
“Bog off Dog Breath! You’re Talking Pants!” Swearing as Witness Evangelism in Student Evangelical Groups

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Abstract: It has been widely noted that formerly taboo sexual swearing is an increasing part of contemporary popular culture, especially among the young. It has equally been observed that evangelical Christians (or at least evangelical Christian students) tend to swear in an idiosyncratic way (e.g., Bramadat 2000), though this has not been looked at in depth. This article will examine the ways in which two evangelical student groups use swearing as part of their “witness evangelism.” Drawing upon fieldwork, as well as research by Douglas (1966), McEnery (2006), Reiss (2000) and Stark (1996), it will argue that the groups’ use of swearing leads to successful evangelism because it gives the group a sense of status in broader society—but also clear boundaries in relation to that society—while maintaining the cultural heritage of those that the groups are attempting to evangelise. Moreover, it will suggest that it helps to create social bonds, within certain parameters, and provides a means of talking about and expressing Christianity and thus “witnessing.”

Introduction

[1] When I was an undergraduate at Durham University in the year 2000, one member of the university’s evangelical student society—the Christian Union—told me to “Bog off dog breath! You’re talking pants!” during a Church History lecture.¹ I think I was jokingly insulting her in some way but what was surprising, even though she was being light-hearted, was that she did not swear. A non-Christian, British student would almost certainly have said, “Bugger off!” or even “Fuck off!” but in an amusing tone of voice. Swearing—and particularly sexually based swearing—has become increasingly common in recent decades, at least in the anglophone world (e.g., McEnery 2006). It has moved from being highly taboo fifty years ago to being a common occurrence, with Australian judges ruling variously that the phrase “Fuck off!” is not really offensive and nor was it was contempt of court for a defendant to call a judge a “wanker”² (Ludowyk 2001). The same change in attitudes to sexual swearing in particular has been noted in other English speaking countries, especially Britain, and in many non-English-speaking European countries as well,³ especially among younger and also less educated people (see for example Martin 1981, McEnery and Xiao 2003). Certainly in a British context, it is notable that certain groups tend still not to swear in this way despite swearing being common among their peers. Most obviously, fieldworkers who have spent time with evangelical Christians—in many cases within the context of university evangelical groups—have noted, albeit in passing, that there is a tendency for members, unlike their fellow students, to not swear (Bruce 1978, Helander 1986, Bramadat 2000). While arguing that Christian students swear idiosyncratically and not strongly, this article will develop these observations and draw upon fieldwork with two British evangelical student groups to examine the place of swearing in their attempts to evangelise—to persuade “non-Christian” students to “convert” and join their group.

[2] The article will argue that swearing—or its absence—is a significant part of the group’s “witness” (evangelical activity) both from an “emic” (insider) and “etic” (outsider) perspective.⁴ From the anthropologist’s perspective, it will argue, drawing upon Mary Douglas (1966), that

the group's infrequent and mild use of swearing makes it appear to be "pure" and even superior, at least in a certain sense, rendering it highly attractive to students searching for a sense of identity. Moreover, it will argue, drawing upon McEnery (2006), that the absence of strong swearing—and the forms of swearing employed—is attractive because it is, historically, a significant dimension to British middle-class identity; a means by which middle-class status is reassured and expressed. In this regard, difficulties with Douglas's power model, such as the differences between perception and reality with regard to the supposedly powerful, will be discussed. As a part of this analysis, it will be argued that swearing regulation is also something that makes the group appear highly differentiated and structured, something which again will be argued to be attractive to potential converts. Finally, the way that swearing is used in the groups means that a balance is maintained between being differentiated and maintaining one's cultural heritage. The article will first examine changing attitudes to swearing and the nature of swearing. It will then examine social class in the evangelical groups studied, Douglas's Purity Rule, McEnery's discussion of the development of British swearing and also other factors that render an evangelical group attractive to potential converts. Thereafter, it will look at the groups and their context and, drawing upon detailed participant observation fieldwork, examine the place of swearing in their evangelical activity.

What is Swearing?

[3] Edmund Leach argues that swearing relates to the "taboo," which is anything which challenges order within a system of meaning. Hence, to give one example, issues relating to excretion challenge a system of order because the very nature of excretion brings into question the issue of precisely where we are able to draw the distinguishing line between ourselves as separate beings and the rest of the world (Leach 1964, 28). Equally, Douglas (Douglas 1966) has argued that the taboo is that which is incongruous in a system of categories. Sexual parts of the body are taboo because they challenge the division between the self and the other. Leach highlights three kinds of swearing each of which would appear to relate to a certain taboo. These types are: Dirty Words which relate to sex and excretion; Blasphemy and Profanity and finally Animal Abuse (28). Blasphemy is seen as taboo because it challenges the distinction between God and human while animal abuse is seen as taboo because it portrays a person as an animal, rendering them anomalous.⁵ One possible difficulty with these three categories is the implicit blurring of "blasphemy" and "profanity." McEnery (2006, 65) distinguishes "blasphemy" from "swearing." The former is language that might be perceived as insulting to the accepted religion while "profanity"—such as shouting, "Jesus Christ!"—comes under the purview of swearing and is not specifically blasphemous.⁶ Also, McEnery has examined the way in which swear-words can evolve and become, essentially, strong imagery rather than an insult intended literally (49). Indeed, he speculates about whether or not a swear-word is more offensive if meant literally—as in "I fucked her!"—than as an image, as in "Fuck off!" To a great extent, British swearing conforms to the latter model and this is notably true of words such as "bastard."

[4] Other analyses of swearing such as Montagu (1967) Hughes (1991) and, as noted, McEnery (2006) have agreed that swearing relates to that which is taboo. Hughes points out that there appears to be a relationship between the changing nature of societal taboo and the perceived strength of a given swearword. Thus, according to Hughes, religious swearing, in an English context, was particularly offensive at the time of Chaucer while sexual and bodily swearing—including the word "cunt"—was considerably less so. By the nineteenth century the taboos had changed and so had the degree to which the related words were considered offensive. Equally, McEnery notes in passing that the "the word fuck surged in popularity" during the Victorian era (2006, 62). It has been widely argued that words such as "fuck" and to a lesser extent "cunt" have become far less offensive as the sexual taboo has lessened (McEnery and Xiao 2004). As such, they are heard more and more frequently, at least in the UK, and this has not gone un-

noticed in the British media. Right-wing newspapers have been noting the apparent increasing acceptability of sexual swearing since the early 1990s.⁷ A *Daily Telegraph* article in 1991 (Anon 1991) reported on the sharp rise in swearing on television while by 2001 *The Times* (Anon. 2001) was reporting that swearing on television was at its highest ever level. In 2002, a *Daily Mail* correspondent argued that swearing was a “sickness” in British society and commented that “to be boorish is cutting edge and contemporary” (Phillips 2002). Newspapers have cited many examples of the acceptability of swearing such as the Australian judges discussed above but also, in Britain, a Scottish judge insisting that an Edinburgh man charged with “breach of the peace” for telling a policeman to “Fuck off!” was merely “using the language of his generation” (Margolis 2002). The word has become so acceptable in the UK that French Connection—the clothing company—re-launched themselves in Britain as “FCUK” (French Connection UK) in 1997 (Teather 2006) and the Conservative Party’s youth wing adopted a very similar name, CFUK (Conservative Future UK), until it was threatened with litigation by French Connection themselves⁸ (Gold 2004).

