

Voices

VOLUME TWO



*Voices is a collaborative project between FXU, Her Campus
and The Falmouth Anchor, providing a platform for students
whose voices might previously have been lost in the noise.*

**VOICES VOLUME TWO
FAITH**

NOVEMBER 2017

foreword

My politics and activism can be defined by my belief in more equal and just systems, on campus, in our communities and across the world. But my identity as a Jewish woman also reflects so much of my activism. One of my first encounters of student activism was through my involvement in the Birmingham Jewish Society — I wanted to improve campus communities, run innovative campaigns and to support Jewish life on campus. Students of faith often face numerous structural barriers throughout the education system, for example the difficulty in participating in the student experience due to the collision of many activities with the timings of religious festivals, the lack of appropriate food provision or the threat of religious hatred and dangerous rhetoric pervading campus.

However the last few years have awoken me to the fact that there are those that seek to sow division between groups on campus, with hatred and intolerance. This is not just a campus problem. From Trump's Islamophobia to the stark rise in religion and faith-based hate crime, the voices of people of faith are under threat. This is not the world that students are aspiring to live in. There has never been such a more turbulent and pressing moment than now to create a welcome, tolerant and inclusive global community.

My earliest activism story at University was in the organising of multiple rallies of all faiths to join our voices against the loud but small minority who sought to divide us. This gave me the drive, from Sabbatical Officer to NUS Vice President, to strive for methods of bringing students of different backgrounds together, through interfaith and community actions. Collectivism as communities and different faiths is extremely powerful. We must stand strong and act together on our promise to ensure that every student, regardless of race, religion, gender or sexuality has the right to walk around their campus free from fear and persecution.

I have continually fought within the National Union of Students to make sure that students of faith are represented and supported through their time in education. Interfaith should not just be about a short-term meeting of people of different faiths before returning to our own groups. Interfaith must be the sustainable political tool we use to build the fair, welcoming and diverse society that all progressives are working towards and to prove that when all parts of society come together, we have far more in common than what divides us.

IZZY LENGA
NUS UK VICE PRESIDENT WELFARE

Originally, I come from a Muslim background but I was never really brought up with the morals and the religion itself. It's always been a bit confusing when I talk about faith because I've been around so many different faiths—my cousins are Hindu and my sister is Christian. I've never really been given a faith and I wouldn't put it under a category; it's my own choice and my own individual kind of spiritual journey, which sometimes I find hard. I believe that there is a God and I find myself following a lot of the morals that come from Christianity, Islam and Hinduism as well. The basic ones are love and respect and there are ones about how to conduct yourself, as I believe they make you a better person.

Faith is an important part of a person's identity: it acts as a moral compass but also gives you purpose as well—the light at the end of the tunnel, so you know what's keeping you going. The problem with not having a definite religion is that you don't really have this goal. It becomes blurry; I have one sister saying all these amazing things about Christianity but then there is also my Hindu family telling me things about my spirituality, like how I should meditate. There are these three different things in my life giving me directions on how to find myself, each of which has its own light at the end of the tunnel, but I don't really have one that's best for me.

For me, while I was going on my own journey with mental health and trying to find my own identity, one of my closest

friends back home, who was brought up as a Christian, would let me come to her youth groups when I was feeling really bad. What I loved about Christianity was the sense of community that is very intrinsic within the church; everyone is there for each other. It's about more than just having a religion that dictates your life—it's a relation that's a part of your lifestyle and you embrace it. It was something that I really loved and I found it really helpful. Since coming to university, when I've struggled with things, other people have always been there for me when I've needed them most. The CU (Christian Union) have held events and it's a nice warming place.

It's not about picking. People always think that they have to pick one faith—like, one denomination. I understand that but, to me, faith is more something that religion stems from; if you have faith, and have that drive to find faith, then that's a starting point. You don't have to push yourself to go and pick a certain religion. Rather, it's about having faith more generally and having love and respect for others—these are things that are universal across all religions, so I think that's always a good starting point to anyone who is trying to find faith. Religion shouldn't be something that traps you and I feel that a lot of people think that—I did too, back when I was a teenager and an atheist. In reality though, religion is quite freeing, and it can help you to find yourself as well.



*love and
respect is
universal*



My name is Amina. I'm an International student and I'm doing my PhD. My degree course is Politics and this is my first time here in Cornwall. It's a lovely place, it's a bit quiet, but I like it.

I'm Muslim, and Islam is a big part of my life. If I may say, it is my life.

I was raised in a highly conservative place. Very understanding, tolerant to change but it's a bit conservative religiously. I struggled in the past to maintain my life between both poles of conservative society and my dreams and what I want to do in the future. It was a bit challenging but I found my way.

In Cornwall, I feel quite safe. I think it's a tolerant place. I lived in Canterbury last year for six months. Although it was a big city, a vibrant city, I experienced a kind of racism there and I was sometimes scared of people. Some of them were kind of racist, they were afraid when they saw me in my headscarf. I did not feel quite comfortable there.

I have sometimes felt like I stick out. I used to go to the gym and the coach and the people who came to the session would sometimes look at me like that. It's annoying sometimes because I want people to come to me and ask me, then they can react according to my answers, not just build a kind of stereotype or opinions or attitudes based on what they see. I want them to come and talk to me, instead of just staring at me in that very strange way. It makes me feel quite uncomfortable sometimes.

Islam is a beautiful religion, it's a very peaceful religion but people will not believe that, because of what they see on television and what they read in newspapers. All they see is terrorism and Isis, blood and oppressed women. I don't blame them because what they see is terrifying. But I do urge them to approach Muslims, talk to them, discover who they are, and then they can build their own perspective and their own opinions.

I come from Algeria and ten years ago, we experienced a huge political conflict and we suffered from terrorism. For ten years, Algerians were slaughtered and killed. Bombs were everywhere, people were found dead in the streets, even children, pregnant women and old people. Technically, I'd say we suffered from terrorism more than any other nation because, back then, Algerians could not really recognise and see their true enemy, because they were fighting against a shadow, a shadow that held knives and bombs and guns. Killing people, tormenting people, tearing down the government, the political system. I'd say that we truly experienced the true meaning and sense of terrorism.

Terrorism is universal, it does not have to be associated with Muslims or Islam or any particular religion. A group of extremists do not represent a whole faith or religion, like the KKK in the US do not represent the whole Christian faith. So this technically applies to the extremist minority in Islam. If you want to know Islam, stop reading newspapers, stop watching television. Just try to approach Muslims, true Muslims who are not extremists, and you will get to know the true meaning of Islam.



I always feel a bit like a tit when I tell people that I'm Christian and I can see that in their head they're thinking, "Why does she believe in a man in the sky?" The truth is that I do believe in a man in the sky who communicates with me but then I also believe that God works through people and that's always going to be how it is. There are always going to be people that strongly believe Jesus talks directly to them and that's probably never going to happen to me. I'm always going to be, "if that's the right thing to do, then that's what I'll do," but I'm not going to sit around and elucidate to randomers on the street about whether I believe Noah split the ocean in half... Oh wait, no, I don't believe that! It was Moses who split the ocean in half!

Anyway, the biggest problem for me is being a Christian who isn't straight and who doesn't believe in a lot of the things that some Christians generally do. I think you have to know the Bible very well, otherwise every argument you have just ends with them bringing you down. When you're arguing with someone who believes so firmly in the Bible, you can't just say, "Well, it was written by a man," so you have to really know it.

The most difficult part about being a Christian is the fact that I'm bi, even though I could get away with it by being in straight relationships and just not telling anyone. But it's important to me that they know and that they deal with that. People look at me and immediately think I'm gay because of the way that I look and I find it strange that the people in the community who look at me know this, yet still make the comments that they make. On the very extreme end, they still think it's OK to say things like, "AIDS was sent by God to punish the gays". What hurts me the most is that it's so vindictive; they know what they're doing yet they do it anyway.

