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Reported experiences of anti-Christian prejudice among Christian adolescents in England

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Abstract: Christians' experiences of anti-Christian prejudice are relatively unexplored in sociological research. This paper analyses perceived anti-Christian prejudice reported by Christian adolescents in England. Rich interview data were generated with Anglican, Baptist and Catholic adolescents (n=26) over a five month period in churches and church youth groups in an English city. They reported incidents of anti-Christian name-calling (slurs), bullying, labelling and aggressive questioning about their faith by non-Christian peers indicating that anti-Christian prejudice may affect the status of Christians in adolescent peer-group hierarchies. They also perceived formal aspects of schooling to be biased against Christian beliefs and practices. These episodes suggest that, like prejudice against other religious groupings, anti-Christian prejudice has historical, negative tropes and stereotypes based upon perceived inferiority. However, unlike other kinds of religious prejudice, the analyses also suggest anti-Christian prejudice can sometimes be related to philosophical objections to religious beliefs rather than negative racial or ethnic attributes. The relationship between these findings and secularisation are discussed.

Key words: religious; anti-Christian; prejudice; adolescents; atheism; secularisation; England

Introduction

Ongoing geopolitical events since September 11th 2001 (9/11) are widely acknowledged to have brought matters of religious identity to the fore nationally and internationally (Cooper & Lodge, 2008). While much research and attention has been directed at Muslim youth in these circumstances (Archer, 2003), relatively little sociological research has been undertaken to explore reported experiences of anti-Christian prejudice (Yancey, 2010). This

paper addresses this gap and presents analyses of episodes of perceived anti-Christian prejudice reported by Christian adolescents.

Exploring the nature of anti-Christian prejudice among adolescents in England is timely. A comparison of the 2001 and 2011 UK census shows a 12 percent fall from 71.7 percent of the population reporting themselves as Christian in 2001, to 59.3 percent in 2011 (ONS). Adolescents in Britain are less likely to practice a religion than adults (Park et al.). Those adolescents who regularly attend and participate in religious activities are a minority among their peers (Kay and Francis). Small-scale research in England indicates that religious participation can therefore be considered abnormal by adolescents who do not have religious commitments, risking the ‘social exclusion’ of those that do (Ipgrave, ‘Relationships’ 265).

The examples of perceived anti-Christian prejudice presented below were reported in a series of group and individual interviews by a small purposive sample of Christian adolescents (n=26) in one English city. These interviews were conducted as part of a larger interview study of schooling experiences and identity construction among adolescent Christians, Jews, and Muslims (n=99) (see Anonymised; Anonymised; Anonymised). Reported experiences of prejudice are identified as perceived ‘behaviour that involves some disparagement of others on account of the group they belong to’ (Brown viii). The analyses given in this paper illustrate common themes reported by the participants in regard to their identification to, and practice of, Christianity. They are presented in three thematic groups: slurs and labels; bullying and status hierarchies; and, reported experiences of aggressive questioning and challenging of Christian beliefs.

Exploring reported experiences of anti-Christian prejudice among Christian adolescents

Interviews were conducted in an English city, referred to as Southville¹ at St Mary's Church (Roman Catholic, n=10), St Luke's Church (Church of England with a charismatic worship style, n=5), and Northstreet Baptist Church (affiliated to the Baptist Union of Great Britain and the Evangelical Alliance, n=11).² These research sites were chosen as examples of mainstream denominations of Christianity in England. The purposive sampling of Christian adolescents who practised regularly and identified as belonging to their respective denominations allowed for analyses of prejudices affecting particular denominations. From the pool of regular attendees of the churches, participants (male = 8; female = 18) between the ages of 11 and 19 were recruited with the consent of parents (BERA). All participants volunteered to take part in the research and regularly participated in worship and cultural activities provided at the churches, including youth groups.

