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Francis (2024) Exploring the responses of non-churchgoers to a cathedral pre-Christmas son et lumiere. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 80 (1). a9347.

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<https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9347>

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# Exploring the responses of non-churchgoers to a cathedral pre-Christmas *son et lumiere*



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Two conceptual strands of research within the field of cathedral studies have theorised the capacity of Anglican cathedrals to engage more successfully than parish churches with the wider non-churchgoing community. One strand has explored mobilising cathedral metaphors, and the other strand has explored the notion of implicit religion. Both strands illuminate the power of events and installations to soften the boundaries between common ground and sacred space. Drawing on a quantitative survey among 978 people who attended the pre-Christmas *son et lumiere* at Liverpool Cathedral during December 2022, the present study analyses the qualitative responses of 123 participants who never attend church services. Three categories of themes emerged from these data, concerning the Cathedral itself, the installation, and discordant experience.

**Contribution:** Situated within the science of cathedral studies, this article draws on original qualitative data to illuminate the experiences of participants who never attend church services when engaging with the pre-Christmas *son et lumiere* at a major cathedral. Conceptualised within the framework of implicit religion, these data confirmed how the *son et lumiere* succeeded in softening boundaries between the sacred and the secular and provided a deeply moving experience. As one participant said, 'I am not religious, but I had the best experience ever'.

**Keywords:** cathedral studies; sacred space; common ground; cathedral metaphors; implicit religion; visitor studies.

## Introduction

Anglican cathedrals occupy an interesting, distinctive, and intriguing position within the changing religious landscape of England. At a time when the national census data for 2021 (set alongside the earlier data for 2011 and 2001) demonstrated that the 'religious nones' were on the trajectory to become the largest religious group in England, the position they already occupied in Wales (Francis 2023), average weekly attendance (including Sunday and mid-week attendance) in Church of England churches has continued to decline (Church of England 2022). Anglican cathedrals in England, however, may be showing some signs of resilience in a way that exemplifies Anglican ecclesiology, an ecclesiology that in theory is committed both to nurturing the faithful and to serving the wider community. This ecclesiology has been captured, summarised and reaffirmed by the Ministry Council in its commitment to 'Ministry for a Christian presence in every community' (Seeley 2019).

A series of recent initiatives within the developing field of cathedral studies has shown particular interest in exploring the capacity of Anglican cathedrals to engage the wider community in the sense of connecting the Christian presence with those who may be less inclined to engage with, or to cross the threshold into, parish churches. These initiatives have embraced both conceptual and empirical studies. Two conceptual approaches have been rooted in metaphors that may express the wider capacity and extended traction of cathedrals, and in the concept of implicit religion that may explain the roots for such capacity.

**Description:** This research is part of the research project, 'Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics', directed by Prof. Dr Andries van Aarde, Post Retirement Professor and Senior Research Fellow in the Dean's Office, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

**Dates:** Received: 17 Aug. 2023 | Accepted: 29 Sept. 2023 | Published: 24 May 2024

**How to cite this article:** McKenna, U., Francis, L.J., Village, A. & Stewart, F., 2024, 'Exploring the responses of non-churchgoers to a cathedral pre-Christmas *son et lumiere*', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(1), a9347. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9347>

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**Note:** Historical Thought and Source Interpretation.

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## Metaphors

The importance of metaphors for shaping cathedral studies was introduced by Muskett (2016) in a programmatic article, 'Mobilising cathedral metaphors', and subsequently developed more fully by Muskett (2019) in a carefully documented book, *Shop Windows, Flagships, Common Ground: Metaphors in Cathedral and Congregation Studies*. The five metaphors privileged for special attention in Muskett's book all illustrate the capacity of cathedrals for engaging their local communities. *Shop windows* arouse curiosity and enhance footfall in the marketplace; *flagships* indicate the serious intention of their operators to be effective in their mission; *beacons* shine out in darkness, symbolise timeless stability, and serve as a secure reference point; *magnets* draw people in, generate tourism, and bring economic prosperity; *sacred space and common ground* finely captures 'the vocation of cathedrals to be both a spiritual and community utility' (Muskett 2019:86).

