drive. .Doc is a widely used and acceptable text format and will aid editing and sharing data.

Both audio recordings and transcripts will be transferred immediately after recording or downloading to the above two places of storage and erased from phone or personal computer.

#### Online material about inclusion/diversity/equality

For my case studies, I will study university websites about their diversity and equality policies and practices. Some of this material might be copied into Microsoft word documents (.docx) for further study and potential anonymised quoting. All such documents will be saved under pseudonyms and stored on University of Oxford OneDrive secure server and on a password-protected external hard drive. Data will not be stored on personal computer. As this is public information and not personal, its very low risk but will be handled with ample care.

---

<sup>24</sup> <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/files/data-protection-and-research-0>

## **Questionnaire**

An online questionnaire of 45 questions will be created and distributed through the JISC Online Surveys platform, the preferred platform of the University. I expect to collect between 250-500 responses.

No personally identifiable data will be collected.

I will be the only person with access to the survey responses. Login to the account will be secure. Respondents' IP addresses will be regularly and permanently deleted even while the survey is live. No respondent list will be created.

Once the survey has closed, data will be exported to SPSS, where all analysis will take place. Data will be cleared (e.g. partial answers deleted, checking for outliers, etc.) and anonymity (lack of IP addresses) double checked at this point.

Total volume of data collected is expected to be well under 1GB

## **How will the data be collected or created?**

Interview data will be either personally collected at the case study universities, or online through Teams. Documentary data will be collected through web-browsing. Questionnaire data will be collected online, using JISC.

## **Documentation and Metadata**

### **What documentation and metadata will accompany the data?**

Detailed documentation of the data will be available in the thesis, the basis of which this data-set will form. This will explain how and by whom the data was collected, what methods were used for collection and analysis in each data strand. Furthermore, there may be articles and a report published based on this project, all with further documentation of procedures and results.

A research diary will be kept throughout the project to document decisions made and steps taken. If data collected is suitable, it will be made available through open sources in the spirit of Open Access.

## Ethics and Legal Compliance

### How will you manage any ethical issues?

Religiosity is a protected characteristic according to the 2010 Equality Act and is classed as sensitive research data according to GDPR<sup>25</sup>.

Participants will be provided an information sheet regarding the study and will be fully aware of its nature and content, i.e. the sensitive subject. They will be asked to sign an informed consent sheet, which will be double checked orally and they will be given opportunity to ask any questions, raise concerns or quit at any point during the project.

Students may become upset talking about difficulties caused by their religious identity. In such a case I will remind them that they are not obliged to continue. If I find that they are deeply affected by a situation, I may need to encourage them to seek further help. If they ask for more conversation, I will have to refer them on to relevant parties – both for lack of expertise and for research integrity.

Interview data will be fully anonymised, including names and participating institutions, to protect interviewees' identity and privacy. IP addresses will be permanently deleted and institutions anonymised for survey responses.

Electronic data will be stored on University protected Nexus 365 and a pin-protected external drive. All files containing personal information will be password protected. Passwords will only be known to myself.

**Consent records** – Electronic consent records will be stored Nexus 365 and backed up to PIN protected external drive.

Paper consent records will be transferred to my personal office at home and securely stored in a file only accessible to me.

**Online consent** – Online consent will be obtained through the survey software JISC. These will be stored on Nexus 365 and a PIN protected external drive. No IP address will be stored from these surveys and thus participants will not be identifiable, with two exceptions. If they give their name and contact details to be contacted for interview or to be entered into the prize-draw. In this case, this personal data will be collected in a separate, password-protected file and deleted from the survey data immediately.

**Contact details for research purposes only** – These will be stored in a password-protected file on Nexus 365 and a PIN protected external drive and will only be accessible to myself.

---

<sup>25</sup> <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/policy/data#collapse470511>

**Contact details kept for future studies** – These will be stored in a password-protected file on Nexus 365 and a PIN protected external drive.

**Audio recordings** – Audio recordings will be stored on the recording device hard drive and backed up onto Nexus 365. There is a small chance of risk of data privacy in the transcription process. NVivo Transcription data is encrypted both in transit and at rest and only the account owner has access to and control over their data. QSR uses Microsoft Azure cloud services hosted in the EU. This is fully GDPR compliant and has been approved by the University for previous research.

**Transcript of audio recordings** – Transcripts will be created and analysed in NVivo and thus not printed. They will be stored on Nexus 365 and a PIN protected external drive.

**Questionnaire answers** – Questionnaires will be conducted online. Data will be exported into SPSS, running on my personal computer, not in a cloud. No IP address will be stored, participants will not be identifiable. Data will be backed up to Nexus 365 and a PIN protected external drive.