Interviews were conducted in places of worship and not in schools so as to recruit regularly practicing Christian adolescents belonging to particular denominations. Previous research suggests that adolescents may not want to reveal their religious identities at school for fear of bullying, so interviews were also conducted outside of school for ethical reasons (see, Anonymous). Five participants belonged to ethnic minorities, but the churches did not serve any particular ethnic or national community. Most participants had parents or family members who attended the same church. Participants attended 10 different secondary schools representing the three principal kinds of secondary schools in England: independent

¹ "Southville", church, and participants' names are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality (BERA). Given the size of the city and the few churches there, giving the city's name would enable the identification of the congregations and therefore potentially the individual participants.

² The Evangelical Alliance is a well-established umbrella body that represents over 70 denominations and two million evangelical Christians in the UK (Evangelical Alliance)

schools, state-funded schools not of a religious character, and state-funded schools of a religious character (DCSF). There was not a discernible difference in the kinds of experiences reported by attendees of different school types.

Eight unstructured group interviews (4-7 participants) were conducted in the three churches either before or after Sunday services or during youth activities on weekdays between November 2010 and March 2011. The same participants were interviewed in more than one group interview on successive occasions as part of an emergent design that closely followed the concerns of participants (Morgan, Fellows and Guevara). Ten single interviews were also conducted with a random selection of participants who had already taken part in group interviews. This design aided generation of rich data, allowed participants time to reflect further on the issues raised, and also enhanced the reliability of the study (Morgan, Fellows and Guevara; Peek and Fothergill).

Interviews followed participants' perspectives and experiences about negotiating the different social contexts of their churches, families, schools, and non-Christian peer groups. Participants were concerned about secular peer group influences, such as sexuality and crime, and reported feeling undermined and threatened in their religious commitments, interests and practices particularly at school – as found in other small-scale studies (Gill; Ipgrave and McKenna). While at times participants discussed religious diversity, they did not report frequent episodes of conflict between religions or between Christian denominations. After preliminary inductive analyses of the interview data, relevant concepts taken from research literature were applied to further interpret the data resulting in the analyses given below.

Anti-Christian slurs as boundary labels between adolescent peer groups

Episodes of anti-Christian prejudice were reported as taking place in each of the secondary schools attended by the participants. A striking aspect of the reported experiences was the reported labelling of Christians with anti-Christian slurs by peers.

Slurs are harmful or derogatory names or comments. They can be used as labels to mark the boundaries between groups, and indicate inferiority, or even seek to change, the status of social groups as part of a hierarchy (Doosje, Spears and Ellemers; Henderson; Mullen and Smyth). The most obvious and researched example of this is the use of racial slurs in the United States as labels which invoke historic and embedded racial power relations (Dovidio and Gaertner; Leets). By contrast, the slur 'Bible-basher' marks an intergroup boundary not based upon racial or ethnic ties (or necessarily of religious identification) but of the intensity and presence of religious belief. It also has the connotation, like its American counter-part 'Bible-thumper', that Christians may seek to preach to, or convert others, identify with or promote, a conservative social and political agenda (Louis and De Maio 'Anti-Christian', 'Prejudice'). This nuance in particular can be interpreted as indicating a possible competition of status between Christian and atheist adolescents. Consider Tobias' example.

Tobias: *I, I've had the odd issue with a few people in Year 10 [Ninth Grade] before, where they've mocked me for it [being Christian], but, I just choose to ignore them, umm. For example, in a classroom that my form [homeroom] is, where I am registered every day, is also their English classroom. So on the backs of some of the tables, they might have written some things about it [being Christian]...*

Interviewer: *What kind of things do they write?*

Tobias: *Umm, it's normally, it's just normally petty stuff like: Bible-basher, and other things of that sort of nature.*

Tobias, male, 15, St Luke's Anglican Church, individual interview

Boundaries between practising Christians and non-practising peers were usually reported as permeable, only becoming apparent over issues of belief or religious

identification. For example, Sheila narrated a story about being called a Bible-basher, which for her, as also suggested by Tobias, had been normalised as a label because of its frequency of use.