But I also think that there's a big part of the community that is just confused and who don't look at me and immediately think "gay." They just look at me as a person who is young and has opinions and who says that being gay is OK. They genuinely do argue out of love but just in the wrong ways. I find that difficult. So many of the people I know think that every action or statement they make against the gays is showing love for the gays in their heads. But they just can't see how much it hurts. That p****s me off, as much as I respect their position.

My mum used to be, not homophobic, but she wanted the best for me and my relationship with God and, in her mind, the best for me was not what I was going for. That is, being bi, or gay—whatever. So, in the last year or so, after I started talking about it with her a bit more, she went to a church meeting on same-sex relationships and when she came home she said, "Oh, do you know what? Someone at that event was saying all this stuff about it being against the scripture. But I think I agreed with the other lady who said that it's all about love. They're really not hurting anyone". That was my favourite thing that has happened in the last year.

Then, a couple of weeks later, we were walking home from where she works and she just started asking me a lot of questions. Things like, "Do you think you're transgender?" but in the nicest way. I was like, "Wow, she's actually OK with things now." I still don't think that they'd be happy for me to live a life that is more difficult but I also think that they'd support me. Even if my dad still thinks that "bisexual" means you have lots of orgies.



I am from London—originally from Afghanistan. I was born in Afghanistan and moved to England when I was about ten, and from then grew up in one of the most diverse places in England: the northwest of London. A couple of years ago, however, I moved to the least diverse part of the UK: Cornwall. This is especially true when it comes to religious diversity. Having the opportunity to live in different places have given me the experience and knowledge of different cultures and religions. Most Londoners have a good understanding of other religions, therefore I never came across a situation where I asked myself why nobody knows anything about other religions until I moved to Cornwall. I was shocked at some of the questions and lack of knowledge but, nevertheless, it was important for me to answer their questions with a smile.

I have this crazy habit of speaking up for others even though I hate leading things and being a leader but, somehow, I end up in the front row of everything. There are two words that I live by and they are; peace and equality. Growing up, I was one of the most irritating kids who would question everything. Whether it was a small incident or an international tragedy, I would sit in front of my parents and ask hundreds of questions – most common being, why would people do such a thing knowing that it is wrong? They loved the fact that I questioned things rather than just going with the flow and accepting it like many of us. My questions became frequent and repetitive, so they came up with a common answer, which is something that I have used as a guide throughout my life. They would always say that nobody is born bad and just because someone belongs to a certain group does not mean they are bad. People do evil things because they do not see the evil side of it. We are all the same and our actions are a result of misunderstanding or lack of knowledge. If there is something unfair happening around you, don't wait for others to do it for you but it is your duty to speak up for yourself and others around you. Remember that not everyone thinks the same way and has the same beliefs as you. This habit has become a personality trait and I can confirm that I still question everything, therefore I would like to take this opportunity to highlight some issues with the hope that someone might find it useful.

Since November is Islamophobia Awareness Month, I wanted to highlight a few things that we have to go through as a minority, things that we get questioned about, on a daily basis. Think about the following words: Terrorism. Bomb blasts. Religious extremism. Gender oppression. What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear these words? Of course, Muslims/ Islam. Now think about this from a Muslim point of view—why Muslims? What makes you relate these words to the 1.8 billion people who follow the religion? When these words are mentioned, why do you look at your Muslim friends around you? Do you think that they have anything to do with such tragedies?

Nowadays people are very quick to point at Muslims without actually knowing the story of the incident. At this point of time everything you know about Islam comes from the media, outlets like television, and these sources do not represent the religion correctly. For instance, the recent Las Vegas shooting and the London Bridge attack were both wrong and, in many ways, there's no justification for either of them—they have no place in humanity. But why was the London attack on every media platform highlighted as a “terrorist attack” whilst the Las Vegas shooting was only labelled as a “Vegas shooting.” The textbook definition of a terrorist is a person who uses unlawful violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in pursuit of a political aim. By this definition, both were terrorist attacks, but only one was presented as such by the media. This is clearly because of the subject behind it—the person who committed it. Say the person who committed the Las Vegas shooting was a Muslim, or maybe just had a Muslim-sounding name: that headline would have been different. This says a lot about the misrepresentation of Islam in the media, particularly in the West.

What I'm trying to say is, before you hate someone, or before you judge who they are, it's important that you get to know what they're going through. Know what their opinion is, rather than placing them in the same category as a very small percentage of the greater whole. And this answers the first question that I asked. This is why Islam came into your head when I mentioned those words: the idea is institutionally fed to the people. A lot of people have no real knowledge when it comes to religions, but because this is what they're taught, and this is what they see, they instantly adopt this opinion. Just because Donald Trump or any other global leader says something for a political gain, that does not mean that it is a fact or true at all. You have no idea what people around the world of different religion or skin colour are going through, so do not base your opinion on someone else's opinion – do your own research and speak to the right people. You don't really know what someone is going through, and having to face abuse about something that is out of our control on top of that can really break a person.

I do not believe that people on this campus are Islamophobic. But, from my experience, what I can say is that people aren't being given the right information. I was elected as the FXU Exeter Education Officer for the 2017/18 academic year and this wouldn't have been the case if people were Islamophobic. The majority of the campus is very liberal and tolerant. There are a lot of misconceptions due to the media and a lot of the opinions I hear from people about Islam are what they've heard from the media. As I said, I don't think the media portrays Islam in the right way. When I came down here in 2015, there was no halal food on campus. Halal is essentially the word for 'lawful' in Arabic and Halal slaughter describes a way of slaughter in which we believe the animal feels less pain. Because I'm used to eating meat, it was very difficult for me to live without meat for a year and a half—I ended up losing about 6kg. About halfway through second year, we were able to get halal chicken on campus. As soon as I advertised it, I got a lot of negative feedback—comments and abuse, some of which asserted that we eventually just chop off the head of the animal in a very inhumane process. Of course, these things aren't true. Someone even commented that, because we'd introduced halal meat, we were surely on the way to introducing halal water. There is no such thing as Halal water because, technically, you cannot slaughter water. I was not offended by this but only wished that this person did a bit of non-biased research or spoke to someone before commenting.

I don't blame these people in a way because that's what they've heard but what I would like to say is that, before you come to a conclusion and say that you hate people of a certain race/skin colour/religion because they believe in something that you do not agree with, or for whatever reason—come and talk to someone who knows more about these things first. The best way to understand a religion or culture is through personal experience.

Killing is another common misconception. A lot of people don't know that, in Islam, killing a human being is valued the same as killing the entirety of humanity—there's no forgiveness for it. That's my belief, because that's what my religion says. Why must people come up and associate me with those thousands of miles away, who do acts that the religion does not tolerate? Why should I be punished for their actions? Only judge me for what I do—I was the President of the Islamic Society last year and we were lucky enough to win five awards. One of them was for the 'Best Faith and Culture Society' in the UK but my favourite was the 'Community Heroes' award, which we were given for what we had done in the local community. We love our local community because that's what we were taught to do. For people to then put us in the same category as terrorists and people who fail to associate with the religion in the right way is completely unacceptable. Did you know that Muslims believe in Jesus, Moses, Adam, Abraham and regard them as their prophets – that Allah just means God in Arabic? Did you know that women in Islam were allowed the right to earn money, to financial support, to own property, to an education, to an inheritance, to vote, to keep their maiden name, to worship in a mosque, to a divorce, and so on 1,400 years ago but not in the UK until around 1882? Did you know that as a Muslim I am allowed to marry someone of Christian or Jewish faith? Did you know that forced marriages, honour killings, female genital mutilation and the confinement of women to their homes are all forbidden in Islam?

I can go on and on but, to conclude, these practices stem from deeply entrenched cultural traditions and/or ignorance of the true Islamic teachings, or how to apply them in society. It is extremely important that people do not mix cultural beliefs with religious beliefs. There are countless things that are accepted in my culture but not in the religion. My appeal to everyone reading would be that there is no harm in researching something that you do not know about and that we are happy to answer any of your questions.