[5] During the same period, scholars such as McEnery and Ludowyk have both observed that as words such as “fuck” (those relating to sex) have become far more acceptable, the use of terms which are not “Politically Correct”—those which relate to the disabled and particularly to race—have become more taboo.⁹ This, they argue, has paralleled the rise in “Political Correctness” which scholars such as Ellis have maintained is an ideology which, effectively, deifies supposedly suppressed racial and lifestyle minorities just as Communism did the industrial working class. (See, for example, Ellis 2005).¹⁰ Thus, according to Ludowyk, the word “nigger”¹¹ was the fifteenth most offensive word according to a 1991 British Attitudes survey. By 1998, it was the fifth most offensive word. In 1999, it was the third most offensive word, perceived as more offensive than “fuck.” Over the same period, other racial epithets such as “Paki” (a term used in Britain to refer to a person from Southern Asia although derived from “Pakistani”) had equally increased in terms of their perceived offensiveness as had terms with regard to the disabled—such as “spastic” and “retard.” Again, this change has been widely remarked upon in the British press. Jonathon Margolis interviewed Oxford University’s Professor of Language in *The Guardian* (Margolis 2002) and she argued that “nigger” was now more offensive in the UK than “fuck” or “cunt,” which is traditionally the most offensive word in British English. As already noted, this kind of language is traditionally more popular among the less educated but it is moving outside that grouping (McEnery 2006).

Class, Gender and Context

[6] Naturally, attitudes to what is offensive are likely to change according to a variety of factors such as class, age and, of course, religion. Robert Graves argued in the late 1920s that the word “bastard” was highly offensive among the working-class because it was “believable” that the one being insulted might well be illegitimate. However, “bugger” (homosexual) was not offensive because it was unlikely that anyone would believe that the working class person in question was genuinely homosexual. By contrast, among the aristocracy, “bastard” was not especially offensive because most aristocrats had lengthy family histories but “bugger” was far more likely to be believed because such activity was seen as rife at the kind of schools attended by the aristocracy (Graves 1936). Thus, developing Leach, swearing might be divided into sexual, bodily (“Dirty Words”), animal abuse, religious and finally non-PC with the latter now appearing to be the most offensive in a British context, at least in certain cases. Although it might be argued, as Ellis does, that Political Correctness, like Christianity, is simply an ideology. Thus, the final category should be “religious” in the broad sense of the word to mean “ideology.”

[7] Paralleling swearing is what Hughes has termed “disguised swearing” (Hughes 1991, 12). Hughes notes that there are many words which are used in place of a swear-word, perhaps as a way of venting frustration without actually swearing. Generally, they sound like the original

swear-word. Thus, “twat” (a British term meaning “vagina” and by extension “idiot”) becomes “twit,” “fuck” becomes “flip,” “shit” becomes “shite” or even “sugar.” Many other examples might be cited such as the use in American English of “dang” in place of “damn.” The word is very clearly related to the original but is disguised in order to be socially acceptable. Some disguised swear-words discussed by Hughes work in terms of rhyming slang as in “berk” (British English for “idiot”) comes from “Berkley’s Hunt—“cunt.” Equally, some disguised swear-words relate vaguely to something taboo. A notable example, which I found in both evangelical groups that I will discuss, was to term something that did not work or was not particularly good as “pants” (used in British English to mean “underpants”) which I would argue have vague associations with the private parts and sex. I accept that, in a sense, this term is not disguised swearing because it does not disguise a specific word in the sense that “Bog off!” disguises “Bugger off!” But at the same time, it is used in place of a stronger term—such as “crap” or “shit”—and it is vaguely related to the sexual/excretory parts of the body, words relating to which it replaces. In this circumlocutory way, it can be seen as a kind of disguised version of “shit,” for example.

[8] It has also been noted not only that the offensiveness of certain terms are class contingent but that different social classes tend to swear in different ways. Indeed, research in this area has yielded some apparently surprising results. McEnery (2006, 48) has observed that members of the lowest social class (DE) swear the most while members of the highest social class (AB) swear the least. Superficially, swearing decreases the higher one moves up the social scale, which would be congruous with Douglas’s Purity Rule, which will be discussed below. However, the superficial correlation hides something more complicated. The frequency of *strong* swear-words among ABs is actually higher than among the category one place down, C1s, or the middle-class, who swear more but using milder words. McEnery argues that this reflects “hyper-correction” on the part of the “lower-middle-class.” They imitate what they perceive to be AB speech and do it to such an extent that they eliminate stronger swear-words.¹² My problem with McEnery’s analysis is that he merges together different social classes. It would be fascinating to see, for example, what the swearing differences are between classes “A” and “B,” between the upper-class and the upper-middle-class. It may well be that that As employ stronger swear-words than Bs. Following Argyle (1994), I think it is probably more useful to distinguish between the middle-middle-class—or “lower professionals” such as school teachers and nurses and the lower-middle-class of, essentially, office workers and so forth. Moreover, I would take issue with the usefulness of this purely economic model. Kate Fox (2004) notes that, in the UK, wealth and profession are only aspects of class. She contends that you are born into your class as a matter of identity—expressed in speech as a pertinent example. Thus, it is possible to be a “working-class doctor” or an “upper-class school teacher.” Most of those who I interviewed, in the Christian Unions, were from either “higher professional” or “lower professional” backgrounds with very small numbers being upper-class or lower-middle, according to Argyle’s model. But McEnery does at least make a very interesting point—that not using strong swear-words can be understood as a “middle-class” play for status. And as such, those further from the centre of power, in Douglas’s terms, can be “purer,” in a certain sense at least, in order to assert superiority. Fox points out that this is necessary because the middle-classes are insecure in their identity and therefore strive to imitate the higher social class. The upper class, according to Fox, are not insecure to the same extent.

[9] McEnery also notes gender related differences in swearing (2006, 36). Women swear differently from men, find different words more offensive and so forth, but they do not appear to swear less than men as has been argued elsewhere (e.g., Trudgill 1974). Many researchers such as Hughes (1992), de Klerk (1992) and Gordon (1993) have concurred on this point. In an article dedicated to this subject, Karyn Stapleton (2004) has examined a mixed-gender group of Irish drinking friends. She notes the view that swearing is “aggressive” and that, as women are expected to play a non-aggressive role, swearing is especially taboo for them. In a sense, it can

be seen to undermine the societal hierarchy (22), a point which McEnery examines in depth more broadly and which will be discussed below. Stapleton argues, moreover, that the manner and extent that a woman swears is a way of negotiating and expressing a gender-based identity (23). In a sense, this is not entirely dissimilar from that which I will note Evangelical Christian students to do. Stapleton contextualises her analysis within the “Community of Practice” model, whereby swearing, for example, is negotiated through the expectations of the community and the speaker’s place and desired role within it (23). She observes that women and men differ with regard to how offensive certain words are and the regularity with which they use them (26). Their reasons for using them also differ with a large portion of women claiming to use them “to show intimacy, trust” and no men identifying this motivation (28). Equally, their reasons for avoiding certain words differ. However, this behaviour is seen as a way of negotiating an acceptable—to others and themselves—identity within a specific community of practice.