Sheila: *I went on my [school] ski trip last year – last week – [I mean]. A couple of guys played with my phone, and on my phone I have a Bible App, so I don't have to bring my Bible to church every week, so, umm, umm, they were looking through my phone, looking at all the games, and they saw the Bible App. And they mentioned something and they were quite rude about it and I was like, to be honest, it didn't really affect me anymore because I was getting so used to it; they were like, 'Oh do you read this all the time? Have you, do you memorise, do you know the whole Bible? Most books have a beginning and an end, and the Bible never ends, the Bible's so weird.'*

Interviewer: *You said, they said they 'mentioned something' – what exactly did they say?*

Sheila: *They called me a – can I say it? – they called me a 'Bible-basher.' I've been called that quite a lot so I get used to it.*

Sheila, female, 17, St Luke's Anglican Church, group interview

Anti-Christian slurs used as boundary labels followed denominational differences. While Protestant Christians reported the label 'Bible-basher' which relates to the Protestant emphasis on the authority of the Bible; for Catholics, slurs were based upon allegiance to the Pope and other distinctive aspects of Catholic teaching.

Interviews conducted in St Mary's Catholic Church coincided with Pope Benedict XVI's visit to England in 2010. One striking label that Ben experienced on a sporadic basis from peers related to the sexual abuse scandal in the Church.

Ben: *I mean as I said you get the odd people joking about you being a Catholic, saying a joke and being silly.*

Interviewer: *Could you tell me a phrase they might use?*

Ben: *Oh, just stuff like Catholics are not allowed to use condoms or giving the world Aids and stuff, or 'Ben, did you get raped by the Pope?'*

Ben, male, 13, St Mary's Roman Catholic Church, individual interview

The suggestion that Ben is a victim of clerical paedophilia is similar to historical anticlerical stereotypes of the sexual perversion of clergy in pre-modern and modern eras (Davis; Jenkins; Ledesma). The accusation that the Pope himself is the perpetrator, and that Ben as a Catholic is culpable by his continued affiliation to the Church, suggest similarities

with historic anti-Catholicism which focused on the issue of Papal authority – a historical boundary between English loyal to the State, and seditious Catholics (Miller). Identifying Ben with an ideology that ‘gives the world Aids’ labels Ben as a conservative political adversary to progress, and impediment to the amelioration of the poor – a critique of Christianity found in historic atheist ideologies (e.g. Comte; Freud; Russell). While these aspects of anti-Christian have historical precedents, it is important to note that they also bear similarities to the widely publicised critiques of Christianity presented by the New Atheists (Beattie). The possible role of anti-Christian slurs in adolescent peer group hierarchies is considered in the following section.

Perceived low status of Christians in adolescent peer group hierarchies

Slurs relate to the position of individuals in adolescent peer hierarchies and have been shown to be important to self-esteem and a predictor of bullying (Brown and Lohr; Cook et al.; Garandeau, Lee and Salmivalli). A perceived lack of respect towards Christianity was a common theme in the reported experience of participants. The slurs and labels assigned to adolescents suggest that identification with Christianity may be low in adolescent peer group hierarchies and inferior to non-religious identifications. For example Ambrose believed that the challenging comments and criticism of his peers were symptomatic of a lack of respect for Christianity in general and of Catholicism in particular.

People [peers] are just like, ‘Arrrgh, you’re Christian! You don’t believe in abortion!’ and things like that. It’s just like ‘Christian’ is almost a derogatory word at the moment. Especially Catholics because of the Pope, and the laws [religious teachings] are a lot stricter [than other Christian denominations].

