

Results of a survey of attitudes of academic staff to religious belief/unbelief in a business school.

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Introduction

A previous paper presented to the C.A.N. conference in September 2010 examined whether Christianity might be used as a moral framework underpinning the teaching in a business school. The body of research examined suggested it might be possible to use this, though it also suggested some hostility might be found from what remain essentially public sector organisations in the UK. This latter concept of Universities being in the public sector is, however, under some stress in spring 2011 in the UK, with some profound politically driven funding changes currently being implemented in Higher Education as a sector.

Nonetheless, in this working paper, the author sets out to test exactly what attitudes to religious belief or unbelief there might be amongst academics in his own business school at MMU and whether any such hostility did exist. To address this in a basic way, the author undertook a straightforward survey of attitudes, constructed from a brief (eight questions) and fully anonymous questionnaire distributed to all colleagues in late January 2011. The results were both fascinating and illuminating and a high response rate of respondents at 38% (54 out of 143 total staff) gave confidence about some level of validity of the responses received.

From a Christian perspective, the results were both positive and negative in terms of how far we might find it possible to encourage our colleagues to embrace the faith that so frames our lives and thoughts. The questionnaire design was deliberately constrained in the options that it gave respondents, being strictly multi-choice in design with no open-ended questions, beyond the initial self-definition of belief. The lack of open-endedness clearly irritated a number of respondents who could not resist writing their views on the questionnaire in the spaces around the questions! However it was made clear that there would be a follow up survey in more depth and that the respondents were asked to indicate any willingness to help in this follow-up process separately by email to the author.

The survey sought answers on;- the individual's belief or non belief; whether they felt staff should express their faith explicitly in an HE institution; whether they felt staff should express their faith to students; whether they should express their political views to students; whether an institution that adopted a clear faith position would make it more or less attractive to work for; whether a faith-based framework could make a contribution to the institution's ethical stance; whether all religious festivals should be recognised or not for student absence; and finally, whether Christianity was a positive or negative influence on staff attitudes to each other or to students (see appendix for the questionnaire).

Results and analysis

First the good news was that the largest group declared themselves as Christians, some 41%. However, if the results for agnostics and atheists are put together, this group was just larger at some 42%. There were small groups of Jewish and Muslim staff and a group declaring unconventional personal beliefs. How far the self declared Christians are practicing actively is a moot point, as our active fellowship of Christians is small, though greater numbers do turn up for our annual carol service. A balance of staff were indifferent as to whether religious faith should be expressed in an HE institution (50%) whilst 28% were supportive and 22% declared themselves hostile in question 2. However, question 3 has a clear majority 59% who were against making their personal religious faith clear to their students, 34% felt neutral about this whilst a small minority (7%) opted for being explicit. The author has made his own faith explicit teaching in tutorials when the topic arose naturally, though would never attempt to proselytise in class, so this clearly declared majority against is interesting in itself.

The next question 4 was put in as a test, posing whether politics would be equated to faith in the minds of staff. Broadly, a similar picture did emerge with 53% feeling that a member of staff should not make his or her political views explicit either, a minority (9%) felt they should and a large minority 37% were unsure. So keeping one's own views neutral in front of students got a clear majority in both Q3 and Q4. This did not fit with the author's own past experience as a student many years ago when his tutors were pretty explicit in expressing their political views at least; perhaps the study of Economics is inextricably linked to politics anyway.

The 5th question sought to ask whether an explicitly faith based institution would be a more or a less attractive place to work and this got a very clear thumbs down, with 78% of respondents considering it less attractive if that were so, only a few thinking it more attractive and a few indifferent. This group of UK academics clearly feel strongly about it. Indeed some of the 'write in' comments made this very clear as well. The US college experience of explicitly declared faith-based institutions does not chime with the UK one suspects. Question 6 seemed to relate to this as well, as a clear majority 52%, felt that a faith-based framework could not make a contribution to framing the business school's ethical stance, with an equal balance of 19% in favour and 19% not knowing. *

It seems that we as Christians have a real problem here. We believe that the UK is a broadly Christian society with its moral underpinnings coming from a historically shared biblical perspective, yet secularism seemingly has moved so far in our society as to lead our colleagues to wish to reject actively this notion of its influence on ethics. We clearly have a long way to go to change hearts and minds amongst this group of academics.

The 7th question sought to test tolerance and to some extent multi-faith acceptance by seeking views on whether students should get time off on their key faith festivals. A more

even split emerged between broad tolerance of all festivals (32%), though taking a broadly secular stance led (at 42%), and thus recognising none beyond the UK cultural traditions of Christmas and Easter breaks; again the secular edged towards being the majority.

The final question was the only one that specifically addressed Christianity, asking if it was a positive influence on staff attitudes to each other and to the students. Sadly, 59% felt it was neutral, neither positive nor negative, 26% felt it was positive and a small number (6%) felt it a negative influence. This too for active Christians is a sad result that should leave us with considerable food for thought. The message of God's love through Jesus Christ is clearly being buried amongst other perceptions of what our faith means to 'outsiders'. Could it be that the perception is of religion getting in the way of faith?