I'm a Christian. And in that I find that that's a relational thing and it's about being Christian meaning believing in Christ and having a relationship with Jesus. I get very frustrated by the perception of Christian as sort of a religious thing about what you do or how pious you are or how often you go to Church, or any of that other nonsense. When you see Jesus, who is central to what you're about, who is an innately relational God, he's not someone who is just aloft. He's someone who's come to Earth and come to communicate with people and cares about people, deeply cares about people in the most troubled circumstances and gets most p****d off in life at people who are religious and who are telling people that they ought to be doing this or that. For it to come full circle and have Christianity now associated with religiousness is very weird and very frustrating to me.

My hope would be, in living as a Christian, is that, in having that relationship, you then seek to give that to other people as well, for them to feel welcome, for them to feel loved, to have that innate value that I hold that each person has.

Something that I've found difficult in misconceptions of religion and misconceptions of faith is people believing that faith is something that's unacademic or that it's something that you can't hold in this day and age. It's something that I've particularly struggled with, always having such a great enthusiasm for nature and loving science and loving that academic world. People from a Christian world view tell me that I've got no place in learning that kind of stuff and people in a scientific, academic world telling me that faith is superstitious nonsense and I should abandon that. It's a struggle for a lot of people. I think it's a very unfair thing. It's been such a joy meeting other Christians studying on my course and through the Christian Union, folks at Church, who

have such a wonderful joy for the natural world and for scientific pursuit. Really living out an example of how you can hold those two things together in such an honest and foundational way. So, I hold myself, sort of, wholly of the same science as you'd find of anyone else. A conventional biological science. But I believe that there is a purpose and a designer behind that and God works through the natural laws of the universe.

It's so much more joyful to have a God who is relational and present, working through the universe and standing at a distance, zapping things into being occasionally and then hiding away. He deeply cares and is involved in all things that are going on through the natural processes of the world. My hope would be to try and knock down those barriers and that people would see that there've been a few very loud and unhelpful voices in the conversation so far. People in the minority, on both sides of the fence, have built up this idea of a false argument. It would be my hope that we would be able to move more towards, or that there'd be at least a more public perception moving towards, how things have been previously.

It really helps me in my studies of being a passionate conservationist that sometimes things can seem quite futile and depressing and the world's going to pot and global warming and micro-plastics and kitic fungus with frogs and the world is failing. It can get really depressing, you can feel really futile, and you can struggle for motivation and hope to go on. For myself, where I find my hope to go on and to continue that work and really see a value, is knowing that this world is such a great gift and has such an innate value. It's such a joy to see those things conserved and it'd be such a tragedy to lose it. Being able to hold on in hope that things aren't just going to fall apart.



it's a joy

I am also largely involved in the Christian Union here and it's been a great joy to see that through my three years at university here. It's great to be able to be communally with other Christians, on my course and other courses, getting such a wide variety of people there from different backgrounds but all holding together in that one faith. Why I've loved it so much is that it's such an opportunity to open up these conversations with people, that we believe each person has an innate value and an innate dignity, that you're not defined by your usefulness to society but defined by the fact you are a wonderful

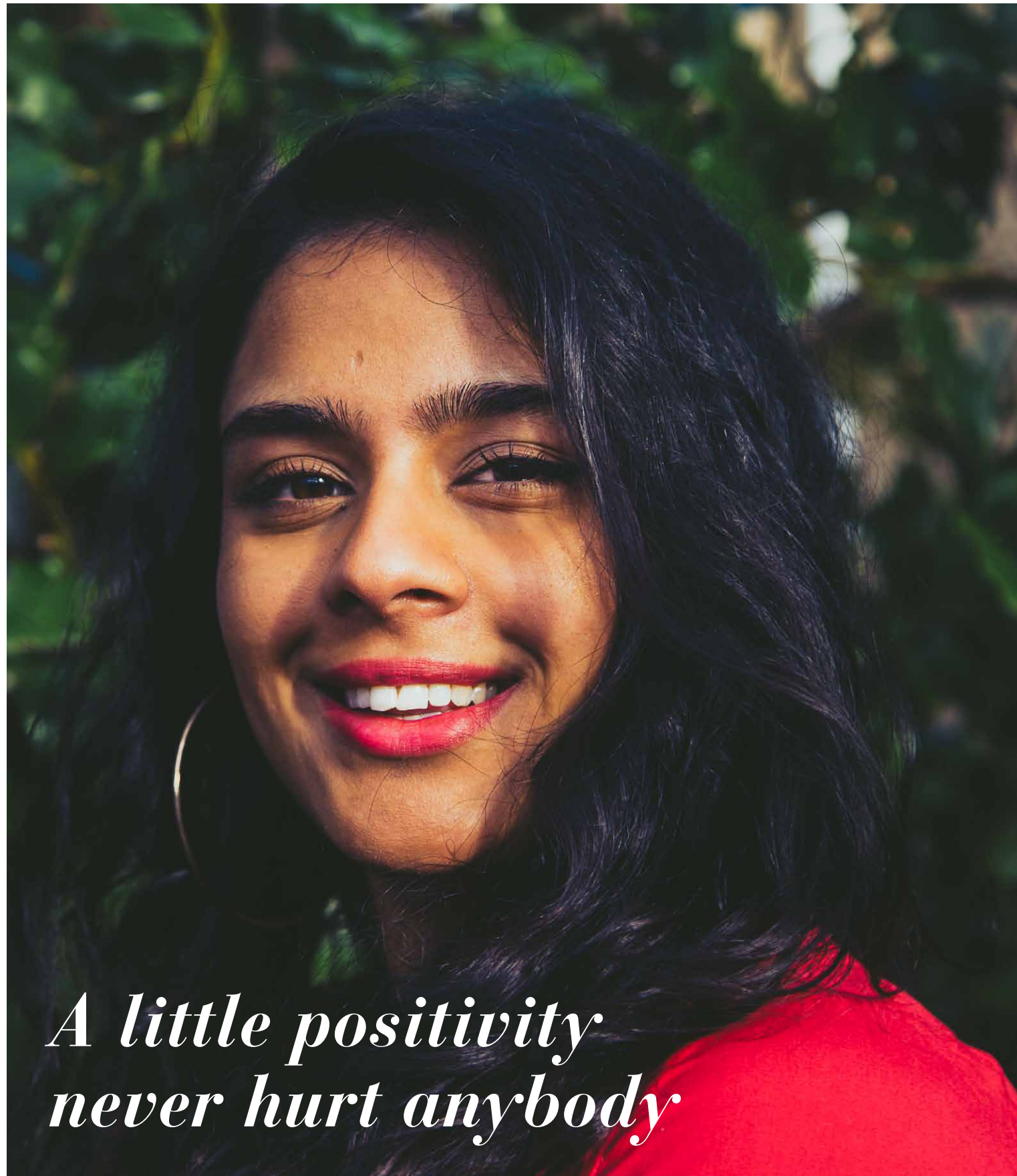
human being, with a father who cares about you. So, whether that's giving tea and toast out to people at the Stannary or whether it's actually being about to engage in conversations about what the faith is about, it's a joy just to be able to try and share a little bit of God with people in their lives and show them a bit of love through that.

You go to church, you must be really religious!

The short answer is yes, I am “really” religious, but I’m not what you might think. Many people assume that Christians are boring, backward-thinking people but, although I may opt out of some things, such as celebrating Halloween, I’m still a normal person who likes to go out, have a cocktail or two and chill in front of some trashy TV. There is a big misconception as to what Christians are really like: I don’t sing hymns or talk in old English and, in all honesty, I find church fun (gasp). To me, being both a part of a church and an active member of the Christian Union at university is like being a member of the biggest, most supportive family ever.

In all seriousness, there is so much more to being a Christian. Knowing that I have a Maker who loves me for who I am and not for what I do, is the best feeling ever. No matter how stressful university life gets, and no matter how many breakdowns I have over RStudio (those who do statistics will understand), I know that I have a God who is greater than all of these things.





