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Assessing visitor evaluation of an immersive cathedral experience: applying the Jungian lenses of feeling and thinking

Ursula McKenna ^a, Leslie J. Francis ^{a,b} and Andrew Village ^c

^aThe Edward Bailey Centre for the Study of Implicit Religion, Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln, UK;

^bCentre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), University of Warwick, Coventry, UK;

^cSchool of Humanities, York St. John University, York, UK

ABSTRACT

Psychological type theory differentiates between two contrasting psychological functions relevant for evaluating experience, styled thinking and feeling. The present study encouraged visitors to the pre-Christmas *son et lumiere* at Liverpool Cathedral, *The light before Christmas: The angels are coming*, to evaluate their experience through these two lenses. Drawing on data from 978 participants, analysis of qualitative responses to the feeling prompt, 'What most touched your heart?' identified nine themes, including valuing being moved by visual images of the nativity, and valuing the opportunity to light a candle. Analysis of qualitative responses to the thinking prompt, 'What big issues were raised in your mind?' identified eight themes, including reflecting on the importance and meaning of Christmas, and reflecting on the world. These two prompts generated quite different responses, suggesting a complementary and richer evaluation of the total experience.

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Introduction

The science of cathedral studies has recognised the growing importance of installations, exhibitions, and events for the developing trajectory of Anglican cathedrals within the religious landscape of England. These installations, exhibitions and events may contribute to the longer-term sustainability of these massive (and expensive) tourist attractions and to the softening of the boundaries between the Christian tradition that these buildings were designed to propagate and the secular society in which they now find themselves located. The capacity of spectacular installations, like the Helter Skelter in Norwich Cathedral and the Crazy Golf Bridges in Rochester Cathedral, were identified in the report prepared by ECORYS (2021) for the Association of English Cathedrals as enhancing footfall and generating additional income not only for these cathedrals but for their communities.

CONTACT Leslie J. Francis  leslie.francis@warwick.ac.uk  Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), The University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 8EE, UK

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Intrigued by the ECORYS (2021) report, a sequence of three studies by McKenna, Francis, and Stewart (2022); Kirby, Francis, and Village (2023), and McKenna et al. (2024) scoped the extent to which other Anglican cathedrals were engaging in installations, exhibitions, and events, explored theoretical frameworks within which the attraction of such innovation could be located, and examined their perceived impact on those who accessed them.

In the first of these studies, McKenna, Francis, and Stewart (2022) identified the relevance of Edward Bailey's (1997, 1998, 2002) theory of implicit religion to account for the ways in which installations, exhibitions, and events could enhance the ministry of the cathedrals within which they were located. Then they conducted an analysis of the websites of the 43 Anglican cathedrals in England and the Isle of Man to document the wide and diverse range of installations, exhibitions, and events hosted between 2018 and 2022. In this context two insights from the theory of implicit religion emerged as of particular significance. First, the notion of implicit religion explores the softening of the boundaries between the sacred and the secular. The data drawn from the websites illustrated eight categories of events that appeared to work in this way, including a prominent category working with scientific themes. Second, the notion of implicit religion explores how diverse themes and activities can generate a significant sense of meaning and purpose. The data drawn from the websites illustrated seven categories of events that appeared to work in this way, including a prominent category working in the field of social justice and social conscience.

In the second of these studies, Kirby, Francis, and Village (2023) noted the prominence given to scientific themes in the earlier analysis of websites by McKenna, Francis and Stewart (2022) and turned attention to listening to visitors to the Luxmuralis installation at Liverpool Cathedral styled, *Space, the Universe and Everything*. Analysis of the responses of 283 visitors who completed a quantitative survey drew attention to four main conclusions. The first conclusion concerned the high proportion of visitors who expressed commitment to Liverpool Cathedral: 92% saw themselves as regular or occasional visitors. The second conclusion concerned the way in which this installation was able to engage with churchgoers and non-churchgoers: 31% attended church at least six times a year and 38% never attended church. The third conclusion concerned the positive impact of visiting the installation on the participants' level of spiritual wellbeing: 70% left feeling better about themselves; 59% left feeling better about their relationships with other people; 57% left feeling better about their relationship with the world; and 39% left feeling better about their relationship with God. The fourth conclusion concerned the contribution of the installation to promoting constructive thought about the connections between science and religion: 94% agreed that a cathedral is the ideal place for this type of exhibition.

In the third of these studies, McKenna et al. (2024) examined the qualitative responses added to the end of a quantitative survey completed by people who had attended a cathedral *son et lumiere*. The survey concluded with the broad and open invitation, 'If you would like to write about your experience of the Cathedral, in your own words, you can do so here. For the 374 participants who contributed qualitative responses, McKenna et al. (2024) selected the responses of those who identified as never attending church services. The data confirmed how the *son et lumiere* succeeded in softening boundaries between the sacred and the secular and provided a deeply moving experience

for these non-churchgoing participants. As one participant said, ‘I am not religious, but I had the best experience ever’.

