

Faith and Belief on Campus: Division and Cohesion

Exploring student faith and belief societies

Simon Perfect, Ben Ryan and Kristin Aune



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Theos Licence Department
77 Great Peter Street
London SW1P 2EZ

+44 (0) 20 7828 7777
hello@theosthinktank.co.uk
theosthinktank.co.uk



Report

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Dr Kristin Aune

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Any errors are, of course, our own.

Simon Perfect, Ben Ryan and Dr Kristin Aune

June 2019



Introduction

Universities have become a microcosm of broader societal clashes on the role of religion or belief in the public square.

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Universities have become a microcosm of broader societal clashes on the role of religion or belief in the public square.

The place of religion or belief is increasingly contested, both as an academic subject and in terms of its presence on campus.

On the one hand, religion or belief matters are very prominent on campus. Faith and belief service provision in the form of faith centres and chaplaincies is growing (including chaplaincy to the non-

religious).¹ Additionally, in response to government equality and counter-terrorism legislation, universities are expected to play a significant role in taking religion or belief seriously and combating extremism.

Yet on the other hand, there is an increasing trend of hostility towards religious groups on campus, with some faith and belief societies coming under pressure and facing

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Islamic Societies are particularly in the spotlight and some have been accused of being hotbeds of extremism.

heightened scrutiny of events, audiences and speakers. Islamic Societies are particularly in the spotlight and some have been accused of being hotbeds of extremism.² Other societies, including Christian societies, also report experiencing hostility.³

Religion or belief issues are also central to controversies on campus. In November 2015, for example, a row broke out at Goldsmiths, University of London,

over the decision of the Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society to invite the controversial secularist Maryam Namazie, spokesperson of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, to deliver a lecture. During the lecture she was disrupted by male members of the Islamic society, who subsequently received rather surprising support from the Feminist Society on the basis that hosting an “Islamophobe” speaker was “creating a climate of hatred”.⁴

Other rows reported in the media include an event on abortion at the University of Oxford between journalists Tim Stanley and Brendan O'Neill being blocked on ‘safety’ grounds after a concerted campaign against the event since it allegedly threatened the safety and welfare of female students.⁵ In March 2013, an event at University College London at which a group called Islamic Education and Research Academy (IERA) were segregating audiences, led to the group being banned from campus.⁶

These controversies often revolve around the tension between the right to freedom of speech (of students, staff and speakers), and the understandable desire of some students to protect minority groups from speech and behaviour they consider harmful. The perception that freedom of speech is becoming restricted across society, but particularly in educational institutions, has become a *cause célèbre* in recent years, with frequent opinion polls attempting to measure the extent of free speech in different sectors, including in universities.⁷

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52% of British adults think that freedom of speech is under threat in universities.

Indeed, in January 2019, YouGov conducted a poll for Theos of the British public’s beliefs about the state of freedom of speech in UK universities. 52% of British adults think that freedom of speech is under threat in universities, compared to only 14% who disagree. When asked about what universities should do regarding freedom of speech, 44% think they should adopt a maximalist approach and should always support freedom of speech within the law – even for extreme speakers. A smaller proportion (35%) think that there are some views that are so offensive that universities shouldn’t allow them. Meanwhile, a sizeable minority of people – 29% – think ‘Islamic extremism’ is common in UK universities.⁸

So significant has this become that successive university ministers and the new Office for Students have named it as a key concern, while Parliament’s Joint Committee on Human Rights and the Equality and Human Rights Commission have both taken evidence and produced reports.⁹

All this comes in the context of complex legal uncertainties (explored further in Chapter 6) that leave universities, students’ unions and students in a double bind. They are accused, on the one hand, of unfairly restricting freedom of speech for legitimate voices (especially politically and socially conservative voices) on campus and, on the other, of giving *too much* freedom to voices deemed to be illegitimate or dangerous. Universities have become a battleground in a much larger culture war.

Despite this media heat, there is very little published research on student faith and belief societies.¹⁰ The place of faith and belief on campus is becoming more contested, but there has been little attempt to understand the nature of that contested space, nor much by way of constructive attempts to

address the problems. More broadly, the argument is over what sort of a public square universities and faith and belief groups want to create, and how free expression and safety can both be guaranteed.

This taps into a broader dispute about the nature of a liberal society. Most people agree that we want society as a whole to be marked by freedom of speech, debate and association, and to be open and hospitable to people of different views and backgrounds, without at the same time sacrificing its security or condoning obnoxious or threatening views. In this regard, universities are a microcosm of this wider debate, providing a defined and often intense arena for such difference and debate, while also helping form the leaders and citizens of the future. The question of how universities accommodate and deal with difference and debate, and, in particular, religious difference and debate, is a critical one, the canary in the coalmine of a liberal society.

Outline of the report

This report is an attempt to add some depth to a debate which has had plenty of attention, but little substantive research on what faith and belief societies on campus actually are, what they do, who their members are, how they relate to universities and students' unions and what all of this means for universities as public spaces. If we want to see cohesive campuses – places with strong, harmonious relations between groups and where

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barriers and stereotypes that prevent mutual understanding are broken down – then a greater understanding of the role and contribution of these societies will be crucial for the higher education sector as a whole.

To that end this research includes both quantitative and qualitative research that seeks to answer three sets of critical questions:

- What role do faith and belief societies play on their campuses? Who are the members, what do they do, and how do they work with their key stakeholders (students, staff, university managers, students’ unions and chaplaincies)?
- How do faith and belief societies address the key issues with which they are concerned: including nurturing and promoting their religious identity, campaigning about particular causes, ensuring freedom of speech and maintaining good relations with those outside their society?
- How effective are faith and belief societies, and what lessons can be learned to enable universities to foster more peaceful relations and a liberal public space on campus?

Chapter 1 offers a statistical overview of the student religion or belief landscape and Chapter 2 outlines the methodology of our research. Chapter 3 explores the quantitative results of two surveys and an internet search exercise, and provides evidence of the remarkable spread faith and belief societies. There are at least 888 such societies containing more than 18,000 members currently operating in UK universities. These data are explored according to different

categories of university and across a wide spectrum of faith and beliefs.


Chapters 4, 5 and 6 draw on qualitative interviews and observations in six case study universities, with more than 70 students from across a wide range of faith and belief societies. Chapter 4 examines the activities and appeal of these faith and belief societies and their contribution to campus life. Chapter 5 considers the challenges and difficulties faced by these societies and Chapter 6 looks at the related issue of how they confront difficult and controversial issues including proselytism, extremism and the Prevent Duty, and worrying evidence of Antisemitism and Islamophobia.

Chapter 7 draws these issues together with a discussion of the critical role of faith and belief societies in providing the 'social capital' that, were it properly harnessed by universities and students' unions, might go a long way to resolve many of the challenges outlined above. Chapter 8 offers recommendations for the future of the sector.

- 1 Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest and Jeremy Law, *Chaplains on Campus: Understanding Chaplaincy in UK Universities*. Coventry University, Durham University and Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019. www.churchofengland.org/chaplainsoncampus; David Savage, *Non-Religious Pastoral Care: A Practical Guide* (London: Routledge, 2018).
- 2 In 2014, the government’s Extremism Analysis Unit named 70 cases of universities hosting extreme Muslim speakers, although the reliability of this research has been challenged. David Matthews, ‘Government names universities hosting ‘extremist’ speakers’, *The Times*, 17 September 2015. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/government-names-universities-hosting-extremist-speakers>
- 3 Kristin Aune and Mathew Guest, ‘The contested campus: Christian students in UK universities’, in *Religion and Higher Education in Europe and North America*, Kristin Aune and Jacqueline Stevenson eds. (London: Routledge, Society for Research into Higher Education, 2017), pp. 71–89.
- 4 Aftab Ali ‘Muslim students from Goldsmiths University’s Islamic Society “heckle, and aggressively interrupt” Maryam Namazie talk’, *The Independent*, 4 December 2015. <https://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/muslim-students-from-goldsmiths-university-s-islamic-society-heckle-and-aggressively-interrupt-a6760306.html>
- 5 Tim Stanley, ‘Oxford students shut down abortion debate. Free speech is under assault on campus’, *The Telegraph*, 19 November 2014. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/11239437/Oxford-students-shut-down-abortion-debate-Free-speech-is-under-assault-on-campus.html>
- 6 David Batty, ‘UCL bans Islamic group from campus in row over segregated seating’, *The Guardian*, 15 March 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/15/ucl-bans-islamic-group-over-segregation>
- 7 Nick Hillman, *Keeping Schtum? What students think of free speech*. HEPI Report no. 85, 2016. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Hepi_Keeping-Schtum-Report-85-Web.pdf; Matthew Smith, ‘Are students really more hostile to free speech?’ *YouGov*, 27 June 2018. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2018/06/27/are-students-really-more-hostile-free-speech>
- 8 The poll was conducted by YouGov with 2,041 adults on 17–18 January 2019. Theos / YouGov, ‘Freedom of speech in universities polling’, 17–18 January 2019. <https://www.theothinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/articles/research/YouGov-Theos---Universities-free-speech-2019.xlsx>
- 9 House of Commons and House of Lords, Joint Committee on Human Rights, *Freedom of Speech in Universities, Fourth Report of Session 2017–19*, 27 March 2018. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201719/jtselect/jtrights/589/589.pdf> Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Freedom of Expression: A Guide for*

Education Providers and Students' Unions in England and Wales, February 2019.
<https://equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/freedom-expression-guide-higher-education-providers-and-students-unions-england>.

- 10 Exceptions include Lydia Reid, 'Navigating the secular: religious students' experiences of attending a red-brick university', in *Religion and Higher Education in Europe and North America*, Kristin Aune and Jacqueline Stevenson, eds. pp. 149-62; Miri Song, 'Part of the British mainstream? British Muslim students and Islamic Student Associations', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 15, 2 (2012) pp. 143-60; Jasjit Singh, 'Samosas and simran: university Sikh societies in Britain', in *Religion and Higher Education in Europe and North America*, Kristin Aune and Jacqueline Stevenson eds. pp. 123-34; Jonathan Boyd, *Searching for Community: A Portrait of Undergraduate Jewish Students in Five UK Cities* (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 2016). https://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/Searching_for_community_-_UJS_report_Dec_2016.pdf and Edward Dutton, *Meeting Jesus at University: Rites of Passage and Student Evangelicals* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishers, 2008).



1. The religion or belief student landscape

What do we know about the student population in terms of religion or belief? In this chapter we explore the available demographic data, and consider how religious students compare to their non-religious friends in terms of their social attitudes.

Demographic data

Data published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) show that in 2017-18, 2.3 million students were enrolled in Higher Education Institution (HEIs) in the UK, of whom 1.8 million were undergraduates and 567,000 were postgraduates.¹ Until recently, it has been difficult to provide an accurate estimate of the religious affiliation of these students. Although HESA routinely publishes statistics on student enrolments by age group, disability status, ethnicity and sex of students and has collected data on religion or belief based on the self-assessment of students since 2012/13, it does not routinely publish this information.² However, data on religious affiliation collected by HESA based on voluntary returns from HEIs are now published by the Advance HE (formerly Equality Challenge Unit) in its annual *Equality in Higher Education: Students Statistical Report*.³

The table below shows the religious affiliation of enrolled students in 2016-17, based on the 134 out of 167 HEIs which returned information to HESA.⁴ In total, 1.85 million students were located in HEIs which returned data on the religious affiliation of their students. Of these, 1.31 million students provided information on their religion or

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Among students in the UK in 2016-17, 49.5% stated that they had no religion, 33.9% that they were Christians and 8.4% that they were Muslims.

belief. Among students in the UK in 2016-17, 49.5% stated that they had no religion, 33.9% that they were Christians and 8.4% that they were Muslims (excluding those students who either left the question blank or refused to provide the information).⁵

Religious affiliation of students in Higher Education Institutions, 2016-17		
	Number	%
No religion	646,455	34.9
Christian	443,090	23.9
Muslim	110,140	5.9
Hindu	25,690	1.4
Buddhist	25,485	1.4
Any other religion or belief	22,015	1.2
Spiritual	18,325	1.0
Sikh	10,395	0.6
Jewish	5,610	0.3
Blank	422,180	22.8
Information refused	125,300	6.8
Total	1,854,690	100
Number of institutions returning data	134	
Number of students in institutions returning data	1,854,690	
Total number of HEIs	167	
Total number of students	2,317,880	

Notes: Data are for 1,854,690 students in the 134 institutions returning data.

Source: Advance HE, 2018, Tables 6.1 and 6.5.

The table below shows that women comprised 56.7% of all students and men 43.3%, and that women now comprise at least half of students in all religion or belief groups. Compared with the overall average of 56.7%, a higher proportion of those describing themselves as Spiritual (67.1%), Christian (63.4%) and Buddhist (60.5%) were female. Conversely, a higher proportion of Muslims (50.0%) and Hindus (48.7%) were male than the overall average of 43.3%.

Religious affiliation of students by gender in Higher Education Institutions, 2016-17				
	Female	Male	% Female	% Male
No religion	354,515	291,595	54.9	45.1
Christian	280,740	162,255	63.4	36.6
Muslim	55,110	55,010	50.0	50.0
Hindu	13,170	12,515	51.3	48.7
Buddhist	15,405	10,065	60.5	39.5
Any other religion or belief	11,990	9,990	54.5	45.5
Spiritual	12,275	6,025	67.1	32.9
Sikh	5,570	4,820	53.6	46.4
Jewish	3,095	2,510	55.2	44.8
Blank	494,695	390,065	55.9	44.1
Information refused	67,195	57,960	53.7	46.3
Total	1,314,035	1,002,820	56.7	43.3

Notes: Data are for 2,316,855 students in all 167 institutions.

Source: Advance HE, 2018, Table 6.14.

The table below shows that White people comprised 77.3% of all UK domiciled students and BME people 22.7%. As is to be expected, compared with the overall average, a higher than average proportion of those describing themselves as Sikh

(99.6%), Hindu (99.4%), Muslim (96.5%) and Buddhist (31.1%) were BME. Conversely, a lower than average proportion of those describing themselves as of no religion (7.8%) or Jewish (8.6%) were BME.

Religious affiliation of students by ethnicity in Higher Education Institutions, 2016-17				
	White	Black and Ethnic Minority	% White	% BME
No religion	506,940	42,930	92.2	7.8
Christian	288,760	85,190	77.2	22.8
Muslim	2,840	78,105	3.5	96.5
Hindu	105	17,185	0.6	99.4
Buddhist	9,695	4,380	68.9	31.1
Any other religion or belief	12,805	3,675	77.7	22.3
Spiritual	12,030	3,545	77.2	22.8
Sikh	40	9,590	0.4	99.6
Jewish	3,990	375	91.4	8.6
Blank	515,190	157,635	76.6	23.4
Information refused	73,275	16,500	81.6	18.4
Total	1,425,665	419,105	77.3	22.7

Notes: Data are for 1,844,770 UK domiciled students in all 167 institutions.

Source: Advance HE, 2018, Table 6.13.

These data show that those of no religion therefore make up the largest single group on university campuses although, as other research has shown, there are huge differences in the beliefs of the ‘nones’ and that most are not straightforwardly secular.⁶ Moreover, as the first table above shows, those with a religion or belief slightly outnumber those of no religion in HEIs, assuming – and this may well be an unwarranted

assumption – that the large number of students who did not answer the question can be equally divided between those with and those without a religion.

Religious students and social conservatism

Socially progressive views on gender and sexuality are the prevailing norm on campus. Religious students are often assumed to be more socially conservative than non-religious ones. While that is often true, naturally the picture is more complex.

If we take Christian students' views on sexuality as an example, a major survey of over 2,500 Christian students, conducted in 2010-11 for the *Christianity in the University Experience* project by Guest et al, found that among self-identifying Christian students, 36% believed that homosexual sex is sometimes or always wrong, compared to just 6% of students identifying as having no religion. That said, nearly two thirds of Christian students thought it was either 'not wrong at all', 'rarely wrong' or were not sure, suggesting that a liberal position is much more common than a conservative one. In addition, Christian students are more liberal on the issue of homosexual sex than the general population of Christians in Britain as a whole (excluding Northern Ireland). As with their non-religious peers, Christian young people are generally becoming more liberal as time goes on.⁷

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Strikingly, Guest et al concluded that non-religious students appeared to be unusually liberal compared to the British population as a whole, with almost double the proportion of non-religious students saying that homosexual sex is ‘not wrong at all’ compared to the general population.⁸



As with their non-religious peers, Christian young people are generally becoming more liberal as time goes on.


When it comes to gender issues, Guest et al found that the vast majority of Christian students believe that women should have the same opportunities as men to contribute to church leadership. However, among those students who were frequent churchgoers, at home and during term-time, 20% disagreed with gender equality in church

leadership, a higher proportion than among other Christian students.⁹ This issue has sporadically reached public attention in cases where Christian Unions have been reported as blocking women speakers at events. One such widely reported case was at the University of Bristol in 2012,¹⁰ but it is an issue which has flared up sporadically over a number of years. It is worth noting that guidelines from both students’ unions and the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF, the umbrella organisation for Christian Unions), are clear in stating that such approaches are not permissible under the Equality Act 2010, a point noted by several Christian Union interviewees in this project. More generally it appears that the frequency of church attendance, as well as other factors like the students’ religious denomination, made a significant difference as to how conservative they were.¹¹

It is possible to conclude from these data that there is much greater diversity of opinion on these issues among

Christian students than among those identifying as having no religion. We can assume the same is the case among students of other religions. While the prevailing norm remains more progressive than the population at large, a substantial minority disagree with the social progressivism of their non-religious peers. As we see in Chapter 6, such disagreements can be sources of tension on campus.

- 1 Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), ‘Who’s studying in HE?’. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he>
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- 6 Linda Woodhead, ‘The rise of “no religion” in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority’, *Journal of the British Academy*, 4 (2016), pp. 245-61. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/11%20Woodhead%201825.pdf>; Stephen Bullivant, ‘The “no religion” population of Britain’, *Catholic Research Forum Reports* 3 (2015). <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2017-may-no-religion-report.pdf>
- 7 Mathew Guest, Kristin Aune, Sonya Sharma and Rob Warner, *Christianity and the University Experience: Understanding Student Faith* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 116-17 (online edition). For a brief overview of the survey, see also Kristin Aune and Mathew Guest, ‘The contested campus: Christian students in UK universities’, in *Religion and Higher Education in Europe and North America*, Kristin Aune and Jacqueline Stevenson eds. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017) p. 73.
- 8 Guest et al, *Christianity and the University Experience*, pp. 116-17.
- 9 Guest et al, *Christianity and the University Experience*, p. 193.
- 10 See for example, Steven Morris, ‘Bristol University Christian Union bars women from teaching’, *The Guardian*, 4 December 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/04/bristol-university-christian-union-women>
- 11 Guest et al, *Christianity and the University Experience*, pp. 193-94.



2. Methodology

This research was undertaken to address the fundamental issue of how faith and belief societies can help foster more socially cohesive and peaceful campuses. More specifically, the research looked to answer the following questions:

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This research was undertaken to address the fundamental issue of how faith and belief societies can help foster more socially cohesive and peaceful campuses.

- What role do faith and belief communities play on campus? Who are the members of the societies, how do they operate and how do they relate to other university bodies and services?
- How do these societies address key issues including supporting religion or belief identities, campaigning, promoting good relations with others and ensuring freedom of speech?
- How effective are these societies and what lessons can be learnt to help them contribute to greater cohesiveness on campus?

To answer these questions we undertook both quantitative and qualitative research. We conducted a national quantitative overview, which we believe is the first attempt to map all the faith and belief societies currently operating in British universities. The qualitative research included interviews and observations in six case study universities. The fieldwork was carried out between December 2017 and May 2019.

Quantitative

The purpose of the quantitative research was to identify the full spread of faith and belief societies currently operating in British and Northern Irish universities. This included both

mapping the total number of such societies and attempting to ascertain the number of students who are active members, and how that varies across different types of university.

To do this we conducted three exercises. We began by searching the websites of every students' union and university to identify any faith and belief societies that were listed as operating. We also attempted to use social media to identify any active societies which were not listed on students' union or university websites. This covered all societies of a specifically religious character (e.g. Christian Union, Islamic Society) as well as interfaith and faith discussion societies (including both explicitly interfaith societies, and societies which are primarily grounded within one tradition but which engage in debates and discussions around the nature of religion and belief more broadly).

We did not include national or cultural societies, though on many campuses there is a significant overlap within some of those societies between religious and cultural activities (and sometimes in membership too). In more than one university, for example, the terminology of Indian and Hindu Societies was effectively interchangeable, with the former hosting religious meetings and major religious events (e.g. Diwali celebrations) and the latter hosting celebrations of India's Independence Day. We noted that complexity, but did not include national or cultural societies unless it was absolutely clear that they had a religion or belief basis. We included secularist, humanist and ex-Muslim societies, as we consider these to be societies which have an interest or focus on religion or belief structures at their heart.

As explained below, there are clear limitations to this approach so we supplemented it with two surveys. One survey

was sent to students’ unions to ask them to provide their latest data on the societies affiliated to them and the membership and activity of those societies. The second survey was sent to national parent organisations (such as BOSS, the British Organisation of Sikh Students and UCCF, the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship – the overarching body of Christian Unions), again asking for their data on affiliated members and their activities. Both surveys are explained in more detail in the next chapter.

The aim of these three different approaches was to present the most accurate picture possible of the work of faith and belief societies in a difficult landscape in which student membership is, by its very nature, constantly fluctuating, with societies forming and dissolving year-on-year with sometimes quite dramatic membership growth or decline. Our report presents a snapshot of the situation at the end of 2018 which is as accurate as possible.

Qualitative

The qualitative phase of the research aimed to provide more detailed information on the three key questions presented above and to hear the views of a range of students across different universities and faith and belief backgrounds. We selected six case study universities which were designed to provide a range of geographical locations, different ethnic compositions of the student body (our case studies range in terms of ethnicity between one university with an undergraduate make-up that is more than 90% White British, to one which is less than 50% White British) and different categories of university (see below).¹

In order to provide an indication of how the dynamics of faith and belief work in different university contexts, we used

the categories introduced by Guest et al in the *Christianity and the University Experience* project.²

	Category Description	Typical characteristics
Category 1	Traditional, elite universities ('Traditional Elite')	Foundation in 19th Century or earlier Typically significantly smaller proportion of state school educated students than other categories
Category 2	Inner-city redbrick universities ('Red Brick')	Foundation in early 20th Century Located in large cities
Category 3	1960s campus universities ('1960s Campus')	Foundation in 1960s Purpose-built campuses
Category 4	Post-1992 universities, former polytechnics ('Post-1992')	Granted university status since 1992, actual foundation can be much earlier Location variable, can include both purpose-built out-of-town campuses and city centre locations Students overwhelmingly state school educated
Category 5	Cathedrals Group universities ('Cathedrals Group')	Universities and university colleges with church foundation Granted university status after 1992, founded in late 19th Century Students overwhelmingly state school educated

Our case studies included one university from each of these categories in England, plus a sixth case study carried out at a Scottish elite, traditional university.