Of these five metaphors, the notion of cathedrals as sacred space *and* common ground may prove to be the most powerful for exploring the capacity of cathedrals to engage the wider community in the sense of connecting the Christian presence with those who may be less inclined to engage with, or to cross the threshold into, parish churches. According to Muskett (2019), the notion of 'common ground' was introduced to cathedral studies by Carr (1992:63–71). Carr documented the different groups of people who have a stake in the life of the church through their contact with cathedrals: sightseers, pilgrims, occasional service attenders and people involved in local organisations, as well as the regular worshipping congregations. Carr argued that 'Cathedrals are a specific and accessible example of "common ground", an idea with many resonances of common land and common rights intended for a variety of different groups' (p. 66). The theme of common ground was developed further by Lewis (1998) who argued that:

On common ground, grazing rights are difficult to define and it is undesirable that they should be too tightly constructed ... Cathedrals are nothing if they are not accessible holy places in which all kinds of people feel that they belong. (Lewis 1998:153)

Recognising the limitations of the metaphor of 'common ground', Platten (2017:15) applauded the emergence of the compound metaphor of 'sacred space *and* common ground'. According to Muskett, this compound metaphor was employed by Percy (2015) in relation to Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford:

Cathedrals are sacred spaces and common ground. Cathedrals stand as signs of God's love and grace in the midst of a distracted world. They provide serious spaces and places for prayer and contemplation in a busy world. (p. 7)

Muskett also found this compound metaphor employed by Gloucester Cathedral and by Truro Cathedral. Barley (2015) commented on how Truro Cathedral focussed on 'sacred

space and common ground' to establish itself as 'a place where people of all backgrounds can come together to experience sacred space in their lives' (p. 409). Exploring the role of a canon theologian within one Anglican cathedral, Francis (2020) argued for the public and academic engagement of theology in the space where 'common ground and sacred space collide' (p. 130).

## Implicit religion

The importance of the concept of implicit religion for shaping cathedral studies was introduced by McKenna, Francis and Stewart (2022) building on earlier work reported by Hammond (2007). The concept of implicit religion was shaped by Bailey (1997, 1998, ed. 2002) and subsequently applied across a wide field of studies (for review see McKenna, Francis & Stewart 2022). Bailey's concept of implicit religion softens the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, between sacred space and common ground. Bailey's original research in implicit religion illuminated two divergent aspects of community life. In his first study Bailey took up residence behind the bar of an English pub and employed the insights of implicit religion to explore and to interpret what he was observing among the staff and patrons (see Bailey 1997:129–192). In his second study, and in his role as rector of a residential parish, Bailey employed the insights of implicit religion to explore and to interpret what he was observing among those engaging with the parish church at various levels (see Bailey 1997:193–262). For Bailey, implicit religion may be characterised by (but is not limited to) three key qualities: implicit religion displays *commitment*, *integrating foci*, and *intensive concerns with extensive effects* (Francis et al. 2013).

Hammond (2007) drew on the concept of implicit religion to explore and to interpret what he was observing regarding the way in which the cathedral in Siena, Italy, embraced and incorporated the local civic festival, including a horse race around the central plaza. In this instance, Hammond argued that the softening of boundaries between the sacred and the secular transformed both the secular character of the civic festival and the sacred space of the cathedral.

Building on Hammond's (2007) work, McKenna, Francis and Stewart (2022) drew on the concept of implicit religion to explore and to interpret the ways in which Anglican cathedrals in England were actively softening the boundaries between sacred space and common ground through innovative events and installations, as symbolised by high profile (and controversial) installations, like the Crazy Golf Bridges (Rochester) and the Helter Skelter (Norwich). Data generated by a detailed review of the 43 websites of Church of England cathedrals (including the Isle of Man) were processed within two analytic frameworks that reflected theoretical perspectives informed by Bailey's concept of implicit religion. The first analytic framework focussed on the nature of the event as exemplifying the juxtapositioning

of the secular and the sacred within the cathedral. This framework identified eight themes (e.g., scientific exhibitions and musical events) as different ways through which cathedrals soften the boundaries between the sacred and the secular. The second analytic framework focussed on the *integrating foci* that display meaning and generate purpose. This framework identified seven themes (e.g., social justice and social conscience, migration and sanctuary) as offering opportunities for *commitments* to develop, for *integrating foci* to furnish meaning, and for *intensive concerns with extensive effects* to shape lives.

Building on this initial study, McKenna, Francis and Stewart (2023) employed the same research method (the systematic review of the 43 cathedral websites) to explore the response of Anglican cathedrals to the coronation of King Charles III. For this study, their lens was much wider. Here the websites provided exemplification of engagement with explicit religion (incorporating coronation-related music and prayers within their routine liturgical provision), with civic religion (arranging special services involving civic dignitaries and uniformed groups), and with implicit religion (welcoming within the sacred space a wide range of community-focussed events, exhibitions, and activities).

## Research aim

The foregoing conceptual approaches, rooted in metaphors that may express the wider capacity and extended traction of cathedrals, and in the concept of implicit religion to explain the roots for such capacity, have given close attention to what cathedrals are saying about themselves (in their literatures and on their websites) and to what has been documented in the literature about cathedrals. Absent from the discussion, however, are the voices of the participants themselves, the voices of those who venture across the threshold into those places characterised as sacred space *and* common ground.