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to take a deeper look at the experience of visitors attending an immersive cathedral experience by means of analysing qualitative data generated through the Jungian lenses of feeling and thinking as shaped within psychological type theory. Psychological type theory is rooted in three core insights into the notion of human cognition as originally formulated by Jung (1971), and as developed and operationalised through a series of instruments, including the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey and Bates 1978), the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985) and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis 2005; Francis, Laycock, and Brewster 2017). The first insight differentiates between two core psychological processes, styled the perceiving process and the judging process. The perceiving process is concerned with gathering information, while the judging process is concerned with evaluating information. The second insight posits two contrasting functions through which each process is expressed. Perceiving is expressed through the two functions of sensing and intuition. Judging is expressed through the two functions of thinking and feeling. The third insight posits that, while individuals have access to all four psychological functions, they tend to prefer one perceiving function over the other, and one judging function over the other.

Within the fuller development of psychological type theory, these two core cognitive processes are nested within a wider context that differentiates between two psychological orientations and two psychological attitudes. The orientations are concerned with the direction from which the individual’s psychological energy emerges. Those with a preference for introversion are energised by their inner world, and they may be wearied by too much interaction with others. Those with a preference for extraversion are energised by the outer world, and they may be wearied by a lack of interaction with others. The attitudes are concerned with the direction in which individuals prefer to orient their preferred judging function and their preferred perceiving function. Judging types direct their preferred judging function (thinking or feeling) to the outside world where they appear to others to be well organised and prepared. Perceiving types direct their preferred perceiving function (sensing or intuition) to the outside world where they appear to others to be spontaneous and flexible.

According to psychological type theory, it is the combination of the cognitive preferences that help to characterise an individual’s cognitive strengths. In terms of perceiving, people who prefer sensing are practical and pay attention to present realities; people who prefer intuition are imaginative and pay attention to future possibilities. In terms of judging, people who prefer thinking are logical, analytic, and driven by the head; people who prefer feeling are humane, empathic, and driven by the heart. Thinking types are committed to an objective truth; feeling types are committed to personal and interpersonal values (Ross & Francis, 2020).

The notion of examining visitor experience through the cognitive lenses proposed by Jungian type theory was introduced to cathedral studies by Francis et al. (2010) through the development of the Visitor Expectation Type Scales (VETS). Designed for quantitative surveys, the VETS proposed eight sets of seven items designed to map expectations associated with each of the eight preferences identified by the theory (and illustrated

below by an item with one of the highest item rest-of-test correlations within each of the eight scales):

- introversion: look around in quiet and stillness;
- extraversion: engage with other people around me;
- sensing: know how the cathedral is used today;
- intuition: dream about the wonder of creation;
- thinking: learn how the cathedral works for truth and justice;
- feeling: learn how the cathedral works for harmony in the community;
- judging: plan how to organise the visit;
- perceiving: make my visit flexible and open-ended.

The original form of the VETS was revised and improved in a subsequent study reported by Francis, Mansfield, and McKenna (2021), drawing on data provided by 1,278 visitors to five cathedrals in England and Wales, leading to the Visitor Expectation Type Scales 2.0.

While Jungian psychological type theory suggests that individuals have a preferred mode of operating, it also stresses how the path to individuation (psychological growth) progresses by accessing and developing the less preferred functions. Times of recreation (and times of spiritual awakening) may trigger such development (see further Ross & Francis, 2020). While the VETS can access visitors' preferred mode for visiting a cathedral, it is not designed to challenge alternative perspectives.

Research aim

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to employ a qualitative research method that will challenge visitors to reflect on their experience of an immersive cathedral experience by applying the two contrasting evaluative lenses of feeling and thinking. The reason for selecting the evaluative lenses (thinking and feeling) rather than the perceiving lenses (sensing and intuition) is that the evaluative process is more pertinent than the perceiving process *after* the visit. At this point no new perceptions are accessible, but evaluation of previous perceptions may continue.

The opportunity to further this research aim was provided by the quantitative survey designed to assess the responses of those who booked to attend the immersive experience of the *son et lumiere* installation, *The light before Christmas: The angels are coming*, that was live in Liverpool Cathedral between 2 and 9 December 2022. It is from this survey that McKenna et al. (2024) also drew.

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, 3,862 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%.

Participants

Among the 978 participants who completed the survey, 20.7% were male, 79.0% were female, and 0.3% preferred not to say; 9% were under forty, 16% were in their forties, 27% were in their fifties, 33% were in their sixties, 14% were in their seventies, and 1% were aged eighty or over.

