

Religion and belief on campus: notes from ‘just your average Muslim’

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Abstract

At the start of 2019/20, religion and belief featured in two prominent sector reports that highlighted problems in social integration on our campuses. This paper offers a personal reflection on faith on the campus, from the perspective of ‘just an average Muslim’, Zia Chaudhry MBE. It presents an overview of the Muslim student experience on campus and endorses the notion of ‘religious’ literacy as a means of nurturing respect and spiritual wellbeing.

Keywords

religion; equality; welfare; student engagement; Islam; chaplaincy

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Religion on campus

At the start of 2019/20, religion and belief featured in two sector reports that highlighted problems in social integration on our campuses. First, Universities UK (UUK) (2019), in *Changing the Culture – a progress report on implementing a framework aimed at tackling all forms of harassment – noted, whilst positive progress had been made in cases of sexual misconduct and gender-based violence, less attention was given to hate crimes, such as those related to race or faith. Changing the Culture* was swiftly followed by the publication of the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s (EHRC) (2019) inquiry into racial harassment at universities in England, Scotland and Wales. Religion and faith featured in this report and, perhaps unsurprisingly, pinpointed the experiences of Muslim students (p. 28):

We also heard from Muslim students who had been subject to offensive references to ‘terrorist’ and additional security checks at events, and said that they felt the need to hide or play down their religious identity.

In responding to the EHRC’s findings UUK President, Professor Julia Buckingham, described them as “sad and shocking” and urged her fellow university leaders to make tackling such harassment a top priority. There clearly seems to be a problem, and one which seems to have been met with no little surprise from the university establishment. To what extent this surprise is justified is itself an interesting question.

In this paper, I wish to look at religion and belief from a personal frame of reference, as a British Muslim. In *Just Your Average Muslim* (2013), I argue that being a good Muslim equates to being a good British citizen. The book represented a culmination of my reflections: of me and my faith in an

increasingly divisive world where ‘being Muslim’ represented a struggle for many. A key tenet of the book, and the ideas leading up to it, is the belief in interfaith dialogue. To channel a sense of respect and understanding – that all religions and faith promote – and, consequently, to challenge pejorative behaviour and actions.



New insights

As of the 2017/18 HESA student data collection, ‘religion and belief’ is now a compulsory return and we now have a more insightful perspective of the modern campus. Of those students who disclosed their religion, 5.2 per cent identified as Muslim (compared to 23.1 per cent who identified as Christian, 1.3 per cent as Hindu, 0.9 per cent as Buddhist, 0.5 per cent as Sikh, and 0.3 per cent as Jewish: 66.7 per cent either refused, left the question blank, or indicated having ‘no religion’) (Advance HE, 2018). The Equality Act 2010 extended the protected characteristics to cover religion and belief, giving HE institutions a legal duty to consider how the on-campus experience of people with a religion or belief may differ. Many campuses have considered carefully matters ranging from dietary matters and alcohol to religious observance, namely prayer, worship, meditation and celebration, and religious dress and symbols. Thus many places have adopted a multi-faith perspective as evident in, for example, the recruitment of chaplains of different faiths and spiritual advisers.

Muslim students on campus

In engendering a supportive culture, student-led religious groups, such as the Islamic Society (ISoc), have played an increasingly important role in several universities. Whilst there has been much debate and discussion of various Muslim student organisations, it is worth noting that FOSIS – the Federation of Student Islamic Societies – was established as far back as 1963 to serve and represent students in further and higher education. Judgements on the Muslim student organisations have tended to be clouded with suspicion and, in some instances, with outright hostility. In the following, I offer a personal perspective on how Muslim student groups have functioned relative to external events.

[often] there is no knowledge or interest in the content of Islamic ideology, only a pulp millenarianism and what one youth worker refers to as a 'pseudo-Islam' that reduces Islam to 'a set of clichés'... apolitical, conspiratorial and narrowly identitarian. (Kundnani, 2014: 285)

In 1979, the Iranian Revolution thrust a brand of political Islam onto the headlines and a shot in the arm to organisations (both supportive and antagonistic) which were predominantly led by overseas Muslim students. By the end of the 1980s, just as a British-born generation of Muslim students were making their way into UK higher education, the Iranian *fatwa* in response to Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* fuelled anger among many British Muslims. As they were not at the forefront of these public demonstrations, the Muslim student organisations were pretty much left alone. In the ensuing years, some groups became more vocal – in campaigns relating to the Israel-Palestine dispute and against the invasion of Iraq in 2003, in particular.

Following 9/11, security vigilance was heightened, but a string of terrorist events – 7/7, and in Western Europe – increased suspicion and scrutiny of Muslims. What was becoming increasingly notable was the role played by social media which seemed to expose a vulnerability, or lack of resilience, among some students – which was not so apparent in the past.

'Relevant higher education bodies' (RHEBs) came under increasing pressure to thwart students coming into contact with extremist ideas. In Briggs and Birdwell's (2009) review of radicalisation among Muslims in the UK, two universities were highlighted as 'key places' where some extremist ideas were discussed (p. 14). Thus, the Prevent duty required RHEBs "to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism". Prevent was met with considerable unease from many Muslims, and also non-Muslims on campus. Section 43 (1) of the Education Act (no. 2) 1986 highlights the importance of 'ensuring freedom of speech' at universities yet, it is argued, Prevent – through no-platforming and self-censorship – can reduce the diversity of opinions expressed at universities (Scott-Baumann, 2017).