*A little positivity
never hurt anybody*

My faith is very important to me. It's something that I grew up with. I've been through a lot, so it's the one thing that has kept me going: just the fact that there's something bigger out there. When I do pray, I feel like no problem is too big—everything is so minute and I am not alone. I'm sharing my problems with the universe and it's no longer my sole responsibility; I don't have to deal with it myself, the universe will help me sort it out.

My family never forced me into believing something I didn't want to. They gave me guidance and then let me interpret things my own way but one thing that they always taught me was to be kind—that's something I carry with me. Even on my worst days I try to be kind. We're human; we all slip up, but I try my best to be kind, to be compassionate, and I like to believe that I'm quite emotional when it comes to people. I really care about their emotions and what they're going through. Although it's not my problem, I feel like it is my responsibility; I feel that, if I help someone, it's going to come back—a little bit like karma but not exactly. Kindness is charity and my faith has taught me to be charitable. One of the teachings is that an act of kindness, even as small as a smile can be charity and, honestly, all it takes is one smile to make someone's day and change their outlook.

Another teaching of my religion is, well, it's actually a verse from the scripture and that is that there's no compulsion in religion, as there shouldn't be. So it really upsets me and breaks my heart when people misunderstand and question whether any of my beliefs are forced upon me. For me, modesty is of importance and it is a part of my religion. It is essential to understand that modesty comes in many ways and forms; it doesn't necessarily mean covering yourself. Being modest is about your intentions and, for me, my faith focuses a lot on intentions: if you have positive intentions, you're emitting positivity into the universe. A little positivity never hurt anybody.

One thing I do want to add is peace. When we meet someone we say, "As-salamu alaykum". That means, "May peace be upon you". I haven't been able to say it to many people because there aren't many Muslims down here, but it's just beautiful. When people think that Islam is very harsh and not very peaceful, I like to remind them that when a person sneezes, they say "Alhamdulillah" which means, "thank God". The person who heard the person sneeze then says the same. Then I would say, "May God bless me and bring me peace, and may God bless you and bring you peace". How can a religion be as harsh as it is portrayed in the media when something as small as one sneeze leads to spreading love, positivity and blessings?



I'm Catholic. I realise that a lot of people will make assumptions based on that simple sentence but the same is true for many other religions and beliefs. I've been called many things: 'Bible Basher' and 'God Botherer' are some of the tamer ones. For some time, the things people would say, and the attempts to force me to stop believing in God, almost made me lose faith. I had grown up in a Catholic household, went to a Catholic school, and Saturday evenings at church were a staple of my childhood. Questioning my faith scared me; I thought I had to be either deeply religious and committed to the church, or an atheist who shouted down anyone who attempted to express a religious belief.

It wasn't until I was 18 that I realised faith was on a spectrum. I don't attend church as often as I used to, nor do I regularly pray, but my faith has become something that is there for me in darker times. While I do believe in something greater than myself, I subscribe to the belief that the Bible is simply a book of moral guidance.


When I was younger, and people would question my faith and sneer at me, I would shy away and pretend that it wasn't that important to me. Now, I am happy to answer them. Should people try to force me away from my faith, I simply ask them if my quiet belief hurts them in any way. If yes, how does it hurt them and how can I help? If no, then why does it matter so much? My personal faith hurts no one and helps me.

I don't agree with my church a lot of the time and will frequently criticise them—I'm what you might call a 'Liberal Catholic'. I find praying to be like meditation; it gives me time to contemplate and be alone with my thoughts, and the idea that a bigger force might be listening gives me hope for change. I pray for the things that I think are important and my faith is sometimes what gets me through a tough and exhausting day. In a similar sense, I think everybody has a faith—a belief in something greater than themselves, that gives them purpose. Just because it isn't God doesn't make it any more or less valid. If it's important to you, then it's important. My faith is important to me.

The founding principle of most spiritual practices is love and I think that's what Christianity is trying to promote at the heart of it. It's less about rules and more about a relationship with God, who is love; an unconditional, ever-present love. Honestly, I don't think anyone besides Jesus has got it right yet. He dedicated his whole life to healing and teaching and making the world a better place — because that was his purpose and he lived by purpose.

That's what Christianity teaches: that we all have a unique purpose on Earth that we need to fulfil but, most importantly, that we must walk in love. Faith has gotten me through the worst of times and, at my lowest moments, I've felt the love and acceptance and healing of God, and that's something I want everyone to experience; a love so deep and pure, it has really changed my life.





It's not a one-way thing where, if you mess up, you're going to hell.

The academic structure of university, and perhaps even the 21st century more generally, isn't geared towards the idea that some people still believe in God. It seems like we have pushed religion aside. Maybe the 'advancements' that we've made over the last hundred or so years have become our new God—in a sense, they have taken God's place. It is through these new developments that we have come to explain things in a way that seems more logical. As such, when it comes to university, and university lectures in particular, it seems that there's no room for God. God almost feels like a myth. Jesus is talked about in the same breath as Minotaurs, or something like that, and that doesn't feel right.

I think a huge contributor to this is the fact that humans try way too hard to deny that there is a spirituality inside every one of us. The resulting attitude is that a lot more people are atheists nowadays, and this might be why academics don't address God as often. I think this is interesting but it's not something that worries or discourages me. Lectures aren't there to change my

opinions on things—university is simply a place for opening your mind; filling it with things is then done by you. University says, "Look at this thing," which you then respond to with, "Here's what I bring to this thing."

I was brought up in a pretty relaxed church environment with my parents. God was a reality there and so there wasn't anything that made me think, "I have to make up my mind as to whether God is real or not". It always felt really obvious; instead of questioning my faith, I discovered more and more about the nature of God. But then I moved to Northern Ireland when I was six until I was 18, and the big religious thing over there pushed me away from my relationship with faith. I felt like faith had become something concrete, with particular ways of imagining God: this big man in the sky who will beat you over the head if you masturbate. This always felt really far away from who Jesus was supposed to be – he wasn't there to make people feel guilty, or to tell people off. God should be all about love.

Whilst at university, I've learned a lot about my relationship with faith and stripped away the lies that religion can attach to it. Jesus came to change the way that we imagine our relationship with God. He messed religion around a bit and essentially said, "We're doing this wrong, we've got the wrong end of the stick here". So a huge part of my faith has been about dissociating myself from religion, and instead stepping into a deeper relationship with a God that loves me, wants to know me, and chat with me. It's not a one-way thing where, if you mess up, you're going to hell.

At this point, I'm conscious I might be being very one-sided and a bit defensive. But we are living in a society which actively tries to stamp out the faith in everything that we do. A society in which everyone has a faith, in which everyone is in a relationship with God—that's Heaven. Some people think that a utopia is a dangerous concept but it seems a lot better than a dystopia. I think that, at their core, everyone wants the same thing: we all subscribe to the hierarchy of needs. If you described Heaven as somewhere with no pain, where everyone gets

along with each other and we party and eat forever, that would sound like a good time to anyone.

I want people to understand that faith and religion are different things; faith is a really cool and important aspect in my life and religion is not. Religion has proven dangerous for a lot of people, I think we can all accept that, but if we started to understand Christianity as a faith independent of the baggage that religion has loaded onto it, then maybe people would be more willing to unlock that door in their own lives. People often look at Christianity as limiting what they can do: "I can't drink alcohol, I can't be gay, I can't have sex". But religion is full of rules that have been imposed by us, they do not fit into God's nature. God is not a being that will smack you over the head every time you do something wrong. There's a freedom in having an identity based in God. There are no shackles; there's this trust and hope, and there is support and love, and those are the things that everyone is searching for. A lot of people are just searching for it in the wrong place.



