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Francis, L.J. (2024) *Evaluating the missional impact of an Advent son et lumiere in Liverpool Cathedral*. *Theology*. ISSN 0040-571X

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*Accepted 27.2.2024: Theology*

Evaluating the missional impact of an Advent *son et lumiere* in Liverpool Cathedral

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### **Abstract**

This study tests the thesis that innovative cathedral installations and events may soften the boundaries between common ground and sacred space, perhaps especially at Christmas. Over two-fifths of the participants surveyed at the 2023 *son et lumiere*, The light before Christmas, in Liverpool Cathedral said that their experience made them more likely to attend a carol service in the cathedral and one fifth said they were more likely to attend a Christmas Eve/Day service. By coincidence the 4,749 attendance at the Christmas Eve Carol services was a 21% uplift on the pre-Covid 2019 attendance; the 1,232 attendance at Midnight Mass was a 73% uplift on the 2019 attendance.

*Keywords:* cathedral studies, sacred space, common ground, implicit religion, Christmas, *son et lumiere*

## Introduction

Several recent studies have drawn attention both to the proliferation of installations, events and exhibitions in cathedrals and to the controversy and debate these generate (see McKenna, Francis, & Stewart, 2022). For some the Helter Skelter in Norwich Cathedral, the Crazy Golf Bridges in Rochester Cathedral, and most recently the 90s Silent Disco in Canterbury Cathedral are *cause célèbre* and represent nothing less than the profanation of sacred space. At one level the development of cathedrals in this way may be nothing more than the economic outworking of the observation focused by the Archbishops' Commission on Cathedrals (1994) that both acknowledged the dual identity of cathedrals as core places of worship and as major tourist attractions, and began to analyse the complementary and conflictual nature of those two identities. Today cathedrals continue to balance their responsibilities to serve the mission of their diocese and to pay the enormous bills presented to a national heritage site.

Against this background scholarly attempts are being made to reflect on the rationale underpinning the diversity of installations, events and exhibitions currently colonising cathedral space. Are these unashamed genuflections to commercialisation, or are they strategic agents of ministry and mission? Recent approaches to think strategically and missionally about the role of installations, events and exhibitions in cathedrals have been rooted in two fields of enquiry: the analysis of cathedral metaphors initiated by Judith Muskett; and Edward Bailey's notion of implicit religion. These two approaches share in common the assumption of secularisation and the appreciation of the growing gulf between the Christian narrative and the dominant social context.

### **The power of metaphor**

The power of metaphor for illuminating an understanding of cathedrals was introduced by Muskett (2016) in a programmatic paper, '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 with diverse publics. *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, p. 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. The first part of this compound metaphor was discussed by Carr (1992, pp. 63-71). 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 in respect of cathedrals 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, p. 153)

The second part of the 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)

This compound metaphor was also employed by Barley (2015) to describe how Truro Cathedral established 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).

### **The power of implicit religion**

The power of Edward Bailey's (1997, 1998) concept of implicit religion for illuminating an understanding of cathedrals was introduced to cathedral studies by Hammond (2007).

Subsequently, McKenna, Francis, and Stewart (2022) focused on two specific insights from the theory of implicit religion for analysing the range of installations, events, and exhibitions that their survey found promoted within Anglican cathedrals. First, the notion of implicit religion softens the boundaries between the sacred and the secular and gives substance to the idea of cathedrals as 'sacred space and common ground'. Within this perspective they identified and discussed eight categories of events mentioned on cathedral websites and hosted within cathedrals that appeared to be softening the boundaries between the secular culture and the sacred space of the cathedral. These categories were: scientific exhibitions, festivals, musical events, art exhibitions, theatre, markets, community events, and installations. While few of the examples identified in the study rivalled the sensational appeal of the Helter Skelter, the Crazy Golf Bridges, or the 90s Silent Disco, many clearly held capacity to enhance footfall and to extend the reach of cathedrals into diverse publics.