Elsewhere, different strands of research have begun to listen to those who access cathedrals in a variety of ways. One strand has been concerned with mapping the characteristics and motivations of visitors to Anglican cathedrals. This strand includes studies reported by Jackson and Hudman (1995), Winter and Gasson (1996), Williams (2007), Williams et al. (2007), Voase (2007), Gutic, Caie and Clegg (2010), Hughes, Bond and Balantyne (2013), and Francis, Annis and Robbins (2015). For example, Williams et al. (2007), in a survey conducted among 514 visitors to St Davids Cathedral in Wales, reported clear differences between the quest and experience of visitors who attended church services weekly (styled religious pilgrims) and visitors who never attended church services (styled secular tourists).

A second strand has been concerned with mapping the psychological type profile of visitors to Anglican cathedrals, drawing on psychological type theory as originally proposed by Jung (1971), as further developed by the Myers-

Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley 1985), and as operationalised by the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis 2005; Francis, Laycock & Brewster 2017). This strand includes studies reported by Francis et al. (2008), Francis et al. (2010), Francis et al. (2012), Francis, Robbins and Annis (2015), Francis and Mansfield (2022), and Francis, Mansfield, McKenna and Jones (2022). For example, Francis et al. (2022), in a survey conducted among 196 visitors to Brecon Cathedral during the Brecon Jazz Festival (in which the Cathedral played a part), reported that this festival brought into the cathedral significantly more intuitive types and significantly more perceiving types than found among cathedral visitors in the other surveys.

A third strand of research has been concerned with mapping the characteristics of people who attend cathedral carol services. This strand includes qualitative studies reported by Phillips (2010), Murphy (2016), and Pike (2022), and quantitative studies reported by Walker (2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2015), Francis, Edwards and ap Siôn (2021), Francis and Jones (2020), Francis, Jones and McKenna (2020, 2021a, 2021b), Francis, Jones, McKenna, Pike and Williams (2020), Francis, Jones, McKenna, Pike and Williams (2021), and Francis, McKenna and Stewart (2024). For example, in a survey conducted among 1234 participants at two carol services held on Christmas Eve in Liverpool Cathedral, Francis, McKenna and Stewart (2024) isolated the responses of 404 participants who self-identified as not believing in God and who had completed the psychological type scales and who had completed the Fisher spiritual wellbeing measure just before the close of the service. They reported that among participants who did not believe in God, people who felt connected with Liverpool Cathedral and who felt connected with the carol service in such a way that they return year-on-year derived more spiritual benefit from their attendance than those who appeared to be more casual attenders.

Against this background, the present study was designed to explore the responses of visitors who booked to attend a *son et lumiere* pre-Christmas installation in Liverpool Cathedral. The focus of the study is specifically on those participants who self-identify as not religious in the sense of never attending church services. The style of research employs content analysis of qualitative data. The analytic framework within which the data are placed employs the concept of implicit religion.

The *son et lumiere* installation, *The light before Christmas: The angels are coming*, was live in Liverpool Cathedral between 02 December 2022 and 09 December 2022. This was a light and sound show created by Luxmuralis, drawing on the skills of sculptor Peter Walker and composer David Harper, designed as an immersive experience to embrace the iconic space of England's largest cathedral, constructed during the 20th century and completed in 1978 (Kennerley 2008; Thomas 2018). Immersed within this installation, participants were guided through three phases of the light and sound extravaganza. Entering at the west end of the cathedral,

phase one was stationed in the great well with projection focussed on the majestic west window and wall. Here were sounds and images of secular Christian celebration, including Santa's reindeer and sleigh floating across the night sky. Phase two drew participants into the main space with projection focussed on the walls, the lofty ceiling, and the ornamental reredos behind the high altar. Here were flying angels and clocks ticking down to the holy nativity. Phase three channelled participants into the ambulatory and walkways hidden in the shadows around the cathedral and focussed their attention on iconic images of the holy nativity, before releasing them back into the main space and offering personal engagement by lighting their own votive candle.

## Method

### Procedure

When people booked to attend the *son et lumiere*, they were invited to give assent to receiving a follow-up survey from the cathedral team to assess their experience. On 7 February 2023, 3862 emails were sent inviting participation in the online survey. By the end of March and after two reminder emails, 978 responses were received, making a participation rate of 25.6%.

### Instrument

The survey was hosted on the Qualtrics platform of York St John University. The quantitative component of the survey contained three main sections, exploring: demographic and background information, responses to the experience, and the psychological type profile of the participants. The survey concluded with the open invitation: 'If you would like to write about your experience of the Cathedral, in your own words ... you can do so here'. The present study thus contributes to the wider literature that pays serious attention to the qualitative data entered on the back page or at the end of a quantitative survey (see McKenna 2022, 2023; McKenna, Neal & Francis 2022; McKenna, Neal & Francis 2023; Pike 2022; Rolph et al. 2015).