Why Swearing?

[10] As stated, this article will examine the ways in which swearing among certain evangelical groups relates to the success of their evangelism. Before examining these groups or the mainly anthropological method that will be employed, I think it would be useful to explain why this article has chosen to focus on swearing. The Christian Unions, with which I worked, frequently talked about “witness evangelism.” This meant that one had to spread evangelical Christianity not merely through “preaching the Word of God” but also through one’s behaviour. Obviously, the kind of swearing employed is just one example of such “witness evangelism.” One might equally examine the kind of clothing worn (see Dutton 2005) or, indeed, attitudes to alcoholic drink (Francis *et al.* 1999) or even what kind of films or plays to watch (Goodhew 2003). I have chosen to focus on swearing for a number of reasons. First, as I will explain in more detail below, many CU members justified not swearing as a form of evangelism. They did not do this, at least not at first nor in so large numbers, with regard to clothing for example. As such, the kind of swearing used was a form of evangelism both from an emic and an etic perspective.

[11] Secondly, differences with regard to the kind of clothing worn were generally quite subtle. Female members, for example, would not wear the slightly revealing fashions—such as crop-tops with hipsters—that are currently fashionable. Equally, differences in alcoholic consumption were subtle. Male members of both groups were almost never teetotal. But they might have two pints of beer where their non-Christian friend might have five. However, swearing was a conspicuous difference and a number of members even commented that they would be asked by non-members why they did not swear. They used this as a means to engage in evangelical activity. Thus, again I think swearing is the most pertinent form of witness evangelism to examine. My final reason is simply with regard to making a contribution to academic knowledge. As stated, a number of researchers with Christian Unions have noted that members tend either not to swear or to swear in a somewhat idiosyncratic way (Bramadat 2000) These observations were made in the context of examinations of evangelistic method. I think that they are worth developing and that such a contribution develops our understanding of how such groups reflect and deal with a certain aspect of popular culture.

Evangelical Groups

[12] Before examining the factors that make groups attractive, it would be useful to define precisely what an evangelical group is. This article will focus on the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (OICCU) and the Aberdeen University Christian Union (AUCU). It will draw upon participant observation fieldwork with these groups. In both cases, they are the largest evangelical groups at their universities with, according to my own fieldwork, 250 and 170 members respectively. In both cases, a balanced sample of 25 members were interviewed in detail about various issues, including their attitudes towards swearing, upon which this article will focus. In

both cases, 25 further members were surveyed. In the case of both groups, the fieldwork was conducted over two academic terms between September 2002 and March 2004. It involved attending a large number of their meetings as a participant observer and talking to a large number of members in semi-structured interviews.¹³ Both groups are student societies which students at the respective universities are welcome to join as long as they sign the group's "Declaration of Faith." The two groups regularly organise events for their members—twice weekly prayer, worship and speaker meetings for AUCU and similar meetings at least four times a week for OICCU. In addition, AUCU had outreach meetings a couple of times a term and a "Mission Week" once a year. OICCU had at least one outreach meeting a week as well as other outreach events and the yearly "Mission Week."¹⁴

[13] Both groups refer to themselves as "evangelical Christians" and both are affiliated with the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF) and, more broadly, with the International Federation of Evangelical Students. This information is made quite clear on their websites. (AUCU 2005; OICCU 2005). According to James Barr, evangelicals tend to be "conservative" or "fundamentalist" in their understanding of Christian doctrine and with regard to lifestyle ethics. They are, of course, Protestant (Barr 1977). In his historical discussion of evangelicalism, Bebbington makes precisely the same points (Bebbington 1989). Indeed, for Barr, to a certain extent, there is little distinction between "evangelicalism" and "fundamentalism." UCCF has a Declaration of Faith which all those who wish to join a CU must sign that they agree with. According to this declaration, the Bible is "inerrant ... as originally understood." Thus, there is a heavy implication that belief in "evolution" is not acceptable among group members. The Bible is also seen as a guide for how to live here and now, which implies that the lifestyle ethics that it is seen to advocate in the view of evangelical Christians are appropriate in the modern world. The declaration also declares a literal belief in doctrines that some Christians might reject such as Hell for non-believers. Apart from this declaration, UCCF makes clear that the purpose of a CU is to create a "witnessing community on campus" and make Christianity and God known to Non-Christian Students (UCCF). Thus, its purpose is, in essence, to persuade non-Christians to become Christians and to create a community for those who are already Christians. Successful evangelism involves persuading others to become Christians and maintaining those that already are. I entirely appreciate that this summary of evangelicalism is undoubtedly simplistic. It overlooks disputes within evangelicalism, such as the appropriateness of Charismatic worship and so forth.¹⁵ There is also a movement known as "Post-Evangelicalism" which, though evangelical, is more "liberal," particularly with regard to lifestyle (see Tomlinson 1998). But as a general summary, I think it is useful.¹⁶

[14] There were, however, differences between the degree of conservatism in the two groups. All of those whom I interviewed from both AUCU and OICCU claimed to believe in Hell and to believe that non-Christians would go to Hell. All of those to whom I spoke claimed to believe in the Devil as an actual force in the world. Also, 23/25 in AUCU and 24/25 in OICCU rejected Evolutionary Theory and all believed in the reality of doctrines such as the Resurrection. In OICCU, all thought it was acceptable for Christians to drink alcohol but none to become drunk. Only one felt it was acceptable for Christians to smoke, only one felt it was acceptable to date a non-Christian and none felt it acceptable to take drugs of any kind. All felt premarital sex was unacceptable. In AUCU, the results in relation to drinking and sex were the same. But two felt it was acceptable for Christians to smoke, two would date a non-Christian and none would take drugs.

[15] These are, of course, very small differences but I note them because it would be oversimplifying the beliefs and practice of the groups to ignore them. Moreover, there were slight differences in terms of the class composition of these groups, following Argyle's model, but both were broadly middle class and, indeed, were over-representative of the university in terms of being from "lower professional" backgrounds.