It should be noted that these categories are not ideal, and that some universities may not fall as easily as others into them. But by using these categories, we can compare findings with other research which uses them.

At each case study we carried out a series of semi-structured interviews. The original plan had been to identify three representatives from four separate societies at each university (12 per university). The three interviewees in each society were intended to include one committee member (e.g. society president or secretary), a committed, regular member and an irregular or occasional member. This proved to be difficult to achieve in practice. Particularly with smaller societies (those for example, with a membership of fewer than 10 students), there was no effective difference between the first two categories (a regular member and a committee member ended up being one and the same). For societies that did not meet weekly, or even necessarily once a term, there was also little practical difference between a regular and occasional member. Some societies were large and had regular weekly meetings, but it proved difficult to match that model onto smaller, less established societies. We have attempted to keep the schema as close to the original plan as possible with that caveat in mind.

In some cases it proved difficult to secure three interviewees for each of the societies due to time commitments or the size of societies. In two case studies (the Post-1992 university and the 1960s Campus university), we were only able to secure interviews with three societies due to the limited number of such societies that proved both to be active in practice and willing to participate in the research. In other universities we exceeded the original intention to look at four societies, since additional societies seemed particularly interesting as case studies, and because we were keen to ensure a good spread of faith and belief representation.

During the project as a whole, 27 faith and belief societies in the six case studies provided at least one interviewee and we interviewed a total of 72 students. The breakdown is as follows:

Type of Society	Number of societies	Total members interviewed
Christian		26
Anglican	1	3
Catholic	2	6
Christian Orthodox	1	3
Christian Union	2	6
Christians in Sport	1	2
Just Love	1	3
Pentecostal/Charismatic	1	3
Muslim		14
Ahlul Bayt (Shi'a Islam)	2	4
Islamic	3	10
Hindu	2	5
Humanist	1	3
Interfaith	2	6
Jewish	4	9
Sikh	3	8
Yoga	1	1
TOTAL	27	72

The interviewees were evenly split by gender (37 women and 35 men). The overwhelming majority were undergraduates (63). Of these, roughly half were second years (30 of 63), the rest were drawn fairly equally from first years (14) and finalists

(18, including both third and fourth years). One student’s status did not fit any of these categories.

During the case studies we also interviewed nine other people, who included university and students’ union employees, students’ union elected officials and chaplains who had a particular perspective on the activity and role of faith and belief societies.

In addition to the interviews, we also conducted participant observations. Members of the research team attended meetings, lectures and events put on by a number of faith and belief societies to seek information on the societies’ role, their methods of addressing their key issues (religious identity, campaigning, good campus relations and freedom of speech), and their effectiveness. The breakdown of these observations was as follows:

Type of Society	Number of observations across case studies
Anglican	1
Bahá’í	1
Catholic	2
Charismatic/Pentecostal	3
Christian Union	2
Christians in Sport	1
Hindu	1
Islamic	1
Jewish	1
Just Love	1
Sikh	1
TOTAL	15

Finally, these case studies were supplemented by interviews with five representatives of national umbrella organisations:

- Faith & Belief Forum (formerly known as the Three Faiths Forum)
- Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS)
- Humanist Students
- Student Christian Movement (SCM)
- Union of Jewish Students (UJS)
- Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF)

These interviews aimed to provide information on the work and contribution of faith and belief societies at a national level.

- 1 For data on the ethnic composition of university populations, see Institute for Policy Research, ‘Appendix of Tables’, in *Diverse Places of Learning? Home neighbourhood ethnic diversity & ethnic composition of universities*, 2014-15. <https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/diverse-places-of-learning-home-neighbourhood-ethnic-diversity-ethnic-composition-of-universities/>
- 2 Mathew Guest, Kristin Aune, Sonya Sharma and Rob Warner, *Christianity and the University Experience: Understanding Student Faith* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).



3. Mapping faith and belief societies nationally

One of the intentions of this research project was to identify the scale and spread of faith and belief societies currently operating in UK universities. In order to establish this, we attempted three different exercises. First, we searched the websites and related social media accounts of every students’ union in the UK to identify each faith and belief society that is currently in existence. This took place in the summer of 2018.

The exercise provided us with the broadest possible range of data, since it encompassed each university in the country. However, it was also limited in so far as it relied on students’ unions and societies having an up-to-date and accurate internet presence. The nature of student societies (particularly smaller ones) is that they tend to come and go, and websites and social media presence often lag behind the reality. Furthermore, though this exercise gave us a good idea of the range of societies, it did not give us an indication of their relative size or activity.

For this reason we also conducted a second exercise, in which we surveyed students’ unions. We asked questions about how many, and which, faith and belief societies were present on campus; about the membership and activities of these societies; and about how these societies interacted with the students’ union. This gave a more in-depth picture than the first exercise, but was limited by the response rate from students’ unions. In all we received 47 responses, representing around a third of all UK universities. Responses were received between December 2017 and November 2018.

As a final exercise, we surveyed national umbrella organisations which support particular types of faith and belief society. Responses were received by the National Secular

Society, the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF – the national body for Christian Unions), the Union of Jewish Students (UJS), Just Love (a nationwide Christian social action movement for students), the British Organisation of Sikh Societies (BOSS), and the Faith & Belief Forum (an interfaith movement, previously known as the Three Faiths Forum). This survey asked the organisations to state in which universities they had an associated student society. They were also asked about their views on the relationships between their associated societies and the students' unions and universities. Responses were received between July 2018 and May 2019.

This three-pronged approach allowed us to gain a sense of the broad context, including how many societies are operating in UK universities and from which religion and belief groups they stem, and also a more in-depth picture derived from the two surveys.

It should be noted that data were gathered over two academic years, 2017-18 and 2018-19. It is possible that data from a students' union might have varied depending on which academic year they responded to our survey, given the annual fluctuation in membership and activity of some student societies.

The big picture

The internet mapping exercise revealed that a total of 888 faith and belief societies operate on UK campuses. The average university in the UK had 6.3 faith and belief societies. It is worth noting that this matches almost exactly the findings from Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest



A total of 888 faith and belief societies operate on UK campuses. The average university in the UK had 6.3 faith and belief societies.

and Jeremy Law’s 2019 *Chaplains on Campus* project, which suggests an average of 6.4 societies across 99 universities as reported by university chaplains.¹ Our figure is drawn from an analysis of 140 universities, which excludes some of the smallest and newest higher education providers. If all higher education providers had been included, the total of faith and belief societies would probably increase, potentially to over 1,000 if the average of 6.3 applied. However, a smaller overall total is actually more likely, since the number of societies varies significantly by university type, and smaller and newer providers are likely to have a lower than average number of societies. This is shown by the number of societies according to university category, derived from the internet mapping exercise:

University type	Total faith and belief societies	Average number of societies
Traditional Elite	188	9*
Red Brick	176	10
1960s Campus	162	6.5
Post-1992	313	5
Cathedrals Group	49	3

* The average increases to 12 if some of the smaller constituent colleges of the University of London (such as those with under 2,000 students) are excluded. Many of these colleges are notable for lacking any student societies of any sort (faith-based or otherwise).

These data show significant differences between different types of university. This is probably in part a reflection of the fact that Cathedrals Group and Post-1992 universities are more likely than other university types to attract students of lower parental income levels, who are significantly more likely to live at home and juggle paid work and study, and thus have less time for student societies. It is also perhaps not surprising that Red Brick and many Traditional Elite universities, which are found

in major cities, should have higher numbers of faith and belief societies; in part this is simply representative of the diverse ethnic and religious make-up of urban areas in the UK. It is also worth noting that Cathedrals Group universities tend to be much smaller than universities in the other categories. Only three members of the group had more than 10,000 enrolled students in 2019, including postgraduates, while seven had fewer than 6,000. The average number of students for a UK university, excluding some small specialist higher education suppliers and the Open University, is currently just under 16,000.²

In general, there is a moderately strong correlation between the size of a university's student enrolment and the number of faith and belief societies found on campus.³ As a broad rule, larger universities have more societies, as might be expected. However, on the whole the type of university seems to be a more significant determining factor than size alone.

We can compare these data derived from the internet mapping exercise with the responses from our survey of students' unions (47 respondents):

University type	Sample size	Total faith and belief societies	Average number of societies
Traditional Elite	6	41	7*
Red Brick	5	60	12
1960s Campus	8	81	10
Post-1992	23	139	6
Cathedrals Group	5	17	3

* The average increases to 12 if smaller constituent colleges are excluded.

It is worth remembering that this constitutes only a third of all universities (and also represents about a third of each university type). However, we can see that the survey

has produced broadly similar results to the internet mapping exercise. The average numbers of societies in each university type derived from the two different exercises are very close, and the order of universities in terms of their average number of societies is the same in the two exercises (with Red Brick universities having the highest average, and Cathedrals Group universities having the lowest).

The students' unions survey data show slightly higher averages than the data from the internet mapping exercise. This may be a product of the sample of survey respondents, or may indicate that the reality of societies on the ground is slightly higher than is apparent from students' union and university websites. This is not impossible given that there was significant variation in the quality and frequency of updates of many of those sites.

From the survey of students' unions, we can see a significant range in the number of societies within each university category:

University type	Lowest	Highest	Median
Traditional Elite	0	31	10
Red Brick	5	22	10.5
1960s Campus	0	16	7.5
Post-1992	1	25	4
Cathedrals Group	0	12	3

It is striking that none of the Red Brick universities in the sample have fewer than five separate faith and belief societies, again pointing to the fact that they are all in major cities with diverse populations. The Traditional Elite university numbers are distorted somewhat by including some small constituent colleges of the University of London which have

few student societies of their own, but instead tend to rely on societies that serve the University of London as a whole. The high scorers in the Post-1992 and Cathedrals Group are, probably not coincidentally, found in London and its environs, again reflecting the extremely diverse ethnic and religious composition of the capital.

The spread of faith and belief societies

By far the most prevalent faith and belief society in any given UK university is a Christian Union. The internet mapping exercise revealed 140 Christian Unions across the 140 universities (it should be noted that some universities had multiple Christian Unions representing different campuses or colleges, or in some cases acting as distinct undergraduate and graduate student societies). Next most common were Islamic Societies, with 102. Seventy-three percent of UK universities had an Islamic Society according to the internet mapping exercise.

The most common societies (all of those with a count of at least 20 across the 140 universities) are shown in the table below, as identified in our internet mapping exercise:

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By far the most prevalent faith and belief society in any given UK university is a Christian Union.

Society	Count
Christian	393
Christian Union	140
Catholic	52
First Love (Pentecostal)	22
Pentecostal/Charismatic/Evangelical (combined count across all societies, not including Christian Unions)	179

Muslim	128
Ahlul Bayt (Shi’a Islam)	26
Islamic	102
Jewish	50
Hindu	47
Sikh	41
Humanist/Atheist/Secular	29
Buddhist	23
Krishna Consciousness	22

Yoga Societies, which would have had a high total, are excluded from the table above since it was not always clear during the internet mapping exercise whether they were understood by their students’ union as being a faith and belief society.

However, the students’ union survey revealed that there were 20 Yoga Societies across the 47 respondent universities, making it the joint third largest behind Christian Unions and Islamic Societies, tied with Catholic Societies.

The many Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical groups were not included in the table separately (except for First Love), since each individual group had less than 20 societies across the sector. However, when all groups are added together, they totalled 179 societies, equivalent to 20% of all faith and belief societies.

Fifty percent of Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical societies are found in Post-1992 universities. This is quite a striking proportion, particularly given that Post-1992 universities tend to have fewer societies than other university types. For example, only 17% of Catholic,

37% of Hindu, and 20% of Jewish Societies are in the Post-1992 universities.

Both the students' union survey and the internet search show that Hindu and Sikh Societies tend to be found in the same university (there were very few cases where a university had a Sikh Society, but no Hindu Society, or vice versa). Similarly, there were no Ahlul Bayt (Shi'a Muslim) Societies except in universities which also had an Islamic Society. Along with Jewish Societies, all these minority religious societies tended to be found in large cities, or in Traditional Elite universities that were in smaller towns.

The Cathedrals Group universities tended, as we have seen, to have far fewer faith and belief societies than other university types. As might be expected of these institutions with historical Christian foundations, they had less variation in the type of faith and belief societies. Indeed only 29% of societies in Cathedrals Group universities were non-Christian, while they make up 48% of faith and belief societies nationally.

We can compare these data with data about the number of societies affiliated with particular national umbrella organisations (such as UCCF or BOSS). This table shows the numbers of affiliated societies provided by the national bodies that responded to our survey. We have also provided the (estimated) numbers of societies affiliated to a selection of other national bodies where known:

Parent organisation survey responses	Count
National Secular Society	13
UCCF: The Christian Unions	128
The Faith and Belief Forum	10 (interfaith teams)
Just Love	28 (7 affiliated to students' unions)
British Organisation of Sikh Students (BOSS)	62
Parent organisation data from other sources	
Union of Jewish Students	Over 60 (includes UK and Ireland) ⁴
Catholic Student Network	57 ⁵
National Hindu Students' Forum	46 ⁶
Muslim Student Council (Ahlul Bayt Societies)	34 ⁷
Federation of Student Islamic Societies	Estimated c. 120 (interview with FOSIS officer)

Interestingly, the survey of national umbrella organisations often indicated that those national bodies thought there were more societies (and in the case of BOSS and Just Love, significantly more) than the internet mapping exercise indicated. In the case of the former, this is probably because for several of the universities in which they had affiliated students, those students joined with students from other universities in the same city, rather than creating a separate society in their own university. This seemed to be relatively common among minority faith groups in large cities with multiple universities (a finding which also arose in interviews). In one case study university, the Sikh Society effectively operated as a hub for three local universities. In another, Jewish students tended to join in the activities of a larger Jewish Society at another local university.

A member of FOSIS (the Federation of Student Islamic Societies) told us that they believed the total number of Islamic Societies to be higher than the 102 figure we identified in our internet mapping exercise (perhaps as many as 120). They noted that there are some Islamic Societies which are not affiliated with FOSIS, for example new and small societies that are not yet fully established.

Just Love presents a different case. The first such society was founded in Oxford as recently in 2013. While Just Love has spread quite quickly into 28 universities (by their umbrella organisation's count), most of these are not affiliated with students' unions, or operate as separate entities within city and town centres rather than as student societies in the usual sense. Our internet mapping exercise of students' union websites returned only three which said they had Just Love Societies.

How big are faith and belief societies?

One of the aims of the students' union survey was to explore the size of faith and belief societies. This turned out to be quite difficult to achieve because recording measures in different students' unions vary significantly (some, for example, keep data only on paid members, while others record data on broader 'sign-ups', including any student who is on a society's mailing list; and many seem to record no data at all). We are, therefore, somewhat limited both by the difference in recording techniques and the overall response rate to our survey (around a third of students' unions responded). The following data should, accordingly, be considered as indicative only.

Society	Average size	Largest single society
Yoga	108	396
Islamic	90	Over 800
Hindu	60	260
Meditation	54	85
Christian Union	43	127
Sikh	37	173
First Love	17	71

The students' union survey indicated that the average number of members of a student faith and belief society is 21; however, this figure varies widely. The largest recorded membership was for an Islamic Society with more than 800 members. That society was an outlier, but two other Islamic Societies recorded more than 300 members and several more had over 100. If the average size of Islamic Societies in the students' union survey was replicated across all such societies

nationally, over 9,000 students would currently be members of an Islamic Society (excluding members of Ahlul Bayt, Ahmadiyya, and several other smaller Muslim societies). If the average number of members in Christian Unions in the survey was replicated across the UK's Christian Unions, then just over 6,000 students would currently be members of Christian Unions,

a much lower total figure. This does not mean that there are necessarily more Muslim than Christian students involved with faith and belief societies, however, since that number would exclude Catholic, Orthodox, Charismatic and Pentecostal

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The data are witness to a remarkable diversity of faith and belief societies currently operating on UK campuses.

Societies (as well as other smaller groups including the Student Christian Movement, Christians in Sport, Quakers and others). It is also worth saying that UCCF believes that the number of students involved in Christian Unions is significantly higher than the figures provided by students' unions. It stated in the parent organisation survey that more than 10,000 students are regularly involved in Christian Unions, and that more than 50,000 have attended Christian Union events weeks in any given year.

Some possible reasons for the much greater size of some of these minority faith societies are explored in the qualitative research below. First Love, we noted above, is one of the most commonly found of the large number of Pentecostal/charismatic/evangelical Christian societies, appearing in more than 20 universities. In common with many such societies, however, its membership tends to be quite small, below the average for a faith and belief society. Nevertheless, the growth of these societies is remarkable, and would seem to be undercutting the previous hegemony of Christian Unions among students from evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic Christian traditions.



We can estimate that over 18,000 students are members of faith and belief societies.

The survey of national parent organisations showed that UCCF and BOSS both record higher student memberships than do students' unions. UCCF's data show an average of 56 students per Christian Union, and that 23 Christian Unions had more than 100 members. BOSS record an average number of 58 members, significantly higher than students' union responses. The reason for the disparity probably relates in part to the complexity of counting students. UCCF and BOSS are both largely drawing on

their current mailing lists, which contain more students than the number who are necessarily registered with the students’ unions (though this will vary as students’ unions have no single method of recording society membership).

Conclusions

The data are witness to a remarkable diversity of faith and belief societies currently operating on UK campuses. This vibrancy and variety may come as a surprise given the commonplace narrative of young people disengaged from



These societies can have a significant impact in shaping students’ religiosity, identity, and perception of the public square.

religion or belief communities. It is worth noting that there are at least 888 societies (and possibly more) operating in UK universities run by, and for the benefit of, students themselves. These are not societies or religious services put on by universities or by faith groups, but represent student-led approaches to their religion or belief. Given the average number of students involved in a faith and belief society

(21) across that total of 888, we can estimate that over 18,000 students are members of faith and belief societies. A huge number of young people are therefore choosing to be involved in these societies. Even more may come along to activities organised by these societies, since our figure does not include students who participate but are not formal members (as noted above, UCCF estimates that over 50,000 students attend Christian Union events weekly, for example.)

The data also demonstrate the importance of engagement and research in this area. As the qualitative research discussed

below shows, these societies can have a significant impact in shaping students' religiosity, identity, and perception of the public square. Given the sheer scale of membership, these societies represent a critical area for understanding the way in which religious identities are constructed, supported and challenged within a university environment.

That said, these data also point to a need to nuance and qualify the way we think about faith and belief societies. Not all such societies are created equal or do similar things. An Islamic Society with more than 800 members has a very different set of issues and student experiences to a Pentecostal Society with fewer than ten members.

We also need to consider the role of societies within the context of the university in which they are found. A university or students' union drawing up policy relating to faith and belief societies in a Cathedrals Group university with an average of just three such societies (which are likely to be mostly Christian), faces a very different set of questions and assumptions to a Red Brick university with ten or more such societies.

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These societies represent a critical area for understanding the way in which religious identities are constructed, supported and challenged within a university environment.

- 1 Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest and Jeremy Law, *Chaplains on Campus: Understanding Chaplaincy in UK Universities*. Coventry University, Durham University and Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019. www.churchofengland.org/chaplainsoncampus
- 2 These figures are drawn from the Higher Education Statistical Authority, available via their data explorer at <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection>
- 3 The correlation coefficient R is +0.5.
- 4 Union of Jewish Students, *Our Year Leading Defending Enriching. Annual Review 2017 – 2018* (London: Union of Jewish Students, 2018), p. 3. https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ujs/pages/878/attachments/original/1548947647/UJS_Annual_Review_Final.pdf?1548947647
- 5 Data drawn from <https://www.catholicstudentnetwork.co.uk/find-your-society>
- 6 National Hindu Students' Forum (UK), *Guru Purnima 2018*. Press release, 2018. <https://www.nhsf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/NHSF-UK-Guru-Purnima-2018-Official-Statement.pdf>
- 7 Data drawn from <https://absoc.co.uk/>



4. Social and campus-based activities of societies

Categorising faith and belief society activities

Faith and belief societies vary greatly in the kinds of activities they undertake. All societies seek to create friendship between their members and build a sense of community based on their shared affiliation to a religion or belief identity. But while some are orientated inwardly, with their activities focusing primarily or totally on their own members, others also have activities which are more outward-facing, directed towards the wider student body or local community. Additionally, some activities (such as communal prayer) are more closely rooted in the practice or exploration of the religion or belief than others (such as a film night). The table below sets out the variety of activities our case studies were involved in.

	Inwardly orientated activity	Outwardly orientated activity
Primarily concerned with practice or exploration of religion or belief	Religion or belief practice, worship / prayer, festival observance, scriptural study	Evangelism and faith-sharing
	Nurturing individual religion or belief identities	Social action as a practice or obligation of religion or belief
	Individual spiritual and religious support (such as advice on religious observance)	Social action as a form of faith-sharing
	Educating members about / debating issues in religion or belief	Social action motivated by desire to educate others about religion or belief
		Educating others about / debating issues in religion or belief
		Interfaith activities

Primarily concerned with other objectives	Individual pastoral support	Representing interests of members to the university
	Educating members about / debating other issues (e.g. politics, social justice, environment)	Educating others about / debating other issues (e.g. politics, social justice, environment)
	Social activities with members to build friendships / celebrate communal identity	Social activities with others to build friendships / celebrate communal identity
		Social action not directly motivated by religion or belief

This is necessarily a simplified way of displaying the range of activities of these societies. In practice, it can be difficult to categorise particular activities under either of the two categories in the table, since the activities often have multiple aims and students participating in them can have different motives. For example, some students will engage in social action both because they see this as an actual expression of, or required by, their religion or belief, and because they wish to challenge misconceptions about their religion or belief. Individual support given by one student to another could be framed in purely secular terms, or could also involve, for example, the students praying with each other.

Overall, most societies studied in this project combined some of these inwardly and outwardly orientated activities. Some were almost entirely inward-facing, not really reaching out to others or organising social action initiatives.

It is also worth noting that the same activity may be understood as a 'religious' practice by one student, and as a primarily 'secular' or 'cultural' practice by another. 'Practising' religion can be conceived of very differently both between members of the same religion and between members of different religions. For example, the Red Brick university's

Jewish Society held a communal meal every second Friday as part of the observance of Shabbat, but was unable to provide food that was strictly kosher. As such, one committee member we interviewed did not regard the meals as being primarily ‘religious’ in significance, since he understood religiosity as involving the correct observance of religious rules including about diet. For him, participating in the society was primarily about connecting with fellow Jews and celebrating shared

heritage, rather than about practising Judaism itself:

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The same activity may be understood as a ‘religious’ practice by one student, and as a primarily ‘secular’ or ‘cultural’ practice by another.