Ambrose, male, 15, St Mary’s Church, single interview

The reported emotional impact and perception that anti-Christian slurs were intended to cause hurt rather than be harmless comments varied among participants. In the episodes

given in the previous section, participants played-down the distress and offence anti-Christian slurs caused them. However, some participants were very concerned about bullying and its relationship to their Christian identity. Toni, who had just entered her secondary school, broke down in tears when she described her experiences of being bullied at school which she believed were associated with her Christian identity.

For me being Christian, everyone [at Secondary School] thinks you're the teacher's pet, and everyone does something really mean, like what they did to me in French. We have this thing if you forget something three times you get a detention and they took my French book and they kept for nearly a week so I had two marks off before I even took... and I told my French teacher and everyone had to open their lockers. It was really upsetting because everyone thinks you can't be anything fun, they just hate you. And every time I get teased for being Christian, like, everyone's playing and they say you shouldn't join in because they say I'll go crying to God.

Toni, female, 11, Northstreet Baptist Church, group interview

This episode, in contrast to the other examples, suggests boundaries between Christians and atheists in peer hierarchies can also be less permeable.

The low status of practising Christianity can be further understood in the context of Catholic church-goers attending a Catholic school. Anti-Christian prejudice was reportedly occurring in church-affiliated institutions and in other contexts that may otherwise be expected to tolerate or promote Christian practices and identifications. In a study of practising Catholic adolescents in Catholic Schools in Australia (identified as 'core Catholics' in the study), some participants reported being picked upon because of their religious commitment at school, particularly those who identified as more strongly religious (Rymarz and Graham). For example, an altar server (someone who assists the priest during the Mass) reported that he was nicknamed 'church boy' by other Catholics in his school (83). This suggests that non-church attending adolescents may attribute a lower status to adolescent church attendees even if they attend the same religious institution.

The reported experiences of participants in this study indicate a similar position in adolescent peer group hierarchies in an English Catholic school. Daniella explained that being 'religious' (i.e., attending church) was 'not cool' and not the norm among her school peers. Jodie agreed and suggested that religious commitment attracted questions from peers. These experiences relate to non-practising Christians as opposed to members of other religions.

Daniella: *Religion [at school] is still seen as uncool like, it's a really not cool thing to believe in, or whatever.*

Interviewer: *How about your interactions with these people [school peers] who think religion is uncool?*

Jodie: *It is hard for them to understand ... and like they would ask questions like 'why do you believe in God?' and 'do you believe God rose again in heaven?' and stuff because they haven't been grown [brought] up ...*

Daniella [interrupting]: *in the same environment we have. Like we've been brought up going to church pretty much every week whereas a lot of the Catholic people in our school don't go to church and it's quite a small percentage of us that do.*

Jodie, female, 13; Daniella, female, 14, St Mary's Roman Catholic Church, group interview

Participation in worship as an identity boundary between practicing Christians and their peers was also emphasised by Anglicans. For example, Ellen reported that her peers attacked her on account of the strangeness of charismatic forms of worship when they encountered them in a religious education lesson.

I was in my [religious education] lesson, and, umm, you know, you know like [...] charismatic worship... Well we were learning about that, and I was like, 'ok well that's what, that's what I do.' And, umm, they showed like a video of some people doing it and stuff, and everyone was like: 'oh, that's really weird! That's really really weird and stuff.' And I kinda felt like that was me being attacked. And I felt like really really defensive...

Ellen, female, 16, St Luke's Anglican Church, group interview

A corollary of the perceived lower status of Christianity in peer group hierarchies was the perspective that it is more acceptable to criticise Christianity than other religions. For example, Anne felt that the values and norms of her Anglican school did not respect

Christianity in the same way other religious beliefs were accommodated. She gave an example of bias taking place during a discussion in a religious education lesson.