Class and the Christian Unions

[16] I surveyed twenty-five OICCU members. Of this number ten had attended independent schools (three of which had attended public schools, where they boarded) while the other fifteen had attended state schools; in all but three cases these were Comprehensives. As such, state school students would appear to be over-represented in OICCU as fifty percent of Oxford students were from these kinds of school at the time. The same surveys indicated that the overwhelming majority were from backgrounds that Argyle would term “professional.” However, there was a distinction between “higher professionals” and “lower professionals” and, to a great extent, this distinction was paralleled in terms of whether the student had attended state or private school. Of the ten OICCU sample members who had attended independent schools, all of the parental professions were at least “higher professional.” They included three barristers, two architects, a veterinary surgeon and a hospital consultant. Among those from state schools there were a very large number of students whose parents’ main profession was “school teacher,” one of the main examples cited by Argyle (2004) of a “lower professional.” Two cited “Civil Engineer” as the main parental profession. There were a very small number, indeed, that might not fit into this class such as one whose father was a “bookseller.” There were a small number of state school pupils whose parents were, it might be argued, “higher professionals.” There was one whose father was an architect and one whose father was a solicitor but, I would submit, a social difference between those at state and private schools can be noted from these results. OICCU was mainly “middle class.” The same was true, to a lesser extent, in AUCU. The majority of the AUCU sample were from backgrounds that were either higher or lower professional. Three students had attended private schools. One student’s father was simply the headmaster of the private school that he had attended. The other two were an English student, whose father was a hospital consultant and a Scottish student whose father was an architect. Certainly, the latter two would be defined as higher professionals. However, there was a large minority from Northern Ireland where the education system is different from the rest of the UK and where there are a large number of Grammar Schools (state schools that pupils must pass an exam to attend of which there are very few in the rest of the UK) and very few private schools. The four Northern Irish students in the sample noted parental professions as General Practitioner, Shop Manager, Dairy Farmer and Teacher. All had attended Grammar Schools. The three English students from Comprehensive schools noted parental profession as Coach Driver, Health and Safety Officer and Computer Programmer. The Scottish students, from Comprehensives, involved the children of three ministers, five teachers, a bank clerk, a bus driver and a General Practitioner. Thus, in general, those who had been to state schools were from lower professional backgrounds or, in some cases, white-collar or, as in a coach driver, a working-class background. The very small number that had been to private schools, apart from the anomalous headmaster’s son, were from higher professional backgrounds. Some children of higher professionals can be seen in the state school category but, in general as with Oxford, a distinction can be noted.

Factors that Make Evangelical Groups Attractive

[17] There are a number of factors which various researchers agree make a religious group attractive. One factor that has been noted again and again is that group membership makes them feel in some sense superior to outsiders: only members will go to Heaven, only members truly understand the nature of life and so forth. This point has been made by Reiss who has provided a list of factors that make religious groups—and particularly proselytising groups—attractive to outsiders. Stark (1996) has composed a very similar list of which Reiss’s is a slight development. Some of these factors are basic animal desires such as food, romance and exercise. However, of greater interest to this article is Reiss’ observation that a religious group is more attractive than another if it provides the potential member with honour, order and status within the broader

society. As swearing relates to taboo and order, I think it would be useful to examine precisely how status is seen to operate through discussions of taboo language and behaviour.

[18] Swearing is generally seen to relate to the “taboo” and anthropologists such as Leach have argued that that which is taboo is, essentially, “dirt” or “disorder” because it defies a system of categories. Mary Douglas has made the same point, arguing that the taboo is disorder. However, she uses this to present a model of the nature of society as it relates to dirt and disorder (Douglas 1966). Douglas presents what she calls the Purity Rule. She argues that society—or the power of society—can be understood as a series of concentric circles. The central circle is the most powerful person, or group of people, in that society. The next circle out is slightly less powerful until we reach the outer circle which is the least powerful, usually the working-class. Douglas maintains that the closer a person is to the power centre of society the greater the control society exerts over that person’s body in terms of purity. Thus, the closer one is to the power centre, the purer one must be in one’s behaviour. To give an example in a British context, it would be perfectly acceptable for a British taxi driver to go out to a pub on a Saturday night and get drunk and thus exhibit a lack of self-control, something that might be seen as unclean. It would be unacceptable, however, for the Queen to do this because she is at the centre, or near the centre, of societal power. As such, she has to be controlled in her behaviour, at least within certain boundaries. Equally, it might be argued that it would be unacceptable for the Queen to use a strong swear-word as these relate to something that is taboo and therefore, following Douglas’s rule, unclean.

[19] The difficulty with Douglas’s model is that it appears to ignore different kinds of power and assume a relatively simple model of societal structure. Put simply, there are different kinds of power in a complex society and different people are the most powerful in different circumstances. Symbolically, the Queen is the most powerful person in the UK and this power is expressed in the theatre of the State Opening of Parliament for example. Moreover, the office that she holds is accepted as the supreme office. In that sense, she is the central circle in Douglas’s model. However, it is generally accepted that the Prime Minister is actually in charge. He or she is at the central circle in most other circumstances and, indeed, part of this relates to the office s/he holds. It could possibly be argued that celebrities, rather than political figures, are the most idolised, and thus most important, people in contemporary society. Indeed, it could be argued that people such as Ozzie Osbourne are allowed to engage in scandalous behaviour *because* they are at the centre of society and, therefore, above the rules as it were. But it might be countered that such celebrities effectively play the role of jester, or even conceivably shaman, in modern society and are given a certain degree of licence in their behaviour for this reason. But then, it could be submitted that, in a sense, a shaman is the most powerful person in a tribe and can often be noted to be above the rules of acceptable behaviour. This point has been made by Jakobsen (1999) in relation to traditional Greenlandic Shamans, for example. Moreover, if the Queen were to go and listen to a sermon by a vicar—and participate in the symbolic discourse of the service—it could possibly be maintained that in that narrow set of circumstances the vicar occupies the central circle. Thus, in assessing the Christian Unions and their use of swearing, it will be argued that the kind of swearing employed makes the CU seem close to the centre of society in a certain sense; it gives them some kind of moral superiority. However, it could be argued that in another sense, such swearing expresses the group’s cultural heritage and social aspirations and demonstrates that, in a social class sense, they are not quite so close to Douglas’s central circle.

[20] McEnery (2006) effectively argues that the taboo on swearing, in a British context, is a middle-class phenomenon. We have already discussed the way that, in his analysis, the middle-class appear to use strong swear-words less than the upper class and they also use more