If ten is ‘cultural’ and one is ‘faith’, I’d say we’re a solid ‘eight’. When we’re at our event, we don’t really talk about Judaism that much. (Red Brick university, Jewish Society member)

It is possible, however, that other members of the society had different ideas about what it means to ‘practise’ Judaism, so may have seen participating in the meals even without kosher food as an important expression of their religiosity.

Contributions to campus life

Student religious groups play an important role on campuses. They create communities on campus for students to practise their religion away from home, and to meet other like-minded students. (Students’ union, written response to survey)

They play a really integral part to culture and equality on campus. They go above and beyond to put events on and are a really positive influence on other groups. (Students’ union, written response to survey)

Faith and belief societies contribute enormously to student life. For some students, the societies play very important roles in the maintenance and development of their faith or belief identities. For some, they are an essential source of community; and for others, they are hubs through which students can generate positive change in society, whether locally or globally. In this section we explore some of these points in more depth.

1 Practising, learning about and developing students' religion or belief

The primary contribution to student life which many (though not all) faith and belief societies offer is a place for communal religious worship, prayer or ritual practice. These activities may be led by the students themselves or by non-students in positions of leadership, such as chaplains or external religious leaders.

Sometimes the societies are the primary, or only, arenas on campus through which students engage in communal religious practices. Some students, particularly those of minority religions or beliefs, do not have easy access to places of worship or religious instruction in their local area. Moreover, where those local institutions exist, they may not be suitable for all groups. Many smaller mosques, for example, lack suitable spaces for women to pray or sometimes discourage women from attending.¹ By contrast, university

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For some students, the societies play very important roles in the maintenance and development of their faith or belief identities. For some, they are an essential source of community; and for others, they are hubs through which students can generate positive change in society, whether locally or globally.

prayer rooms, and the Islamic Societies and Ahlul Bayt Societies which make use of them, can be important places where female Muslim students can engage in communal prayer.

Occasionally, where suitable places of worship are not available nearby, local residents and non-students will make use of the facilities and spaces of faith and belief societies. This was the case at the Islamic Society of the 1960s Campus university, where local people preferred to use the university's prayer room rather than travel further to the nearest mosque. In this regard the society members saw themselves as serving the needs of the local community as well as of Muslim students. University administrators, however, were concerned about non-students making use of the campus' facilities; the staff were effectively turning a blind eye to the situation but it remained a point of contention between them and the society.

Even when suitable faith and belief institutions are present near to the university, some students may prefer to attend their society's meetings as well as, or instead of, these institutions. The President of the Jewish Society at the Scottish Traditional Elite university attended a synagogue in the university town but felt more comfortable in the Jewish Society meetings, because she felt she had more freedom there to express her views:

I feel JSoc is a really, really good place to be able to air your opinions which I don't feel always I'm able to do, especially, well in all the synagogues to be honest. You say something that they [the synagogue members] go against, then people think that's a bit of a stupid thing to say, but in JSoc aren't like that, because it's a pluralist space they're much more kind of willing to listen

to each other's opinions. (Scottish Traditional Elite university, Jewish Society member)

For other students, talking about or expressing their religion or belief identity in public may make them feel anxious. As we explore in Chapters 5 and 6, universities are sadly occasionally affected by religious hate crime and sectarian divisions within religious communities. Where this occurs, faith and belief societies can be safe havens for students who feel vulnerable because of their identity. For example, sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims sometimes become manifest on campus. This is usually not in explicit animosity but in an implicit distancing between the two groups, with Islamic Societies being seen as primarily Sunni spaces, and Shi'a Muslims often praying elsewhere or setting up their own distinct Ahlul Bayt Societies. At the Scottish Traditional Elite university, the former President of the Ahlul Bayt Society said he had founded the group in order "to get the sort of 'closet' Shi'as to come out" – to give Shi'is a private space where they could form a community and express their religiosity confidently.

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Faith and belief societies can be safe havens for students who feel vulnerable because of their identity.

Beyond the actual practice of religions or beliefs, the societies have important educational functions. Many organise talks or debates for their members on topics related to religion or belief. These are often requested by students who come from non-practising or less religious backgrounds, or those who are new to the religion or belief. We heard repeatedly that students

felt their understanding of their own tradition had increased through their participation in their societies’ activities:

Our parents and grandparents would tell us all the stories and the history behind our religion and stuff but obviously we didn’t really pay much attention... but now we’re trying to discover it a bit more and we’re kind of falling into religion a bit more. (Cathedrals Group university, Sikh Society member)

My religion is Hindu, it’s never been a simple religion, it’s always been very complex...It’s taken me a very long time to understand it as well... It’s like, ‘Hey, do you know what?I want to know why we do things, I want to know why I do this, why I don’t do this’ ... I’ve even stopped looking at Hinduism as a religion, it is more of a way of life to be honest. (Cathedrals Group university, Hindu Society member)

In addition, the societies also play a key role in educating the wider student body, and the general public, about their religion or belief. As well as holding educational talks and discussions, some students find different, creative, ways to break down public concerns and stereotypes about their religion or belief. At the Post-1992 university, a member of the Sikh Society said he felt there is a lack of awareness about basic Sikh practices in the UK. He decided to wear a badge saying “Ask me about my turban” to encourage people to approach him; in return for a conversation he would give people a free hot chocolate.

Sometimes, of course, the primary aim of outwardly orientated society activities is to encourage people to convert. As we show in Chapter 6, generally, faith-sharing activities by faith and belief societies are responded to amicably or with indifference by other students; but they can occasionally become a source of significant tension.

As well as education on religion or belief issues, the societies can also serve a wider educational role as hubs for discussion about socio-political issues. At the Scottish Elite Traditional university, for example, the Ahlul Bayt Society organised talks on the rise of fascism and on social media and privacy issues. These events were open to all students and helped to increase the society's public profile on campus. They also provided an avenue for students to engage in informal political conversation outside of academic settings – which, as the former President of the society pointed out, was particularly valuable for students studying non-humanities courses, who often have very little opportunity in their studies to discuss such issues.

Some faith and belief societies also collaborate with each other in interfaith discussions. For example, at the Red Brick university, the Christian Union, the Jewish Society, the Humanist Students Society and one of the Pentecostal societies participated in a debate about the origins of morality. Community-building events and social action initiatives are also good opportunities for different societies to work together.

When they occur, these are essential moments on campus where divisions between different groups are broken down and relationships formed. Unfortunately, as we discuss in Chapter 5, on many campuses such interfaith initiatives seem to be few and far between.

2 Building community and friendships

Core to all the societies is building community around a shared affiliation to a religion or belief. Many of our interviewees told us that they had met their main friends through a faith and belief society and that their society helped

them to settle into university life – several described it as a “home from home”.

Most societies organise regular social events to build bonds between the members. These can range from small-scale social nights to festivals or balls for hundreds of people. The Sikh Society at the Post-1992 university, for example, had organised laser tag, paintballing, ice-skating and movie nights in the months prior to our visit,² while the Jewish Society organised a big annual ball for Jewish students. Religious festivals that are shared by different communities, such as Diwali, can also be episodes of interfaith collaboration between different societies. Additionally, sometimes students form large-scale collaborations with people at other universities who share their religion or belief. At the 1960s Campus university, the Hindu Society put together teams to enter an annual national sports competition for Hindu Societies organised by the National Hindu Students’ Forum (UK), which annually brings together hundreds of Hindus from around the country.³

Such activities are particularly important socialising spaces for students who do not wish to drink alcohol. Numerous students from different religions and beliefs told us they struggled with the dominant drinking culture in their university, which made it difficult to make friends, particularly in the early weeks of the academic year when many welcome events take place in bars or revolve around alcohol. Non-alcoholic social events held by faith and belief societies provide a welcome haven for these students and help them form friendship circles quickly.

Faith and belief societies can also play a crucial role in combatting loneliness and supporting students with poor mental health. At the Cathedrals Group university, one of our

Muslim interviewees was a first year international student from Pakistan. He found it very difficult to make friends because other students socialised through drinking, and his loneliness evidently had a detrimental impact on his mental health. It was only when he joined the Islamic Society that he was able to make friends and move forward.

At the same university, the President of the Sikh Society said that when he first started his studies the society didn't exist and he felt very isolated until he founded it. The experience was ultimately profoundly religious for him:

I didn't know anyone who was Sikh on campus... I was alone and that aloneness really hit me in the first few weeks of living here, because I was living here... the story goes that I went to this spot somewhere on campus, a really nice reflective place, and then just prayed and I was really upset, I needed to find some people that were like me at least. As soon as I had finished doing my prayer someone messages me straightaway on Facebook... it was a girl and she was like, 'Oh, would you like to start a Sikh Society?' and I was like, 'How is this even possible?' (Cathedrals Group university, Sikh Society member)

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Faith and belief societies can also play a crucial role in combatting loneliness and supporting students with poor mental health.

3 Providing pastoral and spiritual support

Some societies are able to offer support to students on a more individual basis. A number of our case study societies had committee members who offered pastoral support to individual students, providing a listening ear and advice on both secular and spiritual issues.

At the Cathedrals Group university, the same Sikh student who was deeply lonely at the start of his studies had developed into a religious and pastoral teacher by the time of our

interview. He gave formal talks on Sikhism to educate other members of the society, and acted as a spiritual and moral mentor to them:

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Students in these mentoring roles are emerging as new sources of religious authority and gatekeepers of religious knowledge.

I have people phoning me up, in the middle of the night, and they're like, 'This is what I'm going through today'. And they just need an ear to listen to. And I always try to open that up to them. I'm like, 'Look spirituality or religion isn't about judgment because God doesn't really judge, it's about us trying to listen to each other and really hear about what's going on'. So if there's anything to do with sex, drugs, violence at home, whatever, I'm here to listen to that so I can help you go to the right avenues about it. (Cathedrals Group university, Sikh Society member)

Despite being an undergraduate himself in his early twenties, he was acting effectively (and consciously) as an informal chaplain to plug a gap in the university's provision of pastoral support. This was particularly significant since the university, despite having a strong chaplaincy team with chaplains from a range of religions and beliefs, did not provide, or have formal links with, a Sikh chaplain.

We can see from this quote how this student was confidently offering his own interpretation of his religion to his friends. Other members of the society deferred to him on questions about what was expected of a Sikh in a given situation. It is no exaggeration to say that students in these

mentoring roles are emerging as new sources of religious authority and gatekeepers of religious knowledge, despite not having the formal training or qualifications of traditional leaders. Though they may refer to traditional sources of authority like clerics or online religious resources, often it is their own interpretations of religion or belief matters which carry weight among their peers.

In another society, the provision of pastoral and spiritual support was more formalised. At the English Traditional Elite university, the Islamic Society appointed a Head Brother and Head Sister each year. Students were selected for these roles on account of their capacity to offer pastoral support and also their perceived level of religious knowledge and personal piety. For the Head Sister, this was a ‘24 hour’ role. She organised Qur’an study classes for the women students, posted daily encouragements to a social media group shared by the women, and gave one-to-one advice, including on whether certain acts are, or are not, permissible in Islam in her view. She understood that she was expected to be a role model for other women in the society, and this responsibility encouraged her to increase the rigour of her personal devotional practices:

I feel accountable to God for this responsibility that He’s given me... I think that a part of our faith is that if you are in the public eye, you have to do more in private as well, as in you wouldn’t want your intentions to be meddled with. So I probably read

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Where these structures of peer-to-peer pastoral support exist, these societies can act as incubators for a new generation of faith and belief leaders who are emotionally sensitive and pastorally experienced.

more Qur'an, pray more at night, private acts of worship, because you're in the public eye so much and you want to be sure that you're doing what's required and not for validation or reward from other people. (English Traditional Elite university, Islamic Society member)

Where these structures of peer-to-peer pastoral support exist, these societies can act as incubators for a new generation of faith and belief leaders who are emotionally sensitive and pastorally experienced. This is a particularly important

development for men in minority religions, where cultural barriers may inhibit their confidence in discussing personal matters with others. For example, the Head Brother of the Islamic Society at the English Traditional Elite University saw part of his role as being about overcoming those barriers to enable his fellow male students to articulate their feelings.

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Faith and belief societies are also places where traditional authority structures, particularly patriarchal ones, are being contested.

These kinds of society-based support structures provide clear benefits to students and are to be encouraged in other societies that do not have them. However, some of the students in these roles may be dealing with very complex issues among their peers, like poor mental health or family problems. If the potential of faith and belief societies to act as supporting systems for students is to be maximised, then students' unions should provide training to the student mentors in how to handle sensitive conversations and escalate matters to the university staff if needed.

4 Opportunities for women's leadership and exploration of women's issues

As well as being sites where a new generation of community leaders are emerging – leaders who, in the best cases, are being equipped with a strong combination of organisational, pastoral and dialogue skills – faith and belief societies are also places where traditional authority structures, particularly patriarchal ones, are being contested by the many women who participate in or lead them.

Most of our case study societies had women on the committee and in positions of leadership. Some of the larger societies, like the Islamic Society at the English Traditional Elite university (with around 100 members), had a man and a woman for each committee post, with the role of President being open to all. Some of the medium or small-sized groups, like the Ahlul Bayt and Hindu Societies at the Cathedrals Group university, were run entirely by women.

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Faith and belief societies can be catalysts of religious and cultural reform.

Women-led faith and belief societies can act as critical sites for female empowerment, particularly for women of minority religious or ethnic backgrounds. A striking example of this in our research was a Pentecostal society at the Red Brick university, which consisted mainly of black women (both British-born and international students). We visited one of their worship sessions, where women led the worship and prayer for healing, and gave powerful testimonies about the work of God in their lives. As we saw in Chapter 3, Pentecostal and other evangelical Christian societies are flourishing in universities, and now rival traditional Christian Unions in terms of their numerical spread (though not in terms of their

visibility or number of attendees). One of the consequences of this growth of smaller Christian societies is that women from minority ethnic backgrounds have greater opportunities for faith leadership than would otherwise be the case. This can have profound consequences both for the women themselves and for their wider communities.

Faith and belief societies can also be vehicles for women (and men) to challenge beliefs and practices within their communities which they consider to be patriarchal. In the Cathedrals Group university, for example, the Hindu Society was run by women who wanted to challenge the belief among some Hindus that menstruating women should not enter the temple, and organised a discussion on the matter. The committee members we spoke to made a clear conceptual distinction between true ‘religion’ and ‘culture’. They saw the taboo on menstruation as a ‘cultural’ practice – meaning a tradition that had been introduced to Hindus over time but which in their view was not an original element in the religion:

It’s taught in Hinduism but not really in Hinduism, it’s more cultural that we cannot pray or go into a temple if we are on our period. It’s sort of offensive to me personally and to a lot of Indians, why can I not access my local temple just because I’m going through something that’s natural and healthy?... Before, in my mum’s generation, and my grandmother’s generation, it was sort of, ‘We’ll take it on the chin, we’ll do it because that’s the way it’s supposed to be’. But this new generation that’s come in, we have talks on it to the point where people, young girls and boys in Hinduism and the Indian community are questioning, ‘Why is it?’ (Cathedrals Group university, Hindu Society member)

When these students came to university, they wanted to learn about the basis of their religious practices which

they had previously been following as part of their families' customs. The Hindu Society gave them space to interrogate these inherited norms and the confidence to push back against family pressure:

Sometimes my family for example can be quite full-on and they will make me do things that I don't want to do. And I'm like, 'Well I don't want to do it', and therefore I'll go to uni, I'll see the Hindu Society and be like, 'Look, I've had enough of that at home', that kind of thing... [the Society] has made me question my faith and beliefs in certain things quite a lot. (Cathedrals Group university, Hindu Society member)

Thus some faith and belief societies can be catalysts of religious and cultural reform – places where students are able to contest received traditions about their beliefs and customs, with a level of freedom they may not have in religious institutions outside the university.

That said, the societies are also places where traditional understandings of issues of gender and sexuality can be reinforced, as much as contested. At the event on menstruation held by the Hindu Society, for example, one woman reaffirmed the traditional belief in the impurity of menstruation, leading to a debate between her and the other members. While this disagreement was amicable, as we see in Chapter 6 some societies face considerable internal tensions between members with differing views on these issues.

5 Giving back to the wider community

Students contribute enormously to wider society in terms of volunteering in social action projects and fundraising for charity. According to the Charities Aid Foundation, which surveys 12,000 members of the public annually about their social action habits, in 2018 24% of full-time students had



Students contribute enormously to wider society in terms of volunteering in social action projects and fundraising for charity.

volunteered for a charitable cause in the last year, and nearly half had donated money.⁴ We can gain a sense of the scale of charitable giving within the students' union sector from one study which found that, in 2016/17, 39 unions raised nearly £2.75 million between them.⁵

Faith and belief societies are central to these efforts. For example, since 2003, Charity Week, a Muslim charity working in partnership with Islamic Relief, has organised an annual fundraising week with Muslim students to raise money for children's projects in the UK and globally. In a single week in October 2018, Islamic Societies in UK universities raised over £830,000, with one university (University College London) raising nearly £100,000.⁶

Meanwhile, in 2017/18 Jewish Societies partnering with the Union of Jewish Students held over 40 social action events including charity balls, bone marrow drives, clothing and food collections, and raised over £50,000 for charity.⁷ In 2016/17 members of Just Love, a network of Christian students working on social action projects, gave over 5,500 volunteer hours in their communities and raised nearly £13,000 for charity.⁸ These students are supported by regional Just Love staff workers who help them organise local community projects and campaign on wider socio-political issues. Just Love described the students' activities as motivated explicitly by their faith:

In each city there is a small team of 5-8 student leaders called a 'Just Love Committee' who coordinate and execute events, campaigns and projects in their cities (e.g. homeless

outreach, teaching English to refugees, climate campaigns to local MPs, speaker events on human trafficking with external organisations)... The aim is to 'inspire and release every Christian student to pursue the Biblical call to social justice', and so the students' work is focused on motivating and equipping other Christians within their church, CU and other communities. (Just Love, written response to survey)

A great many of our case study societies, both large and small, were involved in social action projects and fundraising. For example, the Islamic Society at the English Traditional Elite university raised over £50,000 in the 2018 Charity Week and had a dedicated 'Give' sub-team which organised actions like soup kitchens and blood drives. At the Cathedrals Group university, members of the Ahlul Bayt Society founded a Refugee Action group and went to Calais to support the refugees camped there. Similarly, at the Post-1992 university, the Sikh Society collaborated with Sikhs from other universities and the local community to organise a *langar*, a large-scale free meal for hundreds of members of the public. A member of the society said this act of public service was a direct manifestation of his religion's values:

We do this because it's a sign of our teachings, like giving food to people and not asking anything in return, it's a gesture sort of thing. (Post-1992 university, Sikh Society member)

According to the British Organisation of Sikh Students (BOSS), students at over 25 universities organise an annual 'Langar on Campus' as a way of bringing people together

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In a single week in October 2018, Islamic Societies in UK universities raised over £830,000.

“regardless of their differences to sit and communicate with their fellow human beings with love and acceptance” (BOSS, written response to survey).

Social action projects can be good opportunities for interfaith collaboration on campus. Two of our interviewees were part of social action interfaith teams organised by the

Faith & Belief Forum through its award-winning ParliaMentors programme.⁹ In each participating university, groups of five students of different religions and beliefs are brought together for a year to collaborate on a community project. They receive training on interfaith dialogue and leadership skills, and are assigned an MP as a political

mentor. The organisation recognises that some people in faith and belief societies on campus will go on to take leadership roles in their communities after university; by investing in them during their studies, it hopes to generate long-term cohesion between communities in the wider society.

In our case study universities, however, most social action projects were organised by a single faith and belief group (sometimes supported by umbrella organisations like BOSS or the Union of Jewish Students) rather than by multiple groups in collaboration. Often this was not due to a lack of interest among students in collaborating on interfaith projects – rather, it was because of the significant logistical difficulties societies face in organising such endeavours. Interfaith social action projects can be hugely beneficial for breaking down barriers on campus, but in general they need a dedicated external

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Social action projects can be good opportunities for interfaith collaboration on campus.

facilitator with the time and skills to help them get off the ground.

Conclusion

Clearly, on many campuses faith and belief societies play a major role in the lives of students. They are much more than spaces for students to organise communal religion or belief practices; in some cases they are providing vital networks of community and individual support to students. They even play a role in helping universities attract new students. One students' union told us that applicants sometimes contact these societies in advance, in order to learn what it is like being a student of their religion or belief at the university. The societies can act as barometers for new students, helping them to work out how welcoming the university would be for them.

However, it was also clear from our research that many of these societies are facing obstacles that are inhibiting their potential. We turn to these challenges now.

- 1 For estimated statistics on the provision of facilities for women in UK mosques in September 2017, see Mehmood Naqshbandi, ‘UK Mosque Statistics / Masjid Statistics’ http://www.muslimsinbritain.org/resources/masjid_report.pdf
- 2 The importance of organising social activities for Sikh Societies is also discussed in Jasjit Singh, ‘Samosas and simran: University Sikh societies in Britain’ in *Religion and Higher Education in Europe and North America*, Kristin Aune and Jacqueline Stevenson eds. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017) pp. 123–34.
- 3 See for example National Hindu Students’ Forum (UK), ‘National Sports Competition 2016’. <https://www.nhsf.org.uk/2016/03/national-sports-competition-2016/>
- 4 Charities Aid Foundation, *CAF UK Giving 2019*, p. 8. https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/caf-uk-giving-2019-report-an-overview-of-charitable-giving-in-the-uk.pdf?sfvrsn=c4a29a40_4; Charities Aid Foundation, *CAF UK Giving February 2019*. https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/uk-giving-infographic_jan-19.pdf
- 5 National Student Fundraising Association, ‘39 Student Unions raise £2.7m for charity’, 4 December 2017. <https://www.nasfa.org.uk/articles/39-student-unions-raise-2-7m-for-charity>
- 6 Charity Week for Orphans and Needy Children, *Charity Week Annual Report 2018*, pp. 30–35. <https://charityweek.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/CW2018-Annual-Report-1.pdf>
- 7 Union of Jewish Students, *Annual Review 2017–18*, p. 4. https://d3n8a8pro7vbm.cloudfront.net/ujs/pages/878/attachments/original/1548947647/UJS_Annual_Review_Final.pdf?1548947647
- 8 Just Love, *2017 Annual Report*, p. 35. <https://justloveuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Just-Love-Annual-Report-2017.pdf>
- 9 Faith & Belief Forum, ‘ParliaMentors’. <https://faithbeliefforum.org/programme/parliamentors/>

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5. Challenges facing the societies

In our survey of students’ unions, most respondents were positive about the achievements of their faith and belief societies. But a significant proportion identified various issues that limit the contribution they offer to universities. Some respondents said their societies are isolated, inward-looking and, in the worst cases, a source of division.