Instrument

The survey was hosted on the Qualtrics platform of York St John University. The quantitative survey also included two open-ended invitations to engage the feeling function and to engage the thinking function. Among the participants, 398 responded to the feeling prompt, 'What most touched your heart?' and 238 responded to the thinking prompt, 'What big issues were raised in your mind?'.

Analysis

The written responses to both questions were extracted into separate *Word* documents. These data were then subjected to four iterations of content analysis, a process of reading, re-reading, categorising, and grouping the data into themes (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018; Robson, 1993). Initial categories were identified from the data and the strength of response, in terms of the number of participants mentioning similar things, was recorded. The data for each category was then grouped together and re-read. Similar categories were then combined, or sub-categories identified. Further reading then allowed themes to emerge supported by examples from the corresponding categories.

Results

What most touched your heart?

When prompted to describe what had most touched their heart while attending the immersive installation, nine themes were highlighted: valuing being moved by visual images of the nativity; valuing the Christmas spirit; valuing multi-sensory engagement; valuing the opportunity to light a candle; valuing personal feelings; valuing reflection on family; valuing being warmed by the responses of children; valuing the sense of community; and valuing the use of the cathedral space.

Valuing being moved by visual images of the nativity

Across all data for this prompt, mentions of 'the nativity scene', 'the Holy Family', or 'the stable scene', gave rise to the greatest number of responses. In addition, there was a singling out of the final image at the end of the immersive experience, of 'Mary and

Jesus', the 'Madonna and Jesus', or 'Our Lady and Jesus', as particularly poignant, touching, or simply 'breathhtaking'.

Coming through the walkway at the end which isn't normally open and being confronted by the projected image of the nativity on the wall in front of me. (Female, 70s)

The simplicity of the nativity scene in contrast to the greatness of the moment as a whole. (Male, 70s)

Definitely the Virgin Mary and Jesus. The dimmed lighting and music was very atmospheric and a hushed reverence came over the crowds. It was incredibly moving. (Female, 50s)

Our Lady holding baby Jesus, I was overwhelmed with many others. (Female, 50s)

The adoration in Mary's eyes as she looked at Jesus. (Female, 60s)

The final depiction of Mary and Jesus was beautiful as you turned and walked along the last passageway. (Female, 50s)

That Mary was a mum who lost her son. (Female, 40s)

Valuing the Christmas spirit

For some, what most touched their heart was that the installation brought Christmas 'alive'. A Christmas 'spirit', 'vibe' or 'feeling' was described as created by the installation. It had helped participants to celebrate the joy of Christmas.

It was such a breathtaking display, it was the start of our family Christmas preparations. (Female, 50s)

Sense of joy and anticipation of Christmas. (Female, 60s)

The whole spirit of Christmas in all its elements. (Female, 50s)

Bringing the spirit of Christmas alive. (Female, 60s)

The whole display helped me to reflect on Christmas which I found to be an emotional and moving experience. (Male, 60s)

Valuing multi-sensory engagement

Many participants valued the multi-sensory immersion in the story of Christmas with responses that mentioned the visual appearance of 'angels', 'images in walkways', the 'lights' and 'stars', combined with the music and singing. After mentions of the nativity scene, it was reference to the 'angels' that was the most frequently noted image to have touched the hearts of the participants.

People of different ages just quietly smiling at all the images. People just stopped and were clearly fascinated by the images and changing colours. A sense of peace and happiness. (Female, 70s)

The surroundings lit up with the lights. (Female, 40s)

The stars in the walkway. (Female, 40s)

The journey guided by light and the angels. (Male, 70s)

We went on the promise that the Angels were coming and we were not disappointed. (Female, 70s)

The angels and the doves made me quite emotional. (Female, 50s)

Hark the herald angels carol and the angels ascending. (Male, 60s)

The way the lights danced in tune to the music and how the tempo constantly changed. (Female, 60s)

The atmosphere, music and lights in harmony. (Female, 30s)

The immersive combination of sound and images made me feel that I was seeing the Nativity through the eyes of the Wise Men. (Female, 70s)

Valuing the opportunity to light a candle

Participants valued the opportunity provided to light a candle. They were appreciative of the time and space that this gave them to think about and remember friends, family, and those no longer around with whom they could share the experience. There were frequent mentions of lighting candles for loved ones recently departed. Others were simply moved by the visual scene created by the burning candles.

