

RELIGIOUS & ANTI-RELIGIOUS FORCES AT WORK IN A UNIVERSITY

ANYONE who wishes to interest himself in the religious life of a university must take care to give it neither too little nor too much importance.

It is a mistake to see it as a sharpened image of national opinion, or as a guide to what the future is likely to be: undergraduates are a small, untypical section of the late-teenage population. They are prone to express their opinions sharply and to change them frequently. On the other hand many of them will be in positions of influence in the future, and there is a considerable number who form their life-convictions while they are at the university.

All that is true of any university: but the old universities have their special features. They, and almost all the colleges which make them up, are religious foundations which have lost their thoroughgoing "Church" character comparatively recently and still retain strong marks of it. So the effects of a long religious tradition, in some ways rather a conservative one, are startlingly strong to one who comes from a State school or a more modern university.

MUCH GOING ON

With this for basis, expressed primarily in the college chapels, there is an abundance of undergraduate religious activity of innumerable kinds. Some of it is stable and works along well-worn paths; some of it is ephemeral in the quickly changing student generations and presents recurring patterns, always with a bright show of originality. Compared with the country at large and with the modern universities, the sheer scale of religious activity and the numbers of people involved in it are very large indeed, and this remains true whatever is said about "the mounting tide of secularism."

The Anglican chaplaincy arrangements have all the marks of being the outcome of long development: they are neither neat nor simple but complex and overlapping, one agency often duplicating the work of another. The observer may be pardoned if he finds it all bewildering. At all events he will not complain that the quantity of Anglican chaplaincy activity at Oxford is inadequate, whatever else he may wish to reform.

THREE CHURCHES

The college chaplains, most of them members of the teaching staff of the University in the theology faculty or some other, have pastoral responsibility for those in their colleges. They are responsible for the services in the college chapels, which are attended by something like ten to twenty per cent. of the undergraduates, and usually organise discussion groups which often attract audiences outside the ranks of the faithful. Because of their position at the heart of the life of the University, the college chaplains probably do more general pastoral and evangelistic work than any other agency; but in the nature of things a good deal of it tends to be somewhat diffuse and unnoticed.

Alongside them, three parish churches in the town take special steps to work among undergraduates—the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin, St. Ebbe's and St. Aldate's. The latter is the home of the flourishing Oxford Pastorate, established in the last century when college chapel religion was a good deal more formal than it is now. St. Aldate's and St. Mary's both attract considerable numbers of members of the University to special courses of sermons delivered in term-time, and carry out a good deal

Christians Active at Oxford—but So Are Humanists

By J. L. HOULDEN

of pastoral work as well as catering for specialist and large-scale activities to which college resources would be unequal.

For example, St. Aldate's normally sponsor a mission in an urban area during the Long Vacation and recruit a large university team. They also maintain strong links with Lee Abbey and the work of the Church Missionary Society.

A modern university chaplain would consider himself well enough off if he possessed even one of the pieces of apparatus we have mentioned so far. But in Oxford there is still more. Pusey House provides something like the "chaplaincy centre" which exists in some modern universities, but combines with it the housing of the main theological library of the University. A staff of three priests is available for pastoral work, and at the well-attended High Mass valuable courses of sermons are given, many of which eventually find their way into print.

make provision for the chaplaining of the members of the University in their denomination. Most of them do it through a church in the town whose minister also has pastoral oversight of students, and through a society which organises meetings and other activities. Of the Free Church groups the Methodists are by far the strongest, with a well-developed class system and touching about four hundred undergraduates.

The Roman Catholics maintain a chaplaincy centre which is not linked with a parish and exists solely for work in the University. It looks after much the largest non-Anglican group (some 780 strong) and, with the liturgical life as its centre, promotes all kinds of study and social activities. As an example of this type of concentrated chaplaincy centre, it is widely admired.