There are numerous challenges facing these societies, which limit their effectiveness to support their own members, and also their capacity to generate cohesion between different groups on campus. These include:

- Patchy support from universities and students’ unions
- A lack of provision of needed space or resources, including a lack of university accommodation for the society’s religion or belief practices
- Organisational and funding issues
- Low levels of participation
- Non-members’ assumptions and misconceptions about the society / the religion or belief
- Internal divisions over sectarian, denominational or ethnic orientations
- A lack of capacity to undertake interfaith activities, and a lack of external support to help organise those activities

We consider some of these below. In Chapter 6 we explore specific topics of controversy which also shape the experiences of students of different religions and beliefs.

1 Patchy support from universities and students' unions

One of the main factors which shape the experiences of students of different religions and beliefs on campus is the extent to which university and students' union managers see the flourishing of religion or belief communities as important for student wellbeing.

Some institutions offer high quality facilities, resources and staff support for students of different religions or beliefs. Among our case studies, for example, the Cathedrals Group university has multiple prayer and worship spaces and a team of chaplains. The prayer spaces were spread throughout the campus and the university's support for the flourishing of religion or belief identities was very prominent.

Most (not all) of this university's chaplains are Christian (of various denominations), reflecting the institution's historical Christian foundations. As we saw in Chapter 4, the absence of formal chaplaincy provision for students of particular minority religions, such as Sikhism, meant student leaders of faith and belief societies were effectively plugging the gap in pastoral support. Thus in this example, the university should identify the gaps in chaplaincy provision and appoint new chaplains to meet student needs.

During the period of our research at the Cathedrals Group university, the students' union employed a member of staff who was dedicated to supporting the activities of student societies (of all types). She gave strong support to faith and belief societies, organising regular 'check-up' meetings with their leaders to discuss any difficulties they were facing and to discuss how the union could assist them to achieve their goals. The committee members of the faith and belief societies we interviewed greatly valued this support.

However, the provision of these kinds of structures is patchy across the higher education sector. A staff member from the Faith & Belief Forum, which helps students’ unions build interfaith teams on campus, told us that:

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Where universities and students’ unions do not devote resources and dedicated staff time to supporting faith and belief societies, individual societies may find it more difficult to grow, meaning that they are less able to provide the internal support networks to students.

Different institutions’ approaches to faith and belief differ so much in terms of how much the institution sees this [interfaith work] as a priority. Like who on campus has responsibility to do that work, and in general, we find that it often slips through the cracks. Students’ unions tend to focus on the four ‘liberation’ categories: BME, women, disabilities, and LGBTQ. If they are doing this kind of work, their staff is generally focused on these four areas, and interfaith can get messed up a bit. Some of the best people that we work with on campus are just individuals who are really passionate about faith and belief... And it might be quite a small part

of their job, but they have chosen to prioritise it. (Faith & Belief Forum, staff member)

Similarly, some respondents to the students’ union survey felt that university staff can be wary of faith and belief societies:

Universities could do better to integrate these groups into their activities and promotions, as faith groups are sometimes treated suspiciously, or held at arms length despite the universities often promoting their supposed diversity. (Students’ union, written response to survey)

Some interviewees suggested that universities and students' unions should dedicate as much resources to faith and belief societies as they do to sports groups and their facilities, since the former are just as (if not more) important for students' wellbeing.

Where universities and students' unions do not devote resources and dedicated staff time to supporting faith and belief societies, individual societies may find it more difficult to grow, meaning that they are less able to provide the internal support networks to students that we saw in Chapter 4. Without active encouragement from students' union staff, they may also be less likely to engage in interfaith collaborations with other societies.

In our research, we found many examples of positive work by the university and students' union staff to support faith and belief societies. At the same time, some student members of the societies felt insufficiently supported or accommodated by their university or students' union. In particular, some students felt they lacked the necessary practical facilities or resources properly to practice their religion or belief.

2 Lack of provision of space or resources for the society

A number of interviewees, particularly Jewish and Muslim students, told us about difficulties they had in practising their religion or belief on campus. Some were negatively affected by university timetables, for example finding it difficult to attend lectures scheduled on Fridays due to Friday prayers or Shabbat, or struggling in exams which fell during Ramadan or other religious festivals. Other research has demonstrated the problems that timetabling can have for Jewish and Muslim students, in particular, and the lack of consistency between universities in making special arrangements to deal with these

problems.¹ While our findings confirmed these problems still exist, encouragingly some of our case study universities have made good attempts to take the needs of religious students into account during timetabling – for example, the Scottish Traditional Elite university coordinated with its Jewish Society when planning exam timetables.

Some universities lack access to facilities which are suitable for students’ religious dietary requirements. Members

of the Islamic Society at the 1960s Campus university had some access to halal food on campus but this was of very limited choice. But this was better than at the Red Brick university, where the Muslim chaplain told us that there was no halal provision in university cafeterias, forcing Muslim students either to eat vegetarian food or to go home to eat.

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Some universities lack access to facilities which are suitable for students’ religious dietary requirements.

Access to kosher food is also a problem in some universities. The Jewish Society at the Red Brick university was unable to provide kosher food for its Shabbat meals since the institution lacked a suitable kitchen; according to one member, although the students found this problematic, they had not raised the issue with the university because they doubted it would be feasible for a separate kitchen to be provided. The lack of access to kosher food had an impact on how ‘religious’ this student felt – he felt that his time at university had made him “slightly less religious” because he now ate non-kosher meat, unlike before he went to university.

Lack of access to kosher food was also a problem at the Scottish Traditional Elite university, because the university required that hot food brought onto campus must be prepared by university caterers for health and safety reasons. The Jewish Society at this university was able to provide kosher food for its Shabbat meals, but only because they prepared the food in the Catholic chaplaincy buildings, which were not owned by the university. The society's President found this deeply frustrating and worried about the impression it gave to prospective Jewish students:

It's been something that we've worked on to try and get a space on the campus itself because I think it's important that Jewish students see that they come to uni and that you can be Jewish in your university instead of, 'Oh, you can be Jewish but it has to be in another building down the road', you know, run by the Catholic church. (Scottish Traditional Elite university, Jewish Society member)

Practical problems of suitable catering facilities are sometimes exacerbated by a failure on the part of university staff to understand differences of religious practice between different religion or belief groups, and a tendency to assess the relative importance of different religious practices from a Christian perspective. The President of the Jewish Society at the Scottish Traditional Elite university sometimes had to explain to staff and students that collective prayer was not an important activity in her society and that, contrary to their assumptions, observance of dietary rules was more significant:

It's confusing [for non-members of the society] because it's a faith society but it's about a lot more than just the faith. And the practices are important and we say, 'Oh we don't like pray as a society', and they say, 'Oh, [so] why do you care about the

food restrictions?’, and [we’re] like, ‘Oh, because that’s different’.
(Scottish Traditional Elite university, Jewish Society member)

Offers by the interfaith chaplaincy to host collective Jewish prayers were well-meaning but resolving the problems of kosher food provision would have made a greater difference to these students’ experiences on campus.

Accessing suitable prayer facilities can also be a challenge for some students, particularly Muslims. In a survey of 578 Muslim students conducted by the National Union of Students in 2017, about a third of the respondents who gave feedback on how to improve services for Muslim students requested improved access to prayer space, and a similar proportion requested better access to halal food. A tenth of the respondents who gave feedback also requested wudu washing facilities for ablutions before prayers.² Some of our Muslim interviewees also wanted better prayer facilities. At the time of our visit to the Post-1992 university, Muslim students were frustrated because they had lost exclusive access to a designated prayer space, following university redevelopment work that had put pressure on available space. At the Red Brick university, Muslim students had access to prayer spaces in university buildings but these were very small. The university chaplaincy organised a petition calling for the establishment of better prayer facilities closer to campus but at the time of our visit this call had not succeeded. Meanwhile, at the Scottish Traditional Elite university, Muslim students used a multi-faith space in the interfaith chaplaincy throughout the day for their daily prayers. Jewish students also wished to use the space for a weekly lunch but thought it was inappropriate for them to be eating there whilst other students were praying. The lack of dedicated Islamic prayer space left both Muslim and Jewish students feeling frustrated.

Among Muslim students, issues around the provision and management of prayer spaces are sometimes associated with wider concerns about feeling unfairly scrutinised by university staff (see Chapter 6). Members of the Islamic Society at the 1960s Campus university said they had good facilities for prayer and ablutions and that the university management was supportive of them. Yet they also had “a big fear” that one day that support might be withdrawn and the prayer spaces closed down. As such they felt they had to avoid courting controversy:

I think like sometimes we have to be very careful, like even the slightest mistake could escalate and that would cause the prayer room to shut down. (1960s Campus university, Islamic Society member)

The students believed that Islamic Societies at other institutions had been penalised, citing the University of East Anglia (UEA) as an example. In 2017, it was reported in national newspapers that shortly before Ramadan, the UEA had temporarily removed one lecture theatre from use as a Muslim prayer space in order to carry out building works, and reduced Muslim use of another space to make more room for exams. The university made its multi-faith centre available for Friday prayers, but the Islamic Society complained that this was too small and insufficiently equipped to accommodate the Muslim students alongside students of other faiths. It appears this incident was due to poor planning and a lack of dialogue with the Islamic Society.³ It was unclear whether our Muslim interviewees at the 1960s Campus university knew all the details of this story; but rightly or wrongly, they saw it as part of a wider narrative wherein Islamic Societies and Muslim students are vulnerable to censure by their university’s management.

3 Organisational problems

Student societies do great work, but many are hampered by organisational difficulties. One of the most common challenges that committee members told us about was the huge amount of time they felt they had to spend on their role. Aside from their academic studies and any employment commitments, they often spend a very large amount of time

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Student societies do great work, but many are hampered by organisational difficulties.

organising society activities. The President of the Jewish Society at the Scottish Traditional Elite university said that running the society is “definitely the thing that I spend the most time thinking about”. Presidents in smaller societies felt especially under pressure, since they often had only a couple of other committee members helping them

with tasks like organising speaker events or discussions.

Many new committee members find that assuming their responsibilities is something of a baptism of fire. They may receive training and advice from the previous committee, and from their students’ union, but in a very short space of time they are expected to transition from participants in a society to its decision-makers. For many students, these roles are their first real experience of leadership, people and budget-management. It can be a transformative experience for the students, giving them skills that will prove invaluable in their careers; but at the same time, particularly for Presidents, the pressure of responsibility can be very intense.

Sometimes this can have detrimental consequences for committee members personally. The Vice President of the Islamic Society at the Cathedrals Group university devoted

a significant amount of time to his role, because he felt the society was extremely important in supporting the wellbeing of Muslim students on campus. At the same time, he noted that being on the committee “can really hurt you despite your efforts”. Some members of the committee had achieved lower grades and missed academic deadlines because they had devoted too much time to the society.

Societies can face a range of other organisational challenges, such as the unfair distribution of workloads among committee members, or disagreements among the committee about activities or the general direction the society should take. In Chapter 6 we discuss the issues of women’s leadership and gender segregation, which are issues that have caused tensions among committee members of certain societies as well as between the societies and their students’ unions.

Some societies told us their activities were hampered by funding problems. Limits in available funds can restrict students’ ability to host the external speakers they want, as they may not be able to afford travel or security costs. Security measures may be required by the students’ union for very controversial, high profile, speakers which the society may be expected to fund. The President of the Humanist Students Society at the Red Brick university told us that a “huge thing” was the limited money available for the society, which inhibited their ability to advertise and bring in speakers. The President contrasted this situation with that of the much larger Christian Union, which seemed to have substantial resources and was able to hold regular outreach events for the wider student body.

It should be noted that some faith and belief societies receive significant support and resources from external

umbrella organisations, while others do not. The vast majority (128) of Christian Unions are affiliated to UCCF, which provides a network of about 90 full-time staff workers who are employed to work closely with Christian Unions around the country, with most splitting their time between two societies. The staff members help to train students on the committee in leadership and evangelism skills and provide guidance and pastoral support. Other societies may receive some support from their respective umbrella organisations, in terms of suggestions for external speakers or annual training for committee members, but most do not have access to the same level of institutionalised support as the Christian Unions.

4 Low levels of participation

The size of faith and belief societies varies massively across the higher education sector. At the higher end, these societies can be some of the largest on campus. One of the students' unions responding to our survey reported that their Islamic Society had over 800 members. By contrast, the Jewish Society in the Scottish Traditional Elite university had about

eight to ten regular participants, with around 45 people attending the society's larger events like its Rosh Hashanah celebrations.

A common feeling among the members of small faith and belief societies is that they have low numbers of regular participants and struggle to increase turnout at their activities. Some students compared their society's size unfavourably to that of other faith and belief



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societies at their university, or to the size of the same society at another university, and felt demoralised by their lower number of participants. A number of interviewees spoke about events or talks they had worked hard to organise where very few people turned up.

We did an event two weeks ago, basically next to no one turned up, there was literally five people including us. Yes, there were two people [in addition to us]. So for us it was really demoralising and demotivating, especially as we did it on a day when we thought we would get the most turnout. (Cathedrals Group university, Ahlul Bayt Society members)

It was always a struggle when you do it, and you turn up and there'll be five students there to some speaker. And you're like, but this is a really interesting talk, why is there no one here? So it's always been a bit of slog. (Red Brick university, Humanist Students Society member)

Turnout at events can of course be affected by any number of reasons, most importantly students' study commitments. But some of our interviewees pointed to other reasons why they experienced low turnout. Some felt that there was simply a lack of awareness that their society existed, despite their efforts to promote it. Some thought that their students' union did not do enough to help them advertise their events. In addition, living on campus or at home can also make a difference as to whether a student participates in societies. In many universities, lecture halls and accommodation blocks are spread across multiple sites; students are less likely to attend a faith and belief society if they would need to travel to a different site. At the Cathedrals Group university, for example, the students' union told us that there was a notable split in societal participation between students living in student halls,

near to where the societies met, and those living at home. The latter were often much less engaged in the non-academic aspects of university life.

Concerns about low turnout at events, and about the long-term sustainability of the society, can often be a concern for committee members. A committee member of the Ahlul Bayt Society at the Cathedrals Group university was very worried about the society’s future – “It will be quite upsetting if it goes to pot because I’m still in contact with the girl that first started the society... I would be really upset if we are the ones who leave it to nobody.”

Such fears are sometimes well justified. Some faith and belief societies may be doing well in terms of numbers one year, before declining in participants or even folding a couple of years later if there are no new committee members to keep them going.

5 Misconceptions about the society which hinder recruitment

Faith and belief societies vary significantly in the extent to which their activities focus on communal worship, prayer or other religion or belief practices, or on social activities to celebrate a shared communal identity. Societies which are based around an ethnoreligious identity, such as Jewish Societies, may have much more internal diversity in terms of their members’ religion or belief orientations than societies like Christian Unions. Some Jewish Societies bring together both highly religiously observant Jewish students and non-practising, ‘cultural’ or atheist Jewish students, while, in contrast, membership of Christian Unions is predicated on being a practising Christian. Some students told us they had joined their society primarily because they were looking for a space to build friendships with people of the same background,

rather than to engage in practices like worship or prayer.

Sometimes it can be challenging for the societies to appeal to both religiously practising and non-practising students, and this can create barriers to recruiting new members. We heard that some students did not want to join societies because they perceived them to be ‘too religious’. The President of the Hindu Society at the Cathedrals Group university told us that she had tried to invite a new first year Hindu to join the society:

He was like, ‘No, I’m away from my parents, it’s my time to be free. I don’t want to come to no religious thing’, and I was like, ‘No, we’re not about that’. He was literally like, ‘I’m here to find a relationship and to get my degree, I don’t want to be all preachy, I can do that at home’. (Cathedrals Group university, Hindu Society member)

The President was saddened by the student’s response, and felt her society was more of a mix of religious practice and cultural celebration than he had assumed.

Some of our interviewees thought their society was perceived by non-members as being judgmental of those lacking a high level of religiosity. A member of the Islamic Society at the 1960s Campus university thought that:

Sometimes being a faith society we can be seen as too religious; or people find it daunting to just come to the events or

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Faith and belief societies vary significantly in the extent to which their activities focus on communal worship, prayer or other religion or belief practices, or on social activities to celebrate a shared communal identity.

they feel like people are going to judge them. Or because someone doesn't pray, they'll be like, 'Okay, they're going to judge me for not praying', but it's not like that and it's hard to change their perception. (1960s Campus university, Islamic Society member)

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Sometimes it can be challenging for the societies to appeal to both religiously practising and non-practising students.

Some students can feel under pressure to present themselves publicly as ‘more religious’ than they actually feel, in order to fit in with a faith and belief society. At the English Traditional Elite university, the Head Sister of the Islamic Society said that some women had told her

they felt they had to “take on a persona” to avoid being judged by members of the society. One woman confided to her that “‘I felt like I had to wear an *abaya* [a loose over-garment worn by some Muslim women], or I felt like I had to stop talking to guys’”. The Head Sister worried about this, because although she personally wanted to encourage women to adopt these conservative practices, she insisted that this should be done out of personal devotion, not out of pressure from others. Despite the society’s attempts to accommodate students regardless of their level of personal religiosity, there was a pressure on members to practice their religion in certain ways.

Other societies, however, can face the opposite problem. They can be seen by non-members who share the religion or belief as being ‘too cultural’ – either as too based on celebration of communal identity rather than religious practice, or as too based on practices that non-members consider to be heterodox and not based on ‘true’ religion. A member of the Jewish Society at the Red Brick university, for example, noted that few religiously observant Jewish students came to the society

meetings, and that their attendees tended to be “people from reformed backgrounds who don’t really want to get involved in any solid faith stuff at all; they just want to have a chill time with a few Jews” (Red Brick university, Jewish Society member).

6 Internal divisions over sectarian, denominational or ethnic orientations

To varying degrees, faith and belief societies bring together students of different denominations or ethnic backgrounds or from across sectarian divides. Occasionally, such differences can lead to internal tensions among members, or to the societies being perceived (rightly or wrongly) by non-members as serving specific groups and excluding others.

Divisions between different Muslim groups sometimes emerge on campus. For example, as discussed in Chapter 4, in some universities Shi’a students feel marginalised in Sunni-dominated Islamic Societies, which can lead to a level of distancing between Sunnis and Shi’is on campus, or to some Shi’is avoiding their Islamic Society’s activities. Where tensions exist, these are exceptions rather than the norm; in general, our Muslim interviewees thought that in their universities relations between Sunnis and Shi’is were generally very good, and some interviewees were friends with Muslims from different religious orientations. On a societal level, in our case study universities there seemed to be cordial relations between the Islamic Societies (which in

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Some students can feel under pressure to present themselves publicly as ‘more religious’ than they actually feel, in order to fit in with a faith and belief society.

these universities were Sunni-dominated) and Shi’a-orientated Ahlul Bayt Societies. The students were aware, however, of more significant problems between different groups in other institutions. It is possible that other fault-lines within the Muslim communities, such as between Sufi-orientated and Salafi-orientated students, or between Ahmadiyya and other Muslim students, are also present on campus, though we did not find evidence of this in our case studies.

Even where Islamic Societies have a broad membership incorporating a range of religious orientations, sometimes students of minority orientations may assume they would not be welcome there. At the English Traditional Elite university, our interviewees from the Islamic Society emphasised the diversity of their membership, including Sunnis, Shi’is, Sufi-orientated and Salafi-orientated Muslims, and the importance of serving all Muslim students. But the Head Sister (a Sunni) told us that at an Open Day for the university, she had met a prospective Shi’a student who was worried she would not be welcome at the Islamic Society:

She asked ‘Are the ISOC [Islamic Society] friendly to Shi’a?’, and I really felt upset... because it was one of the first [questions] that she vocalized I could tell that it was something that was on her mind, that she was worried about, and I didn’t want her to be worried about. So, I told her that no, please don’t worry, when you do come on campus it will be fine and we are welcoming, we are open to everybody. (English Traditional Elite university, Islamic Society member)

The Head Sister also said that some Shi’a students had told her they were anxious about using the university’s prayer room, because they had slightly different forms of prayer than

Sunnis (including the use of a *turbah*, a clay tablet) and were worried they would be criticised by the latter students.

Research on Jewish students has shown that there can be tensions on campus between Orthodox students, on the one hand, and Reform or Masorti students, on the other.⁴ These tensions between different denominations can adversely affect Jewish Societies. A staff member from the Union of Jewish Students told us that some Jewish Societies are dominated by a particular strand of Judaism. This was the case in the Jewish Societies at the Red Brick and English Traditional Elite universities. Jewish students who do not affiliate with the dominant form of Judaism in a particular society may feel unrepresented or unable to participate in the activities:

That's where you see tensions arise because on some campuses, you'll have a traditional prayer service and an egalitarian progressive prayer service and in other campuses it very much fluctuates depending on the leadership... So, you know, Orthodox students will be like, 'I can't eat this, it's not strictly kosher'; and our Reform students say, 'I'm not coming to a prayer service where men and women sit separately'. (Union of Jewish Students, staff member)

Christian groups tend to be more specialised than most other faith and belief societies, with some orientated towards specific denominations, and others towards a particular (non-denominational) flavour of Christianity (such as Christian Unions which are usually broadly evangelical in orientation). Some Christian Unions help new first year students to find a local church in the area; sometimes there can be internal disagreement among committee members about which churches they should recommend. This was the case in the Christian Union at the English Traditional Elite university,

when some committee members were opposed to the inclusion of a particular church in the Union’s list of recommended institutions, because they disagreed with the church’s theology.

As with sectarian or denominational orientation, some faith and belief societies are perceived to be dominated by

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As with sectarian or denominational orientation, some faith and belief societies are perceived to be dominated by students of a particular ethnicity or nationality.

students of a particular ethnicity or nationality, which can also inhibit their appeal. At the Cathedrals Group university, the Hindu Society was dominated by students from a Gujarati background. One student, who was actually Sikh, had joined the Hindu Society in order to make friends with Indians but was put off by what she saw as a rather exclusive clique. Meanwhile, most members of the Sikh Society were of Punjabi Indian origin; there was some division between them and a group

of Afghan-origin Sikhs, with both groups socialising primarily amongst themselves rather than with each other. The President of the society had to convene a meeting to encourage interaction between the two groups.

7 Barriers to interfaith activities

As we saw in Chapter 4, some faith and belief societies collaborate with others in interfaith (or religious – non-religious) activities, whether in discussion events or social action projects. However, many other societies rarely engage in such collaborations. In our survey of students’ unions, several

respondents commented that there was little substantial interaction between their faith and belief societies:

I strongly feel more work needs to be done to build stronger bridges across faith and cultural groups. Although, there are a few collaborations, it is very limited and there is not enough emphasis put on inter-faith initiatives or on creating a deeper understanding of other cultures. I feel more budget and strategic partnership work needs to be invested in to make this happen and to create more opportunities for students. (Students' union, written response to survey)

They do quite well within an isolated circle of already-engaged students, but could always improve their outreach. (Students' union, written response to survey)

Some respondents felt that their societies contributed “very little” to cohesion and good relations between different groups, because they tended to be inward-looking and isolated.