Lighting real candles and having a quiet moment to reflect. (Female, 70s)

Lighting a candle in memory of my dad. (Female, 40s)

Lighting a candle for my mum. (Female, 40s)

I lit a candle in memory of my Nan, she would have loved the light show. (Female, 40s)

Lighting a candle (not something I usually do) whilst praying for a friend who had just tragically lost her husband. (Female, 50s)

So many people enjoying the display and following the journey . . . especially the lighting of so many votive candles at the baptismal font. (Male, 50s)

The candles at the end. They appeared to be floating. (Male, 60s)

Valuing personal feelings

For some what most touched their heart was how the installation had made them feel. Here participants frequently mentioned feeling ‘spiritual’, ‘emotional’, ‘moved’, ‘peaceful’, or ‘calm’.

The peacefulness, people transfixed by the whole display. I went on the anniversary of my mother’s birthday, so it was a very moving, very special experience for me. (Male, 50s)

Just watching it all brought tears to my eyes and a lump to my throat. (Female, 60s)

Everything, it was truly moving. (Female, 60s)

Found it all quite emotional. (Male, 60s)

It made me feel quite spiritual and emotional. (Female, 50s)

The whole atmosphere of peace and oneness. (Female, 60s)

Several alluded to a sense of healing engendered by their attendance.

Knowing I needed my spirit raising it's been a hard year or so and it didn't disappoint felt much better afterwards. (Male, 60s)

A friend whom I was with . . . is suffering with PTSD said how relaxed and calm it made her feel. (Female, 80s+)

Valuing reflection on family

Many participants mentioned how they had valued time spent with their own families, 'sharing', 'enjoying', or just 'being together' at the experience. Several others observed and pointed out the sheer number of other families in attendance and commented on the enjoyment experienced by those families too.

The fact that touched my heart was that family time was spent together and it started Christmas for me. (Female, 50s)

Just being there with my family. (Male, 50s)

The whole experience. Family united in shared experience in an inspirational setting. (Female, 30s)

It was a lovely evening spent with the family at a festive experience. (Female, 50s)

How many people, especially families were enjoying being there. (Female, 60s)

The number of families enjoying a shared experience – it's what Liverpool does best. (Female, 50s)

It was lovely to see so many families with young children in the cathedral, hopefully learning the Christmas message. (Female, 60s)

The families around me having such a close family time. Thought of those who weren't there – children without the opportunity to experience this kind of event. (Female, 70s)

Valuing being warmed by the responses of children

Continuing with a focus on family, a considerable number of participants specifically wrote about observing and being warmed by the reactions of their own and other people's children while enjoying the installation. They described the reactions of the children as ones of 'wonder', 'joy', 'pleasure', 'excitement', and as 'captivating'. They hoped attendance at the installation would leave a lasting impact on these children.

Seeing my 8-year-old grandson's face and the fact it held his attention for 40 minutes. Hoping he'll remember it in association with future Christmases. (Female, 60s)

My son enjoying it and forgetting he was a worldly wise 9-year-old. (Female, 50s)

Watching my 4-year-old son mesmerised by a sea of stars. His childlike innocence absorbing all the beautiful lights and how he enjoyed making friends with other children in the area with the main steps running through the lights pretending to fly like an angel or reindeer. (Female, 30s)

Was amazing to take my two-year-old who was wowed by the experience. (Female, 30s)

The blue stars the music and my grandson laying down on the cathedral floor enjoying the experience. (Female, 60s)

The look of wonderment and excitement of the children. (Male, 60s)

Seeing children captivated. (Female, 60s)

It was wonderful seeing the joy in the faces of the children and everyone else, as they got lost in the story. (Female, 60s)

The all-encompassing feeling of the display, it was awe inspiring and mesmerising. There was space for the children to have fun and just be in the moment (Female, 40s)

Valuing the sense of community

For some participants it was the sense of community and togetherness that touched their heart. They drew attention to the opportunity the installation had provided to be with others and pointed out its inclusive nature by noting how they had observed people from all walks of life enjoying the shared experience.

Seeing all ages enjoying the experience in my hometown. (Female, 50s)

Seeing so many people . . . different generations, together and really enjoying the event. It was uplifting to see such a beautiful light show with so many varied people of different ages, socio-economic groups and ethnicities. (Female, 70s)

The fact that it was in the cathedral which I love and seeing all the people who many like myself probably don't attend a local church but have a faith. (Female, 60s)

The atmosphere, seeing the magic and wonder of the event on other people's faces. (Female, 30s)

The immersive nature of it and the wonder. Being able to share the experience with strangers who were similarly entranced. (Female, 60s)

Valuing the use of the cathedral space

For another group of participants, it was the way in which the cathedral space was being used that most touched their heart. They wrote about appreciating the beauty of the installation combined with the surroundings in which it was set. They noted how the cathedral architecture was suited to the narrative being

conveyed, praised the way in which the installation was staged and projected, and commended the effort the cathedral had put into hosting the installation and the welcome given to those attending.