### Participants

From the 978 completed surveys, 374 participants contributed qualitative responses. Of these 374 participants, 123 (33%) responded to the question, 'How often do you attend acts of public worship apart from occasions like weddings or funerals?' with the answer 'never'. Among these non-churchgoers, 17% were male and 83% were female; 1% were aged 18–19 years, none were in their twenties, 11% were in their thirties, 12% were in their forties, 28% were in their fifties, 34% were in their sixties, 12% were in their seventies, and 2% were aged 80 or over.

### Analysis

All the written responses were extracted into one *Word* document and subjected to content analysis, an iterative process of reading, re-reading, categorising and grouping the data into themes (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018;

Robson 1993). These data were subjected to five iterations of analysis. Initially, two categories emerged: those who had written about experiences of the Cathedral generally and those who had written specifically about the experience of attending the *son et lumiere* installation. Within these two categories there were then identified several themes: four themes related to the Cathedral and seven themes related to the *son et lumiere*. From this more detailed analysis, a third theme emerged, identifying discordant experience. By listening to comments in this category, cathedrals may be better equipped to maximise the potential within such events.

## Results

### The Cathedral

Around one-third of the participants wrote about the Cathedral in terms of its place in the community and their personal connection to it, highlighted by four themes: a sense of inclusion for the non-religious non-Christian; a sense of deep personal affection; a sense of personal belonging; and a sense of pride and desire to share.

#### A sense of inclusion for the non-religious non-Christian

While confidently non-religious and being ambivalent about attending church services, several participants wrote about the Cathedral in terms of their appreciation for the building and its architecture, the welcome they received when visiting, and the atmosphere that offered them the opportunity to just sit, think and enjoy the space:

'I enjoy visiting the cathedral in a non-religious way. I love the peace and quiet and watching people be amazed and enjoy. My religious beliefs change often – always questioning but tend not to believe.' (Male, 70s)

'I love visiting the cathedral, even though I have no religious faith. It is a beautiful building with wonderful architecture. Although I'm not religious, the building and its grounds make me feel tranquil.' (Female, 60s)

'I visit the cathedral regularly. I find it a very peaceful, spiritual place which is welcoming and accommodating to all. I always leave feel calmer and happier after visiting. If I am struggling with anything I like to visit to light a candle or sit quietly and think. It helps me a lot. I am not particularly a religious person, as I do not attend church services, but feel connected with God or a higher being whilst in the cathedral. I really like that when you visit you can do your own thing and are not pressured into conforming to set ideas of religion. The building is beautiful. The people are friendly in a non-intrusive way. I love the whole atmosphere and I am very grateful that I am able to visit regularly. Thank you.' (Female, 50s)

'It's a beautiful space to be proud of. I don't believe in God but if he existed, I'm sure this would be the place to find him. Thank you.' (Female, 50s)

#### A sense of deep personal affection

Some participants expressed a deep affection for the cathedral space and gratitude for the peace and calm it offered. They declared that they 'just loved' attending the Cathedral, that it

was their favourite place, and that when visiting they experienced a feeling of being at home:

'I love going to the Cathedral for anything – any reason – even just my regular coffee – It is a place I enjoy being in – for any reason.' (Male, 70s)

'I love the Cathedral just to be able to go in there and sit and wander round I never tire of that ... It's a wonderful cathedral and I'm so glad I can go there anytime even if just want to reflect on my life and family and the world outside.' (Female, 80s+)

'I just love it here. It's my peaceful happy place. My favourite building in the world.' (Female, 30s)

'Whatever reason I attend the Cathedral, I always feel at home ... It is lovely to see other people also enjoying it with all of the shows and installations that have been taking place.' (Female, 30s)

Others emphasised the Cathedral as a place of calm, peace and tranquillity, a sanctuary providing respite from the pressures of everyday life:

'I think Liverpool Cathedral is an amazing place it makes me feel very calm and definitely very spiritual.' (Female, 70s)

'Due to my career and the stresses of daily life – it can be easy to plan everything, get frustrated, worry about children and family. Coming to the Cathedral allows you to forget it all for that short time and feel like someone is looking after you whilst there ... I wish in our modern life I had more time to attend the Cathedral. It's a special place.' (Female, 40s)

'Loving visiting the Cathedral. It's a lovely peaceful, tranquil place. I always feel lifted after a visit ... It's one of my favourite places to visit.' (Female, 60s)

### A sense of personal belonging

Others described in detail a strong personal attachment to the Cathedral and its capacity to evoke memories of familial connection. They recounted a sense of belonging with the place engendered by previous association with the cathedral space:

'The Cathedral has always meant a lot to me in my adult life. It is where my partner first put a ring on my finger and asked me to be his. I later graduated from here as did he and both his daughters. I have gone into the Lady Chapel when I have needed spiritual comfort and to the Refectory with friends ... It's my place of comfort ...' (Female, 60s)

'I have been fascinated by the Cathedral ever since attending a primary school leavers service in 1968. I completed my CSE [*Certificate of Secondary Education*] religious education project on the building of the Cathedral which I found fascinating ... After losing my much-loved father in 2012, I visited the Cathedral that Christmas and lit a candle for him and sat in quiet reflection. I find the Cathedral a very beautiful, inspirational, peaceful, and healing place.' (Female, 60s)

'The Cathedral is a magnificent and mystic space. I have known it for 60 years, incomplete and complete. I have regularly taken my days old daughter there many years ago, I have performed there and in the glorious Lady Chapel and attended concerts there. I have met friends for coffee there and guided visitors there. As a non-believer, I treasure it!' (Male, 80s+)

### A sense of pride and desire to share

Many of those writing about their experience did so by explaining the sense of pride they held for the Cathedral. This pride was expressed in relation to the Cathedral's place in and for the community. They saw the Cathedral space as inclusive and open to all, and they complimented it on its success at bridging old divides between the different Christian denominations within the city of Liverpool:

'Just that I really enjoy my visits and take pride showing it to family from America when they come over. I learn something new every time I come.' (Male, 60s)

'I am proud of our Cathedral and love how accessible it is for everyone regardless of their faith. I grew up in age when it was Protestants versus Catholics and love how it's changed. The cathedral does our city proud.' (Female, 70s)

'I feel that the cathedral has opened up its doors to all people, no matter who they worship. You are moving with the times, which in turn can help a lot of people, who have lost their way ... I thank you for opening the cathedral in this way. You have made it a far more welcoming place for all ... that's what many need to do.' (Female, 60s)

### The *son et lumiere* installation

Around two-thirds of the participants wrote about their experience of the *son et lumiere* installation. Seven themes were identified as reflective of the event having a positive impact on wellbeing, in terms of promoting both a positive experience and positive attitudes. These included: an affective response of appreciation and thankfulness; connecting with and valuing personal depth; connecting with and valuing other people; connecting with and valuing space; connecting with the Christmas spirit; connecting with and valuing inclusivity; and going away longing for more.

#### An affective response of appreciation and thankfulness

Attendance at the *son et lumiere* was variously described as a 'wonderful', 'beautiful', 'magical', 'stunning', 'amazing', 'lovely', 'entertaining', 'special', and 'enjoyable' experience. Many comments were recorded that reflected general thanks and appreciation:

'Just thank you so very much for holding these events, magical.' (Female, 50s)

'It was a wonderful experience. I was brought up in Liverpool until I left in my 20s ... It was such a wonderful way to return for a visit.' (Female, 50s)

'I had the best experience ever as I have been going through a difficult time alone and I always have to stay strong for my boys and this really cheered me up and put a big smile on my face ... Me and the kids absolutely loved every minute we felt very welcomed ... it was actually the best time of my life, the best memory of my children.' (Female, 30s)

#### Connecting with and valuing personal depth

For some the installation affected them deeply on the personal level. One female in her thirties stated that, 'it was all beautiful and very inspiring' while another in her sixties asserted that,

'it was a heart-warming experience'. Others described their experience at the event as 'moving', 'joyous', and 'spiritual' or acknowledged that while the event provided entertainment it also helped them to reflect on what was important in their lives:

'... [I]t was a very special evening spent with my 13-year-old son ... It was a magical spiritual evening and really did touch my heart. Thank you!' (Female, 30s)

'Very enjoyable event which made you reflect on what is really important in life.' (Male, 60s)

### Connecting with and valuing other people

Several participants emphasised the helpfulness of the staff and volunteers supporting the event:

'This was the third of your big art events we had attended, and it was every bit as good as the others. It was spectacular and moving ... Each event has felt very well organised, and your staff and volunteers are friendly and helpful and make the whole experience easy and pleasant to attend.' (Female, 50s)

'It was wonderful to be part of this delightful experience ... The staff were extremely nice and informative. The atmosphere was wonderful. The effort that went into providing the public with this amazing spectacular event was much appreciated.' (Female, 60s)

### Connecting with and valuing space

For many the cathedral space and the nature of the installation event were identified as mutually enhancing. For some the beauty and magnificence of the Cathedral building was seen as the perfect setting for both the *son et lumiere* and for similar events. The Cathedral setting complimented and enhanced the installation:

'This and other displays we have been to are an excellent use of this wonderful building, it really does take your breath away and they are curated splendidly.' (Female, 50s)

'I do often attend events at the Cathedral. I love the building and it hugs you as you enter. You feel good being there and as such the building enhances any event we attend there.' (Female, 40s)