There was this one time in my [religious education] lesson when this girl in my, umm, class, her family are like [New Age] Pagans and she's like into it and everything, and, umm, the guys behind – like, also at the lesson, they were all just like dissing [criticising] Christianity all the time – and everyone knows that I'm a Christian so I was trying to back it up and everything, and then they started dissing Paganism. And then, she just blows, and it's just like, umm, they, when she explains the reasons against it, they take it in and go: oh right, sorry. But I'm trying to explain things about Christianity, they don't do that; they just keep going. And the thing is: I don't understand how, when everyone's all like: oh yeah, I respect other people's beliefs and everything, when, obviously they can't, like, understand Christianity; they just have to have a go at you for it.

Anne, female, 14, St Luke's Anglican Church, group interview

Ambrose, to give another example, believed that Catholicism was placed lower than Islam in peer group hierarchies. He explained that peers were not hostile to Islam or Muslim students in school on account of their beliefs because that would be perceived to be racist. Christianity, on the other hand, could be criticised because, while there were religious boundaries between him and his 'white' peers as a practicing Catholic, these were not racial boundaries. This example shows Christian adolescents' awareness of a religious aspect to identity politics and the permeability of boundaries between practising Christians and non-practising peers. It also shows how some participants' struggled with defining and articulating anti-Christian prejudice in interviews.

If you are a Muslim it is seen as much stricter [...] like the rules can't be questioned because it is like a new religion whereas people have got used to Catholicism and have started questioning it. But in Islam...if you say something and question an Islamic belief you can quite easily be seen as racist whereas in a predominantly white class isn't going to be racist against a Catholic person - well in a way they are- but it isn't seen as that because they are both white.

Ambrose, male, 15, St Mary's Church, single interview

The idea that Christianity was not perceived as cool by peers was a recurrent theme in participants' explanations for the inferior, low status of Christian identification. A "cool" adolescent can be understood as a popular, fashionable higher status adolescent whose clothes, accessories and behaviour follow, or innovate, according to aesthetic and stylistic

conventions established by advertising and wider media (Milner). When asked about the source of Christianity being uncool, Meg, Anne and Sheila explained:

Meg: *The media does not help at all, in films [...] In some films where they have a Christian character they always set them as ...*

Anne: *Glasses, tight-top*

Meg: *Always everything good [conforming], and it is very rare to see in films to see a cool Christian, like someone who believes in God but no one will judge [them for being uncool].*

Sheila: *It depends what you classify as cool*

Anne: *Like you know that Little Britain thing, they have that guy Judith and they're like Christians; it was really funny...*

Meg: *Like the stereotypical Christian doesn't appeal to the young people, it's like they think it's all the rules [Christian attitudes to drinking, sex and smoking]*

Anne, female, 14; Meg, female, 14; Sheila, female, 17; St Luke's Anglican Church, group interview

While participants' criticism of media do not necessarily constitute episodes of overt anti-Christian prejudice, they give some plausible reasons for the low status of Christianity among adolescents that could be a factor in incidents of anti-Christian bullying and labeling. Anne claims Christians are typically depicted as unfashionable and unstylish. She refers to characters in the BBC's mockumentary *Come Fly with Me* screened at the time of the interviews (Come fly with me). This was a controversial off-shoot of the popular BBC show *Little Britain* (Little Britain) which depicted several religious and ethnic groups negatively, including Christians. Meg argues Christians are considered negatively because of the difference between Christian moral teachings and the portrayal of 'normal' adolescent behavior in media which includes drinking, promiscuity, and smoking. Later in the interview, the participants explained this in regard to the BBC show *Skins* (Skins) which depicts the lives of teenagers in Bristol, England.

Assertive questioning of the rationality of religious belief

Assertive questioning of the rationality of religious belief was a prevalent theme in the reported experiences of participants. Peers' questions were not reported to be part of a

debate or an even-sided exchange of views, but ‘like accusations’ (Ambrose). Consider this example.

I have a particular friend who is very atheist and she'll at any opportunity challenge my religion. [In] a conversation we were having the other day she said how it was funny that I could fall for this whole God thing and she like claims that she wishes Richard Dawkins had arrested the Pope and stuff ...

