

Why support Christian FE students in sharing their faith?

As Christians, we are people who have found our hunger for real life met in Jesus. The classic statement by DT Niles encapsulates the heart of what it means to share our faith: 'One beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.' Talking with people about Jesus is always to be undertaken in a humble, respectful manner with no hint of superiority. So how do students in FE best tell others about this incredible Life?

The prominent Yale historian Kenneth Latourette speaks of the most effective evangelism in history being '*...men and women who carried on their livelihood in some purely secular manner and spoke of their faith to those they met in this natural fashion.*'

Christian students in FE colleges are men and women who carry on in their studies and speak of their faith in Jesus with those they meet, in a natural fashion. Many Christian FE students find that through their natural friendships and conversations, people often want to find out more about Christianity. Putting on events at college tailored to the questions of inquiring friends (where people can listen to, ask questions and discuss the Christian message) are a great way of helping people to discover more about the Bread of Life, Jesus.

What follows are six reasons why we believe it is so important to encourage Christian students to engage in evangelism both personally and corporately. These reasons are born out of both educational and Christian objectives. So, why encourage Christian students to be evangelistic?

It develops the critical faculties of students

When CUs participate in evangelism, it enables the Christians to begin to think critically about their own beliefs: "Why do I believe what I believe?"; "Are there good reasons for believing the Bible?" etc. Through evangelism, those who are not Christians are also given a platform for thinking through and questioning their own beliefs.

All students, whether studying A-levels, vocational courses, or the International Baccalaureate ask and think about the big questions of life. In fact, atheist philosopher John Gray laments that 'The need for religion appears to be hard-wired in the human animal.'² CU evangelism presents an excellent opportunity for further exploration, critical thinking, evaluating evidence and reflection on issues that impact on us all.

It creates awareness for others about what Christians believe

It was the Lord Chancellor who in 1998 stated that: "We should not, must not, dare not, be complacent about the health and future of British democracy. Unless we become a nation of engaged citizens, our democracy is not secure."³

As CUs engage with other students about their beliefs, the resultant awareness and deeper understanding of the beliefs and practices of Christians will certainly enrich engaged citizenship and democracy in a multi-cultural society. Furthermore, as Christians talk with, listen to and dialogue with people about Jesus, it helps them to understand the different worldviews of other students and their objections to the Christian faith.

It demonstrates the true meaning of tolerance respectfully disagreeing

Almost by cultural default, the idea of thinking someone else's beliefs to be wrong strikes us as intolerant. In our world, tolerance is increasingly understood to be the virtue that refuses to think that any opinion is wrong, but it 'hardly makes sense to speak of tolerating something of which one heartily approves!'⁴ In other words, you can only be truly tolerant of someone or something if you first disagree with them/it. Voltaire's dictum strikes the right balance: 'I may disagree with what you have to say, but I shall defend to the death your right to say it'.

In evangelism, Christian students in FE have the great opportunity to exercise true tolerance the way that Jesus did. He was inclusive in His relationships, but he was not inclusive of all worldviews and belief systems (e.g. Samaritan woman in John 4). The Missiologist Andrew Kirk puts it well when he explains that in his experience of dialogue with Muslims, Muslims do not expect the Christian to deny the absolute truth claims of the Gospel, any more than the Christian expects the Muslim to deny the absolute truth claims of the Koran, and yet there is still fruitful dialogue.⁵

It challenges the private–public wedge

Whether religious or secular, we all have beliefs about the major questions of life and every person believes that their worldview is better than everyone else's otherwise they would not believe it. What each person does in "public" is influenced by their "private" faith assumptions regarding what they believe life is about. Therefore, in order to treat people holistically we need to recognise that the private–public distinction is a false dichotomy; no one is purely neutral or objective.

One of the great advantages of Christian FE students participating in sharing & discussing the good news of Jesus is that it gives them confidence to think carefully about how the Christian faith challenges, informs and shapes the world in which we live. As Nancy Pearcey puts it: 'most Christian students simply don't know how to express their faith perspective in language suitable for the public square...In private, they speak to one another in the mother tongue of their religion, but in class they are uncertain how to express their religious perspective in the accents of the academic world.'⁶

For Christian students to be authentically Christian, they need to be encouraged to see that Christianity is not merely private but shapes the entirety of their worldview and lives, including all aspects of life at college. One cannot separate the person from their faith. Jesus said: '...love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind.'⁷

It is appropriate for a multi–cultural society to allow Christians to practice their faith

In a pluralistic world, we must be careful to guard against what Professor of History, George M Marsden once noted: 'Pluralism remains a basis for imposing uniformity.'⁸ In contrast, a true multi–cultural society allows for a diversity of belief and practice.

Christians are to reflect the Triune God they worship who is outward–looking, mission-oriented and whose desire is to draw people into a loving relationship with Himself and one another. It is therefore at the core of a Christian's identity to want to share the good news of Jesus with others.

One of Jesus' disciples, Peter, understood this well and hit the nail on the head in terms of the manner in which it is to be undertaken: 'But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...'⁹

It offers the opportunity to fulfil both OFSTED and NUS recommendations

There is often an assumption that 'Equality' means that a college cannot sanction the request of one religious group to meet/put on an event if they are the only one, as this would be favouring one particular faith. Indeed some students requesting to start a Christian Union have been told they can do this only if they also start a group for students of other faiths. This is to misunderstand the nature of equality and diversity and both the OFSTED and NUS recommendations.

The foreward to the LSIS SMSC Report of 2010¹⁰ states 'this guide seeks to highlight the relevance of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development for the learning and skills sector and provide support on how to plan, deliver and assess appropriate SMSC development'. In the guide there are recommendations that the providers create an ethos of openness and trust by listening to the voice of every learner and encourage the learners to play a central role in shaping the development of SMSC provision. Well run, open events by Christian students can only enhance the overall well-being of the college. For their part, the NUS have put much effort into fuelling 'Good Inter-Faith Relations on Campus'. On page 10 of their Inter-Faith Tool Kit¹¹ they are clear that interfaith is not about 'diluting difference' but 'appreciation of distinctiveness'. It is 'an interaction between separate and distinctive faiths'. 'Learning and exploration of each other's beliefs' is what Christians who are seeking to share their faith with those of a different (or no) religion participate in.

End Notes

¹ Latourette Kenneth S, A History of the Expansion of Christianity, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1944, 1:230.

² Gray John, The Myth of Secularism, New Statesman, <http://www.newstatesman.com/200212160045>, December 16th, 2002.

³ Lord Chancellor, address to the Citizenship Foundation, 27 January 1998. Quoted in Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools. Final Report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship, September 1998, London: Qualifications & Curriculum Authority, p. 8.

⁴ Netland Harold, 'Exclusivism, Tolerance and Truth', Evangelical Review of Theology Volume 12 No. 3 (July 1988), p. 244.

⁵ Kirk, Andrew J, What is Mission? Theological Explorations, London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1999, pp.137-138.

⁶ Pearcey Nancy, Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from its Cultural Captivity, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2004, p.68.

⁷ Jesus, Luke 10:27, The Bible, NIV.

⁸ Marsden, George M, The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p.436.

⁹ Peter, 1 Peter 3:15-16, The Bible, NIV.

¹⁰ www.lsis.org.uk/Services/Publications/Pages/default.aspx?page=7

¹¹ http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/asset/News/6105/NUS-Inter-Faith-Toolkit_Web-Version.pdf