For others, it was the installation that complemented the scale and vastness of the cathedral space. Hosting the *son et lumiere* not only brought a sense of awe to the building but allowed visitors to see the building in a new way, or even encouraged them to visit for the first time:

'As a whole the event worked well and gave a new perspective to the building.' (Male, 70s)

'Thank you for showcasing one of my favourite buildings in so many different ways through the events you put on.' (Female, 50s)

We find the cathedral a special, peaceful, and deeply moving place to attend and your art installations are a wonderful way of bringing people into the building. (Female, 50s)

'Great reason to have our first visit to your magnificent building, thank you.' (Female, 50s)

### Connecting with the Christmas spirit

For many their visit to the *son et lumiere* was described as a success in terms of bringing people together at an important

time of year. The evening had helped them to prepare for the Christmas period and had provided the opportunity to spend quality time with family:

'I felt like it started Christmas off for me. It was a very spiritual and moving experience.' (Female, 60s)

'A great experience, bringing family's together just before Christmas.' (Male, 40s)

'I visited the Cathedral for the family carols too and both these events made me truly thankful for my family and being able to spend Christmas together.' (Female, 30s)

'Thank you so much for a wonderful experience at the cathedral. Myself and my husband ... thoroughly enjoyed this, especially in the run up to Christmas, it set us up and made us so happy.' (Female, 50s)

Expanding on this theme, several others described the event as having helped them to focus on what they understood to be the 'true' meaning of Christmas:

'The experience gave me an uplifted feeling and a connection with the true meaning of Christmas, in a meaningful setting, away from the commercial aspect.' (Female, 40s)

'The story of Christmas with pictures and music was fabulous. We took our granddaughter who was fascinated by the whole thing ... The whole thing reminded of how family Christmas's used to be like, when my parents were alive.' (Female, 60s)

### Connecting with and valuing inclusivity

It was frequently noted how the event drew visitors from all walks of life and from all age groups:

'I came with my sisters-in-law – all very different people. We all enjoyed our visit immensely.' (Female, 60s)

'I really hope that further events like this will be held in the cathedral as it reached so many people throughout the community ... It felt very inclusive, like it really was for everyone.' (Female, 50s)

For some it was the impact of the installation in terms of its ability to both attract and have meaning and significance for those who were non-religious or from other faiths that was highlighted and often written about in depth:

'Although not a religious person myself, I felt moved by the sounds, images and colours and it left me thinking about the possibility of something greater and unknowable existing in the universe.' (Female, 60s)

'As a non-religious person. This was one of the most amazing things I've been to and experienced. I know about the nativity. I attended a Church of England school as a child. But it didn't take me on that journey. It took me on my own. Surprisingly, when I did see Mary holding Jesus I felt prompted to take a short video, as this area did feel very connective. Whether or not I believe it, I respect it, that others believe it, that we can all live together in peace regardless of each other's different views. This part was a reminder of differences that can bring us together. It brought about discussions with my son, about what it means to him now as a teen, and how this is a part of a Christmas even [if] I am a non-believer in religion, how we continue to actually have traditions which are religion based etc ...' (Female, 30s)

'Events in the cathedral unite people as the world has many faiths it can still bring people together in accepting their different faiths and can inspire creativity and happiness ... Would like to see more shows like this it can unite people regardless of their faith.' (Female, 40s)

### Going away longing for more

Going forward it was clear that many participants were keen for the Cathedral to continue to hold various events and installations both for the public to enjoy and to bring people together.

Several also affirmed that they would be keen to see the *son et lumiere* installation if it were repeated the following year:

'Great experience and thoroughly enjoyed it ... Put me down for next year.' (Male, 70s)

'It was an amazing event and I hope that there will be something similar this coming Christmas. I will definitely attend again.' (Female, 60s)

'It was a heart-warming experience, my husband and I both agreed this wonderful building and treasure of our city should have more things like this open to public, and a lot more regular.' (Female, 60s)

### Discordant experience

While the majority of those attending the *son et lumiere* were complimentary about their experience, there was also a sizeable minority who described having a less positive experience. The reasons they gave for the event having failed to meet their expectations included: organisational and logistical challenges on the evening they chose to attend; concerns about the content of the installation (noting the unnecessarily loud music); and a feeling that the event was insufficiently religious or that it lacked connection to their understanding of the traditional nativity story.