mild swear-words which, he argues, is because they believe that the ABs do this (49). McEnery argues that swearing was not especially taboo in England until the rise of the middle-class. Not swearing and rendering swearing taboo, he submits, was a way for the middle class to assert moral superiority over the upper-class and distinguish themselves from the working-class (12).¹⁷ Hence, swearing gradually became a sign, in the UK, of not being middle class and became taboo. McEnery argues that this taboo came about through a series of “Moral Panics” over swearing, most notably from the eighteenth century onwards and then in the 1960s, led by Mary Whitehouse and the Viewers and Listeners Association (VALA) (3). These “Moral Panics”—alarmist debates and campaigns about the state of society which scapegoated, in these instances, swearing—are, he maintains, the historical reason why swearing is still taboo in the UK. McEnery notes that in the Elizabethan period, swearing was not really taboo and was simply used as a convenient means to suppress politically sensitive material (81). Swearing gradually became taboo with the rise of the middle class. Interestingly, with regard to the Mary Whitehouse campaign, McEnery presents a case for the view that even here, while swearing was objected to, challenging the social system by means of swearing was objected to more. He notes that VALA objected strongly to the swearing in the 1960s/1970s sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part* but not especially to that in the sitcom *Steptoe and Son*. This, McEnery argues, is because the latter maintained the social order by having the working-class swearing but also showing deference to the social order. By contrast, *Till Death Us Do Part* challenges such notions as patriotism and conservatism by associating them with Alf Garnett, a character who frequently swears and is portrayed as bigoted. McEnery argues that this reaction is congruous with a view whereby swearing in the UK is indicative, due to the Moral Panic of the eighteenth century, of the unsuitability of a person to have power and authority, a view asserted and accepted by the middle-class (128). Thus, swearing can act as a challenge to the established order—and the power of the middle class whose superiority is indicated by their lack of swearing. As such, it can be argued that while Douglas’s model may oversimplify the issue, not swearing is an issue of social status among middle-class British people even if they believe, incorrectly, that they are imitating the upper-class by not swearing. Of course, this does not entirely undermine Douglas’s model but it complicates it because those who are not at the power centre seem to imitate those who are—who may be highly controlled—but in an exaggerated way, rendering them even more controlled than their superiors, in a moral sense. However, this relates to only one dimension—swearing, and possibly accent. There may be numerous other ways in which the upper-class express greater control to distinguish themselves from the middle class, for example in carefulness about other forms of language. Fox argues that the upper class strenuously avoid “middle-class words” like “toilet,” “pardon?” “dinner” and “dessert” in favour of “lavatory,” “what?” ‘supper’ and “pudding” (76–79). They also show off their status more subtly by, for example, displaying awards in the downstairs loo rather than in the hall (117).

[21] However, another factor that is perhaps slightly distinct from honour and status is that of order. According to Reiss’s model, an ordered religious group—whether in terms of offering an ideology or a clear group structure—is particularly attractive. Research into the issue of conversion would appear to substantiate this point. Experts on conversion such as James (James 1952, 149), Sargent (Sargent 1997, 85) and Rambo (1993, 17) all find that a person is more likely to have a conversion experience—and thus join a religious organisation—during a time of great distress and that this will often be caused by a period of change and disorder. In this analysis, I will be focussing on university evangelical groups. A number of scholars have noted that university (in many cases) is a time of considerable change which may cause certain students to become distressed. This point has been made by Conn (Conn 1986, 26) who argues that the age of undergraduates and their environment leads to difficult existential questions, Fisher (Fisher 1994, 41) who argues that university, because it is a time of change, is often deeply stressful, and Morris (1969) who argues that universities can be compared to brutal tribal initiation rituals.

Research, looking at university as a liminal (transitional) phase has demonstrated that, when taking all other factors into account, the more liminal university is, the higher the proportion of evangelical group members who have converted to Christianity while at university (Dutton 2005 and 2006a). This would seem to imply, following Lewis, that a highly stressful situation of change will tend to lead to conversion.¹⁸ Thus, the issue of order, in a disordered period or situation, is a highly significant factor in a religious group's success and will also be examined below.

[22] Reiss also points out that a successful proselytising group must—in addition to providing order—allow group members to maintain their cultural heritage—their identity in terms of nationality, social class and so forth—at least to some extent. Naturally, to some extent the group is likely to be differentiated and distinct from the surrounding culture but it must, effectively, maintain the appropriate balance in this regard. Stark makes a similar point, arguing that a key factor is that the religious group is neither “too strict nor too lax” (Stark 144). The success of various religious groups has been examined in terms of their ability to blend their own ideas with the existing culture. This can be noted in terms of the synthesis of Christianity with tribal beliefs and practices in parts of Africa, for example.¹⁹ As such, in examining the place of swearing in evangelism, it is these factors that will be drawn upon as they appear the most salient. I will argue the way in which the groups swear does indeed strike this important balance.

Conventional Swearing, Purity and Power

[23] The attitudes towards swearing in both groups were very interesting. At no point in any context did I observe OICCU students to swear in a conventional fashion. However, AUCU members were very occasionally noted to do so. When interviewed, almost all of those to whom I spoke in both groups claimed they would not use what we might term as conventional swear-words relating to sex or bodily functions or, indeed, blasphemous swearing. In the case of OICCU, this was twenty-four from a sample of twenty-five and in the case of AUCU it was twenty-two. A significant minority of group members mentioned the issue of witness and bodily cleanness with regard to not swearing conventionally. In relation to conventional swearing a number of justifications were given. Most gave non-religious explanations in the first instance. These included: “It’s disgusting,” “It’s lazy,” “because it’s rude,” “it’s offensive.” However many members of both groups also agreed that to use conventional swearing was simply “bad witness.” It was felt that most people found words such as “fuck” and “cunt” offensive at least to a degree and associated negative ideas with those who used such words. People who used words like that were “undesirables” or “riff raff” as one OICCU member put it. Both of these terms, in British English at least, refer to a person being, essentially, working class and, perhaps by extension, a person who is distant from the power centre of society. These views seem to reflect the middle-class perception, as discussed above, with regard to the kind of people who swear. As one OICCU member put it:

“I think it’s just lazy to swear like that. I don’t know, maybe I do occasionally but I shouldn’t ... Because it’s rude ... it’s offensive. I think a lot of OICCU members would be offended by it as well as many non-Christians. And, in all honesty, it’s just plain bad witness. I can’t say it’s particularly helpful, in all honesty.”

[24] Many commented specifically that the use of such words was “unhelpful” or “not particularly helpful.” Upon further discussion, I found that these remarks meant that swearing was “unhelpful” to the “witness” of the individual Christian and the CU more broadly. It was thus perceived as being unhelpful to evangelism. The idea of “bad witness”²⁰ here further allows us to note the relationship between group members and outsiders. It has been noted that a successful religious group will make a member feel powerful and give them status. I would argue that this, in essence, is what can be seen here. By not swearing in a conventional way, CU members demonstrate that they are purer than Non-Christians who generally do swear in a conventional

way. As such, to the outsider, they appear to be closer to the power centre of society, providing their members with status. Their behaviour makes the group seem—following Douglas at least—important, powerful and prestigious because it reflects the kind of behaviour that would be expected, at least by the middle class, among a powerful group. It also reflects perceived British middle class behaviour. According to the group's theology, they are indeed closer to the power centre of society. This power centre, from their perspective, is God and therefore in order to demonstrate how close they are to God, group members must be pure and this includes not using words like “cunt” and “fuck.” Of course, it is only a certain kind of power or purity, that of moral or behavioural purity or control, that the group is asserting. Many OICCU members, in my observation, essentially “lost control” during worship services, crying and shouting and so forth. (Indeed, this might be understood as a necessary balance when behaviour is otherwise so tightly controlled.) But this power can be seen as attractive, relating to the “power” of the Holy Spirit, in the group's view.²¹ Even from an emic perspective, not swearing conventionally is an important part of evangelism, hence it is “bad witness.” Moreover, a small number of members cited a specific Biblical passage in I Corinthians which they felt implied that they should not swear because they had to reflect the purity of God and so be purer than non-believers.²² Thus, I would argue that the absence of conventional swearing in both CUs is a form of evangelism. It demonstrates to the outsider that as an insider they will have status and power because group members behave as though they have status and power and, indeed, have it in their own theological terms. They behave, in this regard, in a supposedly very middle-class manner (or even perceived upper-class manner), thus associating themselves with power and asserting superiority. This, I think, is especially salient in the CUs which, in both cases, are mainly composed of a lower social class composition than the membership of the student body as a whole.