The combination of the illuminations and the magnificent building. (Female, 60s)

The visual effects looked stunning in the cathedral and really showed the beautiful architecture of the cathedral. (Female, 40s)

It was inspiring. The light bouncing off the tremendous architecture of the Cathedral and the feeling of peace at Christmas. (Male, 50s)

The enormity of the narrative in such a special place. (Female, 60s)

The sheer size of the whole thing, I'd seen pictures etc on social media but nothing compares to waking in there, and feeling, seeing, hearing and sensing what was around you. It all touched my heart. (Female, 30s)

How beautiful and moving it all was. And how lucky I was and my friends, that we could see it in Liverpool in such a special building. (Female, 60s)

Absolutely everything and the fact that Liverpool Cathedral is always so proactive in welcoming people. (Male, 60s)

The warm welcome we received from the staff and volunteers. (Female, 50s)

What big issues were raised in your mind?

When prompted to describe the issues that had been raised in their minds, eight themes were highlighted: reflecting on the importance and meaning of Christmas; reflecting on shared experience; reflecting on relationships with others; reflecting on consumerism and commercialism; reflecting critically on the Cathedral's engagement with consumerism; reflecting on religion; reflecting on the big questions of life; and reflecting on the world.

Reflecting on the importance and meaning of Christmas

Many of the participants reflected on the role and importance of Christmas in their lives and how the installation helped them to think about what they felt was the 'true' or 'real' meaning of Christmas. There were questions posed as to whether this 'true' meaning of Christmas was being lost in society, and the thought expressed that maybe installations such as the Angels were an opportunity to remind people about this 'true' meaning whether in a religious or non-religious way.

To remember what Christmas means to me. (Female, 30s)

The meaning of Christmas and be kind to everyone. (Female, 50s)

That too many people ignore the real meaning of Christmas. (Female, 70s)

How the true meaning of Christmas isn't recognised as it still should be. (Female, 50s)

The true meaning of Christmas. The relevance of the Christmas message for the world in which we live. (Male, 40s)

The importance of reminding people of the true meaning of Christmas. (Female, 70s)

How does the message of Christmas inform how we live our lives? (Female, 60s)

How Christ's birth is central to people's celebration – consciously or subconsciously. (Female, 40s)

Reflecting on shared experience

Several participants reflected on the shared experience detailing how the installation brought together a wide variety of people from different faiths and backgrounds. They maintained that the installation provided access to the Christmas story but did so in such a way that allowed each person to take away their own personal meanings.

That Christmas is for all. (Female, 40s)

The Cathedral was full of people of all ages and all walks of life. It was amazing to see so many people accessing the Christmas story and being made aware of the light the Christmas story brought into the world. (Female, 60s)

It was lovely to see everyone sharing an experience, even though it meant something different to us all. (Female, 50s)

The importance of shared ritual regardless of belief. (Female, 50s)

The fact that there were obviously so many people of different faiths and beliefs enjoying it. (Female, 70s)

That whatever your religion, race colour or creed, we can all come together to celebrate, and enjoy a special time of year. (Female, 50s)

Reflecting on relationships with others

Some participants reflected on the quality of relationships with others. They stressed the importance of having family and friends and being able to spend time together, building bridges with them when necessary, and thinking about those, especially at Christmas, who might be estranged from their families.

The joy of having my family together. (Female, 60s)

How special being a mother is and how lucky I am to have a baby of my own. (Female, 18–19)

How much I love my children and want to protect them. (Female, 40s)

Family time is the most important thing at Christmas not just the presents! (Female, 50s)

The fact that Christmas is a magical time, a family time and a time for reflection. (Female, 60s)

People who I've lost, people who are struggling. (Female, 50s)

Being together at Christmas, trying to be closer to family and build bridges with people. (Female, 50s)

That all families are not together. (Female, 60s)

Reflecting on consumerism and commercialism

Many of the participants wrote about the way in which the installation had made them reflect on the relationship between contemporary celebrations of Christmas and the traditions of the past. In particular, several participants drew attention to the installation as highlighting tensions between the 'true' or 'real' message of Christmas and the reality of consumerism and commercialism surrounding the modern-day celebration. They reflected on how an excessive focus on spending money and being under pressure to do what others expected took them away from the true meaning and enjoyment of the occasion.

