

Religion and higher education: developing a critical understanding of the experiences of religious students in UK secular universities (0013)

This paper draws on the narratives of 'religious' students, interviewed over their first fifteen months in a UK higher education institution. The first part of the paper highlights the discrimination faced by the students and the ways they are positioned both by the media and within the HE institution. The second part builds on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus to make sense of the reflexive, agentic, strategising aspects of their actions in negotiating the complex field of secular higher education.

Religious students in higher education

Muslims and Islamist students are constantly in the news (with the terms often used synonymously and interchangeably); alarmist discussions about 'Muslims' are pervasive, with the language of newspapers at best embroidered and at worst inflammatory. It is not exclusively the media, however, that is alone in fanning the flames of public concern: the foreword to the most recent Universities UK publication, 'Freedom of Speech on campus' (UUK, 2011) begins with the statement that *'violent extremism is one of the greatest threats to the liberty and safety of citizens in modern times'*. In response to the ever increasing 'moral panic' that they are the seed beds of Islamic fundamentalism, universities have increasingly been urged to put strategies in place to facilitate greater understanding of diverse religions and thus increase religious tolerance on campus.

However, whilst the events of 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005 have enabled the media to construct Muslims within an ever narrower and more negative framework (Salgado-Pottier, 2008), they are not the only religious group to experience ignorance and indifference (at best), and violence and intimidation (at worst). Christians are increasingly represented as either the 'victims' of religious intolerance, or that their belief is a less acceptable form of 'difference' than, say, sexuality; people from 'New Religious Movements' complain of open hostility and discrimination, including being labelled as 'child abusers' and 'cults', by the media; the majority of Hindus and Sikhs report a high level of unfair treatment including within education (Weller et al, 2001), and the intimidation, violence and desecration of property directed towards Jews is on the rise (A-PP Group, 2006).

Despite these concerns, although there is a body of literature focussing on the role of staff in HEIs in supporting religious and cultural diversity, there are few UK studies exploring how their higher education experiences both affect and shape 'religious' students at secular universities. This is a considerable omission since, for many students, religion is one of the strongest aspects of identity and of more importance to certain groups than any other aspect of identity, including gender, class and ethnicity (Modood et al, 1997; O'Beirne, 2004; Tyrer and Ahmad, 2006). In addition, whilst for all students higher education may confront them with questions regarding their purpose in life, their beliefs and their identity, for religious students, higher education, with its emphasis on the secular, will not only present challenges to class, gender and ethnicity but may also present a major challenge to their religious beliefs.

The research

The paper draws on the narratives of fifteen Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Sikh students, interviewed over their first fifteen months in a UK higher education institution, with each student interviewed three times. The transcripts were read and re-read through a Bourdieuan lens drawing on the intersectionality between the students religious, raced, gendered and classed identities and subjectivities, their individual habitus and the strategies they undertake to negotiate the complex field of higher education.

It is clear from the students' narratives that each student's habitus, the product of their history (Bourdieu, 1977) had arisen from, and continued to be shaped by, amongst others, an amalgam of racism, parental rejection, familial demands, trauma and, in particular, religious conversion and religious intolerance. For these students, however, the habitus did not function unconsciously - contrary to Bourdieu's assertion that it is created and reproduced '*without any deliberate pursuit of coherence... without any conscious concentration*' (Bourdieu, 1984, 170). Rather they were constantly reflecting both on their actions and their identities and were thus closer to having what Giddens (1984) might describe as a 'discursive consciousness', an on-going articulated discourse about the social conditions of their actions.

In addition, whilst each student was actively engaged in creating their own social worlds, many, through their actions, contested the notion that '*the structure of those worlds is already predefined by broader racial, gender and class relations*' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 144). Rather they were not only strategic but demonstrated high levels of agency in positioning themselves in relation to others. Their 'discursive consciousness' generated in them a wide repertoire of strategies including resistance and defiance, which they utilised on a daily basis, not just during moments of crisis. Other students, however, whilst exhibiting equal levels of reflexivity and agency selected less confrontational strategies using charm, avoidance and 'passing' instead. A third group comprised those students whose were the least agentic and whose strategies included physical and emotional disengagement, including withdrawal for the university, regression and self-silencing.

Implications

Bourdieu perceived religion almost purely in organisational terms, as a system of symbolic meaning serving to create social distinction and reproduce and perpetuate social domination. In addition, although he recognised that the field is relational (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), the only relations he considered were class based. However as Barber (2010) notes: '*religion can also be a relational system...religion does not maintain a static, hierarchal existence in the institutional domain. Rather, it is dynamic and shifts between institutional and relational social systems, at times existing in them simultaneously*' (p.3). The lack of recognition (not only from Bourdieu but more generally) of the relational nature of religion ignores the ways in which religion intersects with other relational systems and positions people as different or 'other'. In addition, Bourdieu's notion of habitus takes insufficient account of the ways in which striving and self-awareness are constitutive of the habitus and thus fails to recognise the types of strategies which religious students elect, or are forced, to undertake to enable them to succeed in higher education.

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