Profanity

[25] As noted, the ability to provide order and identity is also crucial in a successful religious group. I would argue that this can be seen not only in the way that CU members do not swear conventionally but also their avoidance of blasphemous swearing and their use of disguised swearing. Members of both AUCU and OICCU all appeared to express a strong objection to profanity. They variously stated that it was “disrespectful to God” and this view was expressed in various ways. They cited certain phrases which they would, therefore, never use such as “God damn it.” Equally, the word “damn” was itself rejected by a minority of CU members as being blasphemous though most, especially in Aberdeen, did not find the use of this word particularly offensive and did not necessarily associate it with “God damn it.” AUCU and OICCU members would also never “take the Lord's name in vain” by exclaiming His name out of frustration such as by shouting, “Jesus!” or “For God's sake!” All members were, however, happy to make exclamations such as “Heavens above” or “Heavens” because they did not regard this as anything like swearing. By contrast, most members claimed that they would not say “Bloody Hell,” as it was profanity, but “Hell's Bells!” was theoretically acceptable in both groups. In fact, most regarded such phrases as simply being comical. Many commented, however, that they felt this phrase was old-fashioned and they “wouldn't use it anyway” and this was also true of “Heavens!” But they were not prepared to use “Jesus” as an exclamation of surprise, rather than frustration, as this was still perceived to be “taking the Lord's name in vain.” As one AUCU member put it:

I really don't like swearing like that. It's offensive to God, basically, to take His name in vain. It's also just lazy ... but I really don't like it. In fact, I find that kind of swearing more offensive, probably, than the “F-word” or whatever ... I'd never use words like that, not even on my own.

A handful of members in both groups commented that they would also not say the word “bloody” because they understood it to be blasphemous, it being a corruption of “By my Lady” and thus relating to the Virgin Mary. However, one AUCU member commented that he only knew this

because he was “being a swot.” In explaining why they would not blaspheme, members of both groups also cited the Bible, claiming that various passages made it quite clear that one should not “take the Lord’s name in vain.” Most members actually commented that they tended to find profanity more objectionable than normal swearing. Obviously, the view that profanity is more offensive than words such as “fuck” is an important indicator of a differentiated identity and of group boundaries. Most people do not find profanity particularly offensive. By regarding it as so offensive, members create a clearly differentiated group which, as we have noted, is attractive to potential converts who are frequently experiencing a kind of identity crisis.

Idiosyncratic Swearing

[26] We have already examined Hughes’s notion of “disguised swearing.” In circumstances in which we might expect Non-Christians to use a swear-word, I found that members of both OICCU and AUCU would instead use a word that perhaps sounded similar to the swear-word or which could be perceived, in some way at least, to relate to the taboo to which the swear-word itself related. Indeed, the majority of members said that they would not even be prepared to quote a swear-word when explaining that another person had used it. They would feel considerably more comfortable referring, for example, to the “F-word” or “the C-word” rather than actually saying the word. However, most, though not all, were slightly happier to quote, though not themselves use, swear-words. Again, this refusal to even allow such a word to pass their lips could be seen as evidence of the importance of a high sense of purity as a distinguishing identity component from non-Christians and other classes.

[27] The most obvious example of this phenomenon, however, was the use of the word “pants.” Now in commenting on the usage of this word among members of OICCU and AUCU, I do not wish to suggest that the use of this word, as a disguised swear-word, is unique to evangelicals or indeed any particular group.²³ I note this word because of the relative frequency with which it was used when compared, perhaps, to other disguised swear-words which one heard such as “flip” or “twit” for example. I should emphasise that I at no point noted the use of the word “pants,” or any other disguised swear-word, during prayer. I did, however, observe the use of this word in public and private speech and indeed during what was effectively preaching by members of OICCU or AUCU. I do not want to give the impression that the usage of this word was frequent during my fieldwork but I certainly heard it, and other disguised swear-words, on a number of occasions. For example, on one occasion I observed a member of the AUCU Exec, who was trying to fix the projector so that all those present could read the hymns projected onto the wall, say, “Sorry! This projector’s a bit a pants!” Likewise, I observed a member of the OICCU Exec, again during a religious meeting, claim that the reason certain leaflets were not yet ready was because “the printer’s a load of pants to be honest.” There were, in my field-work, a handful of other examples of the use of this specific disguised swear-word among both OICCU and AUCU members. It was always with regard to an object—whether abstract or not—and not a person. A person was never “pants” in the same way, perhaps, that we would not refer to a person as being “rubbish” but might term his work “rubbish.” The remark quoted in the title was made to me, so I was “talking pants” by goading the student about fundamentalist Christianity. The consequence, from my personal perspective, was to be quite amused by the remark and to regard the girl in a friendly light. Indeed, in the cases quoted above, there was a very slight laugh on the part of a few CU members. People, basically, smiled in response. But, conventional swearing was mainly rejected in favour of swearing in a disguised form. I questioned a number of members of OICCU and AUCU about why they chose the word “pants” rather than stronger swearing. All of them argued in various ways that it was because it was a funny word that expressed what they had felt and they found no problem in using it. I equally asked them whether they felt other group members would be offended by such words and all felt that they would be unlikely to be. A minority of members were very aware that the term was idiosyncratic—indeed,

one called it “Christianese.”²⁴ They were aware that using it with Non-Christians would often lead to questions which would allow them to share their faith.

[28] Members tended to agree that “pants” was a word, rather like “flip,” which could be used in the place of a swear-word without offending people. A number of members of both groups also commented that the word was “funny” and “amusing” and this was one reason why they used it. A number of AUCU members commented, without provocation, that “flip and pants are very much Christian words.” When I suggested that the word “pants” could be considered rude because pants relate to both sex and bodily functions in an indirect way, most members either thought this was funny or actually started laughing. “I don’t think it’s thought about like that” one member of AUCU commented. “I’ve never thought of that!” laughed another. But certainly the taboo dimension to “pants” would appear to be congruous with Leach’s theory on swearing. A number of members commented that they used the word “pants” because “everyone else seems to.” In both groups, “pants” did very much appear to be a “Christian word.” I asked a number of members from both groups if they felt using this word in some way helped the CU to reach out to people, to seem “normal” by using something approximating a swear-word. Most claimed that they had not really thought about this but a minority in both groups, and especially male members, seemed to feel that words such as “pants” were acceptable to use with “non-Christians” who might be using stronger and undisguised swear-words. Among most members, however, the view was that one should not swear, as it was “bad witness.” A very small minority even found “disguised swear-words” problematic because they felt that such words clearly referred to a worse swear-word. But few members of either group seemed to perceive “pants” as being a disguised swear-word. As such, its use appeared to be perfectly acceptable among all members to whom I spoke.²⁵