It grounds me by reminding me who I am

The relationship I have with faith is interesting because I wouldn't like to say that I'm religious in the traditional sense. I grew up in a household where my mother was religious; both my parents were religious but my mother taught me religion as a source of strength, not just the fundamentals that are taught. She had two academics that raised her and whilst one was an atheist (my grandfather was a complete atheist and didn't believe in God's existence), my grandmother was religious in the sense that she would talk about the epics and the mythological stories that are part of the religious identity that she associates herself with, but she would also give me the scientific reasons as to why those many years ago would have talked about different incidences in the same light.

For example, she would talk about the [Ramayana] epic that Hindus read a lot and have a lot of their festivals revolved around. It's a mythological epic, it's supposed to be written thousands of years ago and is about a God King and whilst the whole story is really wrong, the basic idea is that he is one of the incarnations of Vishnu who is the creator and the guy has his wife kidnapped by another individual and brings her back. She returns and brings peace to the world because there's a lot of instability going on and that's why the God comes down as the incarnation as the God King. One of the incidences is when the wife does come back, the society that the God King is a part of doesn't believe that it's the right thing for her to be called "Queen" because she was in another man's house and she may or may not be pure. She feels so embarrassed that the Earth swallows her whole.


Now this is the religious context of how you should be pure, your marriage should be sanctimonious and you should really be focused on how that's holy matrimony and you're taking care of those things. What my grandmother would also say is while the religious stories are a lot more flavoured to make them interesting to listen to, the truth must be that the woman came back since she'd been kidnapped by another man. She wouldn't be accepted back into society and so, when she wasn't, she gave up and she killed herself. That's one of the issues that happens even with the God Kings because they're a version of the Gods, so even they can make mistakes. They're not perfect. He didn't accept his wife so she gave up and decided not to live and that was on him. So she would give me a context to believe in so that I would not get completely enamoured by the whole idea of God. That's the only source of my strength. That was one of the things that has always influenced my way of thought. She taught me to look at these stories in terms of their moral and the hope and faith that's associated with them. Those are the ideas that she has always talked to me about.

I used to watch a lot of soap operas and every time the heroine would be so scared of the diya, which is like an Indian candle that would symbolise everything good, going out. Every time the wind would try to blow out the candle, the actress would always try to put her hands over the wick and try to prevent the darkness coming over her. It was very dramatic and I did that once when she was trying to light the candle one of the evenings before we were going to worship the God and she said "What are you doing?" and I said "No! The evil will follow if the light goes out!" and she said "There's nothing like that, the light is meant for you to focus your energies in one place, to use your religion as a method to bring you back to sanity. Don't get caught up in the flavours they use to spice up the stories, believe in the morals that they give you. Look at God as something that is external to you, that can help you focus the energies that you have in you to be the best you can be."

So the reason why I don't tell people I'm religious is that, in the traditional sense, religion and faith are defined quite differently compared to how I look at them. I wasn't sure if I should talk about them when I'm living here as an international student where very few people have the same faith or the same religion that I follow. I didn't know how to talk about it.

As far as my faith in relation to how it's been as an international student, it's played a massive role. The first time I realised that religion is something that I could define as giving me the energy and the strength to power through the darkest times in my life was when, during my first few months at university, I hadn't really made a lot of friends. I was still struggling to understand what my identity was. I hadn't met Joe yet, who was a big grounding force in my life, and I was really struggling. There were nights where I hadn't slept and times that I wasn't really cooking or eating and I was really weak for a couple of weeks. One day I just sat down and did this one thing that my mother used to do. She used to light an incense stick and would ask me to stand in front of the deity and say a few incantations before I went to school. I did it that day and for some reason I felt more like myself before I had come to university. That's when I realised the sense of familiarity that my faith gives me, it grounds me by reminding me who I am and where I've come from.

I don't agree with everything that is said and practiced by a lot of people when it comes to Hinduism but what I've also realised is that it's such a pluralistic religion. There are so many Gods, so many versions of those Gods, so many varied ways of looking at the same thing, and that's the beauty of the religion itself. For me, it's allowed me to bring back what I used to know and remind me that I'm capable of a lot more. That's what my faith did for me. I don't really pray a lot but when I do pray, I pray for things like the capability to fight my way through dark times, the strength to recognise what I'm capable of, to get through situations that may or may not be there in the future. I think that's what my Mum taught me and that's what I remember.



I've been a Christian all my life. I go to Harbour, a church in Falmouth, and I really like it. I've found that being a Christian and a student is somewhat of a dichotomy—it's one of those things that people just don't expect to happen. People are like, "Oh, you're a student and you go on nights out, yet you believe in God? That's strange. I didn't expect that". Their heads look as if they're about to explode—like you've just grown four more eyes. I find it really weird how easy it is to accept someone as being a student but when you say that you're a Christian who goes to church, they begin to question things: "How can you do that?" It's something that I definitely struggled with in Art Foundation but I tended to ignore it. I would disappear for a few hours on a Sunday morning and my housemates would ask where I had been. I would say that I was 'just busy', never admitting that I'd been at church. They didn't even know that I was a Christian.

In my first year at university, I joined the Christian Union in an attempt to find my feet. People told me not to join: "They're all crazy people who believe in God!" I thought that was good, that's what I believe in too. I did find it all very intense to start off with because I had never been in a community of people where you were allowed to talk about your faith so openly. Contrary to what people had said, everyone seemed pretty normal. It was also strange to see people my own age at a church; at home, I bring the average age down to about sixty. I'm there as a twenty-two-year-old and the only person younger than me is two. It's not exactly a community-led church—it's very generational-led. You kind of get used to that, I think.

Since coming down to Falmouth and accepting that my faith is a part of me and who I am, a lot of my projects have become faith-related—in small ways that not many people would notice. For example, we have a business project to do on the side, and one of the job numbers is the same as one of the Psalms. No one would know that unless you're a Christian, and you stop to think about it. I like putting that in because the church that I go to is very creative—there are so many creative people and so many of them can inspire you. You start to think that this is OK; they talk about their faith through what they do and that's very important to me. I'm slowly starting to gain confidence through that.

I do think there's always room for improvement, though. Lots of other Christians I met whilst at uni had a very fixed idea of what being a Christian is, and I disagreed with some of the points that were made. I still respected their view point but what was frustrating was that they just thought I was wrong, even though, at the very basic level, we believe the same thing. I think the same could be said for all faiths. I don't necessarily understand Islam, or Buddhism, or Judaism, but I can still respect them. There are so many interesting and diverse cultures that you can learn about. There are going to be small similarities between them all and that's important to know because it makes these different faiths a lot less alien to everyone.

I was brought up in a Catholic family and both of my parents are Irish. I went to a Catholic primary school, I have been baptised, had my first communion, first confession, confirmation—I've done it all. Or at least, I thought I'd done it all. I thought that I knew what I was doing, and what I was on about—not a clue. Just because you've done all these things doesn't mean that you're a Christian. I wasn't in the capacity to say no; I wasn't given the option to, and I didn't really understand what was going on. It's only recently that I've been able to take a step back and ask questions. What makes a person a Catholic? What makes people this, that and the other? There are different ways in which you can explore your faith.

That being said, I think that there is definitely a huge gap between the generations. My grandmother is Irish and stuck in a generation that just doesn't seem to have the ability to understand or learn new things; I love her dearly but she's 91 and has fixed ideas on race, gender, religion, money and land. She doesn't know that I go to Harbour, which is an Evangelical church. My parents only found out in the last couple months because I was way too scared to tell them. But I think it's just a personal choice—it's your relationship with God, not a community relationship with God. Your personal relationship should come first and through that a community develops.

Since being at Falmouth and joining Harbour, my friendship group has really expanded. It's great—I'm having so many conversations and reading new things that I never would have read before. I remember having some doubts: "I'm going to go to these people who are way cooler than I am, and who know way more about the Bible than I do, and I feel very unqualified as a Christian by comparison". But I had the confidence to go regardless because ultimately, they believe in God and I believe in God—we have a common ground. It almost feels like you have your own little cheerleaders behind you, and it's nice. This is particularly true for third year: it's really stressful and, I'm not going to lie, I've really been struggling. But we can lean into God; we can read all these things together and know that things are going to be good.



