

MEETING JESUS AT UNIVERSITY

Review by E. Ochsenmeier – *Groupes Bibliques Universitaires de Belgique* – September 2009

DUTTON, Edward. *Meeting Jesus at University: Rites of Passage and Student Evangelicals.* Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008.



THOUGH EVANGELICAL student ministries have been around worldwide for decades, for the most part they have remained under the radar of critical and scientific work. Dutton's essay, partly based on a doctoral dissertation in Anthropology of Religion presented at Aberdeen University (Scotland), is therefore a welcome addition to the literature on religion and higher education.

Dutton attempts to reconcile two models of "Rites of Passage" (rites that function as transitions between two stages of life) in anthropology studies: Victor Turner's theory of the *Communitas* model—according to which during a rite of passage, social differences are broken down to create a community that provides a sense of belonging—and Eade and Sallnow's model of *Contestation* according to which some of those who undergo a rite of passage stress their own differences and even exaggerate them. Dutton's suggestion, which draws from the writings of Hammond and Hunter, is that both models can be reconciled if the rite of passage is thought of in terms of structure: there is first structure, then *communitas*, then structure (142). Though the *communitas* model has been criticized, Dutton offers a revised model called the *Level Model* (144).

Dutton's thesis is that university is a rite of passage, a corridor between two stages of life (hence the use of Victor Turner's term of rites of passage as "liminal" [from the Latin *limen* corridor] phases leading to status elevation...." 5). University is "a time when young people have their identities challenged, remoulded and even fundamentally changed as they become adults" (ix). These challenges and changes present an opportunity to mix with people of other social groups but also to join a structured and structuring movement like a Christian Union. The book "will ex-

amine the relationship between universities, the intensity to which they are a Rite of Passage, and the evangelical student groups within them." (ix).

Though he is aware of its limitations, Dutton nevertheless follows a rather wide, and in my opinion controversial, definition of "evangelical" that somewhat equates evangelicalism with fundamentalism in the sense that it "involves a retreat from the contemporary culture into a strongly differentiated counter-culture which usually aims to evangelise." Conversion is indeed seen as central to all the groups studied, but with varying levels. In the more liminal universities, those that are more strongly differentiated with the students' life, evangelical groups tend to focus more on conversion than in less liminal ones, though Dutton does recognize the speculative part of such a conclusion (13). After having detailed his approach and given some background on his own personal experience at Durham University (UK) in the first chapter, Dutton tests his thesis in six different settings.

Each chapter opens with a brief section on the relevant historical, religious, and educational background. In each case Dutton examines how differentiation is manifested in structure, clothing, language, drinking, the executive committee of the student movement, etc. Four of the case studies are the result of Dutton's own field work: Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (OICCU) at Oxford University; Aberdeen University Christian Union (AUCU) at Aberdeen University; *Christelijk Studenten Leiden* (CSL) at Leiden University in the Netherlands; *Oulun kristittut opiskelijat* (OKO) at Oulu University in Finland. OICCU, AUCU, and OKO are affiliated with IFES (the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students). Dutton also studies the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) group at the Trinidad campus of the University of the West Indies through the research of Eila Helander conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s and some groups in American universities based on other primary research.

The longest chapter is dedicated to the OICCU. In England many students move away from home, applications are a strenuous process, and universities are status raising. For Dutton, given Oxford University's structure, operation, status, and lack of relationship with the rest of the city, the university is very liminal and prone to *communitas* development, especially since Oxford may lead to a change of social status for those coming from English state schools (26). Students from state schools were indeed over-represented among those who became Christians in the OICCU (30). A high percentage of the OICCU members said

they had become Christians there, even if they came from Christian backgrounds or thought they were Christians before, which is an indication of the liminality of Oxford. Dutton also emphasizes the importance of witnessing and evangelizing. As research purports (reference is made to the works of Steve Bruce), “evangelism and ‘witness’ are often used as a means of monitoring group behavior in Christian Unions.” (32).

In the third and fourth chapters, dedicated to the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship groups on the Trinidad campus of the University of the West Indies and some campus ministries in the USA, liminal elements of the university systems are brought to light that seem to confirm Dutton’s thesis. In the USA for example many students move quite some distance from home to attend university after what is sometimes a quite grueling and long application process. The following chapter studies the student ministry at Aberdeen University. Scottish universities are generally not very liminal. Usually students in Scotland do not study far away from home. Furthermore, since university attendance is higher in Scotland than in England, it is comparatively less status raising (79). The AUCU is less strictly structured than at OICCU, meets less often and is much smaller. Because of lesser liminality, *communitas* is less developed for first year students (82). It is also less conservative and differentiated in beliefs, clothing, etc. than OICCU. Very few AUCU members become Christians at AU (24% compared to 84% at OICCU (84). The AUCU is also less interested in direct evangelism (86).