How sad it is that most people get carried away with the extravagance and commercialism and forget about the real meaning of Christmas. (Female, 50s)

How commercial Christmas has become. (Male, 60s)

Christmas is too commercialised now and that it's true meaning is lost to a lot of people. (Female, 60s)

How the true meaning of Christmas is lost ... it appears to have become a commercial matter rather than an important part of the Christian calendar. (Female, 60s)

The consumerism of Christmas, the real meaning has got lost by Father Christmas and expensive presents that we don't need. (Female, 60s)

That Christmas has become far too commercialised. People seem more interested in expensive presents than helping others ... (Female, 50s)

Christmas should be a much simpler affair without the stress of present buying and everything having to be 'perfect'. (Female, 60s)

How simple Christmas can and should be, without the pressures modern life puts on us. (Female, 50s)

Reflecting on the Cathedral's engagement with consumerism

Participants reflected critically on the location of the installation within the Cathedral pondering on whether such paid for installations help those attending to counterbalance the consumerism and commercialism of modern celebrations of Christmas or, in contrast, do such installations (and the Cathedral in hosting them) simply add to this unwelcome consumerism and commercialism?

I believe that the Christmas story has been lost and filled with commercial exploitation. Maybe things like this will start bringing people back together. (Male, 60s)

It was a reminder that Christmas is not about presents but the birth of Jesus. (Male, 50s)

The real reason for Christmas and not the expense and expectancy it has sadly become. (Female, 40s)

That an opportunity to introduce the good news of the Christmas story to many people who would not normally set foot in a church had missed the mark, and how even such a venture in the cathedral seemed more of a commercial event. (Female, 50s)

How we no longer create beautiful public spaces without a commercial incentive. (Female, 50s)

The extent to which commercialism has swamped spiritual aspects of life even in a cathedral. (Male, 70s)

The participants were also willing to be self-critical about their own contribution to such consumerism and commercialism.

How did Christmas become so commercialised? How can I stop adding to that? (Female, 60s)

Just that we should enjoy shared experiences not possessions. (Female, 40s)

Reflecting on religion

For some participants the installation had encouraged reflection on the role and place of religion in modern society, including self-reflection on the personal meaning of religion and faith.

How can the story of the birth of Jesus make sense in today's religiously plural and secular society. (Male, 70s)

The reducing numbers of persons associating themselves with Christ. (Male, 70s)

My friend and I stood in the centre of cathedral and discussed what religion meant to us. (Female, 50s)

If I believe the Christmas story. (Female, 50s)

What it must feel like to have faith. (Female, 40s)

Reflecting on the big questions of life

Other participants reflected on the big questions of life. They wrote about the quest for spirituality, and the importance of awe and wonder to human flourishing. Questions were raised about the unknowable, the meaning and impermanence of life, and humanity being just a small part of the universe.

I think it was a spiritual experience. It was awe inspiring. (Female, 50s)

Make time for awe and wonder. (Female, 60s)

We are a small part of something infinite and unknowable. (Female, 60s)

Because it was majestic, makes me think of how small we are in the universe. (Female, 60s)

What comes after death? (Female, 50s)

The renewal and impermanence of life. (Male, 60s)

How life is short and every day is precious, and how we need to make the most of the life we've been given. (Female, 50s)

Reflecting on the world

Reflecting on the current state of the world was a frequent response when participants considered the issues the installation had helped to bring to mind. They wrote about a lack of justice in the world with prolific mentions of 'war' (including specific mention of the war in Ukraine), 'homelessness', 'poverty', 'inequality', and the treatment of refugees together with the perceived failure of national governments.

Just how we need to love each other more as a community, how the world is struggling at the moment. (Female, 30s)

How sad it is that there is so much conflict in the world and sad that relatively so few people would experience peace. (Female, 60s)

I thought of the war in Ukraine and how it is our duty to help others. (Female, 50s)

The fact that we as a family could go to our Cathedral, see something of beauty representing the birth of Jesus Christ with so many other people in peace – at a time when war was taking place in Ukraine, Yemen, and in other places around the world where such gatherings would be impossible. And a visit to the Cathedral does trigger issues such as homelessness – especially at Christmas – and people living in poverty. (Male, 70s)

The world being on the edge of a precipice and wondering if my grandchildren would get the chance to enjoy the same kind of event. (Male, 60s)

Issues of asylum, poverty. How sad we see so much of it in Britain today with us helping so few people. (Female, 50s)

Would the Holy Family be treated any differently if Christ was born in 2022. The family were effectively refugees who received some small act of kindness. I pray that we can offer refugees that same act of kindness in 2023. (Female, 70s)

In that space the world felt peaceful and friendly, strangers all enjoying the same experience. It made me feel a little sad thinking about the world, corrupt governments, wars etc and how human beings have lost the connection to the spiritual realm of God. (Female, 30s)

They reflected on how they felt privileged to be able to attend such installations when others were less fortunate, and expressed gratitude that they were able to do so.