My faith is everything that defines me. I believe that God is real and I believe that Jesus Christ is Lord. That belief is the very epicentre of everything that I am. From that, I endeavour to act out everything that I can. But I think that it's more than just my conscious actions that accept Jesus Christ as Lord; His Holy Spirit is transforming me. I know that I'm in a relationship with God and I get absolute joy and peace from that. My faith is how I define myself; I am a daughter of the living God and a follower of Jesus. It's intrinsic and I feel like I've stepped into my true identity. It's more than just a choice, if that makes sense. The Holy Spirit is working in me in ways that I can't understand and helps make me into the person who I was created to be.

I go to church on Sundays. I tend to go for churches that are based on the people rather than on the institutional side of things—that community you feel as part of a church is really important to me. Apart from that, when it comes to work, I see university as being somewhere that God has called me to be and I want to give everything that I do to Him. I'd say that I feel like I am following His guidance throughout and it impacts everything I do. It's just normal life to me. I guess there are intentional Christian things that I do, like going to church, and during first year I did a lot with the Christian Union. But apart from that, it's just normal life, I guess.

I feel like I've stepped into my true identity.

I'd say that for my whole life I've been aware of Him and believed that He was real. But I was about 17 when I really decided that this was a life choice – and it was actually a choice I've had to make and that I wanted to give my whole life to it. Since then, there have been some really transformative moments, where life has hit me sideways and everything I thought I knew gets thrown into the air. I found that the only thing that I could cling on to was my faith and believing that God was real and that He was who He said He was. And that meant I am who He says I am. In my life, and in the lives of others, there have been real pinpoint moments when it could be the only thing that I could hold onto. So, there are moments when I'm especially transformed by it and know that this is really what I believe. They are probably the hardest times, when it feels the most painful and the most, like, “God, are you real?” But that makes me stronger and so I'm grateful for those times.

The university as a whole is so accepting; people are so accepting generally. As a general observation, I think it's interesting how we've really overcome a lot as a culture in regard to things like Islamophobia. We've come leaps and bounds in that sense. Yet the church is pinpointed as having particular views on homosexuality and women in

leadership, things like that, and so is being shunned and pushed to the bottom. I find this interesting because the church used to lead culture, in a sense—architecture, the arts, and paintings are examples—but now the general view of the church is in decline. We've slipped so much, it's a real shame. But, at the same time, I don't think that I'm surprised by this. Jesus said that we would never be a part of mainstream culture; the world rejected Him. I'm not agreeing with some of the things that the church has done but sometimes it makes me sad that Christianity isn't seen as a part of mainstream culture. That being said, I still think that people are generally really nice and accepting when it comes to the religion.

Women in leadership is one of those really contested topics that I think so many people have been hurt by. The way I see it, I would go to the Bible and see that God has made man and woman differently. He made us completely loved and completely equal but I haven't figured out what I believe about different roles yet. I wouldn't want to say that I have an opinion on that. But what I do know is that God loves us; He loves women and He wants us to be completely accepted and never pushed down. I was actually reading a bit in Leviticus where it's talking about when a mother has a child. In the Old Testament,

she would be unclean for seven days if she had a son and would have to keep to herself for that long. But if she had a daughter it could be something up to 16 days. At first you would think, “Why is a woman unclean for so much longer if she has a daughter?” But the interesting thing is that the baby would be with the father for that amount of time and, if the daughter was with the father for a longer time, it's almost like God saying that your daughter is so important to you that you need to have this time. Sons in that culture could often be made the most important but in that moment I just saw how valued we are and how much He wants to emphasise that.

Being a Christian is everything to me but I don't think that it makes me different from anyone else. I would say that just because I say that I have faith and believe in God doesn't mean that I would see someone differently if they did not. I don't think that God sees them differently, because I think He creates us all the same, and we have such value and importance to him. He just wants to know us. That's something which I would love people to know: that having a faith isn't something that separates you from other people. Having faith is something that bonds people, because you can share it together. It's the most precious thing in my life—when other people have it, it's

so exciting to share and talk about it together. Even when someone doesn't, I think they're just as valued and loved.

I think the Christian Union is such a great presence to have on campus, especially with the events, because I think the really important thing is that everyone has the opportunity to respond to Jesus and say whether they accept Him as their saviour or not. I would encourage anyone who wants to seek the fullness of life to seek Jesus, the person who says, “I will come and give you life abundantly”. I can testify that that is true. In literally every single situation—from a place where I had actually lost the will to live to a place of absolute happiness—I can say that Jesus is always there. He has never forsaken me and He would never forsake anyone who calls out to him. I want with everything in me for people to know that He is there if they want to call on Him, and that it is genuinely the best decision you can ever make in life. If you are seeking, seek Him and you will never be disappointed. The church may make mistakes, that's true—people make mistakes and that's obvious—but Jesus never does. I want to leave on that encouragement that Jesus is my saviour and that I really think that He is everybody else's too.



I have quite a strong relationship with my faith. I've been going to church for pretty much my entire life, so I've basically grown up there. I have quite an interesting faith though, because I'm part of a Baptist Church, which often gets quite a bad reputation in the press due to the very extreme American branch. We're a bit more liberal, however. Obviously, I'm from Wales—got to throw that in there—so we have a lot of hymns and things in our traditions, and my family have a strong church link. My Granny is Presbyterian and she was teetotal for pretty much my entire childhood.

I was baptised at the age of seventeen. It wasn't until I was sixteen that I understood my faith and my relationship to God and it's really important to me now because it makes me who I am. When I was in sixth form, I used to get teased a lot by the boys in my registration because I was Christian. They kept saying, "How is God real? How can you support something that is homophobic?" and I was like, no, it's down to what you believe. In my family I've always been taught that you should love everyone, and that God loves everyone; he died for everyone to save you.

For me, the issue of gay marriage was one of the fundamental things that turned me against being baptised. I have so many friends that are gay and to me it's important that they're included and not excluded. There are people back home who have horrific views on gay marriage but I've grown up in a house that is very liberal. My mum's best friend is gay and she went along to his wedding so it's not an issue for me. However, it was something that caused a lot of problems growing up: we got a new minister when I was 16 and I couldn't understand how people could say that God loves everyone and then say that he doesn't love this group of people because they love someone. It just didn't make sense to me. I had to really overcome that as an issue because it was something that really stopped me from having a faith and properly believing that God is real.

I started reading the Bible more and started thinking, "Actually, this does make sense. This is how the world is ordered". Although, to me, some of the things in the Bible are truly horrific, and some of it has to be taken with a pinch of salt. I'm a history student—you have to question everything.

One day I woke up and just went, "You know what, I'm ready to be baptised. I'm ready to go and get dunked in a pool", which I despised because I don't like water near my eyes but there we go. Since coming to university things have definitely changed as well. I don't go to church as frequently; I'm terrible at getting up on Sunday mornings and we'll always miss the bus or won't make it. I've been to the Harbour church twice and they're so lovely but it's not like my church at home. When I am home, I go pretty much on a weekly basis. I would say that faith is really important to my identity and I'm not ashamed to say that I'm Christian.

There wasn't a time when I wasn't aware I was Jewish. Even though my mum never went to synagogue and we didn't keep the holidays, it was a fact of my DNA. Being Jewish is passed down the mother's line and that is the side of the family that I have always been closest to. You can be born Jewish and never practice the religion a day in your life but it is tied hand-in-hand with the cultural aspects.

I remember being in a school and being faintly jealous of the religious upbringing that some of the other kids had. Judaism is complex though, because you have different levels; my grandmother wanted my mum and aunt to go to synagogue when they were little but the only one in town was Orthodox, which is extremely strict about pretty much everything. Being a reform Jew is more flexible when dealing with the modern world.