In our research, we found that a lack of interfaith activities was not usually due to a lack of willingness on the part of students. Repeatedly, our interviewees said they would like to form more collaborations with different societies. The primary barriers to them doing so were often practical issues – organising collaborative events or projects can be more time-consuming for committee members than simply organising activities by themselves. Some of our interviewees said they

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A lack of interfaith activities was not usually due to a lack of willingness on the part of students. Repeatedly, our interviewees said they would like to form more collaborations with different societies.

had reached out to other faith and belief societies to put on joint events, but due to organisational difficulties these had not come to fruition.

It is notable that some societies seem more eager to

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Some societies seem more eager to engage in interfaith collaborations than others.

engage in interfaith collaborations than others. While some of the small societies we explored were very inwardly orientated and focused on building up their own numbers, other small groups were very active in reaching out to others to form partnerships. In the Cathedrals Group university, the Ahlul Bayt Society and an Interfaith Society

were on very good terms, and through the latter, students of different religions and beliefs were building friendships. The Ahlul Bayt Society had also collaborated with the larger Islamic Society in a World Hijab Day event organised by the university chaplains; but this did not seem to have led to a long-term partnership between the two groups. Members of the Ahlul Bayt Society said that though they had tried a few times to instigate other collaborations with the Islamic Society, members of the latter had shown initial interest but had not taken the proposals forward. Meanwhile, our interviewees from the Islamic Society said that they were hoping to organise a poetry slam event with the Christian Union, but indicated that most of their focus currently was on organising their own internal activities.

It is possible that some societies, particularly new and small ones, are more eager to engage in cross-society collaborations because they have more to gain from such

activities in terms of increased publicity among the student body than more established, larger groups.

Differences in theology and in the central purposes of the societies are also important factors here. In our case study universities, a number of non-Christian students said they perceived their university's Christian Union (and sometimes other Christian societies) as being focused on their own activities and less interested than other groups in forming collaborations. The Interfaith Society at the Cathedrals Group university was building links with different faith and belief societies, but was struggling to do so with the Christian Union:

I feel like they've been a little bit challenging and I feel like it would have been nice if they had made an effort and took the initiative and been like, 'Hey, you know, why don't we work together or do something?' Rather than us trying to go to them, no one from them has tried to contact us... that's the only challenge with another society. (Cathedrals Group university, Interfaith Society member)

Some Christian Unions may be less interested in interfaith collaboration than other societies because their primary concern is evangelism rather than the flourishing of religion or belief identities in general on campus:

Sometimes we get invited onto interfaith panels or socials or whatever and sometimes we'll do them and sometimes we won't... the reason put forward is that they don't focus as much on the Gospel. I think the thought is that if an event is not going to be evangelising then we're not going to take part. That's the kind of stance in our CU [Christian Union]. (English Traditional Elite university, Christian Union member)

It should be noted, however, that Christian Unions sometimes engage in interfaith collaborations and events, and that their members may be interested in carrying out more interfaith work than their society currently does. The student quoted above said she would like the society to increase its activities in this area.

It was clear from our research that if faith and belief societies are to fulfil the potential they have to break down barriers between groups on campus and contribute to social cohesion, they need help from non-student facilitators who can build bridges between them. At the Red Brick university, a member of the chaplaincy team organised half-termly

meetings with the committee members of the different faith and belief societies. An interviewee from the Humanist Students Society at the Red Brick university told us how beneficial this kind of facilitated dialogue was:

That was a really good thing because it meant that we got together and said, ‘Right what are the issues that are affecting all of us? And have you got any problems with me? Do you have problems with me and the things that we’re doing?’ And most of the time it’s not that there’s an issue, it was just like ‘This is

what we’re doing, this is our goal’, and then people wouldn’t have a problem with it, because you were able to run it by everybody.
(Red Brick university, Humanist Students Society member)

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If faith and belief societies are to fulfil the potential they have to break down barriers between groups on campus and contribute to social cohesion, they need help from non-student facilitators who can build bridges between them.

Unfortunately, at the time of our interview these meetings seemed to have stopped, because the facilitator was unavailable.

Even when faith and belief societies do collaborate over events, there is no guarantee that this will lead to closer understanding and relationships between the students over the long-term (especially since committee members and a large part of the membership of the societies change annually). Universities and students' unions need to take proactive steps to build long-term relationships between these groups. Ideally they should nominate a permanent member of staff (from within the students' union, or else from the chaplaincy team) to organise gatherings of the faith and belief societies, and to help them undertake collaboration projects.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the obstacles that can reduce the capacity of faith and belief societies to make positive contributions to university life arise from both the societies' internal dynamics and external factors. Some of the issues we have highlighted, such as insufficient provision of the necessary facilities for particular religious groups, are unacceptable and universities should take steps to remedy them, whilst listening carefully to the needs of the students themselves. Some of the other difficulties (such as how 'religious' a society is perceived to be by non-members) are obviously beyond the responsibility of university and students' union staff.

But interventions by staff can help in other ways. Universities and students' unions should nominate a permanent member of staff (from within the students' union, or else from the chaplaincy team) to be responsible for helping build strong relationships between the union and the societies,

and between the societies themselves. This staff member with a religion or belief brief must receive appropriate religious literacy training and be confident talking to students of different religions and beliefs about their beliefs, practices, values and needs. Part of the staff member’s brief should be proactively to encourage collaborations between different faith and belief societies – particularly on long-term social action projects, which are so important for building relationships across difference and breaking down barriers.

The ideal arrangement at a university would be the presence of this permanent staff member with a religion or belief brief in the students’ union, alongside a strong team of chaplains (who should be representative of the diverse religion or belief identities among students and staff, including Humanism).⁵ Chaplains would provide essential pastoral support to students of different religions and beliefs, while the ‘faith or belief’ staff member would provide the society leaders with the practical support they need to achieve their goals and navigate the students’ union’s policies.

- 1 Adam Dinham and Stephen H. Jones, *Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education* (York: Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education Programme, 2010), p. 10. http://research.gold.ac.uk/3916/1/RLLP_Analysis_AW_email.pdf; Paul Weller and Tristram Hooley, 'Religion and belief, equality and inequality in UK higher education', in *Religion, Equalities and Inequalities*, Dawn Llewellyn and Sonya Sharma eds. (London: Routledge, 2016) p. 91.
- 2 National Union of Students, *The Experience of Muslim Students in 2017-18* (2018), p. 18. <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/the-experience-of-muslim-students-in-2017-18>
- 3 Rachael Pells, 'Top UK University removes Muslim prayer spaces during exam season on eve of Ramadan', *The Independent*, 19 May 2017. <https://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/university-east-anglia-muslim-prayer-space-abolish-exam-season-uea-ramadan-a7745131.html>; Zhyar Said and George Martin, 'UEA permanently closes Muslim prayer spaces a week before Ramadan', *The Norwich Tab*, 2017. <https://thetab.com/uk/norwich/2017/05/18/uea-permanently-closes-muslim-prayer-spaces-week-ramadan-27202>
- 4 Jonathan Boyd, *Searching for Community: A Portrait of Undergraduate Jewish Students in Five UK Cities* (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 2016), pp. 20-21.
- 5 As recommended by Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest and Jeremy Law, *Chaplains on Campus: Understanding Chaplaincy in UK Universities*. Coventry University, Durham University and Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019, p. 133. www.churchofengland.org/chaplainsoncampus



6. Handling controversial issues

So far we have explored the range of contributions faith and belief societies make to university life, as well as the obstacles they face. By and large, and contrary to popular opinion, universities are places where different religion or belief identities flourish harmoniously alongside each other.

That said, religion or belief issues also underpin significant controversies on campus. In this chapter we consider:

- Freedom of speech on campus
- External speakers
- The Prevent Duty
- Gender and sexuality (including women's leadership, gender segregation and abortion)
- Faith-sharing activities
- Antisemitism and Islamophobia

Freedom of speech on campus: the context

Central to all these issues is the right of freedom of speech, and its interactions and clashes with the right to freedom of religion or belief and the (contested) right to be free from discrimination. Universities are seen by most people as having a unique role to play in upholding freedom of speech and as providing spaces for debate on difficult issues that cannot be held elsewhere. This is reflected in the fact that in England and Wales, university

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governing bodies have a strong legal duty under the Education (No. 2) Act 1986 to take “reasonably practicable”¹ steps to uphold freedom of speech, for their staff, students and visiting speakers. This includes the expression of views which many people would find offensive or abhorrent – as long as they are within the law.

Crucially, this legal duty does not apply directly to students’ unions, which are separate organisations from their parent universities (though in practice, students’ unions are indirectly affected by this duty – see the Appendix).

The legal frameworks for freedom of speech in universities (which differ slightly between the four UK jurisdictions) are complex and to some extent contradictory. Alongside the requirement on universities to uphold freedom of speech within the law, there are other rules which place restrictions on such freedom. In 2015, in response to growing concerns about extremism, David Cameron introduced the so-called Prevent Duty via the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act. This places a legal duty on public bodies including universities (in England, Wales and Scotland) to “have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism”. Universities are expected to train relevant staff to be able to identify people who may be drawn into “extremist ideas which risk drawing people into terrorism”, to establish mechanisms to support such people, and where necessary refer them to Channel, the de-radicalisation programme.² As we discuss in Section 1, this Duty has been very controversial.

Also under the Prevent Duty, universities are required to assess the risk that external speakers will express extreme views that lead people into terrorism, and where necessary put in place mitigating conditions to reduce that risk. There has

been considerable debate about this requirement, with some people concerned that this will lead to risk-averse university staff turning down requests for speakers with controversial, but lawful, views. In a legal case in 2017, a judge clarified that the Duty does not require universities to deny platforms to speakers with extreme or offensive views but who do not pose a high risk of drawing people into terrorism. The legal duty to uphold freedom of speech (applicable to universities but not directly to students' unions) means that universities are allowed to host extreme speakers if they so wish.³

In this context of legal complexity and confusion, universities now find themselves in a double bind regarding freedom of speech. Firstly, they and their students are sometimes accused of unfairly restricting freedom of speech for legitimate voices (especially politically and socially conservative voices) on campus. According to *Spiked*, an online libertarian magazine which developed an often-quoted index to measure freedom of speech in universities, in 2018, 54% out of 115 institutions actively censored speech, whether through university policies or student activity, and freedom of speech was being chilled in a further 40%.⁴ That freedom of speech is under threat in UK universities is a very common narrative – as we saw in the Introduction, according to polling conducted for Theos by YouGov in January 2019, over half of the public agree, and only 14% disagree.⁵

Secondly, and conversely, universities are said to be giving *too much* freedom to voices deemed to be illegitimate or dangerous. In particular, Islamic Societies and their external

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Universities are allowed to host extreme speakers if they so wish.

speakers are often seen as cultivating extremism. In the Theos poll, a significant minority (29%) of people agreed that

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Universities now find themselves in a double bind regarding freedom of speech.

‘Islamic extremism’ is common in UK universities, rising to 36% for people aged over 55. By contrast, only 17% of people around university age (18-24 years old) agreed.⁶

Both of these narratives need to be treated with considerable caution. Regarding the first, *Spiked’s* ‘Free Speech University Rankings’

have been criticised by some in the higher education sector for being sensationalist and having a questionable methodology. This included a tendency to see any curbs on offensive but lawful speech in university policies as unduly censorial (such as zero tolerance policies for bullying or misogyny), without seeing whether they actually impede freedom of speech on the ground.⁷ In 2017-18, the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) conducted an inquiry into freedom of speech on campus and concluded that “The press accounts of widespread suppression of free speech are clearly out of kilter with reality”.⁸ It argued, for example, that ‘no platforming’

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Universities are said to be giving too much freedom to voices deemed to be illegitimate or dangerous.

(where external speakers who have been invited by students are then subsequently disinvited or denied a platform to speak)⁹ is not as pervasive as it appears from media commentary, where a few high profile cases are cited repeatedly (and often inaccurately), giving a distorted picture.¹⁰

However, the JCHR inquiry also confirmed that there are some factors which can chill freedom of speech on campus, including intimidating behaviour by protestors during events, and restrictive attitudes in policies designed to protect students from harm ('safe space' policies).¹¹ The JCHR also found that bureaucratic and regulatory issues can encourage risk aversion and self-censorship.¹² In particular, it received evidence from a variety of sources in the sector arguing that the implementation of the Prevent Duty has discouraged Muslim students from requesting 'controversial' speakers, or from speaking as openly as they want on political or religious matters, for fear they may be misidentified as extremists.¹³

With this context in mind, in the following sections we explore how our student interviewees navigated a range of controversial issues on campus.

1 External speakers on campus

In our research, we found that students have a very high regard for the principle of freedom of speech. Generally, most students felt free to express their beliefs as they wished. Some, however, clearly felt that freedom of speech is being chilled to some extent – particularly religious students with socially conservative views, as we discuss below in Section 3. At the same time, students wanted to ensure that speech they saw as hateful or racist was kept off campus, and some were concerned



Generally, most students felt free to express their beliefs as they wished. Some, however, clearly felt that freedom of speech is being chilled to some extent – particularly religious students with socially conservative views.

about the right of freedom of speech being used to cause unnecessary offence.

These attitudes are reminiscent of a representative survey of 1,006 undergraduates in 2016 conducted for the Higher Education Policy Institute, which found that 83% of students feel free to express their views and 60% think that universities should never limit freedom of speech. However, 43% think that protection from discrimination and ensuring the dignity of minorities can be more important than unlimited freedom of speech.¹⁴ In general students show strong support for the abstract principle of freedom of speech, but many are likely to support some restrictions on it when asked about how universities should respond to offensive language.

Much of the debate about freedom of speech on campus focuses on controversial external speakers requested by student societies and hosted by the students' union. For many faith and belief societies, hosting external speakers is actually an infrequent occurrence. Many societies focus more on other activities, such as social events or internal, student-led discussions. When external speakers are hosted, often they are invited to lead religious practice or to give educational talks about the religion or belief to society members. Relatively few of these societies organise public-facing panel debates, and even fewer do so on topics they know to be controversial.

When societies did host external speaker events, generally these went ahead without problems. When students request particular speakers, their students' union staff will vet the proposed person (usually by searching on the internet to see if s/he is controversial or 'extreme'). In our research, the students' unions sometimes assessed the requested speakers as being controversial and required the societies to put in place

certain measures, such as allowing a union staff member to monitor the event, so that it could go ahead.

There were, however, instances where the students' union's vetting processes were overly burdensome, meaning that events could not proceed. A member of the Faith & Belief Forum told us that his team were unable to speak at a university's interfaith event because the organisers "didn't submit a form to the students' union six weeks in advance to say we were going". Such bureaucratic barriers can have an unseen detrimental impact on free debate on campus.

Among our interviewees there were few indications that events organised by their faith and belief society had been disrupted by protest. Many were aware, however, of such disruption in events elsewhere, either at their university or another institution.

Frequently, the disrupted events were about the Israel / Palestine conflict, which is one of the main sources of controversy on UK campuses. External speaker events on the issue frequently generate protests, some of which have involved protestors (students or members of the public) shouting down speakers and curbing their freedom of speech.¹⁵ In 2014, the NUS' National Executive Council voted to support Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS),¹⁶ the Palestinian-led movement which calls for the withdrawing of support from, and boycotting of, Israeli institutions and goods. A number of students' unions have since adopted policies to support the boycott of Israeli academic institutions, though in 2017

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There were a small number of instances where a students' union refused to host a requested speaker.

the Charity Commission wrote to them expressing concerns that campaigning for such a boycott could contravene their legal duties.¹⁷ In addition, some campuses see pro-Palestinian groups taking action during the annual Israel Apartheid Week (sometimes with the support of the students' unions), including setting up mock 'check points' to raise awareness of the situation in Israel.¹⁸ As discussed in Section 5 (below), this fraught environment makes many Jewish students feel uncomfortable in engaging in debate about the conflict.

Among our case studies, there were a small number of instances where a students' union refused to host a requested speaker. They can legally do this, since the duty to uphold freedom of speech within the law lies on universities not the unions. But in doing so, students' union staff may leave the requesting students feeling unfairly treated.

For example, at the Cathedrals Group university, the students' union was worried about a Pentecostal society which was aggressively evangelising (see Section 4). It was also regularly requesting the same external speaker (the pastor of the church it affiliated to) for its weekly meetings. The students' union staff were concerned that the society was not being run wholly by students and ultimately refused their requests for the same speaker in order to retain its control over the group. As a result of this episode the union also introduced a new, stricter external speakers' policy which affected the activities of other Christian groups. The Christian Union, for example, requested a local pastor to give a series of talks, but the students' union was concerned that the pastor was trying to recruit students to his church by using the university's name and logo; he was refused permission to have a stall at the Fresher's Fair. The pastor in question told us that he

felt the students' union was discriminating against him as a conservative evangelical Christian.

A staff member at the students' union, however, said that she was worried about external Christian groups coming on to campus and promoting a form of Christianity which she considered harmful – particularly 'prosperity gospel' messages. She had heard stories from other universities where Pentecostal students from low-income families had donated exorbitant amounts of money to external churches, meaning they got into debt. She was worried that a similar scenario could occur on her campus and felt she needed to restrict the presence of external pastors who might promote such a theology.

This case shows the difficult positions students' union staff can find themselves in, where in effect they must make judgments about the appropriateness or otherwise of hosting particular theological viewpoints on campus. We appreciate the students' union's concern to ensure that the union's societies were being run entirely by students and not by external faith leaders. Nonetheless, the union was probably being unnecessarily risk-averse regarding some of the requested external speakers.

Meanwhile, at the Scottish Traditional Elite university, a member of the Jewish Society tried to book a chaplaincy room for an event about archaeology in Israel, but the staff were hesitant to grant the request because they were concerned the speaker was controversial. Our interviewee felt this was unfair on Jewish students and was deeply frustrated by the chaplaincy staff's risk averse approach:

[Israel] is a place of Jewish relevance to almost all Jewish students. So I find it difficult when they tell you you're not

allowed to have speakers about Israel come to JSOC. (Scottish Traditional Elite university, Jewish Society member)

It was unclear whether the event was ultimately allowed to proceed.

Also in the Scottish Traditional Elite university, the students' union also refused to host a Muslim scholar (invited by the Islamic Society) who was found during the vetting process to have previously expressed support for stoning

LGBTQ+ people. At first glance one might conclude from this that the Islamic Society members were sympathetic to extremism, but this would be to make too many assumptions. It is possible that the students were unaware of the speaker's views, particularly if he had made the remarks a long time ago or was invited to talk about an unrelated issue (it is worth remembering that students with limited time to organise events will probably spend less time vetting a speaker's past remarks than their students' union may

like). Even if they were aware of his views, we should not assume that they shared them. Students are active agents in these events, capable of critiquing and challenging the ideas presented to them. This happened in the English Traditional Elite university's Islamic Society, where the Head Sister was concerned that a speaker's comments were exclusionary and alienating of non-practising Muslims. After raising the issue

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Universities are not hotbeds of potential terrorists; and while it is undoubtedly true that some universities have hosted external speakers with offensive or extreme (but lawful) views, this is not widespread.

with the committee, the students agreed not to invite him back.

It is worth reiterating here that determining whether or not it is lawful for a university to host an extreme speaker like the one invited by this Islamic Society is very complex. Universities' legal duties mean they can choose to host speakers with extreme but lawful views. Students' unions need to comply with their parent university's freedom of speech code, but do not have the same direct legal requirement to uphold freedom of speech. Moreover, they have charity law requirements which encourage them to avoid hosting speakers with potentially extreme views. In general, it is not at all straightforward to determine whether a university or students' union has broken the law by hosting someone who has potentially extreme views.

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The Prevent Duty remains hugely controversial.

In contrast to Islamic Society at the Scottish Traditional Elite university, other Muslims appear to be avoiding requesting certain speakers they worry will be perceived as controversial. In one society some of the students wanted to invite Moazzam Begg, the Director of Outreach at Cage, to speak at a charity event being organised in support of Islamic Relief. Cage is an organisation which says it lobbies against “repressive state policies”¹⁹ initiated under the War on Terror, but which has faced repeated accusations of supporting extremism. According to one student, the committee had decided not to invite him “because we are attracting baggage that we don’t need”; according to another, the decision was made by their partners at Islamic Relief, who “[didn’t] want us students to be dragged up in controversy”. Whether or not

Begg would have been an appropriate speaker for the society to host is open to debate. The students, however, saw this as symptomatic of a wider pressure created by the Prevent agenda that is pushing Muslims to be unduly risk averse:

It's frustrating... sometimes we want to get certain speakers in who we know aren't of harm to our students, and even if we know the topic they are going to speak on is completely neutral, but we know they are not going to be accepted by the SU. (English Traditional Elite university, Islamic Society member)

2 The Prevent Duty

This leads us to take a closer look at the Prevent Duty, and the wider public narrative that universities are unwittingly facilitating the growth of violent extremism.

Are such concerns justified? Similar concerns date back to the 1990s and 2000s, when the NUS and students' unions were concerned about the infiltration of campuses by Islamist groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir.²⁰ More recently of course, the focus has been on the links between universities and British terrorists, such as the infamous 'Jihadi John' (Mohammed Emwazi) who studied at the University of Westminster before subsequently becoming radicalised while abroad. In early 2019 a captured jihadist told the BBC he was one of at least seven students and ex-students from the same university to have joined Daesh.²¹ In this case, it seems clear that these students were radicalised while at university.

But in the case of most ex-student jihadists, it is difficult to conclude that they were radicalised while studying. There is also little publicly available evidence to show that Islamic Societies have been particularly significant hubs for breeding potential terrorists.²² If students are vulnerable

to radicalisation, this could be just as likely to happen in networks outside an Islamic Society (and particularly online) than inside it. Universities are not hotbeds of potential terrorists.

While it is undoubtedly true that some universities have hosted external speakers with offensive or extreme (but lawful) views, this is not widespread. Nor is it clear that one-off exposure to such views would make students more likely to commit violence. As discussed above, in our research we were told about an Islamic Society inviting a speaker who (whether they knew it or not) had previously expressed an undoubtedly extreme view. However, there is no evidence from this that the students in that society shared his view or were vulnerable to radicalisation.

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In 2018 the NUS conducted an online survey of Muslim students, and out of 578 respondents one third felt they had been negatively affected by Prevent.