** Note the final three questions were not completed by five respondents and thus distortions to totals appear in these results*

Discussions and conclusion

The author's previous paper to the C.A.N. conference in September 2010 (see proceedings) cited a number of other writers whose thoughts are relevant to this survey here. Most notably King (2007), observed the pattern of greater hostility to all religion in the public sector. Assuming we still take universities as broadly the Public Sector in the UK, though for how much longer in 2011 is unclear, then the pattern of answers obtained here seem to agree with King. Yet ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility do appear to be broadly accepted by academics: it is merely the root or derivation of this that is in dispute. Cavanagh (1999) set a challenge that business schools have concentrated on teaching techniques, but in what amounts to a moral vacuum. Hui 2008 mapped out a Christian perspective on CSR, what he called 'value driven CSR' which challenged this lack of an apparent or clearly defined framework of values that many of the academic staff in this survey appear to declare.

The active rejection of any influence of faith in some circumstances was a shock to the author. Clearly many of the academics at MMU Business School have a complex but largely negative view of the influence of religion and faith and it appears that Christianity is swept up into this. One might point to publicity about extremist sas a possible culprit here. The examples of US Christian fundamentalists whose extreme literal interpretation of texts re women priests or homosexuality attract plenty of media interest and feel alien to many of our notions of open or welcoming Christian love to all humanity and may be an aspect of this. Equally, the bad behaviour by US Tele evangelists that attracted attention in the recent past and the more recent scandals of the Catholic Church do little to give confidence in organised religion to those who are doubtful of faith. Further, Muslim fundamentalists who use their faith interpretation to justify suicide bombings reinforce this doubt or even fear of organised religion. Those of us who express a Christian faith and who understand the positive role that faith can have can become tarred with the same brush of doubt as a

result, however unfair it may feel to us. A largely secular society in day-to-day practice does seem to have need for an ill-defined 'spirituality' (why do all the popular press have 'horoscopes' for instance?) but little need for formal religion and church attendance continues to fall in general. The question it poses for us is how we can let the fundamentals of faith shine though the clutter of "Religion".

Yet and despite all, in this survey, a stubbornly large minority still did define themselves as Christians, albeit lower than the national figures for the last 2001 census. It will be interesting to see the results of the impending 2011 census in this regard and see if the 70% figure from last time grows, shrinks or remains about the same. So we are not entirely without hope. If we, by example or word or works, can lead the rest back towards the central message of Christ's unique sacrifice as opening the way to God for all of us, then faith can play a greater part in academic life, or indeed our national life.

All this points to a need for some follow-up research to this initial working paper. It was always the author's intention to do further research to get under the skin of some of the answers by conducting a series of interviews in greater depth with some of the respondents. A specific call for volunteers was put on the explanatory letter that went with the survey and a small number have volunteered themselves so far. It looks like this continued research will be interesting.

David Muskett

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References

Cavanagh, Gerald F, Spirituality for managers: context and critique, *Journal of Organisational Change Management*, vol. 12 No 3, 1999, pp186-199

Hui, Loi Tek, Combining faith and CSR: a paradigm of corporate sustainability, *International Journal of Social Economics*, Vol3 5 no 6, 2008, pp 449 – 465

King, Stephen M, 'Religion, spirituality and the workplace', *Public Administration Review*, January/ February 2007, pp 103 -114

Appendix; Questionnaire used in the survey at MMU Business School

Attitudes amongst academic staff to religious belief/unbelief in the Business School

1. How would you characterise any religious belief or non-belief that you have?

Agnostic Atheist Buddhist Christian Jain Jewish Hindu Muslim
Rastafarian Sikh Zoroastrian (please circle)

Other – Please indicate _____

2. Do you feel yourself to be? (please tick)

i. Broadly supportive of an explicit religious faith being expressed by staff
in an HE Institution ___

ii. Broadly hostile to an explicit religious faith being expressed by staff in
an HE Institution ___

iii. Neither ___

3. Do you feel that a member of staff should make his/her religious faith position
clear to the students that they teach? (please tick)

Agree ___

Disagree ___

Neither ___

4. Do you feel that a member of staff should make his/ her personal political
position clear to the students that they teach? (please tick)

Agree ___

Disagree ___

Neither ___

5. In the USA it is more common for a Higher Education Institution to take an
explicit faith-based stance in its underpinning philosophy. If this were to be the
case for an HE institution in the UK, would that make it more or less attractive,
as a place to work for you? (please tick)

More attractive ___

Less attractive ___

Neither ___

6. Thinking about MMU Business School's evolving ethical stance, do you feel that a religious or faith-based framework could make a contribution to framing any such stance? (please tick)

Yes ___ No ___ Don't know ___

7. Given that many of our students have an explicit faith or belief system, would you prefer that the Business School? (please tick)

- i. Recognised all major religious festivals to permit absence ___
- ii. Recognised only those where significant numbers shared the beliefs ___
- iii. Recognised none and took a purely secular stance making no concessions beyond state recognised customary breaks e.g. Easter, Christmas ___
- iv. Don't know ___

8. Thinking specifically about Christianity, what do you personally feel its influence on staff attitudes and behaviour to each other and to our students to be? (please tick)

- i. Positive ___
- ii. Negative ___
- iii. Neither ___

Thank you for your help in completing this questionnaire. The results are completely anonymous and will be used purely for research purposes. Could you return this in an internal envelope to David Muskett.

As I intend to do some follow up research in more depth, if you might be willing to be interviewed about this subject area, could you let me know separately by email