Second, the notion of implicit religion draws attention to the themes and activities that generate meaning and purpose and that, by so doing, hold the capacity to direct and enhance human flourishing. Events, exhibitions, and installations not only have the capacity to draw publics into the common ground, but within the sacred space they have the capacity to offer experiences that may generate meaning and purpose and enhance human flourishing. Within this second perspective, McKenna, Francis, and Stewart (2022) identified and discussed seven themes: social justice and social conscience, violence and reconciliation, remembrance, migration and sanctuary, Covid-19 and lockdowns, personal wellbeing, and nature and environment. Themes like these hold the capacity to stir the human heart, to anchor the human mind, and to promote engaged human flourishing.

### **Listening to participants**

The limitation with the analysis reported by McKenna, Francis, and Stewart (2022) is that, while it was able to chart the provision, it had no access to the responses of participants. Two other studies have tried to address that limitation. In the first of these two studies, Francis, Mansfield, McKenna, and Jones (2023) reported on a survey conducted among participants attending the Jazz Festival in Brecon Cathedral. This survey focused on the psychographic segmentation of cathedral visitors, employing psychological type theory. A series of earlier studies concerned with psychological profiling had shown that cathedral visitors were unrepresentative of the population as a whole, and that certain psychological types were less inclined to cross the threshold into cathedrals. This new survey attracted 196 responses and demonstrated that the Jazz Festival made a significant contribution to addressing this imbalance by drawing into Brecon Cathedral more intuitive types and more perceiving types. In other words, specific types of events may extend the reach of cathedrals.

In a second study, Kirby, Francis, and Village (2023) reported on a survey conducted among participants attending the *Luxmuralis son et lumiere* installation in Liverpool

Cathedral, *Space, the Universe and Everything*. This survey focused on exploring the religious background of the participants, on their attitude toward cathedrals hosting science-related installations, and on the impact of the experience on their spiritual wellbeing. The survey attracted 283 responses. Among these participants 15% were weekly churchgoers, 38% never attended and 27% attended less than six times a year, the threshold often taken by social scientists to qualify as a churchgoer (see Richter & Francis, 1998; Francis & Richter, 2007). These data demonstrated that 94% of the participants agreed that a cathedral is an ideal place for this type of installation, and 73% agreed that we need both science and religion in our lives.

Impact of the installation, *Space, the Universe and Everything*, on spiritual wellbeing was assessed by John Fisher's (2016) model that conceptualises spiritual wellbeing as reflected in the quality of relationships that individuals have with the self (the personal domain), with other people (the communal domain), with the world around them (the environmental domain), and with a personal or impersonal transcendent other (the transcendental domain). In response to the prompt, 'Spending time in Liverpool Cathedral has helped me to', 69% reported that it had helped them to feel less stressed about themselves (personal domain), 59% reported that it had helped them to feel better about their relationships with other people (communal domain), 57% reported that it had helped them to connect better with the natural world (environmental domain), and 36% reported that it had helped them to connect better with God.

### ***Advent son et lumiere***

It is against this background that Liverpool Cathedral has invested heavily in a pre-Christmas *son et lumiere* in 2022 and 2023. On both occasions the installation was billed 'The light before Christmas'; in 2022 the theme was 'The angels are coming', and in 2023 'The Manger'. On both occasions the iconic space of Liverpool Cathedral was conceptualised into



three zones and participants were invited to step into a journey of discovery as they progressed through these three zones. Entering from the ‘west’ end of the Cathedral, participants were welcomed into the huge ‘well’ to immerse themselves within the festive joy of the secular Christmas celebration, vibrant in light and sound. Here projected on the great west wall and window were emblems of Christmas wrapping paper, Christmas presents, Christmas festivities, and Santa’s sleigh speeding across the night sky.

From the ‘well’ participants were drawn into the ‘main space’ with a subtle change in temperament and tone as attention was drawn to the high altar and to images and sounds that began to resonate with the Christian narrative. Angels danced across the ceiling to the echo of familiar carols, and church bells called the faithful to worship. Finally, from the main space participants were shepherded into the ambulatory and walkways leading behind the high altar into the south transept, and then through the Rankin Porch. Here the lighting was subdued, and participants were invited to reflect on classic depictions of the nativity. Emerging eventually from the Rankin Porch back into the west end of the cathedral, participants were welcomed into a reflective space illuminated by flickering votive candles. Those so minded could light their own candle and reflect on accessible prayer cards and literatures. On leaving, participants were given a leaflet detailing the services on Christmas Eve and on Christmas Day.