Joyce, 15, St Mary's Catholic Church, group interview

Joyce refers to the New Atheist Richard Dawkins. This resonates with the findings of Ipgrave's (2012) study of an English secondary school in which ‘Dawkinsmania’ had made a significant impact on the beliefs of a whole-school peer group (Ipgrave, ‘Relationships’). Brian and Toni's reported experiences of peers' assertive questioning allows further exploration of this aspect. They concurred over the difficulty in answering their peers' hostile questioning about the ‘Problem of Evil’:

Brian: *The biggest problem is why do bad things happen... and they [peers] ask you all these questions... if there is a God, why does this happen?*

Toni: *I agree with Brian, since like so many people ask me that question and I just say, ‘I'm not like the internet, I don't know everything’ all I know is that everything happens for a reason and God must have allowed it to happen, and I believe that if you are a good person then God will have forgiven you, and if you had died God would have forgiven you, and everything happens for a good reason, may be if a car crashed, God would have his reasons. It's not going to happen because he's bored or anything.*

Toni, female, 11; Brian, male 19, Northstreet Baptist Church, group interview

This example illustrates how perceived hostility may prompt religious adolescents' further reflection and choices about their religious beliefs and identifications (Chaudhury and Miller; Anonymised; Peek).

Hostile questioning about God from peers was reported in connection to secondary schools' religious education lessons. For example, Meg found questions about the existence of God difficult to defend in classroom discussions and written exams.

I find that hard [defending God], especially in PRE [philosophy and religious education], they question you [teachers and peers] and all you can say is ‘that's not true’ and they always ask ‘why isn't that true?’ and it's like I say ‘because I know it is’ but they still question everything. [...] I did my PRE mock [examination] on Friday and the question was ‘If God existed we

would know it' and you had to argue that statement from both points of view, but because our PRE teacher wasn't very good I didn't do very well. I think I can understand all the questions they are asking because I have quite a logical mind, so I think about things logically. It's like I know the answers, but I don't. Like they don't understand it. I put it's hard for people to believe what they can't see, but then I put that Christians can see God. [...] I find RE [religious education] quite hard

Meg, female, 14, St Luke's Anglican Church, group interview

Overall, the combined impact of both peers and teachers' questioning of the rationality of belief in God could be overwhelming for some participants. Toni explained.

[I am] torn between two different ways: everyone's saying he's [God's] not real, everyone saying I'm wasting my time and I should be an atheist like them.

Toni, female, 11, Northstreet Baptist Church, group interview.

Religious education lessons were perceived as a source of antitheism by participants. The 1944 and 1988 Education Acts stipulate that schools of a non-religious character must cater for 'spiritual development' and provide religious education, while church schools also provide education for those of different faiths, or no-faith (DCSF). Put crudely, these circumstances mean that non-religiously affiliated schools include a secular study of religion, and religiously-affiliated schools may not be as religious in atmosphere and ethos as may be presumed (Chadwick; Copley, *Indoctrination*; Grace). Several studies have found that members of religions are critical of religious education provided in non-religiously affiliated schools in the respect that it does not represent religious traditions accurately or fairly (Hayward; Igrave, 'Issues'; Jackson et al; Lundie; Anonymised; Weller, Feldman and Purdam). Some scholars have therefore argued that religious education can present inaccurate or distorted accounts of religions, encourage its philosophical critique, or even promote secular humanism (Barnes; Copley, *Indoctrination*; Thompson). Furthermore, it has been argued that Christianity in particular is poorly taught (Copley, 'Echo'; Copley et al., 'Where', 'On'; Fancourt).

Some participants felt discussions about the existence of God reflected the atheist bias of their teachers. Anita's perspective illustrates this view and shows how the current emphasis upon teaching the philosophy of religion may prompt aggressive questioning by peers (Anonymised).