[29] The use of disguised swearing has a number of implications with regard to successful evangelism. As stated, a number of members commented that they were quite aware of the unusualness of the word “pants” in the context in which they used it. They found that non-Christians often asked them why they used it which gave them an opportunity to “witness.” Thus, even from an emic perspective the use of this term is a form of witness evangelism. From an etic perspective, I would argue that disguised swearing is very useful for two reasons. Firstly, it allows CU members to express frustration—through a kind of swearing—without making themselves impure. As such, it means that a group is neither too lax nor too strict, an important factor, as has been noted, in successful evangelism. However, at the same time it demonstrates that the group is differentiated. Indeed, it may well demonstrate this more clearly than simply not swearing. The group, in a sense, has its own language which demonstrates that it is differentiated and ordered. Following Reiss’ model, this would help to make the group attractive to non-Christians. And following Stapleton, I would argue that this kind of swearing relates to a Community of Practice, leading to social cohesion. Of course, there were small differences in the swearing noted. In Aberdeen, I only ever heard male members—and actually only senior male members—use the word “git” (similar to “bastard”), although apparently this word is not as rude in Scotland as it is in England. But it would be congruous with the observation that those of lower status within a group have a need to assert their status through linguistic purity. Female AUCU members were never observed to swear at all, and, interestingly, although there was even a female President, their power was limited (women did not preach, for example). Many female AUCU members commented that they did sometimes say “shit!” but it almost always transpired that this was when they were alone, after just having received a Lower Second Class mark for an essay or something like that. The findings in OICCU were similar, though all emphasised that they tried not swear, even when on their own, because it’s “disgusting” and so forth. But certainly, this allows us to see that swearing in these groups is a matter, to some extent, of social cohesion. By swearing within the group members are breaking its rules and this is,

perhaps, more pronounced with female members and—something only observed in AUCU—lower status members more broadly.

[30] Thirdly, in a context in which, as we have noted, swearing is very common, allowing a kind of swearing to take place demonstrates to outsiders that membership of the group will not entirely deprive them of an aspect of their cultural heritage. And finally, I would argue that such language helps to create a social bond—an important aspect of evangelism—in, perhaps, two ways. Firstly, swearing in front of somebody, as long as it is in a good humoured way and not a word especially offensive to them, would be likely to create a social bond because swearing is, albeit momentarily, a lack of self-control just as drinking alcohol together involves experiencing a lack of self control together and is often seen to create a bond.²⁶ This lack of self control, it might even be argued, reveals something genuine for that very reason. This is a very narrow point and I do not wish to overplay its significance because it would be so contingent on circumstance. However, I would suggest that in certain circumstances, swearing breaks down social boundaries and thus helps to bond, even if it is only disguised swearing. Certainly, some recent psychological research seems to substantiate this.²⁷ Secondly, to quote the English comedian Richard Herring, “Pants are funny ... but not with a circular saw in them.” Of course, humour is subjective and some people might not agree. But I would argue that “pants” is an amusing and, when used as a swear word, childish word that is likely to make the person who hears it laugh or just smile. Laughter helps to create a bond and helps to make somebody associate whatever is making them laugh—in this case a particular Christian perhaps—with pleasant feelings. I fully appreciate that my final point is somewhat speculative and I would welcome further research in this regard. But it is generally accepted that the taboo, the juxtaposing of opposites and so forth, leads to humour, as we can see in the Herring quote.²⁸ So I would submit there is a humorous aspect to disguised swear-words and particularly asserting that something is “pants.”

“Nigger” and other Racial Terms

[31] All members agreed that they would not use words such as “nigger” because they were “widely seen as offensive” and were thus “bad witness” simply because they would offend non-Christians. Most also commented that they would not use such language “because it’s racist.” They did not justify why racist language was problematic so like many of their peers it seemed to be something that they just believed. We have already noted the way in which the ideology of “Political Correctness” has become highly significant, especially in many westernised countries. By objecting to racist language, CU members are reflecting their surrounding culture. As we have noted, the appropriate balance in this area is crucial to a successful evangelical group. There are, of course, Evangelical Christian groups operating most notably in the United States that use a similarly fundamentalist reading of the Bible to justify racism, race separation and so forth.²⁹ I would simply conjecture that if such a group formed at Oxford University, for example, it would be likely to be less successful than the CU because it would reject such a significant part of the cultural heritage of the young people to whom it would minister.

Conclusion

[32] Swearing plays an important part in the evangelical activity of both OICCU and AUCU and can be perhaps seen as a significant tool among evangelical groups more broadly. Swearing—and especially formerly highly offensive sexual swearing—is a notable aspect of popular culture that is criticised in conservative newspapers especially in the UK. Swearing has, so it seems, increased among all social classes, though it is often seen to be most significant among the less educated. Even so, the CU groups operate in a student environment in which swearing is quite acceptable and in which many students might be, as it were, open to the kind of evangelism offered by evangelical student groups. The use of swearing in these groups—following Reiss’s assessment of successful religious groups—helps to make them attractive in a number

of ways. Following Douglas's Purity Rule, the lack of conventional swearing demonstrates that members are close to a source of power, at least in the view of middle class students, and in relation to a certain kind of power: moral superiority. As such, the group seems to offer a kind of status and power to outsiders and is attractive to many "lower professional" students for this reason. This is also congruous with McEnery's discussion of swearing as a means of asserting middle-class identity. The CU members generally do not belong to the highest social class at the university (those from lower professional backgrounds are over-represented) and the behaviour can be seen as an important play for status as well as, theologically, reflecting a high status in a Christian sense. Also, the language allows students to maintain their middle class cultural heritage which would generally taboo strong swearing. Indeed, disguised swearing also creates a system of controlled behaviour—attractive to outsiders—which permits some emotional release. Swearing is problematic in this context because, following Leach, it relates to something that is taboo and therefore dirty and impure. CU members themselves argued this very point, drawing upon Biblical evidence and discussing not swearing in terms of evangelism. Again, some group members seemed aware of the evangelising potential of disguised swearing but they saw it as a means of inviting the question, "Why don't you swear?," allowing them to witness. Disguised swearing may evoke laughter, thus creating social bonds. Obviously, the group's taboo against racial epithets reflected its broader cultural heritage.

[33] "Witness Evangelism" is a highly significant factor in evangelical groups and especially so in the university evangelical groups with whom I conducted fieldwork. Witness Evangelism would take many forms such as simply being nice people, not getting too drunk or wearing clothes that were not especially sexual. However, swearing (and its idiosyncratic use) was understood by many CU members to be a conscious form of witness evangelism. As sexual swearing becomes more and more acceptable, it may well become more acceptable in Christian Unions. However, at the moment it is a clear means by which Christian Unions differentiate themselves—and in a sense assert a certain social status—but also aid their own evangelical activity. "Bog off dog breath, you're talking pants!" seemed a humorous remark at the time, but it may in fact have been in fact a very subtle kind of evangelism in an environment in which swearing was so acceptable.