#### **How will you manage copyright and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) issues?**

According to the University's Statute XVI, Part B, Sub-Section 3<sup>26</sup>, the University does not have intellectual property right to this research. Results will not be patentable or have commercial value, and will be created by a student member.

Publications of results may be subject to publishers' copyrights.

The thesis will be openly available through ORA.

Storage and Backup

---

<sup>26</sup> <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/statute-xvi-property-contracts-and-trusts#collapse1383596>

### **How will the data be stored and backed up during the research?**

As described above, data will be stored in two places. In OneDrive for Business, the secure cloud storage provided by the University, and on a pin-protected, encrypted external hard-drive. Only I will have access to both and passwords will not be shared with any third parties.

Backup will take place regularly – daily in time of fieldwork, twice weekly in time of analysis and write-up. Data transfer will only take place through end-to-end encrypted providers.

HFS backup service will be utilised when the system will be updated for the latest IOS.

Paper-based data, such as paper questionnaire and consent forms will be stored in a safe place in my house, with no access to anyone else.

### **How will you manage access and security?**

Only I will have access to all research data.

Everything will be password protected and passwords will only be known to me.

Paper documents will be safely stored in my study without access to anyone else.

Selection and Preservation

### **Which data are of long-term value and should be retained, shared, and/or preserved?**

Questionnaire answers/statistical data may be useful for future researchers, however small the sample might be, especially as no such data-set exists to date. Its relevance, however, may expire in 10 years, thus this seems an appropriate time for preservation.

Interview data will be stored for the required 3 years, but is not considered useful for longer preservation. Its findings will be published, and accessible via such articles and reports for other researchers, but the nature of raw interview data makes it very inconvenient for other researchers to use. Furthermore, recordings will not be made available and will be destroyed as soon as University regulations allow, as they are sensitive and potentially make interviewees identifiable.

### **What is the long-term preservation plan for the dataset?**

Data-sets deemed useful for further research will be deposited in the ORA-Data repository<sup>27</sup> until they reach 10 years post-collection.

---

<sup>27</sup> <https://www2.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bdlss/digital-services/data-archiving>

## Data Sharing

### **How will you share the data?**

Data will be deposited to ORA-Data upon concluding the project, i.e. after handing in the thesis. I will make sure the data-set is in its final state before depositing it, in order for a DOI to be assigned to it.

I hope to be publishing in journals from the research findings. If people are interested in further details of data not included in the relevant articles, it will be also available upon request via email.

Before making survey data publicly available, I will run a disclosure assessment, identifying variables which may potentially lead to identification of respondents. For example, university combined with subject and year of study may be a risk of identification. Steps such as coding all universities into the 5 types the project will be working with will minimize such risks.

Consent for data sharing will be sought before survey is filled in. IP addresses will be permanently deleted upon collection. No directly identifiable data, such as name, address or email address will be collected. Responses will all be coded into ID variable. Outliers in certain categories will be re-coded into 'other' or less identifiable variable.

### **Are any restrictions on data sharing required?**

No restrictions on the data sharing are required after the above procedures of ensuring anonymisation have been adhered to.

## Responsibilities and Resources

### **Who will be responsible for data management?**

The data management plan will be revised and updated by myself and my supervisor periodically until completion.

At the end of the project, when data is deposited into ORA-Data, a data steward will be named.

### **What resources will you require to deliver your plan?**

At this point, an external drive with pin-protection and enough data capacity is the only resource to be paid for.

If the data repository is no longer a free service the University offers when the time comes to deposit the data, this cost will have to be covered, however at the time of writing this service is free.

## Appendix O

### Participant consent form

1. What is your name?

2. Can you confirm that you have read the information about this study at <https://www.christianpostgrads.org/privacy-and-data-management> and had the opportunity to consider the information?

- Yes
- No

3. Do you have any further questions regarding the study before we talk?

- Yes
- No

3.a Please enter questions regarding privacy and other issues regarding the project. We will aim to discuss these before or at the beginning of our conversation with you. You will also have an opportunity to ask questions when we speak.

4. Can you confirm that you understand that your participation is voluntary and that you are free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without your legal rights being affected? As long as you let me know by the 31st of August, 2022, you may also withdraw your data retrospectively.

- Yes
- No

5. Do you give permission for the interview to be audio recorded?

- Yes
- No

6. Do you agree for information to be collected about your religion?

- Yes
- No

7. Do you give permission to be re-contacted in order to clarify information if needed?

- Yes
- No

Thank you for filling in the consent form.