How lucky we are to live in this beautiful city with these great events compared to others in war torn parts of the world. (Female, 50s)

It felt like a very special place to be and we all felt emotional because we knew how lucky we are when there is so much destruction, abuse and sadness throughout the world. (Female, 50s)

Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to assess how the Jungian lenses of feeling and thinking could be applied to amplify visitor evaluation of an immersive cathedral experience. According to the theory, as discussed in the introduction to the study, the lenses of feeling and thinking focus attention on different aspects of visitor experience, as operationalised for example in the Visitor Expectation Type Scales (Francis et al. 2010; Francis, Mansfield, and McKenna 2021). Two observations from Jungian theory are particularly pertinent here. The first observation is that the preference for thinking displays commitment to an object truth, driven by the head, while the preference for feeling displays commitment to personal and interpersonal values, driven by the heart. The second observation is that, while individuals may show a preference to one over the other, with individuation (the developmental process of integrating conscious and unconscious functions) both preferences are accessible.

Against this background, the present study prompted participants to draw on both preferences to shape their evaluation of an immersive cathedral light show that they had experienced some weeks earlier. The feeling function was stimulated by the prompt, 'What most touched your heart?' The thinking function was stimulated by the prompt, 'What big issues were raised in your mind?' Data drawn from among 978 participants, who had booked to attend the *son et lumiere* installation at Liverpool Cathedral, *The light before Christmas: The angels are coming*, confirmed the extent to which these two contrasting prompts generated two different kinds of responses.

Listening to feeling evaluation

Content analysis identified nine themes that emerged from the feeling prompt and each of these themes focused on aspects of the experience that had been valued by the participants. First and foremost, participants valued being moved by visual images of the nativity. The classic images of Christian art were found to be powerful to touch the heart. As one participant put it, the image of the virgin Mary and the infant Jesus, emerging from the dimmed lighting and accompanied by the atmospheric music, was 'incredibly moving' as a 'hushed reverence came over the crowd'.

Participants valued being moved by the Christmas spirit. The installation captured the 'sense of joy and anticipation of Christmas'. It brought 'the spirit of Christmas alive'. It marked the start of 'family Christmas preparations'. Participants valued being caught up in multi-sensory engagement. The angels, the stars, the lights, alongside the evocative music, sparked the emotions. Participants valued the opportunity to light a candle. Amid all the powerful electronic extravaganza of the *son et lumiere*, the opportunity to light a simple candle touched the heart and called to mind 'in a quiet moment to reflect', 'my mum', 'my dad', 'a friend who had just tragically lost her husband'. Participants valued acknowledging their own feelings. The installation 'moved' them, 'brought tears' to their eyes, brought 'a lump' to their throat. For some it brought a sense of peace, a sense of healing. Participants valued reflecting on their family, and the families of others around them. Here was an installation that brought together the generations, the very young alongside the very old. Participants valued being warmed by the responses of children.

They were caught up in the ‘wonder’, ‘joy’, ‘excitement’ of the children and found this experience ‘captivating’. Participants valued the sense of community and togetherness that touched their heart. That all this was taking place in ‘their’ cathedral was particularly powerful for some of the people of Liverpool. For them it was happening in the cathedral that they ‘love’ although they do not attend a local church. Participants valued the use of the Cathedral. The architecture and the space were brought to life in a new way by the installation.

The prompt ‘What most touched your heart?’ has unearthed a rich vein of visitor experiences none of which were trivial or insignificant. Viewed through the lenses of implicit religion, as earlier discussed by McKenna, Francis, and Stewart (2022), here is further evidence for the capacity of installations, exhibitions, and events hosted within cathedrals to soften the boundaries between the sacred and the secular. People were attracted to cross the threshold into the Cathedral by the promise of a stunning sound and light show. Once across the threshold, they were part of an immersive experience that touched their hearts and possibly stirred their souls. In line with Muskett’s (2016, 2019) consideration of cathedral metaphors, having stepped onto the ‘common ground’, some of these participants found themselves standing in ‘sacred space’.

Listening to thinking evaluation

Content analysis identified eight themes that emerged from the thinking prompt and each of these themes focused on aspects of the experience that stimulated participants to reflect on something that mattered to them. First and foremost, participants reflected on the importance and meaning of Christmas. The juxtapositioning within the Cathedral of secular images (like Santa Claus) and sacred images (like angels) focused big questions about the ‘true’ meaning of Christmas. The questions were asked, ‘What Christmas means to me?’, whether ‘the true meaning of Christmas isn’t recognised as it still should be?’, and whether ‘the message of Christmas informs how we live our lives?’.