The Prevent Duty remains hugely controversial. The Prevent Strategy, which was unveiled in 2007 and includes the Duty on public sector bodies, deals with all terrorism, including Islamist-inspired and far-right forms.²³ However, it is seen by many Muslims as targeting them unfairly and contributing to them being seen as a suspect community. Historically most referrals to the Channel programme have been Muslim (in 2017-18 the balance of referrals was 44% Islamist-inspired to 18% far-right).²⁴ Other criticisms include that the Prevent Duty expects public sector workers with minimal training to identify people attracted to ‘extremism’ – the latter defined highly ambiguously as “vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values”.²⁵

Defenders of Prevent, however, argue that the system is effective at identifying people with extreme views, and also acts as a catchall process for directing people with a variety of vulnerabilities to the support they need.²⁶

In the university context, the Prevent Duty has faced significant opposition from students, staff and the NUS.²⁷ The Joint Committee on Human Rights’ inquiry received evidence from a variety of sources in the sector arguing that the Duty has had a chilling effect on freedom of speech, encouraging Muslims to censor their speech on political or religious matters for fear they may be misidentified as extremists.²⁸ In 2018 the NUS conducted an online survey of Muslim students, and out of 578 respondents one third felt they had been negatively affected by Prevent. Of those people, 43% (14% of all respondents) said that their experience of Prevent had made it harder for them to express their opinions.²⁹ Muslim women who wore religious coverings (such as the hijab, niqab or jilbab) were more likely to feel affected by Prevent than those who did not (40% to 26%);³⁰ and students affected by Prevent were significantly more likely than others to believe that there is no safe space on campus to discuss issues that affect them.³¹

Universities vary greatly in their approaches to implementing Prevent. Alison Scott-Baumann and Simon Perfect have shown that some institutions are concerned about the Duty’s potential to alienate Muslims and to chill freedom of speech; these take a minimalist, light-touch approach to the Duty, complying with the law but going no further. Other institutions have a much more rigorous level of implementation, for example by mandating that staff across many levels should have training in spotting signs that people are vulnerable to radicalisation.³²

Interestingly, very rigorous approaches to implementation are sometimes opposed not only by explicitly anti-Prevent groups (like the NUS' Students Not Suspects) but also by more unexpected bodies. UCCF, the broadly conservative, evangelical organisation to which 128 university Christian Unions are affiliated, has claimed that some universities' interpretations of the Prevent Duty constrains the legitimate activity of Christian Unions.³³ A member of the UCCF told us that one university had initially taken "a very extreme" approach to implementation, whereby "you cannot have any society expressing a faith view on campus". The UCCF took "vigorous action" against this approach, which according to the interviewee turned out to be one university staff member acting outside of their authority. We were unable to corroborate this story, but if this occurred as described then it seems that the individual regarded faith and belief societies as encouraging division, and saw an extreme form of secularism as the best way to prevent this.

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A significant proportion of Muslim students, particularly those who are actively practising, feel they are subject to unfair scrutiny as a consequence of Prevent.

In our research, only a minority of the students we spoke to (about one in six) discussed the Prevent Duty. Most students had nothing to say on the matter even when it was specifically raised in our interviews. There is a chance that some students may have felt uncomfortable talking about Prevent to researchers, but it is more likely that most felt it had no real impact on their activities, or were unaware of it.

In general, awareness of Prevent is undoubtedly higher among Muslim than non-Muslim students. In our student

interviews, 11 out of the 12 who discussed the Duty were Muslim. However, awareness of Prevent may actually be lower among Muslim students than commentators on higher education might expect. An officer at the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS) thought that a majority of Muslim students may be unaware of it. Awareness may be lower among international Muslim students, and also on campuses with less ‘politically active’ student bodies. The FOSIS officer gave advice to Muslim students who had been contacted by local Prevent officers, and noted that many of these students came from universities in the south (outside London). These students tended to know less about Prevent than students in London universities, with larger Muslim populations.

The majority of the Muslim students to whom we spoke to expressed concerns about the Duty. As we saw in Section 1 some felt the Duty was encouraging Muslims to avoid requesting potentially controversial (though lawful) speakers. In each of our six case study universities, we heard that Muslims felt they were under unfair scrutiny. At the 1960s Campus university, for example, members of the Islamic Society said the students’ union had called a meeting with them to discuss the introduction of the Prevent Duty:

...when Prevent was about to be enforced, the union was very insistent on, ‘We want to have a meeting with you guys’, but it’s just the agenda of the meeting didn’t seem very welcoming in that sense. We were very hesitant because we don’t know what they’re going to say and it just felt they wanted to be like, ‘We’re imposing Prevent, we’re going to be looking more into your things’, it just felt like an invasion of our privacy. (1960s Campus university, Islamic Society member)

The students admitted that, apart from the students' union's request for a meeting, there was no noticeable policy change as a consequence of the Duty. Nonetheless they were worried about the assumptions underlying the union's request: "By speaking to the ISOC [Islamic Society] I feel like that's targeting us by linking us to radicalisation and extremism" (1960s Campus university, Islamic Society member). As discussed in Chapter 5, these students also said they had a "big fear" that their prayer spaces might one day be closed down if their society generated any controversy, and implied they had to be very risk averse in their activities, presumably including their requests for external speakers.

Strikingly, we encountered such risk aversion among some Muslim students while conducting our research. At the Cathedrals Group university, we tried to arrange interviews with members of the Islamic Society by emailing members of the committee and by speaking with the students' union staff, who were supporting our work. However, it was only after we enlisted the help of the university's Muslim chaplain to vouch for us that we were able to arrange interviews. The chaplain told us that many of the Muslim students considered they were under suspicion because of the Prevent Duty, and so tended to avoid engaging in external research projects run by non-Muslims. During the interview the chaplain was present in the room, but the students still requested that we did not audio-record the conversation. One of these students was worried about the impact of the Prevent Duty on Muslim students and had raised his concerns with the university. Interestingly, his worries were not shared by all our Muslim interviewees at the university – we spoke to a member of the Ahlul Bayt Society who had no issues to raise on the matter.

Overall it is clear that a significant proportion of Muslim students, particularly those who are actively practising, feel they are subject to unfair scrutiny as a consequence of Prevent. Some students feel they need to be risk averse in their activities in the classroom and on campus more widely, even when they have not directly experienced scrutiny. It is worth remembering that students in UK universities are interconnected in multiple ways, through social media, student journalism, friends and relatives. Rumours about the impact of the Prevent Duty in one university can be very quickly picked up by Muslim students elsewhere.



Where divisions on issues of gender and sexuality existed, they tended to be more significant within faith and belief societies than between a particular society and the wider student body or university staff.

At the same time it is important not to overstate how concerned Muslim students are about Prevent. It appears that many Muslims do not share these concerns – perhaps up to two thirds of the NUS’ survey respondents.³⁴

3 Gender and sexuality

As we saw in Chapter 1, most non-religious students on campus hold socially progressive views on issues of gender, sexuality and abortion, but among religious students there is greater divergence

of opinion, with a proportion holding more conservative positions. Our focus on faith and belief societies meant that our student sample consisted primarily of actively practising religious students, so unsurprisingly we interviewed several people with more socially conservative views across a range of religions and beliefs.

In our case study universities, where divisions on issues of gender and sexuality existed, they tended to be more significant *within* faith and belief societies than between a particular society and the wider student body or university staff. None of the societies we explored, including those dominated by socially conservative students, reported major or ongoing tensions with other societies with different values, such as LGBTQ+ or feminist societies. There may have been disagreements between individuals from different societies but these did not lead to significant disputes between the groups themselves.

Furthermore, when asked about these issues, our interviewees were much more concerned about running their groups in ways which aligned with their values, and having the freedom to express their personal views, than with challenging the views and behaviours of others outside their societies. Regardless of social progressivism or conservatism, when discussing these issues the students claimed to adhere to the principle of tolerance and seemed to do so sincerely, acknowledging the right of other students to live as they wished even if they disagreed with this.

Those who held socially conservative views were more focused on building subcultures of conservatism than on actively trying to change the wider progressive culture. However, many of them felt wary of expressing their beliefs in public. For example, the President of the Anglican Society at the Scottish Traditional Elite university strongly disagreed with

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Students claimed to adhere to the principle of tolerance and seemed to do so sincerely, acknowledging the right of other students to live as they wished even if they disagreed with this.

same-sex marriage and felt that his institution was “now sadly becoming known as a place where you can’t speak your mind”. He insisted, however, that the society had no standpoint on the matter and was a neutral, apolitical space, both in terms of formal party politics and wider “divisive issues”.

A number of our Muslim interviewees felt similarly although, unlike the conservative Christian interviewees, they were worried that if they expressed their views they would come under Prevent scrutiny. According to one student:

We just feel the same level of respect isn't given for Muslims, just to be a more conservative Muslim in this day and age is harder and harder. The more fundamental principles of faith are harder to observe, if you express them you are kind of liable to be judged for it. Can I be a conservative Muslim in this day and age? It's something not just as a society but our individual members struggle with, they feel they can't express their faith in its entirety. (English Traditional Elite university, Islamic Society member)

With these factors in mind, in the following section we consider examples of controversial gender issues – women’s leadership, abortion and gender segregation.

3.1. Women’s leadership

Many of our case study societies had women on the committee and in positions of leadership. Some of the larger societies had a man and a woman for each committee post, with the role of President being open to all. Several, like the Ahlul Bayt and Hindu Societies at the Cathedrals Group university, were run entirely by women. As we saw in Chapter 4, for women of minority religions in particular, these societies can act as critical sites for female empowerment that have

much wider implications for their religious communities outside the university.

Some faith and belief societies have a primarily female membership. In fact, some struggled to attract male members. The Just Love society in the Scottish Traditional Elite university, for example, had only two men on a committee of nine. We visited one of their lunchtime meetings and out of around 25 participants, counted only five men. A female member of the committee said they were worried that among “some people it does have a reputation as a girl thing. We really want to break away from that because it’s not true”. As we saw in Chapter 5, many societies lack internal demographic diversity and once they become seen as catering for a specific group they can find it difficult to attract new people from outside.

Faith and belief groups on campus are usually required to adhere to their students’ union’s equality policy in order to be affiliated with it, and most do so even if a majority of their members disagree with the policy’s stance on issues like gender or sexuality. Publicly, then, they affirm to respect the (socially progressive) values of the students’ unions.

Privately, some societies avoid taking a position on these issues in recognition of their members’ diverse opinions. In others, however, a particular view will be dominant and will effectively become an implicit dogma that members (or at least, those in positions of leadership) are expected to adhere

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For women of minority religions in particular, these societies can act as critical sites for female empowerment that have much wider implications for their religious communities outside the university.

to. Tensions can arise when some members want to contest the dominant view.

This was the case in two of the three Christian Unions we visited, which had internal divisions over women’s leadership. At the Red Brick university, many members of the Christian Union attended a local evangelical church with a complementarian view of gender roles and disagreed with women holding leadership roles in Christian contexts. When a woman ran for President of the society a couple of years prior to our research, this led to an internal debate about whether women could lead the Christian Union (women held other roles on the committee). But since the society was affiliated to the students’ union, it had to adhere to the latter’s equality policy and could not prohibit the woman from running (which would probably have been unlawful discrimination). Ultimately she was unsuccessful in the election – one of our interviewees implied she did not win because people voted against her on grounds of her gender.

A similar debate occurred in another of our case study universities. According to a female member of the Christian Union’s committee:

There have been issues about women in leadership which I struggled with. It was a massive thing last year when the committee was chosen because I felt that, and a couple of us did, felt that one girl would have been perfect to be the senior President and she wasn’t put forward... this kind of sparked a debate about women in leadership, a more general one because then we realised that actually, the people we’re bringing into speak at the CU central meetings on Thursdays, none of them were women. Like, what’s going on with that? (English Traditional Elite university, Christian Union member)

The student said that, after a period of intense debate about the issues, the committee “kind of pushed them to one side” since “we can’t just crumble and divide amongst ourselves”.

In these cases, the members of the committees who opposed women’s leadership were probably out of step with the majority of Christian Union attendees. The *Christianity and the University Experience* project discussed previously found that in 2010-11, two thirds of Christian Union members thought that women should be given the same opportunities as men in church leadership.³⁵ The above cases show the Christian Unions at moments of transition, where a majority, which is more liberal, are contesting the values of the more conservative leadership.

The regular turnover of committee members means that a faith and belief society’s position on gender or sexuality issues can change from year to year. Decisions on them are often dependent on the strength of will of the President and his / her dynamic with other committee members. In the case of Christian Unions, the decisions are also shaped by the long-term influence of UCCF, to which the vast majority of Christian Unions are affiliated. Society committee members are expected to agree with UCCF’s doctrinal statement which reflects its conservative theology.³⁶ According to a staff member at UCCF, however, the organisation does not promote a specific view on women’s leadership to its Christian Unions, since “there is not one set of definitive, biblical answers to that”. Instead each society is

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The regular turnover of committee members means that a faith and belief society’s position on gender or sexuality issues can change from year to year.

encouraged to work out a position itself, through prayer and study of the Bible.

In general, apart from the Christian Unions discussed above, we found little tension among our societies about women’s leadership. It should be noted though that even when formal gender equality exists in a society’s leadership, men can still dominate discussions and decision-making. For example, one of our case study Islamic Societies appointed a man and a woman to each committee role and had a Presidency open to

women. However, the Head Sister told us that “sometimes Sisters do feel intimidated in front of Brothers, and with our committee this year it hasn’t been the case, but sometimes the previous committees were more ‘just keep quiet’”. She actively encouraged fellow women in the society to engage in discussions:

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Gender segregation in universities has received significant public attention in recent years.

I put a message on the main group chat [on social media] for Brothers and Sisters and I said I feel that we should have more female speakers for the joint service on Fridays, because a lot of women, unfortunately, feel as though there is no space for them in Islamic scholarship or in public discourse, and one of the reasons – and there are so many – is they don’t have any women to aspire to in anything... I’m 100% aware of the situation for young women, and it’s something I’m trying to combat. We need to speak, we need to break these boundaries, really. (English Traditional Elite university, Islamic Society member).

3.2 Gender segregation

Gender segregation in universities has received significant public attention in recent years. In one incident at the London

School of Economics (LSE), which attracted considerable media comment, an Islamic Society held an event off-campus with seating areas for men and women, separated by a screen. A non-Muslim student who had not attended the event submitted a complaint, and a subsequent investigation concluded the university had not put in place sufficient safeguards to prevent unlawful gender discrimination. The society itself, meanwhile, claimed that the seating arrangement was not obligatory and that men and women were able to mix freely in various places around the venue.³⁷

Such instances have become touchstones for commentators who see universities, and Islamic Societies in particular, as failing to uphold liberal values and allowing patriarchal practices to flourish. It should be noted, though, that many Muslim women as well as men want to put boundaries between the genders, and that their desire to do so is not incompatible with a commitment to gender equality. The Head Sister of the English Traditional Elite university, for example, was simultaneously advocating for women in leadership whilst also believing she needed to put in place limitations on her interactions with unrelated men. Another Muslim woman told us that she considered it to be double standards that some societies could be women-only spaces in the name of female empowerment, but that she and other female members of the Islamic Society were not allowed to segregate their events as they wished to; she felt disempowered by the situation, and that other (non-Muslim) women were being afforded a privilege that she was denied.

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Many Muslim women as well as men want to put boundaries between the genders.

Some form of gender segregation is common in many Islamic Societies, usually in collective prayer (which is lawful where voluntary) but sometimes also in other events. According to the FOSIS officer we spoke to, London Islamic Societies tend to be more conservative and are more likely to

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Segregation in Islamic Societies is usually voluntary for attendees, but problems arise where societies actively try to encourage it.

want to segregate their events, in contrast to societies in the north, which “don’t tend to segregate their events to that extent”. She pointed out that students coming from towns with very small Muslim communities, such as in the North of England, are likely to be more comfortable with gender mixing than those coming from larger communities such as in London where segregation is more common.

Segregation in Islamic Societies is usually voluntary for attendees, but problems arise where societies actively try to encourage it. Mandatory gender segregation is unlawful in events held by universities, students’ unions and student societies, with the exception of religious prayer, worship or practice events. According to guidance from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), if organisers of a meeting or talk encourage or pressure women or men to sit separately from each other, implicitly or explicitly, this will probably amount to unlawful discrimination. Individuals are being put at a disadvantage on account of their gender by not being free to sit wherever they choose. This is the case even if the event hall contains a non-segregated area as well as segregated areas. Event organisers may also find themselves breaching the law if they hold segregated religious worship or practice,

followed directly by a meeting or a talk which continues to be segregated.³⁸

If attendees at an event voluntarily choose to segregate by gender, with no encouragement by the organiser and are free to sit wherever they choose, this would not cause disadvantage on the basis of gender and so would be lawful. In practice, however, universities will find it difficult to demonstrate that any gender segregation at an event is entirely voluntary.³⁹

The EHRC recommends that universities and students' unions should put in place policies to prevent unlawful segregation from occurring, such as monitoring events where staff suspect segregation may take place, and intervening to insist that segregation ends after segregated prayer or worship.⁴⁰ But such policies would be very difficult to implement in practice, and would exacerbate Muslim students' feelings of being unfairly targeted and treated as suspect. One university staff member told us it was "lunacy" that he should be expected to intervene in society events "and tell people where to sit in a room in the name of liberal values".

Some students' unions can act overzealously where segregation is suspected, in order to pre-empt negative media criticism. According to the FOSIS officer, at one university the students' union had discovered that a non-faith and belief society was segregating by gender. In response, the union proactively sought to investigate and prohibit potential segregation in other societies. The Islamic Society had advertised events on social media as being for 'Brothers' or 'Sisters', but the union intervened to prohibit this. The students argued that their study circles, though not prayer-based, sometimes involved the discussion of sensitive gender-specific topics and that free mixing was inappropriate in these

circumstances. According to our interviewee, the union staff agreed that the society could hold women-only events but insisted that it could not advertise events only for men. FOSIS was supporting the students involved, who clearly felt the union’s approach was restricting their freedom to organise as they wished.

In contrast, there was little sign in our conversations with university and students’ union staff that they saw gender segregation as a cause for concern even when it occurred in their Islamic Societies.

Gender segregation can sometimes be a source of tension within these societies, as well as between the society and their students’ union. Many Muslims disagree with the more conservative interpretations of correct gender relations. For example, in one Islamic Society, members had a discussion about the issue and a man called for free mixing. One of our interviewees was unsympathetic:

I responded with ‘There are Islamic ways of gender interaction. It does exist. We need to apply that. We don’t need to completely get rid of our beliefs.’ That was essentially my response. We can talk to women. It is not like it is not allowed. We can work with them... He said, ‘Oh, the sisters found it uncomfortable.’ I looked toward the women and I said, ‘Did you guys find it uncomfortable?’ and they all said ‘No’. Then he turned around and he said, ‘No’, he was on a slippery surface. Then he said ‘Non-Muslims find it uncomfortable.’ And then I said, ‘Here we go.’ (English Traditional Elite university, Islamic Society member)

Our interviewee felt such criticisms of the society’s practices were unreliable since they tended to come “from Muslims who aren’t really active in the ISOC”. But he did not

consider that conservative practices of gender interaction could be factors that put some Muslims off from regularly participating, or that some of the women may have responded to his question differently had they been asked in private.

The above quote shows the interviewee felt strongly that putting certain limitations on gender mixing was necessary for him to lead a moral life. He and a few other interviewees told us that wider cultural disapproval of the practice made it hard for them to practice Islam as they wished. At the same time, these particular interviewees had chosen to sit on their societies' committees and so were working very closely with people of the opposite gender on society projects. They saw this as perfectly acceptable since they conceived of it as a communal work context with clear boundaries, rather than a private, social one.

These students held to an imagined ideal of what true moral living is supposed to look like, but in their daily lives had no issue with compromising this in order to achieve their academic, social and personal goals. This pragmatism and nuance in daily practice is often lost in the public narratives about religious practices, particularly socially conservative ones which are often assumed to be rigid and inflexible.

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This pragmatism and nuance in daily practice is often lost in the public narratives about religious practices, particularly socially conservative ones which are often assumed to be rigid and inflexible.

3.3 Abortion and Pro-Life Societies

Divisions between pro-choice and pro-life students are increasingly significant in a number of universities. More so

than the other issues discussed in this chapter so far, in recent years this issue has led to direct confrontations on campus between pro-life (usually religious) and pro-choice (religious or non-religious) students, and also between Pro-Life Societies and their students’ unions.

We were unable to speak to any members of Pro-Life Societies at our case study universities, but a small number of our interviewees explained to us how they felt they had to keep their pro-life beliefs private on campus, or faced hostility from others when they expressed their views. According to evidence submitted by the Alliance of Pro-Life Students to the Joint Committee on Human Rights’ inquiry on freedom of speech in universities, there have been several cases in recent years where pro-life student groups have been refused permission to affiliate with their students’ unions. This is on the grounds that their views do not align with the unions’ values or policies.⁴¹ In other cases, debates on abortion are disrupted by protesters.⁴²

Whether or not it is lawful for students’ unions to refuse affiliation with a group of pro-life students is complicated. Guidance from the EHRC states that students’ unions have no legal obligation to allow each group that applies to them to affiliate. However, they must ensure that if they refuse affiliation, they are not unlawfully discriminating against students on grounds of any protected characteristics they may have (such as a particular religion or belief – which includes the belief that abortion is wrong). So it would be unlawful for a students’ union to act in a way which disadvantages students holding that belief, unless it can demonstrate, for example, that its actions were necessary to protect the rights of others.

These human rights arguments were recently deployed by a pro-life student group in Scotland, which argued in court

that the University of Aberdeen's students' union committed unlawful discrimination by refusing to allow it to affiliate. The group has now been allowed to affiliate as a formal society of the union.⁴³

4 Faith-sharing or evangelistic activities

Faith-sharing or evangelistic activities, sometimes negatively referred to as 'proselytism', are often seen as problematic today. In the Theos report *The Problem of Proselytism* (2015), Paul Bickley identified that proselytism is often seen (simplistically) as divisive, a threat to minority groups, and as taking advantage of vulnerable people.⁴⁴ In the university context, where different and potentially competing religion or belief groups are brought close together, we might expect faith-sharing to be a major source of tension. This was the situation in one of our case study universities, but did not seem to be so in the others.

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For some societies, efforts to share their beliefs with others are core to their activities.

For some societies, efforts to share their beliefs with others are core to their activities. This is particularly the case with Christian Unions, the vast majority of which are affiliated to UCCF. UCCF's vision, according to one of its staff members, is "to get every student who attends university in Great Britain the opportunity to hear and to respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ." Other societies also engage in faith-sharing activities, though to a lesser extent than Christian Unions. Many Islamic Societies hold *da'wah* activities: the society at the English Traditional Elite university, for example, held a 'Discover

Islam’ week with introductory lectures on Islamic theology and history aimed at people of all religions and beliefs.

Christian Union evangelism initiatives might occur throughout the year, but are often particularly concentrated in a single week of activity. We visited the Cathedrals Group university during the Christian Union’s ‘Mission Week’. The society held lunchtime discussions on Christian beliefs, set up cake stalls as a way of initiating conversations with non-Christians, and organised a series of social events open to all students, including a games night, a formal dinner and – rather unexpectedly – a dodgeball competition.

