

GUEST, MATTHEW, KRISTIN AUNE, SONYA SHARMA AND ROBERT WARNER. *Christianity and the University Experience: Understanding Student Faith*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. 244 p. ISBN: 9781780936017 (hardback).

Unlike many European countries, England does not distinguish between universities and polytechnics and its universities vary hugely in standard. Based on 4,500 surveys and 100 interviews, *Christianity and the University Experience* looks at the attitudes and experiences of student Christians at a variety of university types. These are 'traditional elite' universities, such as Durham, where many from high status backgrounds study and which have Church connections; so-called Redbrick universities established in industrial cities; 1960s universities; ex-Polytechnics; and new universities born out of Anglican colleges in Cathedral towns (p. 57).

It statistically establishes that student Christians are counter-culturally conservative, that highly elite universities pose the greatest challenge to student Christianity, and that 'middle class' children (p. 168–172) are likely to become more or less religious while at university. It provides a typology of religious students, which it shows to be a valid predictive model, a handy history of England's university system, and some thoughtful descriptions of life at different kinds of English universities.

However, this reviewer is not sure that this book can be said to offer the 'fresh insights' (blurb) into this subject that it claims to do. In essence, all these data are really being used to argue is that English universities are not homogenous, that Christian students have diverse perspectives, that social class mediates religious difference, and elite universities are the biggest de-stabilisers of Christian identity. None of these points is an original insight to those familiar with the literature on this subject, though backing them up with such quantitative rigor is a welcome contribution. The authors seem to exaggerate the originality of their thesis. They suggest others have argued that university has a 'secularizing effect' (p. 203) and that they find things to be more complex. However, it seems fairly obvious that the argument that they are criticizing refers to a general trend and to a university ideal. And in this regard, Guest et al.'s data actually indicates that the best universities have the most profound secularizing effect overall, while concomitantly creating a reaction of highly conservative Christian Unions, that is, an overall secularizing effect.

The degree of qualitative analysis is puzzlingly small in that the authors propose to understand the *experience* of being a student Christian. They do not appear to have engaged in participant observation with the Christian groups, just interviews. This is a shame, because a more anthropological method might have allowed them to gain more information (as trust was built-up) and would certainly have provided more insights into the experience aspect of being a student Christian, beyond fundamentalist students, where there are a number of ethnographies. In addition, they only draw upon 100 interviews.

In terms of theoretical discussion, Guest et al. do not appear to be especially critically engaged. They use a number of contentious concepts couching including ethnicity—that are not problematized. With regard to class, the authors make a binary division between those who have attended 'private school' and those who have attended 'state

school' (p. 55). This may have some validity, but it needs to be explored in far more detail to avoid the impression of overly simplifying the issue. Class, in England, is not just about money but also education and family background. They may try to pre-empt these criticisms by asserting that, 'like many of the students we spoke to we hope to provoke an ongoing dialogue, not claim an indisputable truth' (p. 9). However, nobody is suggesting they should claim an indisputable truth. As scholars, they should present an extremely well thought through, logical argument in which they respond to potential criticisms. For this reason, comparing themselves to liberal Christians (people of faith) is, perhaps, less than helpful. The authors should also have thought much more carefully about their written style. It is jargon-laden. Unnecessary use of such language gives the impression of attempting to mask a lack of any insightful point.

The theoretical part of the book is extremely problematic. Stripped of this, *Christianity and the University Experience* offers some useful data, some interesting descriptions, and some thought-provoking remarks from interviewees. This reviewer wishes they had provided much more of this part and pursued it in greater depth.

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