In the National Union of Students' (NUS) (2018) survey of UK-domiciled Muslim students (n=578), one-third of the respondents felt negatively affected by Prevent. These ranged from having been referred to authorities under the scheme, having organised events that were cancelled or significantly changed, or having disengaged from political debate (NUS, 2018: 15). The freedom – or comfort – to express also affected students:

Some of these topics I don't have enough information on, but also I don't feel comfortable debating Islamophobia as people

don't take the subject seriously and think we're playing victims. I don't mind discussing political ideologies. (Woman, aged 22-23, 'graduated in the last year')

Revealingly, the NUS survey gauged Muslim students' responses to potentially standing for office, to be a course-level academic representative, or to stand as a volunteer officer or paid sabbatical officer role. Of those students who did not feel confident in standing for these roles, 42 per cent cited being questioned around their faith as a reason to not stand for sabbatical roles. In essence, diversity in student representation is being severely hampered – this is a disservice to both the student body and university.

Moving forward: spiritual wellbeing and religious literacy

The university campus should be a safe haven in which complex ideas about anything – including religion and faith – can be discussed safely. I have offered a brief glimpse of the tensions that exist from the perspective of the Muslim student, but there are ways in which such tensions can be addressed. LJMU's 'Respect, Always!' Charter, which was launched at the beginning of 2019/20, embeds principles that act as a stimulus for 'good relations between persons who share a protected characteristic and those who do not' – this is mandated by the Equality Act 2010 Public Sector Duty (PSDD). In terms of religion and belief, and as advised by Advance HE (2018), this means that HE institutions must consider how to encourage and enable an environment in which positive relationships can exist between (p. 60):

- Those of different religions of beliefs (interfaith or multi-faith)

- Those of different divisions within those religions or beliefs (intra-faith)
- Groups and individuals who are manifesting a religion or belief, and those of other protected characteristics

LJMU Respect, Always!

“The Charter is a statement of our passionate commitment to ensuring that LJMU is a place where everyone can be themselves and is respected for being who they are; a place where we are all equal but never the same; a place where the things that make each of us different make our university stronger.

“We value the warm, friendly and supportive atmosphere of this university and our strong sense of community and pride in our home city, but we do not take that for granted. We are determined that in everything that we do, no matter how small – in our formal roles within the University and the Students' Union and as individuals who make up the LJMU community – to treat each other and our environment with consideration, kindness thoughtfulness and care.

“We are committed to demonstrating Respect, Always!”

Good relations require institutions to promote understanding and to tackle prejudice. In NUS's survey, 79 per cent of those who had experienced abuse at their place of study, believed that this was motivated by the perpetrator's prejudice of their Muslim identity, and UUK (2019) posited that prejudice can affect students in many ways, including their mental wellbeing. On tackling prejudice related to religion and belief, institutions must be equipped, therefore, to act decisively on incidents as they arise. Although, as recognised by Dinham and Jones (2010), the context is one

that is largely suspicious and anxious about religion and belief, they champion ‘religious literacy’. Put simply, having the knowledge and skills to recognise religious faith as a legitimate and important area for public attention; having a degree of general knowledge about at least some religious traditions; and having an awareness of, and ability to find, other faiths.

On promoting understanding, this requires a more imaginative flair, especially considering that a majority of university campuses are secular spaces. Regardless, there are considerable opportunities for universities to work more positively with student-led religious/faith groups and societies – thus, not treating religion and faith as an ‘other’, or relying on the chaplaincy as the main point of contact. Raising awareness and understanding of different faiths, celebrating or raising awareness of important festivals has the potential to impart a spiritual dimension or feeling on campus. In this respect we can mitigate against a climate in which ideas are perceived as dangerous, deviant and extremist.

Such initiatives can be strengthened by ensuring that any workshops and events that are organised do not stop at the basic beliefs and rituals of religions but attempt to create a deeper understanding of different beliefs and cultures. They should be facilitated by those who have a multi-faceted understanding of faith that is able to address, not only the current state of a religion but, the wider trends and schools of thought that can serve to help that faith evolve. University is where ideas are challenged and developed and there is no reason why that should not apply to religion. For example, are all the practices of a particular faith set in stone, so to speak, or is there room for reform and development?

And beyond the walls of higher education, there is much to be gained through interaction with the wider community, particularly for a ‘civic university’. My role as Director of the Foundation for Citizenship has enabled me to engage with the local community through our significant partnerships with a wide range of local organisations and groups. And in reaching out, it gives us a better chance of building more diverse relationships and, thus, access to a wider range of experiences and ideas that we can tap into. This visibility in the community enables us to establish trust and openness to others and, in terms of the students coming to LJMU from these communities, they can be assured of coming to a learning environment that is supportive, respectful and understanding of their backgrounds – a significant foundation for all to succeed.

- *Zia Chaudhry MBE is Director of the LJMU Foundation for Citizenship. His 2013 book, Just Your Average Muslim: The Unheard Voice, offers a personal meditation on ‘being Muslim’ and highlights the importance of interfaith dialogue. Prior to joining LJMU, Zia was Chair of the Merseyside Council of Faiths (2005-08). During this period, in 2006, he became a founding member of the North West Forum of Faiths and, in the following year, founded the Spirit of Cordoba, a charity seeking to rekindle the spirit of co-operation which had been evident between the three Abrahamic faiths in Spain. Zia received his MBE honour in 2015 for services to interfaith relations and an Honorary Fellowship from the University in 2017.*

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