Such activities take a huge amount of time to organise, but sometimes end up ‘preaching to the converted’ rather than engaging their target audience. Members of the Islamic Society at the 1960s Campus university said they held a Discover Islam week with talks aimed primarily at non-Muslims, but in fact the vast majority of their guests were Muslims who wanted to learn more about their religion. The Christian Union at the Cathedral Group university was more successful – at one of the Mission Week talks we attended, according to one of the organisers about 9 of the 20 attendees were non-Christians, mostly friends of the society members. Notably, three guests were hijab-wearing Muslim women, who asked a number of tough questions and engaged in conversation with some of the Christian students for an hour after the talk ended. It appears the Muslim women saw this as an opportunity for theological debate and to challenge their Christian peers, as much as to learn from them.

Some students use social action initiatives as opportunities for direct faith-sharing. The members of the Christian Union at the English Traditional Elite university

told us about their nightclub outreach, where they would stand outside student clubs late into the night and provide clubbers with refreshments and blankets, and sometimes (for those particularly the worse for wear) help arranging transport home. Sometimes, these encounters would lead to conversations about Christianity or even prayer with the clubbers:

I think I was surprised my first time that it was difficult, you know, I really had to think about stuff and be like, 'Okay, Jesus help me with this conversation', it was quite tough. It's often people when they're drunk, obviously they get more emotional, let go of their feelings a bit more, and you can tell, people asking questions but there's more to it, there's more of their back story, there's more of their past running through. So you have to be careful I think sometimes because what appears to be just a theological discussion actually could have deep roots in that person's life... a lot of conversations have been theological, 'Oh, original sin' or 'I don't get why we need to be saved', but then you notice that there's deep roots behind it and it comes out that people have suffered and that's why. But generally it's most people going, 'Oh, you're so nice', 'Why, because you believe in Jesus?' Okay, stuff like that. (English Traditional Elite University, Christian Union member)

Evidently these conversations sometimes take place when students are in a drunk or emotionally vulnerable state, and our interviewees who participated in these initiatives were aware of the sensitivities involved. They saw their primary role as providing public service, with chances for evangelism being a secondary (though desirable) outcome.⁴⁵

Despite the visibility of these faith-sharing activities on campus, many faith and belief societies do not engage in them.

Many of our interviewees (particularly those of non-Abrahamic religions, but also Judaism and Humanism) understood their religions or beliefs as non-proselytising. While all the groups wanted to grow in size, and most organised talks or social action projects aimed at educating non-members about their values, they distinguished between these activities and the direct faith-sharing initiatives of societies like Christian Unions. Strikingly, some Christian students (particularly those from non-evangelical traditions) were keen to distance themselves from what they saw as inappropriate or potentially coercive proselytism. The President of the Anglican Society at the Scottish Traditional Elite university, for example, insisted that:

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Some Christian students (particularly those from non-evangelical traditions) were keen to distance themselves from what they saw as inappropriate or potentially coercive proselytism.

I don't think the Anglican Society can be one of these guys that just stands out there shouting the word of God or dragging people in off the street. The way that it has been is to stand back and let people come to you. (Scottish Traditional Elite university, Anglican Society member)

These sentiments chime with Guest et al's study of Christian students on campus. Despite the public prominence of Christian Union evangelism initiatives, most of the Christian students in their

study were not active in evangelism. A majority said they were uncomfortable about it, worrying about the risk of alienating their friends through direct faith-sharing approaches.⁴⁶ Those who wanted to engage in evangelism often preferred more subtle forms, seeing the building of long-term relationships

with non-Christian friends as being a mechanism to faith-sharing. In our research some Christian Union members affirmed this approach, with one telling us that “Friday night is for your Halls friends, to spend time with Halls friends, and that’s evangelism to me as well” (English Traditional Elite university, Christian Union member).

We might expect directly evangelising students to face hostile responses from other people, but our research suggests this is rarely the case. All the Christian Union members we spoke to (nine members across four universities) indicated that their faith-sharing efforts were met largely with amicable or at least indifferent responses. A student involved in a nightclub outreach initiative said that most clubbers were appreciative of the gestures of support and would express vaguely positive, non-committal (or perhaps condescending) sentiments: “... most people are like, ‘Oh, that’s really sweet.’ Like, ‘Oh, that’s so good... I wish I kind of believed that’” (English Traditional Elite university, Christian Union member). Additionally, in our conversations with non-Christian interviewees (including non-religious students), there was little (explicit) frustration with the faith-sharing efforts of their universities’ Christian Unions.

In general, then, it seems that students are broadly tolerant of faith-sharing activities on campus, even if they

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We did, however, hear about one society’s evangelising efforts which caused significant controversy on campus. At the Cathedrals Group university, a new Pentecostal society emerged on campus a year prior to our visit. This was a campus-based plant of a national Pentecostal church. Members of the society engaged in a direct form of ‘street preaching’ evangelism, congregating around main buildings, distributing leaflets and approaching other students directly to talk to them about Christianity. Many students felt uncomfortable with this, and the situation became even more heated when a student claimed to have been subjected to homophobic comments by a member of the society. A Sikh who was studying Theology and Religious Studies told us he had reprimanded the evangelising students for “harassing people” – “I was like, ‘You guys need to have a reality check, this is not Christianity’” (Cathedrals Group university, Sikh Society member). The episode created issues for other Christian students – the Christian Union came under fire and had to distance itself from the Pentecostal group, since the evangelising students were wrongly assumed by other students to be members of the Union.

Ultimately the students’ union staff persuaded the society to desist from this kind of faith-sharing, but the episode left the staff wary of external religious groups operating on campus and had an impact on the ability of societies to host the external speakers they wanted (see Section 1).

Antisemitism and Islamophobia

Finally, we turn to issues of prejudice and hate crime against religious students. Antisemitism on campus has been

particularly prominent in public concerns about universities, following high-profile incidents like the reports of “poisonous” anti-Jewish attitudes at the Oxford University Labour Club in 2016.⁴⁷ More recently, in February 2019 national newspapers (and politicians) commented on a story at the University of Essex, where over 200 students had voted ‘No’ in the students’ union’s ballot to approve the formation of a Jewish Society. It emerged that a member of the union’s Amnesty International Society had urged fellow students to vote against the approval motion, because the proposed society was allegedly going to celebrate Israel and so (in the student’s view) was not going to be a politically neutral religious society.⁴⁸

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Less high-profile, but just as disturbing, there have been persistent concerns about Muslim students facing Islamophobic abuse, both on campus and in the surrounding areas.⁴⁹ Concern about religion-based hatred on campus has led to interventions from the government (with Universities Minister Chris Skidmore writing to universities about his concerns over Antisemitism on campus)⁵⁰ and from the Office for Students, which has invested £480,000 in projects to tackle such hatred.⁵¹

Generally Muslim and Jewish students feel safe in British universities, but a significant minority feel vulnerable to abuse. In the previously discussed NUS survey of 578 Muslim students in 2018, a third were worried about experiencing abuse on campus, with Muslim women who wore religious coverings feeling particularly vulnerable. Half the respondents said they had experienced online abuse, and about a quarter said they

had experienced some type of abuse or crime on campus which they believed was motivated by prejudice against their Muslim identity.⁵²

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Meanwhile, in a NUS survey of 485 Jewish students conducted in 2016-17, 26% of respondents were worried about being subject to verbal or physical abuse or crime, and 23% said they had actually experienced abuse or crime which they believed to be motivated by hostility to their Jewish identity.⁵³

In 2018 the Community Security Trust received reports of 25 Antisemitic incidents in which the victims were Jewish students, academics or other student bodies, compared to 21 campus-related Antisemitic incidents in 2017.⁵⁴ These figures chime with older research – the 2011 National Jewish Student Survey conducted by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (IJPR) found that one-fifth of the 925 Jewish students they surveyed had been subjected to Antisemitism that academic year, with a further third saying they had witnessed it happening to someone else.⁵⁵

In our interviews with Muslim students we did not hear direct accounts of Islamophobic incidents, though we heard reports of cases from students’ union staff and chaplains. A Muslim chaplain at the Red Brick university said there had been some instances of students facing abuse from local residents, and also of “silent racism” – which he described as being where people show unease around Muslims without actively doing or saying something offensive. At the Post-1992 university, meanwhile, the students’ union President said that a number of Sikh students had been the subject of abuse by

members of the public, mainly because they were mistaken for Muslims.

In contrast to the Muslim students, Jewish students were much more vocal in our interviews about prejudice and abuse, including abuse they had experienced themselves while at university. Sometimes this occurred off-campus, where students with 'visibly Jewish' appearances (such as wearing a head covering) were particularly vulnerable to opportunistic abuse from passers-by. But other incidents occurred on campus and were clearly premeditated. In two universities, swastikas were drawn in student accommodation, and in one institution some students attended parties wearing t-shirts with slogans that were racist and celebrated the Holocaust.

Experiencing these kinds of acts made our interviewees feel deeply vulnerable. In her first week at university, one Jewish student found swastikas drawn in the lift in her student accommodation. Though the drawing was removed, swastikas appeared in the lift another five times over the course of her first term, and only after the sixth incident was a camera installed in the lift as the student had requested. The warden of the halls had circulated an email to students condemning the action, but this had little effect as the images continued to appear. The student was deeply frustrated with the university's response. Before starting her course her grandparents had advised her not to go, as it is "a notoriously Antisemitic uni"; the experience made her "feel that people were right in what they were saying and that I didn't really belong there" (English Traditional Elite university, Jewish Society member).

Our interviewees emphasised that some universities have very poor reputations within the British Jewish communities, with parents encouraging their children to attend universities

with large Jewish populations and to avoid others that are perceived to be hotbeds of Antisemitism. This is reflected in the data – about a half of Jewish students attend just eight universities, with a quarter attending the Universities of Leeds, Birmingham and Nottingham, which are perceived as being largely safe for Jewish students.⁵⁶ That said, Jewish Societies remain quite widespread (with over 60 affiliated to the Union of Jewish Students across the UK and Ireland).⁵⁷ In some places, Jewish students in the same city from different universities will meet regularly and organise events together.

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For many Jewish students, their sense of security and comfort is clearly affected by the strength of pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel sentiment on many (though not all) campuses.

anti-Israel sentiment on many (though not all) campuses. The NUS’ survey of Jewish students (2016-17) found that half of respondents felt uncomfortable engaging in debate on the Israel / Palestine conflict on campus. A third felt uncomfortable doing so specifically in an academic context, explaining for example that they feared being “branded a racist for my pro-Israel views”. Encouragingly our Jewish interviewees generally felt secure

enough to be able to express their views on the situation as they so wished, but all were critical of a perceived pro-Palestinian bias on the part of their university or students’ union. Non-Jewish students and staff often made assumptions (rightly or wrongly) about their personal or the Jewish Society’s position on the conflict. One Jewish student felt exhausted at having “constantly [to] be defending myself, and

defending my faith, and my community” (English Traditional Elite university, Jewish Society member).

Tensions around the Israel / Palestine debate easily blur into claims and counterclaims about Antisemitism and Islamophobia. At one university, a pro-Palestinian students’ union officer posted tweets about Israel and Holocaust Memorial Day. One of our Jewish interviewees wrote a newspaper article condemning the students’ union officer for Antisemitism, but then became subject to intense online abuse and was herself accused of Islamophobia by another woman. In the ensuing university investigation, she felt there was a complete lack of support from the university authorities – “as far as they were concerned, I was the one who had done something wrong” (Red Brick university, Jewish Society member).

This incident highlights the complexity of freedom of speech issues on campus regarding the Israel / Palestine debate. Both women in this dispute felt that the allegations of Antisemitism and Islamophobia were being used inappropriately to shut down their criticisms. University staff are required to make judgment calls about where the boundary lies between legitimate speech and racism, and sometimes those calls are extremely difficult to make.

It should be noted that other Jewish students we spoke to did not feel as threatened or unwelcome as the students we have discussed. Even when they knew that Antisemitic incidents had occurred, generally they saw these as exceptional occasions rather than typical of the university experience. Nonetheless, it is clear that universities still have considerable work to do in creating spaces that are safe for Jewish and Muslim students.

Conclusion

We began this chapter by considering whether the right to freedom of speech is being unduly restricted on campus, and ended with cases where it is being abused – or at least, where the line between legitimate, offensive speech and outright

racist speech is blurred. It is clear from our discussion that a minority of students, particularly Muslims but also pro-Israel Jewish students and people with socially conservative views, do feel restricted in what they can say on campus. Our findings therefore confirm the conclusions of previous analyses, including the Joint Committee on Human Rights’ inquiry.

At the same time, however, the twin public narratives about universities and freedom of speech – that there is a real crisis of freedom

of speech in universities, or that universities are giving free reign to extremists and racists – are untenable. In our case studies, most of our interviewees felt free to express their views and, most importantly in the context of our study, to practice their religion or belief as they wished. And while it is undoubtedly true that some universities have hosted external speakers with offensive or extreme views, this is not necessarily unlawful, nor does it mean that extreme views among students are widespread.

It appears that the widespread public concerns identified in the Theos 2019 polling – that freedom of speech is under



The twin public narratives about universities and freedom of speech – that there is a real crisis of freedom of speech in universities, or that universities are giving free reign to extremists and racists – are untenable.

threat in universities (52% agree) and that ‘Islamic extremism’ is common in them (29% agree) are exaggerated or overblown (especially in the case of the latter). It is notable that these concerns were stronger among older than younger generations – with 36% of over 55 year olds thinking Islamic extremism is common compared to 17% of 18 to 24 year old. This suggests that those people with the least recent experience of university are more worried than those of usual undergraduate age.⁵⁸

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Universities and students’ unions need to do more to ensure that all students are safe on campus and feel able to express their views freely.

Correcting the distorted narratives, however, does not mean that we should overlook the reality that a minority of people, primarily religious students, feel they need to censor their freedom of speech on campus; and that a minority feel vulnerable to, or even have been victims of, religious-based hate crime. Universities and students’ unions need to do more to ensure that all students are safe on campus and feel able to express their views freely.

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- 3 *Butt v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2017] EWHC 1930 (Admin). https://www.bbindmans.com/uploads/files/documents/CO-6361-2015_-_Butt_v_Secretary_of_State_for_the_Home_Department_-_Final...pdf. See the Appendix for more details.
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- 5 Theos / YouGov, ‘Freedom of speech in universities polling’, 17-18 January 2019. <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/articles/research/YouGov-Theos---Universities-free-speech-2019.xlsx>
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- 8 House of Commons and House of Lords, Joint Committee on Human Rights, *Freedom of Speech in Universities, Fourth Report of Session 2017-19*, 27 March 2018, p. 19. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201719/jtselect/jtrights/589/589.pdf>
- 9 The term ‘no platforming’ is often used to refer to incidents where external speakers who have been invited by a student society are then subsequently disinvited, usually following protests from students. However, the NUS uses the term more specifically to mean a prohibition on individuals who are identified as “holding racist or fascist views” from standing for election with the NUS or attending or speaking at NUS conferences. The NUS maintains a list of organisations which it says are subject to the no platforming policy. Currently there are six organisations on the list: Hizb ut-Tahrir; Al-Muhajiroun; Muslim Public Affairs Committee; the British National Party; English Defence League; National Action. See NUS’ No Platform policy <https://>

- www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/no-platform-policy-c0b5 and its No Platform list <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/no-platform-list>
- 10 For example, student protests against Germaine Greer's appearance at Cardiff University in 2015, and an NUS Officer's refusal to share a platform with Peter Tatchell at Canterbury Christ Church University in 2016; see House of Commons and House of Lords, Joint Committee on Human Rights, *Freedom of Speech in Universities, Fourth Report of Session 2017–19*, 27 March 2018, p. 19. See also Alfie Packham, 'Boris, Tatchell, Greer: were they actually no-platformed?', *The Guardian*, 5 May 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/may/05/boris-tatchell-greer-were-they-actually-no-platformed>
- 11 'Safe space' policies are guidelines produced by students' unions that aim to encourage an environment on campus free from harassment and fear. They may include guidelines for the management of events held by student societies and the union. Sometimes they will state consequences for students that break the guidelines, for example asking them to leave the event in question. Not all students' unions have safe space policies.
- 12 Home Office, *Prevent Duty Guidance* p. 3.
- 13 House of Commons and House of Lords, Joint Committee on Human Rights, *Freedom of Speech in Universities, Fourth Report of Session 2017–19*, pp. 29–33.
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- 17 Liam Kay, 'Regulator contacts students' unions over Israel boycott stance', *Third Sector*, 28 April 2017. <https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/regulator-contacts-students-unions-israel-boycott-stance/governance/article/1431921>
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- 19 <https://www.cage.ngo/about-us>
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- 25 This includes democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs and calling for the deaths of people in the armed forces. Home Office, *Prevent Strategy*, (Home Office, 2011). https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf
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- 31 NUS, *Experience of Muslim Students*, 2018, p. 13.
- 32 Alison Scott-Baumann and Simon Perfect (forthcoming 2019) *Freedom of Speech in Universities: Islam, Charities and Counter-terrorism*. (Routledge).
- 33 See Houses of Parliament, Joint Committee on Human Rights, *Freedom of Speech in Universities*, 'Written evidence from the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF) (FSU0039)'. <http://data.parliament.uk/WrittenEvidence/CommitteeEvidence.svc/EvidenceDocument/Human%20Rights%20Joint%20Committee/Freedom%20of%20Speech%20in%20Universities/written/75715.html>
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- 39 EHRC, *Gender Segregation*, pp. 5-6.
- 40 EHRC, *Gender Segregation*, pp. 9-10.
- 41 See Houses of Parliament, Joint Committee on Human Rights, *Freedom of Speech in Universities*, 'Written Evidence from the Alliance of Pro-Life Students (FSU0063)', 19 December 2017. <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/human-rights-committee/freedom-of-speech-in-universities/written/75933.pdf>

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- 53 NUS, *The experience of Jewish Students in 2016-17*, 2017, p. 27. <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/The-experience-of-Jewish-students-in-2016-17>

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- 57 Union of Jewish Students, *Our Year Leading Defending Enriching. Annual Review 2017 - 2018* (London: Union of Jewish Students, 2018), p. 3. https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ujs/pages/878/attachments/original/1548947647/UJS_Annual_Review_Final.pdf?1548947647
- 58 Theos / YouGov, 'Freedom of speech in universities polling', 2019.



7.

**Emerging themes: Secularism
and social capital in universities**

The secular university?

If today's universities contain a large number of students who are of no religion and even if all publicly-funded institutions are secular spaces in the sense that they are open to those of all faiths and none,¹ does it therefore follow that they are also secularising spaces? Some students we interviewed perceived them in this way and saw their societies as a place of refuge from the university's secularising pressures (for example, from the drinking culture, peer pressure to have sex before marriage, or the pressure of academic achievement instead of moral improvement). Others disagreed. Students' perceptions of secularity may not match the reality, when UK universities are set against those in other historical periods or other national contexts.

Historically, UK universities have moved from their religious roots, having formed between the 11th and 13th centuries as places of education for elite Christian men, with chapels established in their grounds and activities such as graduations taking place in the local Cathedral. In the 19th century, the new 'red brick' universities were established as places for (secular) education in science to meet the needs of advancing industry. The next wave of universities in the 1960s, the 'plate glass' or 1960s campus universities, likewise expanded at a time of social and cultural change and rapidly falling Christian adherence, and these were also established without reference to religion. The polytechnic movement democratised higher education, with many of these becoming universities in 1992, opening education up for a

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Students' perceptions of secularity may not match the reality.

more ethnically and socially diverse student cohort.² These universities adapted to the requests of their constituents, leading most to provide spaces for worship and prayer on campus and chaplains (often volunteers or funded by religious organisations).

Recently, universities have become more hospitable to religion or belief as a result of the Equality Act 2010, which requires public institutions, such as universities, to ensure equality for those of particular ‘protected characteristics’, including sex, race and religion or belief. Universities

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In a new, market-led, context in which universities compete for students, religion has also been seen as an important aspect of ‘the student experience’.

are obliged to ensure equality of opportunity, elimination of harassment and good relations between those with the protected characteristic (in this case religion or belief) and the wider university. In a new, market-led, context in which universities compete for students, religion has also been seen as an important aspect of ‘the student experience’. Providing students with a good social experience including access to such things as prayer

rooms, chaplains and student clubs and societies representing their interests, is seen as a good way of attracting students to choose a particular university.³

Universities have not fully achieved the aims of the Equality Act 2010, and religion-based harassment persists, as evidenced in previous research as well as ours, and cases reported in the media. Weller et al’s study of 3,935 students in UK universities found that 6% of students felt they had been discriminated against or harassed. However, this varied

significantly by religious group, with Jewish (27%), Sikh (17%) and Muslim (14%) students more likely to report discrimination or harassment.⁴

Universities, as the academic Adam Dinham argues, take different stances towards religion.⁵ Dinham identifies the problem of religious illiteracy in universities: universities tend to act as secular organisations who do not know how to talk about religion, despite the fact that many of their constituents are religious. Secularity is often cast as neutrality, but it tends to involve neglect of religion or suspicion of certain forms of it – namely, concern about religious extremism:

I have observed a lamentable quality of conversation about religion: at the same time, a pressing need for a better quality of conversation in order to avoid knee-jerk reactions which focus only on “bad” religion.⁶

Talking to staff across the university sector, Dinham identified four university stances towards religion: the first two were secular, ‘soft neutral’ and ‘hard neutral’. A third stance, named ‘Repositories and Resources’, was evident among universities who saw themselves as friendly to religious diversity. A fourth, ‘Formative-Collegial’, often present in those few institutions with religious foundations, held that providing for students’ religious and spiritual development was part of their educational role. Religious literacy is needed, Dinham shows, perhaps for some universities more than others.⁷

Although, as noted above, students with a religion or belief probably make up around half of all university students, it should be noted that only a minority of these necessarily attend religious student societies. For example, as Guest et al found, Christian students are more likely to go to church than to go to a religious student society. Only 35% of them attended

church at least once a month during term time, 27% were involved in other church-based or student-based Christian activities, while only 10% were involved in the largest Christian student society, the Christian Union.⁸

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Universities are not locations that lead students to abandon their faith, contrary to earlier assumptions.

Research on students and religion in the United States and the UK shows that universities are not locations that lead students to abandon their faith,⁹ contrary to earlier assumptions (and to some degree fact). Guest et al's study of 3,936 students in English universities (about half of whom were Christian) found that when asked if they had become more religious or less religious since starting university, 78% said their perspective had stayed the same, while only 11% had become less religious and 11% had become more religious. There was a slight difference among Christian students, who were slightly more likely to have become more religious (15%; 12% had become less religious and 73% had stayed the same).¹⁰

We can conclude from this that while almost 50% of students are non-religious, and there is a persistent perception that universities are both secular and secularising spaces, the reality is more complex. Universities are facing demands from a shifting, and highly diverse student body with demands for good faith provision in a highly competitive university market for students. Secular, understood as welcoming to students of any religion (or none) is (and should be) normal for UK universities. However, with a highly diverse student body and an increasing awareness of the demands of students for high quality provision in all aspects of their university

experience, the case for supporting student societies and faith and belief provision is only likely to grow further. In this, universities are, again, something of a test case for wider recognition of an ever more diverse and pluralist UK society in which the needs and demands of different religion or belief traditions are constantly evolving.