### Organisational and logistical challenges

For some the one-way traffic through the installation caused confusion and resulted in them missing parts of the installation or feeling they had been rushed through:

'Didn't realise that the entrance to more displays meant you left the main displays and my time in the main area was therefore shorter than I would have liked.' (Male, 70s)

'The one-way barrier system manned by staff meant we couldn't move freely and stop and take time to really take in the lights. As if you walked down a corridor you basically began a one way walk around which you had to vacate the building at the end. I felt it would have been more welcoming to allow people to walk freely around the installation.' (Female, 30s)

'We weren't sure how big the display was or how long to stay in each area so walked through quite quickly – would have stayed in each area longer with hindsight.' (Female, 50s)

For others a lack of seating for the elderly or disabled, the need to queue outside on a dark evening and in poor weather conditions, or the lack of refreshments and toilet facilities marred an otherwise enjoyable visit:

'I waited outside in the freezing cold for a very long time. The queue was huge. No seating available for those that were elderly that couldn't stand.' (Female, 50s)

'My only complaint would be the amount of time we had to queue outside on what was a very, very cold night. Is there not some capacity to allow people to queue inside the building which would also offer toilet facilities – another thing people in the queue were complaining about.' (Female, 50s)

'This was a wonderful experience but very chaotic and as we travelled from the Wirral (car, train, taxi) and as it was snowing outside, we wanted a hot drink and were very disappointed that this was not available.' (Female, 60s)

### Concerns about the content of the installation

For some it was the content of the installation in terms of both its structure and its message that caused concern or did not meet expectations. Some participants complained that the event was too 'chaotic', 'noisy', 'loud', and 'overwhelming'. While the light show was frequently mentioned as 'spectacular', there was a feeling that the music was distracting and made the installation less suitable for children:

'Overall, well done for these events, although it was somewhat noisy and overwhelming at times.' (Male, 70s)

'It fell short of the magical experience for me due to there being multiple sources of music which clashed together, creating a harsh sound wherever you went that I found deeply unsettling and chaotic ... I left feeling overwhelmed and frazzled rather than uplifted, which was a shame as I had been really looking forward to it and it was the first time for me in such an incredible hallowed place.' (Female, 30s)

'I love the cathedral and was looking forward to the event with my daughter and grandson but it wasn't what I was expecting. And I think there were too many different noises/music from each area which were all getting mixed together.' (Female, 50s)

'I found at times the music and imaging very overpowering and geared more to adults and less inclusive for children.' (Female, 40s)

### Lack of connection to the traditional Christmas story

Others expressed their disappointment with the lack of what they had expected in terms of religious or Christian content. They expressed a preference for the images to have been accompanied by traditional carols and with a stronger connection made to the traditional nativity story:

'I'd like to stress the fact that I am not a religious person, but I didn't see anything religious in my experience. I went to learn and didn't learn anything. I only remember seeing lots of clocks. I didn't understand what the purpose of the clocks was.' (Male, 50s)

'Although it was a very beautiful art installation It didn't completely feel like a real Christian event. I would have liked to hear Carols.' (Female, 50s)

'Whole thing felt secular when I'd expected more Christian content.' (Female, 70s)

'I thought the light show was interesting, but I didn't think it reflected the Christmas story. I was very disappointed ... I didn't think the Christmas story was told at all.' (Female, 70s)



## Conclusion

The present study was designed as an empirical response to a series of recent conceptual initiatives within the developing field of cathedral studies that has shown particular interest in exploring the capacity of Anglican cathedrals to engage the wider community in the sense of connecting the Christian presence with those who may be less inclined to engage with, or to cross the threshold into, parish churches. In particular, two conceptual approaches have been rooted in metaphors that may express the wider capacity and extended traction of cathedrals, and in the concept of implicit religion that may explain the roots for such capacity. The metaphor of primary significance for the present study was that of 'sacred space *and* common ground'. The feature of primary significance from implicit religion theory was the notion that, as sacred space and common ground, cathedrals have the capacity to soften the boundaries between the sacred and the secular.

Two earlier studies reported by McKenna et al. (2022, 2023) had begun a systematic review of the variety of ways in which Anglican cathedrals were currently engaging with events, installations, and activities showing the potential to soften the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, and thus to give substance to the claim for cathedrals to be both sacred space *and* common ground. These two studies found rich evidence to support the claim that Anglican cathedrals were proactively engaging in providing opportunities for such events, installations, and activities. What, however, was still lacking within this field of enquiry was research among the participants in such events, installations, and activities. What evidence is there that such provision was drawing a wider range of participants into cathedrals? What evidence is there that, having entered the common ground, such participants are also conscious of entering sacred space? The present study was designed to address this lacuna within the research literature.

The context for addressing this lacuna was provided by the pre-Christmas Luxmuralis *son et lumiere* installation at Liverpool Cathedral during Christmas 2022: *The light before Christmas: The angels are coming*. Drawing on a quantitative survey completed by 978 people who attended this installation, the present study undertook content analysis of the qualitative responses submitted to the survey by 123 participants who self-identified as never attending church services. Three main categories of themes emerged from this content analysis: concerning the Cathedral, concerning the *son et lumiere*, and concerning discordant experience. Each of these themes leads to a conclusion regarding the capacity for Liverpool Cathedral to reflect both common ground *and* sacred space among non-churchgoing publics.