Present tendencies among students seem to reflect two factors: first, the lower age at which they come to university, since the end of National Service; second, as far as the Chris-

Earlier this year it was reported that an "anti-religious" humanist group was gaining large numbers of adherents among undergraduates at Oxford. On the eve of a new University term the Chaplain of Trinity College, Oxford, examines in this article the general state of religious life in the University to-day

A fourth agency, the undergraduate religious society, seems to be less strong at present than formerly. The University Anglican Society which used to flourish has gone into abeyance, and other, specialised societies like the SPG-UMCA fellowship report a drop in membership.

On the other hand, the two interdenominational religious societies maintain a steady level in numbers—about two hundred each—though they differ widely in almost every other respect.

Much the most cohesive and strident religious society is the O.I.C.C.U. (Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union), which is rigidly and conservatively Protestant in outlook and relentless in its devotional and evangelistic activity. Because it is more vociferous in its propaganda than any other religious group, and is so clear-cut in its opinions, it tends to be identified by the casual looker-on with the whole Christian cause, whereas many Christians and others regard its views as too un-critical and its brand of zeal as both ill-suited for the promotion of honest discussion with non-Christians and ineffective for the ends in view. But it cares well for those who are helped by its kind of piety.

The other interdenominational society, the Student Christian Movement, has a smaller effective membership (about seventy), but is pleased with the progress of its new policy of promoting discussion and study on "frontier" topics with non-Christians. It hopes to perform a valuable role in making contact with people not inclined to go to sermons or aggressively religious meetings but willing to engage in discussion and elucidation.

The non-Anglican Churches all

tians are concerned, the main trends in the Church as a whole.

On the first point, it is, as always, noticeable how few show intelligent acquaintance with the bases of Christian faith and life when they arrive; and it is perturbing that those from Church schools are often not perceptibly better informed or more faithful than those from secular schools. Also it seems that it is becoming harder to stimulate intellectual interests outside the limits of the student's own subject: which makes even the task of creating worthwhile discussion on the Christian faith difficult. But, among the considerable number of Christians, the two clearest concerns seem to be with the promotion of Christian unity and social work.

JOINT PLANNING

All Christian societies (except the O.I.C.C.U.) meet for joint planning in an "umbrella" committee, and the leaders of the societies maintain close personal relations. In many colleges discussion groups have members of all denominations, and Roman Catholics are feeling increasingly free to join in such activities.

Though for non-Anglicans particularly the main focus of religious life is likely to be in their denominational chaplaincy, in more and more colleges Christian life is thought of in terms of "the Christian community within the college"—with all the real-life problems and tensions of a wide Christian group, consisting of people of many quite different outlooks. Many feel that this is the way to a more realistic training for Christian life in the modern world than continual association with a group of entirely like-minded Christians withdrawn from

the main stream of university life. The Orthodox house of St. Gregory and St. Macrina is a notable centre of ecumenical work and study, and helps to widen many horizons.

Christians are naturally prominent in the Freedom from Hunger Campaign, in protests and study about racial oppression and race relations, and about nuclear disarmament. Many also do social work in and around Oxford, and five colleges have for some years taken part in camps in the Long Vacation with borstal boys, to the great profit of both sides of the enterprise. This again is an ecumenical venture.

Much attention has been drawn from time to time in recent years to the rise of the Humanist Group to considerable prominence in the University. Christians are often inclined to think of it as a kind of anti-Church, but it would be a mistake to see it primarily in that context—though its published aim is "to promote the well-being of mankind from a non-religious standpoint and to oppose irrational thinking wherever it occurs".

This society had as many as eleven hundred members in the first term of last year, and even in the summer term, when societies tend to have a much lower membership, had enrolled about five hundred people. It is not a tightly organised group united by rigid dogma, and contains people of many shades of opinion. But it would be true to say that most of its members regard religion as an inhibiting factor in the discussion of moral and social questions, and a great deal of attention is devoted to the serious discussion of moral, social and legal questions from a strongly secular standpoint. Its members also make a considerable contribution to practical social projects both in and out of the University.

SOCIAL ISSUES

This society, which came into being in 1958, certainly focuses a good many protests against what is considered moral and religious conformism, but at present its main concern seems to be with the serious study of social questions in the light of present political and legal conditions and to work for detailed reform.