The next two chapters investigate the student ministries of Leiden University in the Netherlands and Oulu University in Finland. In both these countries access to university is much less selective, students usually come from the area where the university is located. In Leiden, two thirds of the CSL members were female at the time of study. A majority of the students were from a Protestant background and had attended Protestant schools (102), the membership process was very informal, there was little doctrinal differentiation from the surrounding protestant culture. In Finland, university is more liminal for women than men who oftentimes have had their rite of passage through a previous military experience. In both universities the groups were small with little emphasis on conversion and outreach. Only one of the students interviewed became a Christian in Leiden, and only one female student was found who became “saved” there (112). In Finland few members of OKO had a conversion experience and few of those who did had it at university (127). The most regular students at Oulu University were female students from conservative and “awakening” backgrounds. Given the lack of liminality, very little *communitas* was fostered. Another evangelical group met at Oulu, the majority of its participants were also women. This group, National Outreach, was

even more loosely set up than OKO and organized very little outreach (138).

Dutton concludes with a final chapter that revisits the concepts presented in the introduction as tested by the material surveyed. In line with Hammond and Hunter’s research, one of his main conclusions is that more liminal universities offer an environment where students become more conservative and conversions more frequent, and vice versa (cf. 139).

Though this book does not deal with “applied anthropology,” Dutton thinks that it would be of interest to evaluate its consequences for shaping student ministries and evangelism. Though all might not agree that student ministries should be conceived with the structure of the university in mind, Dutton thinks that there is much to say to defend that as Paul made himself all things to all people (1 Cor 9.22), so might student ministries consider being shaped around university structures.

QUITE NATURALLY, it is not unusual for religious organisations to overspiritualize their operation, to couch their fortunes in spiritual terms (prayer, commitment, God’s action, etc., or lack thereof). Socio-anthropological studies, on the other hand, operate from a human or societal perspective. In that respect, Dutton’s book is a fitting reminder of the obvious but often neglected point that more mundane or trivial constraints also play a part in the operation of religious organisations, in this case the structure of the university and the education system. The fate and shape of student ministries is related to the culture and university systems in which they operate. I find this so obvious that it is hard to think that it needs to be justified. Yet the full implications of this are rarely taken into account. Student ministries are oftentimes shaped according to their context of origin, usually the UK or the USA, much less to their context of operation. In Belgium, where I live, universities have little liminality: there is basically no application process; you study where you want to and it is up to you to meet the standards at the end of the year, there are no residence halls, most students go home at night or during week-ends, if they are from a church background they continue to attend the same church or youth group. There is thus little reason for them to add another activity to their very busy schedule to meet with students that they do not know. It probably is one reason why campus groups are tiny.

Dutton’s study should also suggest further investigation into the difference between the goals of an organisation as set in programs and manuals and the goals of those who actually run and participate in its activities, or refuse to do so. These do not always match. Thus, Dutton remarks several times that despite the avowed goal of evangelism characteristic of evangelical student ministries, few students actually “convert” during their university studies or through

such ministries. This is a well-known, if oftentimes hushed fact, and raises interesting sociological, theological, and managerial issues. A further issue that naturally flows from Dutton's study, even though it is not mentioned, is whether the goal of students ministries should be to have groups on local campuses or to work with university students. These two goals may not always coincide. Campus groups may not always be the most adequate and efficient means to work with and among students.

But Dutton's book also shows the limitations of studying religion from a purely socio-anthropological perspective and with a thesis that needs to be proven. Here and there one has the impression that the data is read through the thesis and that liminality is found even where it really may not be an important factor. Liminality has become an *übertheory* that leads to a monocausalistic interpretation of a very complicated and multi-faceted reality. It is hard to shed the feeling that sometimes this is socio-anthropology from above, from the perspective of the observer and his theoretical framework and that the reading of the data is tainted by the glasses of the theory. This is evidenced in the chapters dedicated to Trinidad and USA. Despite the reassurance given as to the reliability of the research used, one wonders how far the methodological validity of the thesis can be extended when no interview or primary material was used with the purpose of testing the hypothesis of liminality. This may be one reason behind the extensive use of hypothetical expressions in those chapters (see for example 70–71, perhaps... might be interpreted... might be conceived... appear to be..., etc.). This liminal monocausalism sometimes leads to debatable interpretations. Thus, for example, Dutton interprets the motivation behind a public prayer in Aberdeen this way: "This might be seen as a play for or assertion of status as she [the group member] is probably alluding to a particular Biblical passage and is there-

fore deliberately, publicly showing Biblical knowledge through her prayer." (p. 91–92). Note how the interpretation switches from an hypothesis ("This might be seen...") to a strong assertion as to the motives of the speaker ("is therefore deliberately..."). Has Dutton actually tested his hypothesis by asking this person what she was doing and why? Similarly, since people convert for different reasons, it would have been nice to have more input from the converts met during the field work and hear their perspective. Surely, liminality and *communitas* are not the only reasons for the fortunes of student ministries. That conversion may have different explanations is granted (p. 30) yet liminality is used as a defining factor (ex 138). Though Dutton warns that one should not be reductionist, I fear that here and there he cannot avoid that trap.

From another perspective, to test Dutton's theory one should try and see whether it is falsifiable. Do some students join or refuse to join a student ministry consciously for reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with liminality? With hindsight, how do students who were involved in students ministries or who, being well aware of their existence, did not want to attend, interpret their experience?

Despite these reservations, I would recommend reading this book to anyone who is involved in student ministry or is a student of such work.

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