Participants reflected on experience shared by a wide variety of people from different faiths and backgrounds. It focused attention on diversity and equality across ‘religion’, ‘race’, and ‘colour’. Participants reflected on the quality of their relationships with others, with their family, with their children, with their friends, and in so doing they brought to mind ‘people who are struggling’ and people whom they want ‘to protect’. Participants reflected on consumerism and commercialism. They raised questions about how the ‘real meaning has got lost by Father Christmas and expensive presents that we don’t need’, and about ‘how people seem more interested in expensive presents than helping others’. Participants reflected on the Cathedral’s engagement with consumerism. They raised questions about whether hosting the installation within the Cathedral was siding too much with consumerism rather than making a statement against consumerism. Participants reflected on the place of religion in today’s society. They raised questions about how the story of ‘the birth of Jesus can make sense in today’s religiously plural and secular society’. Participants reflected on the big questions of life. They raised questions about ‘what comes after death?’, ‘what life is about?’, and ‘how we can make the most of the life we’ve been given?’. Participants reflected on the state of the world in which they were living. They raised questions about ‘war’ (specifically the war in Ukraine), ‘homelessness’, ‘poverty’, ‘inequality’, ‘asylum’ and ‘refugees’.

The prompt ‘What big issues were raised in your mind?’ has also unearthed a rich vein of visitor experiences, none of which were trivial or insignificant. Viewed through the lenses of implicit religion, as earlier discussed by McKenna, Francis, and Stewart (2022), here is further evidence for the capacity of installations, exhibitions, and events hosted within cathedrals to focus discussion around the profound themes of human engagement that themselves have the capacity to plumb the depths of the sense of meaning and purpose in life. People who ventured into the Cathedral to become immersed within a stunning sound and light show, found that this immersive experience opened their minds to contemplate things that really mattered, and these things included nothing less than the meaning and purpose of life.

Two main conclusions follow from this analysis, one concerning the shape of future research into visitor experience within the science of cathedral studies and more broadly, and the other concerning the shape of future installations, exhibitions, and events in cathedrals. In terms of future research, the present study has demonstrated the benefit of evaluating visitor experience through the twin lenses of thinking and feeling. The two prompts offered by the present study for thinking (What big issues were raised in your mind?) and for feeling (What most touched your heart?) accessed distinctive and complementary veins of considerable interest and importance. In terms of the shape of future installations, exhibitions, and events in cathedrals, the present study has demonstrated how investments in immersive experiences like the *son et lumière* can serve the ministry and mission of cathedrals in ways beyond enhancing income generation for the cathedral and its immediate neighbourhood. The Cathedral served the Liverpool city region by enhancing the personal and social lives of those who benefitted from attending the installation. It added value to the local community. The Cathedral also served its core mission to the people of Liverpool by lowering the threshold across which people could step with confidence onto common ground and thereby experience occupying sacred space. Then, within that sacred space, hearts were warmed to respond to a moving (and spiritual) experience, and heads were stimulated to ask those pivotal (and religious) questions about the meaning and purpose of life.

Limitations

The present study is limited by its focus on one cathedral and one event and by the two core qualitative questions being located within a fairly lengthy and extensive quantitative survey. Further qualitative studies are now required in other locations, employing the same two prompts to access feeling and thinking responses at greater length and in greater depth.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Ursula McKenna is Senior Research Fellow within the Edward Bailey Centre for the Study of Implicit Religion and World Religions and Education Research Unit at Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln, England. She received her EdD from the University of Warwick. Her research engages with both qualitative and quantitative methods, and she has published widely as part of a research group concerned with religion, psychology, and education. Recent articles include, 'Anglican cathedrals and implicit religion: Softening the boundaries of sacred space' (*HTS Theological Studies*, 2022) and 'Introducing the Shorter Dark Tetrad for Muslim Societies (SD4-MS): A study among young adults in Pakistan' (*Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 2023).

Leslie J. Francis is Professor of Religions, Psychology and Education and Co-Director of the World Religions and Education Research Unit at Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln, England and Professor Emeritus of Religions and Psychology at the University of Warwick, England. He received his PhD and ScD from the University of Cambridge, his DD from the University of Oxford, and his DLitt from the University of Wales. His recent books include *Lessons in Spiritual Development* (2017), *Religion and Education: The Voices of Young People in Ireland* (2019), *Personality, Religion, and Leadership* (2020), *A New Lease of Life? Anglican Clergy Reflect on Retirement* (2020), and *The Science of Congregation Studies* (2021).

Andrew Village is Professor of Practical and Empirical Theology at York St John University. He researches in the psychology of religion as well as congregational and clergy studies. He trained as an ecologist before serving in parish ministry in Peterborough and Bangor. Recent studies include surveys of clergy and lay people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ORCID

Ursula McKenna  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2625-7731>

Leslie J. Francis  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2946-9980>

Andrew Village  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2174-8822>

Availability of data

Data are available from the corresponding author on request.

Ethics approval

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee for the School of Humanities, Religion and Philosophy at York St John University (approval code: HRP-RS-AV-05-22-01). All participants had to affirm they were 18 or over and give their informed consent by clicking a box that gave access to the rest of the survey.

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