The first category of themes, reflecting responses to the Cathedral itself among non-churchgoing individuals, included four specific strands. These participants recognised a sense of inclusion within the Cathedral embracing those of

no religious faith and those embracing other religious traditions. This is consistent with an Anglican ecclesiology of being a welcoming Christian presence in every community (Seeley 2019). These participants expressed a deep sense of personal affection for the Cathedral and a sense of being at home there and of benefitting from the distinctive ambience of the place. This is consistent with the view that boundaries between the sacred and the secular are being softened. These participants expressed a sense of personal belonging with the Cathedral. This sense of belonging with and through place is consistent with Walker's (2017) appreciation of the importance of place within an Anglican understanding of belonging to God. For these participants, there was a sense of pride in Liverpool Cathedral and the desire to share this experience with others. It is precisely this sense of pride that may well motivate people to become friends of the Cathedral (see Muskett 2015).

The second category of themes, reflecting responses to the *son et lumiere* installation, included seven specific themes: an affective response of appreciation and thankfulness, connecting with and valuing personal depth, connecting with and valuing other people, connecting with and valuing space, connecting with the Christmas spirit, connecting with and valuing inclusivity, and going away longing for more. It is these seven themes that are redolent of the three core defining characteristics of implicit religion as summarised by Francis et al. (2013): *integrating foci*, *commitment*, and *intensive concerns with extensive effects*. Having stepped across the threshold into the immersive experience of the *son et lumiere* within the evocative space of Liverpool Cathedral, non-churchgoing individuals found themselves caught up in a transformative experience, an experience that helped them to connect with themselves, with other people and with the sacred space itself. For some participants this immersive experience called out deep affective responses of appreciation and thankfulness, and for some participants it stirred a longing to protect and to preserve the experience with a commitment to come back 'next time'. Here are individuals who stepped over the threshold into common ground and there encountered sacred space.

The third category of themes, reflecting discordant experience, are themes that are of the greatest significance for those who are mandated with the care and management of cathedrals into the future. These are the themes that most impede transition from common ground to sacred space. The first two themes are perhaps predictable, obvious, and familiar to those struggling to organise such events. Organisational and logistical challenges inevitably get in the way. Installations employing light shows and boisterous music inevitably clash with the expectations of those who prefer a quieter and less stimulating environment. The third theme, however, may have been less anticipated by the organisers. Here was a light and sound installation promoted as *The light before Christmas: The angels are coming*. Even among non-churchgoing participants, there was disappointment with the lack of what they had expected in terms of religious

or Christian content, in terms of connection with traditional carols and with the nativity narrative. Perhaps at Christmas time in particular non-churchgoers who step across the threshold into common ground *and* sacred space may still be expecting to access and to connect with the religious narrative for which the sacred space serves as guardian and as custodian.

## Limitations

There are three main limitations with the present study that could be addressed by future research. The first limitation concerns the nature of the population sampled. The population was defined as the people who booked the tickets to attend. The survey failed to access the many other people for whom tickets were purchased and who attended with those who had made the booking. If the economics of conducting research among those who attend such installations, events, and activities favour the current mechanism, then the research has to be clearly conceptualised as concerning those who book tickets and attend the installation, rather than as concerning all those who actually attend. The second limitation concerns focussing on and interpreting the qualitative responses added at the end of a quantitative survey, since only one-third of the participants added comments of this nature. A future survey that focusses exclusively on gathering qualitative data could address this limitation. The third limitation concerns the focus on one (quite distinctive) cathedral. Whether or not the findings from the survey can be generalised more widely to other cathedrals remains a question that can only be resolved by the proper process of scientific replication studies.

Following helpful reflection from the peer-review process, we acknowledge that these qualitative data pose interesting questions that could be focussed in future research. There is an interesting dynamic between the established people of Liverpool and Liverpool Cathedral. Tradition maintains that this cathedral was built by the people of Liverpool for the people of Liverpool. With the completion of the Cathedral being as recent as 1978 this is well within living memory. Future research in Liverpool Cathedral should take a closer look at the participants' perceived connection with the city and region.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

L.J.F. took responsibility for overall conceptualisation of the article. A.V. designed the survey and oversaw the data collection. U.M. curated and analysed the data. F.S. shaped the theoretical context. All authors contributed to the writing and agreed the final text.

## Ethical considerations

This study received approval from the Research Ethics Committee for the School of Humanities, Religion and Philosophy at York St John University (HUM-RS-AV-05-22-01).

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

Data are available from L.J.F., the corresponding author.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors, and the publisher.

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