Philosophy and religion [religious education] is hard for me because it's against God rather than being for God. Our teacher is always going on about if God exists, then why does he let all these things happen, and he always has all these arguments and debates throughout ... I don't see how that is religion; he's pretty much telling us how there mustn't be a God because of all these bad things that happen.

Anita, female, 13, Northstreet Baptist Church, group interview

Resonating with this example, studies of English religious education teachers' professional identities show that they can be disparaging about religion. Sikes and Everington found that trainee religious education teachers could assert atheism as a means to negotiate their own identities in classrooms, one participant exclaiming: 'I like to get it in quick that I'm an atheist' (trainee religious education teacher in Sikes and Everington 21).

Discussion

This is a small-scale exploratory study of the informant accounts of Christian adolescents from one city in England. While it can offer some detailed empirically-grounded theoretical analyses, further research is necessary to establish the extent of anti-Christian prejudice among adolescents in England. Since the behaviours reported in this paper concern adolescent peer-interactions, careful judgement must be exercised in interpreting them as indicators of anti-Christian prejudice in wider society. We cannot assume that comparable behaviours occur among different age groups, or in different social contexts. Moreover, like many studies of prejudice, it analyses the perceptions of victims rather than those of alleged perpetrators. However, from the limited data generated in this study it is possible to make

some tentative contributions to the understanding of anti-Christian prejudice in contemporary England.

The examples given in this paper suggest that Christian adolescents can experience negative views about their beliefs and practices (including the accusation that their belief in God is irrational), and experience negative behaviours against them, such as bullying and mocking. Comparisons can be made with these reported slurs, labels and behaviours and negative anti-Christian stereotypes in history. For example, there is a trope relating to Christian attitudes towards sex and the sexual perversion of the clergy. The philosophical critique of the existence of a Christian God, and the belief that Christianity impedes social and scientific progress bear similarities to the critique of Christianity in Enlightenment and modern thought (e.g. Comte; Freud; Mitchell; Russell). These show similarities with the kinds of anti-Christian sentiment and propaganda expressed in traumatic social and political transformations such the Spanish Civil War and Stalinist era Soviet Union (Beemans; Ledesma). These reported behaviours are also congruent with research that suggests there is increasing polarisation between secular and religious positionings in the UK (Amarasingam; Ipgrave; Wilkins-Laflamme).

There will be debate as to whether hostility towards Christianity constitutes a form of prejudice as abhorrent as racism or anti-Semitism (Jenkins; Johnson). It is likely that disparaging attitudes and behaviours towards Christians are more acceptable because they are positioned against traditionally hegemonic power structures, such as the Established Church. An important point to note here is how different understandings of prejudice may affect attitudes of anti-Christian sentiment in relation to other prejudices, such as racism.

The founder of the social scientific study of prejudice, Gordon Allport defines prejudice as a case of mistaken or poor judgement, or a failure of rationality. However, if

prejudice must involve an element of irrationality, and one presumes hostility to Christianity is rational, it follows that anti-Christian prejudice is not a prejudice. This view is endorsed by the New Atheists, and has been articulated by those critical of the role of Christian groups in public life who see opposition towards the beliefs, values and influence of Christianity not as a prejudice but a right of free thinkers in a liberal society (Dawkins, Hitchens, Jenkins). This can be seen as a distinctive characteristic of anti-Christian prejudice in comparison to anti-Semitism and Islamophobia which originate in Muslims and Jews' historical statuses as perceived outsiders in Europe.

The present study suggests Christianity may be regarded as 'uncool' by English adolescents, and this inferior status is perceived to be the result of negative media portrayal, or an absence of fashionable young Christians in media compared with non-Christian role-models. It is likely that media depict mainstream Christians both positively and negatively (Breeze; Clark). However, research undertaken in the United States suggests that anti-Christian prejudice may be reinforced through media by liberal elites as part of an ongoing 'culture war' between conservatives and liberals over the role of religion in public life (Hunter; Louis and Maio, 'Prejudice'). In this respect, as also found by Ipgrave ('Relationships'), at least one episode of anti-Christian prejudice considered in this paper indicates the New Atheists may have had, at least at the time the interviews were conducted, some influence on the views of non-Christian identifying adolescents in wider peer groups (16).