Notes

1. A very early version of this article was presented at the Scottish Divinity Post-Graduate Conference at Aberdeen University in June 2003. I would like to thank the questioners for their comments on it and Prof. Simon Coleman for his comments on an earlier version of the manuscript.
2. In British English, a "wanker" is one who masturbates. The word tends only to be used about a man and it is not commonly used in the USA. It is not generally used literally to mean that a person frequently masturbates, although the implication may be there. Rather, as with many swear-words of this kind in British English, it is used as a broad insult, akin to "idiot" but far stronger due to retaining its original sexual connotation.
3. For example, Smith notes the increase in swearing among young Russians (Smith 1998, n. 34).
4. These are anthropological terms. "Emic" refers to how the group under observation explains something while "etic" refers to the alternative explanation an anthropologist might give. For further discussion see Headland *et al.* (1990).
5. Equally, words such as "bastard" might be seen as taboo because they relate to uncontrolled sex while "bugger" relates to a traditionally taboo form of sex, transgressing the idea that sex should be heterosexual.
6. This distinction can be further seen in Mary Whitehouse's attempts to bring prosecutions using the Blasphemy Act. The prosecution could not be brought against *Till Death Us Do Part* because profanity rather than blasphemy was expressed. However, Mrs. Whitehouse successfully prosecuted the *Gay News*, in 1976, for a poem in which the Roman Soldier has homosexual sex with Christ, brought

down from the cross, which also subverts religious imagery (McEnery 2006, 139). Thus, “blasphemy” appears to bring together a religious symbol with something apparently incongruous with it. For this reason, it offends the religious person. Profanity merely involves using a religion-related word as a swear-word.

7. Mainstream British newspapers are essentially divided between those that are perceived to be politically right leaning such as *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, *The Express*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun* and those that are generally perceived to be left leaning such as *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Independent*, *The Mirror* and *The Sunday People*.
8. As stated, the Conservative Party is Britain’s largest right wing party. It is currently the second largest party in the British Parliament and governed Britain most recently from 1979 to 1997.
9. I appreciate that this term might be seen to have become a kind of epithet to use in relation to left wing political activities. However, I am employing it here as the summary of an ideology that has been discussed in depth by various academics. For further discussion see Dunnant (1995).
10. For further discussion of Political Correctness as an ideology and its effects on the acceptability of certain ideas, see Lind (2004) or Ellis (2004, 2005). Following Ellis and drawing upon Leach, it could be argued that non-PC epithets are taboo because by using them you challenge the accepted ideology that all races and sexual orientations are equal. As such, the terms are incongruous with what might be seen as the current category system. For a discussion of the effects of Political Correctness on Christian Unions, see Dutton (2006b).
11. For an examination of the word “nigger,” see Kennedy (2002). The book is a specific historical and social discussion of this one word. Equally for an examination of “fuck” see Scheidlower (1995).
12. This is congruous with Orans’s (1965) model of “Rank Concession Syndrome” whereby an apparently lower social group imitates the higher group but does so in an exaggerated manner.
13. It is perhaps beyond the scope of this article to go into detail with regard to how I conducted my fieldwork. This is examined in depth in the doctoral thesis that it led to. For further discussion of fieldwork method, see Hammersley and Atkinson (1995).
14. This involved the group organising a whole week of outreach events. There were usually daily talks on various theological subjects by a noted evangelical speaker (with free lunch provided) and social events, such as Ceilidhs, at which Christian literature was available. My thesis also looks at why the level of outreach in OICCU is so much greater.
15. For a discussion of the Charismatic Movement in a British context, see Bebbington (1989) or Bruce (2002), chap. 9.
16. For an examination of the history and origins of university Christian Unions see, for example, Barclay and Horn (2002).
17. Equally, it might be argued that strong swearing could be seen as a way of asserting a form of power among the working class.
18. Conversion was a significant motif among both student evangelical groups assessed, but especially among OICCU. During my fieldwork, I witnessed public “testimony” (giving your biography and explaining about how becoming a Christian was central to it) on a number of occasions at OICCU meetings. I did not witness this at AUCU meetings, but some members published their testimonies on the group’s website.
19. For an examination of this issue see, for example, Thornton (1988).
20. The terms “bad witness” and “unhelpful” were heard frequently and give a fascinating insight into the aims of both groups. The aim is to evangelise, and anything that makes the group seem negative is “bad witness” because it is “unhelpful” to this shared aim. In a way, this imperative to witness helps to control the group because nobody wants to be “unhelpful.” This point was made by Bruce in his sociological study of an anonymous Scottish CU (Bruce 1978).
21. I have previously suggested that those at the centre can, in various ways, be “unclean” and it could be argued that is true of the Christian God. Leach points out that He is taboo because He defies category systems by being both God and Man, three yet one, born of a Virgin, capable of breaking natural laws

- and so forth (Leach 1964). The Christian God is also violent and variously portrayed as “jealous” and “angry” as well as loving.
22. For example, Corinthians 6:19: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit ... therefore honour God with your body” (New International Version).
 23. Indeed, I have heard the word “pants” used in this way on British Children’s TV programmes. This might be seen to indicate that CU members—like adults trying to set a supposed example to children—are restricted in their expression of the taboo.
 24. This exact term was also noted by Bramadat (Bramadat 2000) in his examination of McMaster University Christian Union in Canada.
 25. It might be argued that CU members, like most students at universities such as Oxford and to a lesser extent Aberdeen, are from what Argyle calls “professional” backgrounds and that by using disguised swearing (such as “pants”) they are simply reflecting this background. I do not agree with this explanation. Firstly, the CU members were very aware themselves that they used such language far more than non-members. However, it could, of course, be argued that this would render the CU more attractive to middle-class students than working-class students in terms of maintaining cultural heritage. Secondly the CU (at both universities) was, if anything, less middle-class than the university as a whole. Thus, this swearing is perhaps more likely to reflect class aspiration and a desire for status, following McEnery, than simply background. It is a shame that the distinction was not made between upper-class swearing, higher professional swearing and lower professional swearing in McEnery’s discussion. I would recommend future research in this regard.
 26. The relationship between laughter, loss of control, taboo and bond creation has been examined by, for example, Berger (1997) or Gilhus (1997).
 27. The authors found that people who swore frequently were regarded as more believable than those that did not. This may have been because they were less controlled in their behaviour and thus seemed more genuine (Rassin and Van Der Heijden 2005).
 28. This point is made in both Berger (1997) and Gilhus (1997).
 29. For a detailed discussion of conservative Christian groups that are often perceived to have racist ideologies see Ogilvie (2001). The author openly admits that he opposes such groups but that aside it is a useful overview examining such groups in the USA and South Africa. It also critiques them from the perspective of Systematic Theology.

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