### **Research question**

The two theoretical frameworks rooted in the power of metaphor and rooted in the power of implicit religion each raise expectations about the effect of an Advent *son et lumiere* on the participants in relation to the explicit Christian mission and ministry of the cathedral. The metaphor of ‘common ground and sacred space’ prompts the expectation that individuals who entered the common ground may there have encountered the sacred space, and having encountered the sacred space may wish to return for a more explicit encounter with the

Christian narrative. The theory of implicit religion that installations, events and exhibitions may soften the boundaries between the secular and the sacred also prompts the expectation that the encounter with implicit religion may prompt a more willing engagement with explicit religion.

The intention of the present study is to approach the research question from two directions. One direction invites a survey among those who attended the *son et lumiere* to explore their self-assessment of the impact of the installation on their perception of the cathedral. The other direction invites an examination of the trajectory of attendance figures at the Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services located within the cathedral. We begin by looking at the attendance figures.

### **Counting Christmas Eve and Christmas Day attendance**

- insert table 1 about here -

Table 1 presents the attendance figures recorded for the carol service(s) held on Christmas Eve, the Midnight Christmas Mass, the early morning Christmas Day Communion Service, and the mid-morning Christmas Day Choral Eucharist between 2007 and 2023. For the two five-year periods, 2007-2011 and 2012-2016, averages have been presented to smooth annual fluctuations. No figures were recorded for the Covid year 2020. Two features of this table merit comment.

In terms of the Christmas Eve Carol service, there was gradual growth from 2007 to 2016. In 2016 the attendance had risen to 2,200 and then in 2017 to 2,400. In 2018 the decision was made to provide two carol services at 14.00 and 16.00 in place of the one at 15.00. This additional provision was reflected by 56% growth in attendance with a further increase the following year. The build back after Covid in 2021 was slow. In 2022 a third carol service was added at 11.00 and attendance was almost back to the 2019 figure. Then in 2023 there was a 21% uplift on the 2019 pre-Covid figure.

In terms of the midnight Mass and the Christmas Day Choral Eucharist, the uplift on the previous year is considerable. The Midnight Mass attendance was up by 100% and the Christmas Day Choral Eucharist attendance by 58%. The uplift on the 2019 pre-Covid figure was 73% for the Midnight Mass and 26% for the Christmas Day Choral Eucharist.

These increases in attendance cannot be causally attributed to the experience of the *son et lumiere*, but the coincidence is certainly worth noting. We now turn attention to the survey among the participants attending the *son et lumiere*.

### **Surveying participants at the *son et lumiere***

Building on the initial survey conducted by Kirby, Francis, and Village (2023) among the participants attending the Luxmuralis *son et lumiere* installation, *Space, the Universe and Everything* in Liverpool Cathedral in February 2022, further surveys were conducted among two pre-Christmas *son et lumiere* also created by Luxmuralis, hosted in Liverpool Cathedral between 2 and 9 December 2022 (*The angels are coming*) and (between 1 and 8 December 2023 (*The Manger*)). In 2022, 691 individuals responded to this part of the survey, of whom 81% were female; 25% were under fifty, 27% in their fifties, 32% in their sixties, and 15% were aged seventy or above; 20% identified as weekly churchgoers, with 33% never attending and 30% attending less than six times a year. In 2023, 461 individuals responded to this part of the survey, of whom 78% were female; 24% were under fifty, 25% in their fifties, 34% in their sixties, and 17% were aged seventy or above; 18% identified as weekly churchgoers, with 40% never attending and 28% attending less than six times a year.