Slowly over the years I have started to honour Jewish holidays. It started with observing Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) with the simple act of eating apples and honey so that I would have a sweet year. Last year, I bought myself a menorah and did my first proper Hanukkah; I force-fed my boyfriend fried potato Latkes and gave him a dreidel—he was raised Catholic but is really supportive.

I have met very few other Jewish people over the years and even fewer in Cornwall. I have to basically come out as Jewish because I don't look like the stereotype. Several times people have made comments that have been deeply upsetting because they "didn't realise". Sometimes I am in a situation where I know I don't want to mention it, which hurts. I shouldn't have to keep any part of myself secret—no one should.

It can be lonely. I think people see the Jewish community as being very tight-knit but if you are born outside of that it is difficult to be brought back into the fold. If I knew other practising Jewish people, I think my faith would flourish. I wear my Star of David necklace when I feel that I need some extra strength.

I take so much comfort in the feeling that there is a plan out there somewhere and that, no matter what happens, it will never be too much for me to cope with. I have a long way to go but I enjoy continuing to learn more about my heritage and, through that, learn more about myself.

*I shouldn't
have to keep
any part
of myself
secret—no
one should.*



I feel as though I'm the last person who should be talking to other people about faith. My mum is a Christian, so I went to Sunday school from the age of five. I learned a lot throughout my time in Sunday school and I really believe that it's helped shape me into who I am today. It has forged the personal traits that I'm most proud of, such as patience and perseverance.

It hasn't been a smooth journey, though. I've had issues with being too much of a Scrooge and I'd been tackling PTSD since I was 16. But I've kept walking in faith, no matter how far I've strayed from the church at times.

From sermons that have come at the perfect time, to having an encouraging church family, being a Christian is one of the most valuable parts of my life. Many people have heard the story of Jesus walking on water; his disciple, Peter, came out of the boat and he also walked on water. He walked in faith. And when he doubted, he went into the water, but Jesus caught him. I'm trying to metaphorically 'walk on water,' and I know that when I fall, I'll be caught. That's what my tattoo symbolises to me: to keep walking, no matter how hard things get.


My relationship with my faith is a bit different in England because we believe quite differently in Germany. Like, I've found the Christian belief in Britain to be quite intense and very Bible-bound, which was a new experience in the sense that I haven't met people before who are waiting for marriage to have sex, or who listen to the Bible so closely.

I come from a very open, Protestant church. We have a minister who's very honest about how much of the Bible he believes and how he thinks it's a fairy-tale book. So being a Christian in Germany means you don't differentiate between faith and science; you understand that we live on a planet that, by accident, developed bacteria and ended up having mammals and other animals. They understand that people, at the time the Bible was written, tried to understand the world and tried to explain it. So I found it very interesting listening to, and getting to know, the different forms of faith in Britain.

I'm quite used to talking about faith and science and what we believe in church. The ideas that my church usually present are how we should work with other people, how we should treat other people, how we are as people ourselves, and how we can better ourselves. The approach here is very different but in the end becoming a better human and working better with other people is always present in every faith.

I couldn't actually find a church here that presented my faith the way I knew it, so at first that was frustrating because I really wanted to go to a place and worship. It took me a while; I talked to my ministers at home and they said, "In the end, it all depends what you believe and how you worship in your own way". It's a bit different but it works just as well.





The meaning of faith, to me, has changed over my lifetime because I've always gone to church and to the family services in our village. When I was younger I suppose I never paid much attention to the readings because the church was quite traditional and not that engaging. I mainly went to play the percussion instruments in the songs at the front with all of the kids.

That was my view of church until I was about ten years old. When I was ten we started coming to Polzeath on the north coast of Cornwall for our holidays in the summer and we discovered a church called Tubestation. It was unlike any other church I had ever known. I didn't even

know that churches could be like that; it was upbeat with modern music played with a band, which was new to me because we'd only ever had an organ at our church. It really redefined what church was to me because everyone there would contribute to what the pastor at the front was saying, which would be unheard of at the little church in my village. The pastor at the Tubestation also wore board shorts and flip flops. That just didn't happen there.

It was quite strange realising what church could be because ours was always very structured and traditional – very formal. I just thought that that was what Christianity was about, that we all had programmes that we all

followed. At Harbour now, in Falmouth, we don't have programmes and we don't have Bibles either, you just bring your own if you want to. Going to the Tubestation really opened my eyes to what faith could be and I realised that faith was sort of a feeling. It's a feeling of witnessing the Holy Spirit inside the people around you and inside yourself. Since then, my point of view of what faith is has changed a lot.

My sister and I and my two friends from home led four services every year from when we were about 15 for a few years in our church at home and we took on a Tubestation style. We would have all of the songs at the beginning to really get into the zone to worship and think about God in a passionate way where you can express yourself. One of my favourite things at Harbour is just singing really good songs; I think worship to me is really well expressed in song and dancing as well.

I then took A-Level Philosophy and it really opened my eyes to different viewpoints. We looked at atheism and agnosticism and loads of different things that made you think factually. We looked at the design argument, which is how there is so much beauty and perfection on Earth that can't have not been created by a designer or maker. There are lots of things for and against God that I learnt about that really shifted my opinion. From doing A-Levels I haven't really been one hundred percent sure whether I believe in God or not. But then, sometimes, I'll feel the Holy Spirit just randomly, like if I'm on a walk with my sister or in our favourite place near our village. We'll feel the Holy Spirit and that just reassures me that God is there and that I have faith.

A really poignant moment was when my sister and I climbed Mount Kenya. We had raised money for an elephant charity and we got there just in time for the sunrise. It was like witnessing God's power and beauty in front of our own eyes. That was such a moment of realisation of how powerful God is. It crushes every sort of doubt that you have.

When I came to Falmouth University last year I was in a hard space. My twin sister died four weeks before I came to Falmouth – she'd been at Falmouth the year before, so the plan was that we'd both be in Falmouth together. She'd been to Harbour before, so when I got to Falmouth I didn't really know what was going on. I was in a very raw, upside down world where nothing was really right and I couldn't see sense in anything. But Harbour was there to welcome and embrace me, all these people that I'd never met before were all there waiting for me and were a network of support and love. That's what I really found in faith; there is love, there is always an abundance of love. You can't put a price on that.

That seemed God-given, that Harbour was here, because it helped me so much in the first days that I was here, and then the weeks and months. Even in second year now I still love having Harbour as a support. I met my boyfriend, Adam, at Harbour and I felt like that was God-given, it was time when I needed him and it felt like God had sort of put him in my path. I'd never really felt God had actually done something in my life, I'd never really witnessed a miracle. I'd felt the Holy Spirit but nothing really that God had actually done. So that really secured my faith in a time when I needed it most.

Faith does evolve and it's alright to have doubts. That's what being a Christian is about, it's about really believing and you need a reason to believe – if you've felt the Holy Spirit, then that assures you that God is there and that he loves you.

People get a bad impression about Christians, like when you see Christians trying to shove their faith into your face when you're not ready for it. That's really not what Christianity is about at all, I think Christians want other people to be Christians because they know how good it is for your soul. Christians are shrouded in love and made of love because God is made of love.

Our voices matter



Faith is based within trust and I think trust is when you know that someone really loves you. For me, faith is a massive element in both knowing and getting to know somebody that really loves me and knows me better than I know myself. From that place of safety and trust, I've learned to have faith in God, as I totally believe He won't ever let me down. He is faithful to me so I can be faithful to Him; it's that idea that when you receive a gift you know how loved you are, and by receiving you are then able to give. For me, being able to receive faith — because "faith is a gift" — means that I can almost give it away and then act on my faith. I think faith is often about "taking a leap" — you don't always know exactly how life will look but you can totally trust the journey into God's safe hands. This is a liberating place to live from.