Direct public confrontation between Christians and humanists tends to be concentrated on certain special occasions, especially missions to the University, though much of the argument tends to degenerate into somewhat desultory journalistic banter and sniping. This occurred at the time of Bishop Trevor Huddleston's mission (sponsored by the college chaplains) in February, 1963, and during the O.I.C.C.U. mission (preached by the Rev. John Stott) a year later.

Making less display but probably being more constructive is some of the work of S.C.M. in organising specialised study-groups in which Christians and non-Christians take part. Occasionally also the humanists and S.C.M. organise a public debate between star performers. But such meetings only attract a minority, and it is unfortunate how little open and "truth-seeking" discussion occurs: there is a great tendency to stick to prepared positions and to write off the other side, and, even more so, not to consider the great questions worth investigating.

It is an interesting oddity that, whereas many Christians are inclined to think of themselves as a minority and look out on a world dominated by anti-religious humanists, the latter see a society formed and ruled by the privileged dictates of a religion they oppose!

And where in it all the Spirit is blowing his Church it takes a clever and a good man to know, for the religion of young men and women wriggles into many and changing shapes, but sometimes one catches his sound in the strangest places; and it will all be new and different next term.

Reflections in Amen Court

By Bishop Wand

ANYONE trying to answer the question "What is Christianity?" from Sunday's gospel might be forgiven for thinking that it was best described as an ellipse with two foci, one concerned with right behaviour and the other with the Messiah. Certainly the passage falls naturally into those two divisions. But they are in such sharp contrast that they need to be understood and brought together.

The first section deals with our attitude towards life. What is the right standard to adopt? Love towards God and one's neighbour. That statement is in line with a number of passages of scripture which sum up in succinct terms the proper attitude of the good man. "This is pure religion and undefiled, to visit the fatherless and widow in their affliction and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." "What does the Lord thy God require of thee but to do justice and to love mercy and to walk before God all the days of thy life?"

It is well that we should bear these summaries in mind. They put the rules for our behaviour in a nutshell and they give us something to fall back upon when we are in doubt.

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THE second half of the gospel deals with a very different matter. Admittedly it is a piece of debate, an argument with some critics who were trying to catch Jesus out and whom he was answering in their own language. "From whose line is the Messiah to descend?" From that of David, the king who was the very type of the Messiah. But, in a country where veneration for parents was one of the foundations of society, no father could rank his children above himself. "How then," says Jesus, "can David call the Messiah his Lord?"

No doubt the psalm from which the quotation is taken was originally a coronation anthem describing the divine favour bestowed upon the monarch now ascending to his throne. "God says to our King, 'Sit at my right hand while I put your enemies under your feet.'" But its significance had been lifted a stage higher to apply to the Messiah, and Jesus, accepting the common notion that David was the author, suggests that it is illogical for the founder of a dynasty to hail his successor as greater than himself. The Messiah cannot be David's son and his master at the same time.

Those early Christians who first heard the story knew the solution of the riddle. Jesus, who put the question, was himself the Messiah, and included in himself the attributes both of humility and royalty. He was indeed the descendant of David; he had been born in a carpenter's dwelling; and yet he was destined to sit at the right hand of God and to rule not only Israel but the world.

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HOW now are we to reconcile these two contrasting interests: right behaviour and the descent of the Messiah?

We too, like the early Christians, must see the answer in the life and character of Jesus. He is our Lord, and it is he who bids us love God and our neighbours. We know how exceedingly difficult this apparently simple commandment is to fulfil. Left to ourselves, we soon find our love of God and our desire to help others grow cold. We have no energy of ourselves, and we must keep as close as possible to him in order to draw from him strength to meet our weakness.

Jesus himself shows us how close that relationship may be. "I am the vine, ye are the branches. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, so neither can ye except ye abide in me."

The charge to love God and one's neighbour will become possible to obey when the life of Messiah expresses itself in us, when "it is no longer I that live but Christ that liveth in me." There is really only one short answer to the question "What is Christianity?" The answer is "Christianity is incorporation into Christ."