Freedom of speech, academic enquiry and social capital

As this research has shown, it is certainly true that there are challenges surrounding the issues of faith and belief on campus. Just as in wider society, there are divisions and disagreements and as regards freedom of speech, there is evidence that some students are feeling uncomfortable or restricted in what they can say. This confirms previous research that has argued that there are some factors that can produce a chilling effect on speech, with Muslim students in particular (but also non-Muslim social conservatives and others) feeling they cannot discuss what they want to as freely as they would wish. Universities and students' unions need to take into consideration how they can build trust with those students. We also heard some accounts of external speakers who had been turned down out of concern that they were potentially extremist or offensive. There was some evidence of a degree of risk aversion among students' unions which was contributing to the problem. That said, nevertheless, most students *did* feel free to talk about their beliefs and there was

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Universities are, again, something of a test case for wider recognition of an ever more diverse and pluralist UK society in which the needs and demands of different religion or belief traditions are constantly evolving.

ample evidence of robust and engaged discussions even on the most controversial of issues.



There is evidence that some students are feeling uncomfortable or restricted in what they can say.

Perhaps more worrying is the evidence that many students have experienced Antisemitism, Islamophobia or other forms of hate crime or prejudice. Universities and students' unions are working hard to combat this but evidently much more still needs to be done to ensure that all students can feel safe and welcome on campus.

Universities are supposed to be places of intellectual contestation where difficult and provocative ideas can be examined and discussed in the course of free academic enquiry. Division, in the sense of divergent views and opinions being strongly held and passionately debated, is not, in that sense, a problem. However, the cause of academic freedom is best served when all students, regardless of faith and background, feel confident and supported in expressing themselves rather than excluded or lacking the confidence to engage fully in debates.

In this, faith and belief societies have a key role to play on university campuses. They provide the 'social capital' that both empowers students to build the confidence to engage in debates on issues around religion or belief and the spaces in which such debates and explorations can take place effectively.

Susie Weller defines social capital as being “the resources individuals and collectives derive from their social networks.”¹¹ Weller draws here on Robert Putnam's understanding of social capital as “connections among individuals – social networks

and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them”.¹²

Social networks between people effectively act as their own form of capital, something that creates value and productivity for individuals. People embedded in high quality social networks, with high levels of understanding and trust between members of the network, are able to tackle problems more effectively and accomplish their goals with greater ease. For students, being part of strong social networks is obviously preferable to having fewer, weaker connections with other people. Social networks help students to meet new people and form friendships, develop new skills and secure work experience and then careers. For students, often living away from home for the first time, or finding themselves in a very different social and intellectual environment from the one they are used to, this is especially important.

However, the kinds of connections and impact generated by social capital varies. Putnam contrasts ‘bonding’ social capital with ‘bridging’ social capital. ‘Bonding’ social capital establishes close, intra-group networks of support and friendship based on similarity (for example, class, age, gender, ethnicity), while ‘bridging’ social capital looks outward: it transcends homogeneity and produces inter-group relationships with others who are different, bringing about greater benefits. “Bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity”, Putnam explains, “whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves.”¹³

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Universities are supposed to be places of intellectual contestation where difficult and provocative ideas can be examined and discussed in the course of free academic enquiry.

Religious student societies are contexts where social capital is produced and reproduced. As Guest et al argue in the context of student Christianity:

...there is potential for the utilisation and formation of bridging social capital that unites different social groups and breaks down divisions of ethnicity or social class, for instance through inter-faith forums or within multi-faith centres on university campuses. There are also opportunities for bonding social capital: for Christian groups to act as sources of support, nurturing students' faith, facilitating the transition to university and providing them with potentially lifelong friendships and social contacts.¹⁴

In our research, we found that faith and belief societies are particularly strong sources of bonding social capital. They are effective at creating strong communities of friendship between students who are generally like-minded. Not all students who

participate in the societies are deeply embedded in them – indeed some of our interviewees were occasional participants who for whatever reason did not engage in the activities regularly – but those who were regular participants benefitted from their membership of strong social networks. These students had access to a community

of people that celebrated their shared identity and provided pastoral and spiritual support in times of difficulty. We heard stories of religious students who had experienced extreme loneliness in their first weeks of studies, before joining their society and finding friends. Through their society, some

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Faith and belief societies are particularly strong sources of bonding social capital.

students become transformed into new leaders, with a strong combination of organisational, dialogue and pastoral skills.

Some of the societies are also good sources of bridging social capital. We met some students who were both embedded deeply within their own networks, and had built strong relationships with people outside. But as we have seen, various obstacles make many faith and belief societies less effective at generating bridging than bonding social capital. Most of these obstacles can be overcome if students' unions provide the societies with more active encouragement and support in forging interfaith collaborations. We make a number of practical recommendations for students' unions and universities which would help these societies generate bridging social capital, and thus more cohesive campuses (see below).

The key point, however, on social capital is that faith and belief societies have great potential in providing both the 'bonding' and 'bridging' forms and this is a critical resource for creating more cohesive campuses. The bonding social capital provides students with the confidence and wellbeing to engage while confident in their own status and beliefs. By finding a constituency and like-minded people, students are empowered to explore their own beliefs in a safe environment, hopefully allowing them to go on to engage in the marketplace of ideas beyond their own group with far more self-confidence than would otherwise have been the case. The bridging capital, meanwhile, provides the capacity and the forums in which to engage across boundaries.


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Seen in this light, faith and belief societies are not problems to be overcome but, on the contrary, a critical potential resource for universities and students' unions.

Combining the two provides the strongest possible basis for the cause of free academic enquiry while also supporting the wellbeing and identity of students. Seen in this light, faith and belief societies are not problems to be overcome but, on the contrary, a critical potential resource for universities and students' unions.

In order to build on those strengths and to address the current challenges, in the final chapter we propose recommendations for the future.

- 1 A point made by Stephen H. Jones, 'Religious literacy in higher education', in *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis eds. (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), p. 193.
- 2 Jacqueline Stevenson and Kristin Aune, 'Introduction: religion and higher education in Europe and North America: historical and contemporary contexts', in *Religion and Higher Education in Europe and North America*, Kristin Aune and Jacqueline Stevenson eds. (London: Routledge and Society for Research into Higher Education, 2017), pp. 2-4.
- 3 Kristin Aune, 'Faith and the University Experience in the UK', Occasional Papers on Faith in Higher Education, a joint publication of Whitelands College, University of Roehampton and Colleges and Universities of the Anglican Communion, No. 1 April 2015, pp. 43-61. <https://cuac.anglicancommunion.org/media/153639/Occ-Papers-on-Faith-in-HE-no-1.pdf>
- 4 Paul Weller and Tristram Hooley, 'Religion and belief, equality and inequality in UK higher education', in *Religion, Equalities and Inequalities*, Dawn Llewellyn and Sonya Sharma eds. (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 94-95.
- 5 Adam Dinham, 'Developing religious literacy in higher education' in *Religion and Higher Education*, Kristin Aune and Jacqueline Stevenson, eds. pp. 202-15.
- 6 Dinham 'Developing religious literacy', p. 205.
- 7 Dinham 'Developing religious literacy'. See also Jones, 'Religious literacy', pp. 197-201, who outlines the priorities and challenges for religious literacy in higher education.
- 8 Mathew Guest, Kristin Aune, Sonya Sharma and Rob Warner, *Christianity and the University Experience: Understanding Student Faith* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 94, 137, 149 (online edition).
- 9 For example Damon Mayrl and Freeden Oeur, 'Religion and higher education: current knowledge and directions for future research', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, 2 (2009), pp. 260-75; Jonathan P. Hill, 'Religion and higher education in the United States' in *Religion and Higher Education*, Kristin Aune and Jacqueline Stevenson eds. pp. 25-38.
- 10 Guest et al, *Christianity and the University Experience*, p. 89.
- 11 Susie Weller, 'Young people's social capital: complex identities, dynamic networks', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33, 5 (2010), p. 874.
- 12 Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), p. 19.
- 13 Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, p. 23.
- 14 Guest et al, *Christianity and the University Experience*, p. 197.

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Recommendations

The following recommendations have been divided between those which are directed at faith and belief societies themselves, those aimed at universities, those aimed at students' unions and those which are jointly aimed at universities and students' unions.

For faith and belief student societies:

- **Faith and belief societies should explore ways of increasing the frequency with which they collaborate with other such societies (and indeed societies which are not faith and belief related). When societies are considering organising events, such as a debate or a social activity, they should consider doing this in collaboration with other groups.**

Faith and belief societies could set themselves a realistic, achievable goal, such as organising at least one small-scale collaboration with another faith and belief society per term. Societies should also explore possibilities of collaborating on medium to long-term social action projects.

- **Faith and belief society committee members should seek support from their students' union when facing difficulties in the organisation or management of their society. They should also make links with committee members in other societies to share ideas about society management.**

Our findings show that many faith and belief societies face similar problems, for example in terms of organisation and (for smaller societies) low levels of participation. Committee members in different societies have much to learn from each other.

For universities:

- **Universities should ensure they provide suitable facilities for all major religions or beliefs on campus, such as prayer rooms and suitable kitchen spaces for the preparation of kosher and halal food.**

Universities should regularly engage with students of different religions or beliefs to learn what they require in order to practice their religion or belief freely. Faith and belief societies should be regularly consulted on these issues (since the needs of students may change with each new intake). Universities should also be aware that students of particular religions or beliefs may not be active participants in faith and belief societies; university staff should consider how to consult with these students outside the societies (such as through an anonymous students’ survey). Universities should also consider how to accommodate the needs of Muslim and Jewish students if lectures or exams fall during Ramadan or on Fridays.

- **Universities should ensure that the provision of chaplains and faith advisors reflects the major religion or belief groups present on campus among students and staff. They should also increase their funding of chaplaincy and ensure that all chaplains, paid and volunteers, have access to office and meeting spaces.**

These recommendations are made by Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest and Jeremy Law in their 2019 analysis of chaplaincy in universities.¹ Universities should ensure that chaplaincy services are well advertised, and that advertisements make it clear that non-religious students can also make use of these services too.

- **Universities should be conscious that some of their policies, such as those for the fulfilment of the Prevent Duty, can potentially contribute to a chilling effect on freedom of speech. They should make sure that when fulfilling the Prevent Duty, they prioritise their other legal duty to uphold freedom of speech within the law as far as reasonably practicable.**

A judicial review in 2017 clarified that universities do not have to deny platforms to external speakers who have extreme views, but who do not pose a high risk of drawing people into terrorism. Universities are free to decide how best to handle these external speaker requests, taking into consideration their 'due regard' to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and their 'particular regard' to uphold freedom of speech within the law as far as they reasonably can.²

For students' unions:

- **Students' unions should assign a permanent member of staff a religion or belief brief.**

This person must receive appropriate religious literacy training and must be sensitive to the needs of students of diverse religions or beliefs, and be confident about talking to them about their beliefs, practices, values and needs. Their role should include:

Meeting with faith and belief society committee members regularly to identify problems and help them achieve their goals.

Where these societies are new or small, the staff member should advise the society members on strategies for gaining new recruits and for ensuring the long-term survival of the society.

Assisting the societies with advertising their presence and any events they put on.

Convening regular meetings between committee members of the faith and belief societies.

Actively encouraging faith and belief societies to undertake interfaith collaborations, including one-off discussion and social events and longer-term social action projects.

The staff member should offer advice on organising these activities. Students' unions could consider inviting the Faith & Belief Forum or other interfaith organisations to help organise this. The staff member could also set up an 'interfaith buddy' scheme, directly connecting members of different religions or beliefs and encouraging them to form friendships.

Identifying where gaps lie in the presence of faith and belief societies on campus and actively encouraging new such societies to develop.

Our findings show that the absence of a particular faith and belief society on campus does not mean that such a society is not wanted or needed. Some of our interviewees from minority religions or beliefs were extremely lonely until they formed their own society. Students' unions should be aware that there may be students of minority religions or beliefs who are not represented by existing faith and belief societies and who are struggling to make friends with people of the same religion or belief.

- **Students' unions should provide annual training before the start of each academic year to incoming faith and belief society committee members.**

The organisational skills to be covered could include budgeting, advertising, event planning, society democratic structures, navigating the external speaker processes, handling internal tensions and sensitive issues, and signposting students to appropriate pastoral support. This training could be given in workshops dedicated to faith and belief societies, in recognition of their similar activities and challenges. Students' unions could also consider inviting external groups with specialism in interfaith dialogue, such as the Faith & Belief Forum, to help deliver such training. Students' unions could also organise a follow-up training workshop at the start of the second term of the academic year, to help committee members learn from their experiences in the first term.

— **Students' unions should organise alternative welcome / Meet and Greet events in Welcome Week which are alcohol-free.**

Teetotal students of different religions and beliefs often feel excluded during alcohol-based social events. This is particularly problematic during the first weeks of the academic year, inhibiting those students' abilities to make friends. The NUS' Alcohol Impact scheme encourages students' unions to hold alternative, alcohol-free events among other strategies to improve campus culture.³

Students' unions could also consider organising a welcome event for students of different religions and beliefs (including non-religious students). Faith and belief societies could be invited. The aim would be to help new students of the same religion or belief meet each other (a particularly important goal for religion or belief groups that are not represented by a student society) and

to encourage friendship formation between people of different religions or beliefs.


- **Students’ unions should be conscious that some of their policies and actions, such as external speaker vetting processes or ‘no platforming’ decisions, can potentially contribute to a chilling effect on freedom of speech. They should recognise that one of their fundamental considerations, when thinking about how to meet their charitable objects, should be freedom of speech.**

This requirement has been confirmed by the Charity Commission in its revised guidance for students’ unions in 2018.⁴

For universities and students’ unions:

- **Universities and students’ unions should recognise the contributions of faith and belief societies to campus life. They should encourage the flourishing of diverse religion or belief communities on campus.**
- **Universities and students’ unions must be proactive in ensuring that students and staff of all religions and beliefs are and feel safe on campus, particularly Jews and Muslims in light of persistent Antisemitism and Islamophobia.**

- 1 Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest and Jeremy Law, *Chaplains on Campus: Understanding Chaplaincy in UK Universities*. Coventry University, Durham University and Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019, p. 133. www.churchofengland.org/chaplainsoncampus
- 2 *Butt v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2017] EWHC 1930 (Admin), paras. 98 and 99. https://www.bindmans.com/uploads/files/documents/CO-6361-2015_-_Butt_v_Secretary_of_State_for_the_Home_Department_-_Final...pdf See also Appendix.
- 3 <https://alcoholimpact.nus.org.uk/about>
- 4 Charity Commission, *Charity Commission operational guidance (OG 48) Students' Unions*, p. 12. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/757033/Charity_Commission_OG48_Students__Unions.pdf

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Appendix

A university's legal duties relating to freedom of speech in England and Wales

Various laws affect how universities and students' unions handle external speakers. These have been summarised in guidance issued in 2019 by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), compiled with assistance from the Department for Education, the Home Office, the Office for Students, the Charity Commission and the National Union of Students among other bodies.

It should be noted that the legal framework set out here applies to England and Wales only; there are different legal requirements in Scotland and in Northern Ireland.

The laws include:

— Human Rights Act 1998

This Act says that all public bodies must comply with the rights set out in the European Convention on Human Rights. This includes Article 10, the right to freedom of expression. Public bodies and the state can interfere with an individual's right to freedom of expression but only in specific circumstances, such as for the protection of the rights of others; and such interference must be a proportionate response to address the issue. The right to freedom of expression cannot be restricted just because other people may find it offensive or insulting.

Most publicly funded universities count as public bodies for the purpose of the Human Rights Act. Most students' unions are separate organisations from their parent universities. They are not likely to be considered public bodies for the purpose of the Act, and so are not required to comply with it directly.

— Education (No. 2) Act 1986

This Act places a legal duty on universities to take “reasonably practicable” steps to ensure freedom of speech within the law for their members, students, employees and visiting speakers. This includes making sure that, as far as possible, no individual or group is stopped from using the university’s premises for any reason connected with their beliefs or views. External speakers invited to speak on campus should not be prevented from doing so, unless they are likely to express unlawful speech or their attendance would lead the university to breach its other legal obligations, and there are no reasonably practicable steps that can be taken to reduce these risks.

The duty does not require universities to protect freedom of speech at the expense of the safety of members, students, employees and visiting speakers. It is therefore reasonable for a university to cancel an event if there is a threat of violent protests, and if no reasonably practicable steps (such as increased security within reasonable cost) can be taken.

The Act places its legal duty on universities, not students’ unions directly. But students’ unions are affected by it because the duty applies to students’ unions’ premises. Further, students’ unions are required to follow their parent university’s code of practice about securing freedom of speech within the law.

— Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 / the Prevent Duty

This Act requires that universities have “due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism”. In carrying out this duty, the Act requires them to have

“particular regard” to their duty to uphold freedom of speech under the Education (No. 2) Act 1986.

When carrying out this duty, universities need to have regard to the *Prevent Duty Guidance* (2015) issued by the Home Office. Concerning external speaker events, the guidance states that universities should consider the likelihood that views expressed at the event may “risk drawing people into terrorism”.

It was clarified in a judicial review in 2017 that the guidance is only relevant where the views being expressed risk drawing people into terrorism. Justice Ouseley stated that the guidance does not apply to “non-violent extremism... [if it] does not create a risk that others will be drawn into terrorism”. He also stated that while universities must consider the guidance when fulfilling their Prevent Duty, they are not required to ‘follow’ it to a particular outcome in their decision-making. In 2019 the Court of Appeal judges, the Master of the Rolls (Sir Terence Etherton), Lady Justice Sharp and Lord Justice Irwin, confirmed these points, but found that one paragraph (paragraph 11) of the guidance is unlawful and needed to be revised.

The EHRC’s guidance gives an example of how universities should manage their Prevent Duty and duty to uphold freedom of speech. In the example, a speaker is invited who has “a history of associating with violent extremists and making statements that could risk drawing people into terrorism”. The speaker has publicly distanced himself / herself from these statements “but continues to associate with extremist groups”. The EHRC advises that the university would need to assess the level of risk that this speaker would draw people into terrorism and take steps to reduce those risks. The EHRC also notes that

neither prohibiting the event nor allowing it to go ahead would necessarily be unlawful, since it is down to the university decide how best to balance its legal responsibilities.

— Criminal offences

Speech can be restricted legitimately if it would break the law. Criminal offences in this area include speech which causes fear or provocation of violence; causes a person harassment, alarm or distress; is intended or is likely to stir up hatred on grounds of race, religion or sexual orientation; or amounts to a terrorism offence. Criminal law balances individuals’ right to freedom of expression with the protection of other people from threats, abuse and harassment.

— Charity law

Many universities and students’ unions are charities and must comply with charity law requirements. For example, a charity must act only in ways which further its charitable purposes (usually to further students’ education) and are for the public benefit. Its trustees must be able to show how they have decided to mitigate any risks associated with a speaker or event. They must also avoid exposing the charity’s reputation to undue risk. The EHRC has clarified that this includes considering the reputational harm that may arise to a charity if it prevents a planned speaker event from going ahead as well as, conversely, any risks that may arise from allowing it to proceed.

— Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act requires universities to comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED). They must consider the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and advance equal opportunities and good

relations between people who have a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not.

This means universities must consider how they can promote equality and minimise tensions on campus. When an event on a divisive topic or with a controversial speaker is proposed, the university must consider the potential impact on students who may feel vilified or marginalised by the views expressed. This does not mean, however, that the event cannot go ahead if there is a risk of controversial speech, since the university must also comply with its duties to uphold freedom of speech within the law.

- 1 Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Freedom of Expression: A Guide for Higher Education Providers and Students' Unions in England and Wales*, 2019. <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/freedom-expression-guide-higher-education-providers-and-students-unions-england>
- 2 For Scotland, see Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Freedom of Expression: A Guide for Higher Education Providers and Students' Unions in Scotland*, 2019. <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/freedom-of-expression-guide-for-higher-education-providers-and-students-unions-scotland.pdf>
- 3 EHRC, *Freedom of Expression in England and Wales*, pp. 11-12, 15.
- 4 Education (No. 2) Act 1986, s. 43.
- 5 EHRC, *Freedom of Expression in England and Wales*, pp. 13-15, 22.
- 6 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, s. 26.
- 7 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, s. 31.
- 8 Home Office (2015) *Prevent Duty Guidance: For higher education institutions in England and Wales*, p. 4. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/445916/Prevent_Duty_Guidance_For_Higher_Education__England__Wales_.pdf
- 9 *Butt v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2017] EWHC 1930 (Admin), s. 30. https://www.bindmans.com/uploads/files/documents/CO-6361-2015_-_Butt_v_Secretary_of_State_for_the_Home_Department_-_Final...pdf
- 10 *Butt v Secretary of State for the Home Department*, s. 98.
- 11 *R (on the application of Salman Butt) v The Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2019] EWCA Civ 256 [https://www.bindmans.com/uploads/files/documents/R_\(Butt\)_-v_-SSHD_\(Final\).pdf](https://www.bindmans.com/uploads/files/documents/R_(Butt)_-v_-SSHD_(Final).pdf)
- 12 EHRC, *Freedom of Expression in England and Wales*, p. 25.
- 13 EHRC, *Freedom of Expression in England and Wales*, p. 17.
- 14 EHRC, *Freedom of Expression in England and Wales*, p. 21.
- 15 The relevant protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. The PSSED only applies to the ninth protected characteristic, marriage and civil partnership, in relation to employment issues.
- 16 EHRC, *Freedom of Expression in England and Wales*, pp. 18-19, 26.



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Theos exists to enrich the conversation about the role of faith in society.

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Faith and Belief on Campus: Division and Cohesion

Universities are a symbolic battleground in today's debates about our shared values. They are often seen as secular, yet are places where faith and belief groups flourish. They are accused on the one hand of restricting freedom of speech, and on the other of being hotbeds of extremism. As the places where our future leaders develop their values, how universities accommodate debate and diversity is a critically important issue for the health of our society.

This report considers these difficult matters by exploring the experiences of student faith and belief societies and their critical role in building community, supporting students pastorally and spiritually, and driving social action on campus. If properly resourced and supported they have the potential to be of enormous value both in supporting students and in being sources of cohesion on campus.



Simon Perfect is a Researcher at Theos, and a Tutor at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). His research interests include freedom of speech in universities, British Islam, and Religious Education in schools.

Ben Ryan is Head of Research at Theos. His research interests include European politics and religion, Catholicism in the UK, chaplaincy, mental health and the faith-based charity sector.

Dr Kristin Aune is Professor of Sociology of Religion at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University. Her books include *Religion and Higher Education in Europe and North America* (Aune & Stevenson, 2017, Routledge) and *Christianity and the University Experience* (Guest, Aune, Sharma & Warner, 2013, Bloomsbury).

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