I've gone through some real times of struggle and hopelessness in my life but God has really come through in those areas. He has shown me that beauty can come from ashes and the biggest hurts or pains (Isaiah 61). He has shown me through the journey that He undeniably exists as He was the rock I found when I hit

rock bottom. One day I was on the rocks at Gylly beach and I swore at the top of my lungs, “Jesus, if you’re alive please bring beauty from the ashes in my life. He then did exactly that over the next few months, resulting in me choosing to get baptised in the sea and my life never being the same again. He has totally healed my heart, restored my joy, set me free and shown me who I am. I’ve also come to see the most amazing strength even in my weakness.

That’s what faith is to me. It is a wild, shameless adventure and doing it with someone that knows me more than anyone else gives me the courage to do things that I wouldn’t otherwise do. For instance, there are trips that I’ve taken that I would have never gone on, had God not been there with me. Faith can open doors; it can change lives and has changed mine completely. It has given me a joy that’s uncontainable, a hope that is unshakeable and such a deep love for people — if God can love me at my worst, then I can love anyone else in their brokenness too.

There was one particular trip that I went on recently which God really paved the way for. I went to Cape Town on a quick trip for a project that I was doing on an ex-prisoner, which for me was huge as I have a huge passion to give a voice to the voiceless. It was out of this world

to see things happen that I wouldn’t have even thought possible. I had doors swing wide open in every area, allowing me to film this man’s story and give him a voice. Going to a place that’s not particularly safe to travel to, especially on my own, was a really big step for me. I saw miracles happen daily and got to hear how this man’s life was transformed miraculously through him encountering Jesus in prison and wanting to change his life around. The hope he found in Jesus is what he has now put his faith in and it was awe-inspiringly incredible to see the difference God has made in his life.

This is why faith is phenomenal for me: it meets us in our darkest moments. We were both in fact met in our different prisons; for me, it was a prison of my heart and mind and, for him, it was a physical prison where he was bound. Jesus met him there and set his heart free to the point where he wanted to give him everything. While I was in Cape Town, I went to two different interviews with him and I saw him experience new places, opportunities and doors open for his future. Now, a couple of months on, his life has completely changed. He still has struggles and has to lean on Jesus but it has transformed him and given him a new perspective and hope. That trip also transformed me.

If we were in a jungle, God would be the lion. As we all know, the lion has a roar and the reason it has a roar is because it has the highest authority. With its roar, the lion can scare but it can also empower. For me, faith is like being the lion; when you know who you are, you can roar because you’re so secure in who you are. There are moments that I have seen where God can be silent but you still know who He is. A lion rests as much as it roars and I think there are moments when, yes, sometimes we have to speak. But there’s also such power in silence too. It’s about knowing when to speak and when to be silent but my faith has taught me that our voices matter. Each voice is like a drop in the ocean; while the impact may seem small, every opinion influences our culture. I think this gives me the courage to speak when I need to. It can be scary because not everyone will always agree with you and you have to get over what people think— however, if you know who you are, then you can overcome the fear.

I think that faith plays a role no matter what I’m doing. When I don’t feel strong at university or in life, I know that I have God as a constant companion to remind me of the truth. A truth that liberates and releases joy. A joy that is not circumstance-based and that is outrageously infectious.

In terms of representation of faith at uni, I don’t think it is represented massively. I have found that people think ‘religion’ is what ‘faith’ is and they have a subconscious fear of religion. I personally don’t like religion either. But “faith” to me is different. It is about a ‘relationship’ as opposed to ‘rules’. Faith is exciting: when you really get to know about it and encounter it for yourself, it is seriously life-changing. I would love to see more of that side of faith represented in university life because it can transform lives. It’s a relationship – it takes time, but it’s so worth the ride. It is wild and it is beautiful.



TOM CRANE
CHAIRPERSON FOR THE FXU FAITH COMMITTEE

afterword

I am a Norse Pagan: somebody who works with the Scandinavian Germanic pantheon. You've probably heard about them through Marvel—it's obviously not very accurately represented in terms of the mythology but I'm perfectly fine with the pop culture side. I'm not going to be somebody who's evangelical about it, or claim that it's offensive to my beliefs, because it's not like that at all. It's just that it leaves a certain perception—I've heard people say things like, "do you just read too many comic books," and that's not what the faith is like. But I don't really mind how the religion is represented, because it's all based in myth. It's public domain—people can deal with it as they choose.

What I think I would like, however, is representation not just for my area of Paganism, but for Paganism more generally, as people don't often know what it is. Some people I talk to have a very slim frame of reference: they'll either go for druids and Stonehenge, or for the satanic side. I personally like to distance myself from the Satanists because they're different. I define Paganism as any kind of religious practice that is pre-Christian, non-Abrahamic and European, so I like to distance myself from anything that is Abrahamic. The reason I include "European" there is because I think it's quite patronising to non-European religions to say, "Oh, you're under our thing too". Paganism is basically an umbrella term that catches a lot of smaller groups and, while Hinduism existed before Christianity and is definitely not Abrahamic, I feel that its presence as a major world religion means that it doesn't need to be included in the bracket. I tend to add the word "European" to my definition just to make that clear.

I've been a Pagan since I was about 16—so four or five years now.

I specialised with the Norse pantheon about a year ago now; I started having experiences that I didn't feel were accounted for by the things that I was doing before and everything seemed to draw me that way. I was

quite new to that stuff when I first met my girlfriend. She was talking to me about it and tried to help me understand it a bit more; she started having the same experiences as well, which was interesting. We're now in this position where I mainly work with Loki, and she mainly works with Signy, who is Loki's wife. This wasn't something we planned at all—we're both interested in breaking down gender boundaries and binaries, so we often laugh at the fact that we've gone for deities of husband and wife combination. We often have a microcosm of the deity marriage banter in our own relationship.

One of the current problems in the community that I see, which is definitely a problem with the Norse Pagan branch, but can be a problem with other branches as well, is an increase in fascism. It's not inherent with the religion but a lot of people like to corrupt it to be about that. They take from it things about inheritance; that they are descended from the Gods. This is not true and involves a complete warping and misreading of the myths. I've seen a lot of graphics and things that look spookily similar to SS logos, whether intentionally or otherwise, and there are certain symbols that you can't wear anymore because they're tied up with race issues. The rune for the "o" sound, called Othala, has now been corrupted to mean that cult "pure bloodline" bulls**t. The rune has had its meaning changed and now can't be engaged with or used in a public way.

Cultural appropriation is another big problem in Paganism and I've come across a lot of people who seem to be unaware of these issues. I've heard people describe a select group as "Magpie Pagans" who pick "shiny" things from different belief systems. It's OK to a degree to find stuff and like it but you have to be aware of the context that you're taking it from—often that all kind of dissolves. And this appropriation has an impact on how people look at the faith, especially in the UK, where it tends to get lumped in with New Age practices. There is some overlap but it doesn't entirely explain what it is. Not as many people have put

the required time and research into it to recognise which parts have been adopted by fascism, even when some people who use it aren't necessarily or overtly fascist themselves. They don't necessarily know that it's come from a tradition; we should probably go right back to the source text to show how much it has been twisted. This is less of a problem in the UK but in Europe it's heavily associated with fascism by those who look at it from the outside. It's a subsection of faith that I wish would go away—it does affect people's perceptions and you have to take time to clarify that that's not what you think.

People can be attracted to the faith for more positive reasons, however. There's a reasonably large community of people who work with Loki and are attracted to him through trans issues, as there are frequent gender changes. Most people have heard the story about how he's a horse's mother. If you haven't heard that one, he stops a wall from being built by turning into a mare to distract the builder's horse. Then, nine months later, or whenever the gestation period of a horse is, he returns to Asgard with an eight-legged horse. There's a lot of gender-swapping and allusions to him spending some years as a milk-maid that are throwaway references in some lines of poetry. That's not the reason why I was attracted to Loki as a point of religious practice but it's something that I can perceive as liberating and is something that a lot of people are attracted to for that reason.

I'm the Chairperson for the FXU Faith Committee which aims to represent the views of students of Faith in decision making. The current challenge is how do we best engage students of different faiths in conversations at a time and a place that suits them. We're looking into different models of representation and hope to find a solution that works going forward.

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