The findings of this study resonate with some of the scholarly literature critiquing religious education in England on the basis of its inaccurate representation of Christianity (Copley, 'Echo', *Indoctrination*; Copley et al., 'Where', 'On'; Barnes; Fancourt; Hayward; Jackson et al.; Lundie; Anonymised; Thompson). Copley (*Indoctrination*) argues the

treatment of Christianity in the English education system is indicative of an English culture war over the role of Christianity in English society which he refers to as the ‘the struggle for the mind.’ He considers this both caused by, and contributory towards, secularisation. This is because the education system purports to include religion in its curricula (Christianity in particular), but only in order to misrepresent and critique it.

Copley’s understanding of secularisation is broad and compatible with divergent conceptualisations offered by sociologists, ranging from the traditional secularisation thesis such as argued by Brown (‘Death’) and Bruce, to more nuanced explanations, such as those advocated by Davie (‘Believing’, ‘Memory’) or Bailey (‘Implicit’, ‘Secular’).

The data in this paper are not sufficient to contradict or establish any particular theory of secularisation. However, it is not inconceivable that the influence of peer attitudes, schooling, and media could constitute a ‘positive feedback’ effect in the secularisation of adolescents’ beliefs, practices and identifications at a critical time in the formation of religious positionings and affiliations. Relevant to this interpretation would be the possible role of secular education as an agent of secularisation (Dobbelaere). As curricula can challenge religious interpretations of reality, and peers can ridicule religious belief, adolescents may feel less able to publically acknowledge or practise their faith, making it more likely that others will also see Christianity as inferior, irrational and ‘uncool.’ These challenges to religious belief and practice may present a problem for parents who belong to faith communities, and who may wish for their young members to attend mainstream schools (including Church-affiliated schools). They also present a challenge for educators who wish to promote understanding and cohesion in a diverse society through programmes of religious education inclusive of all religious perspectives (Anonymous).

It could be argued that disparaging attitudes and behaviours towards Christians could be a long-standing aspect of Christian societies which have always been more heterodox and diverse than may have been commonly acknowledged (Stark). It could also be argued that adolescents exhibiting perceived anti-Christian behaviours may feel ownership of Christianity to the extent that they can criticise it, thus indicating a kind of ambiguous identification with Christianity congruent with continued national identification with Christianity, despite a lack of participation (ONS). Qualitative research conducted in the 1960s in England, for example, showed that Christian identification, practices and beliefs were challenged by teenagers (Loukes). Without longitudinal quantitative data, however, it is not possible to establish if reported instances of anti-Christian prejudice are any more prevalent or serious now than in the past. Furthermore, prejudice, contestation and challenge may make religious identities stronger and provide impetus for identity construction (Woodberry and Smith; Peek; Chaudhury and Miller; Anonymised). What young Catholic, Anglican and Baptist Christians in England may lack in comparison to other minority groups, however, are strong ethnic or national ties and affiliations that may also support religious identifications (Jacobson).

Conclusion

Religion has become an increasingly important factor of identity politics in England. This paper has presented exploratory analyses of reported experiences of anti-Christian prejudice among a small group of adolescents in this context. As a small study conducted at one point in time, the data presented cannot be used to assess whether anti-Christian prejudice is a long-standing aspect of the diversity of English society; a fad or phase related to, or indicative of, the arguments of the New Atheists; or, an associated aspect of ongoing

secularisation. However, this paper offers some conceptual and theoretical bases for future research into anti-Christian prejudice. It identifies some established tropes and stereotypes; suggests some denominational differences between these; and, also contends that among adolescents at least, Christian identification can be associated with lower peer-group status and perceived intellectual inferiority.

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