- insert table 2 about here -

While the surveys conducted at these pre-Christmas *son et lumiere* were designed to address a number of specific research questions (see McKenna, Francis, Village, & Stewart, 2024; Village & Francis, in press), the aspect of these surveys relevant for the present paper concerns inviting the participants to assess the impact of the installation on their personal

evaluation of the religious significance of Christmas. They were invited to rate a number of items on a five-point scale: much less (1), less (2), same (3), more (4), much more (5). Three of these items are presented in table 2 with less and much less collapsed into one category (less) and with more and much more collapsed into one category (more). These data demonstrate that in 2022 48% of the participants considered that the experience of the *son et lumiere* had increased their likelihood of attending a carol service in the Cathedral, and so did 39% in 2023. In 2022 22% of the participants considered that the experience of the *son et lumiere* had increased their likelihood of attending church on Christmas Eve/Day, and so did 18% in 2023. The greater impact of the experience in 2022 may be traced to a more powerful experience orchestrated that year in the third zone of the installation within the ambulatory, walkways, and the Rankin Porch.

These affirmations of increased intention to attend cannot be causally connected with the observed increases in attendance, but the coincidence is certainly worth noting.

### **Conclusion**

The present study set out to test the thesis that innovative cathedral installations may soften the boundaries between common ground and sacred space, perhaps especially at Christmas time when residual memory of the Christian narrative may be easier to access. The installation at Liverpool Cathedral by Luxmuralis privileged the theme ‘The Light before Christmas’ and skilfully took participants on an adventure, beginning with the secular celebration of Santa’s sleigh crossing the night sky and reaching the climax with classic images of the nativity and rank on rank of votive candles.

The thesis was tested by two pieces of data. On the one hand, a survey among participants at the *son et lumiere* revealed that over two-fifths of the participants in the survey felt that the experience had increased their intention to attend a carol service in the Cathedral, and one fifth felt that the experience had increased their intention to attend a service on

Christmas Eve/Day. On the other hand, comparison of attendance figures on Christmas Eve/Day in the Cathedral recorded in 2023 with those recorded before Covid in 2019 revealed an uplift of 21% attending Carol Services (from 3,910 to 4,749) and an uplift of 73% attending Midnight Mass (from 714 to 1,232). The current research does not allow these two pieces of data to be causally linked, but the coincidence is worth noting.

There are three limitations with the present research that can be addressed by future research (funding permitting). First, the proportion of participants attending the *son et lumiere* and captured by the survey was small; future research could extend this. Second, to complete the picture we would have needed a survey of those attending the Christmas Eve carol services, the Midnight Mass, and the Christmas Day Choral Eucharist. Such a survey was conducted in 2019 among participants attending the Christmas Eve carol services with 1,231 responses, and could be repeated (Francis, Jones, McKenna, Pike, & Williams, 2021). Third, we need to be able to compare Christmas Eve/Day attendance trends in other cathedrals. The most recent report of *Cathedral Statistics 2022* (Brazemore & Eames, 2024) provides aggregated Christmas attendance from 2012 to 2022 (p. 28), so it may still be some time before the national picture for Christmas 2023 becomes available.

There may also be some practical implications for resourcing ministry and mission in the Church of England arising from these research findings, and as a consequence the following questions may be worth pursuing:

1. What is the missional value of softening the boundaries between common ground and sacred space at Christmas time?
2. Building on Bishop David Walker's (2007) insights in *God's belongers*, how missional is the capacity of cathedrals to draw people to God through place, events, and people?

3. What kind of resources would cathedrals need to fulfil their potentials as Flagships, Beacons, and Shop Windows for the Church of England?

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Table 1

*Attendance on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day*

	Carol services Christmas Eve	Midnight Mass	Early Communion	Christmas Day
2007-2011 av	1410	789	3	798
2012-2016 av	1838	745	6	640
2017	2400	841	6	646
2018	3750	730	8	800
2019	3910	714	5	723
2021	1647	401	5	493
2022	3150	600	13	575
2023	4749	1232	16	910

Table 2

*Perceived impact of the son et lumiere*

	2022			2023		
	Less %	Same %	More %	Less %	Same %	More %
Keeping Christmas as a religious festival	2	61	37	3	72	26
Attending church on Christmas Eve/Day	4	74	22	2	79	18
Attending a carol service in the Cathedral	2	50	48	3	58	39

Note: N (2022) = 691; N (2023) = 464