Crop-tops, Hipsters and Liminality: Fashion and Differentiation in Two Evangelical Student Groups

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Abstract: This article will examine the use of contemporary fashions as a means by which evangelical students express a sense of differentiation from other students. It will draw upon detailed participant observation. It will use this data to criticise Turner's understanding of liminality. The article will demonstrate that university is a liminal phase and that Oxford University is more liminal than Leiden University. It will argue that, drawing upon the groups assessed, liminality is better defined as a loosening of structure on one level and a reassertion of structure on another. In looking at fashions among evangelical students, it will argue that the more liminal a university is, the more structured and differentiated its main evangelical group appears to be. Moreover, the article aims to provide useful research into fashion among evangelical students.

Introduction

Some evangelical students at Oxford University make their religiosity clear to other students. They can often be seen to wear “hoodies,” from their annual Mission Week, which are adorned with a bible verse and slogans such as “Are you Saved?” The majority are far subtler in their use of clothing but there are clear differences between the way they dress and the way that Non-Christians would generally dress. By contrast, evangelical students at Leiden University, in the Netherlands, wear, in essence, the same clothes as other students. I cite these images because they neatly encapsulate the area that this article will address. The article will examine the degree to which members of university evangelical groups, at two very different universities, express their degree of differentiation through their clothing. It will demonstrate that the clothing worn by members of Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (OICCU) betokens the highest degree of differentiation while that worn by members of Navigators Studenten Leiden (NSL) points to a considerably lower degree of differentiation. I will use these findings to highlight a broad methodological criticism. I will suggest that, at least in the cases discussed, the more liminal a situation is, the more communitas there is on one level and the more structure there is on another level. In this regard, the paper will critique the understanding of liminality advocated by Victor Turner who suggests that the more liminal a situation is, the less structured it is. The article engages with the study of religion because it examines the relationship between the student evangelical group and the liminal phase in which it operates. Moreover, it disputes the broadness with which a theory that has been employed to understand the dynamics of religious organisations and religious activities, such as pilgrimage, can be applied. The article will also provide considerable insight into the ways in which evangelical students employ clothing and fashion to express their sense of differentiation. Thus, the article will first look at Turner's understanding of liminality. Thereafter, it will look at why fashion is the most salient sign of differentiation, it will outline my fieldwork methodology and outline the composition of OICCU and NSL. Then, drawing upon interviews with group members, it will demonstrate the differing levels of differentiation in relation to fashion.
**Turner and Rites of Passage**

[2] For Turner, Rites of Passage involve a “passenger” passing through a gap between two cultural realms—an *liminal phase*. In this passage, he experiences a “state of transition” which differs markedly from his previous pre-liminal or his future post-liminal experience. This passage tends to involve “segregation, marginality and aggregation.” (Turner 1969, 94). In this phase, the passenger lacks a specific place in “cultural space.” Therefore, the fellow-passengers tend to experience a strong sense of togetherness in which social distinctions and structure become less relevant. Turner terms this feeling *communitas* (Turner 1969, 95). This allows the fostering of strong bonds (Turner 1969, 96). For Turner “*Communitas* is where structure is not” (Turner 1969, 126), although he earlier defines it as “rudimentary structure” (Turner 1969, 96). Turner also distinguishes between the “liminal” and the “liminoid.” Turner mainly notes the liminoid in industrial societies. People’s work lives are segmented in complex societies into different groups that might have little actual contact. These workers are controlled, more so than in tribal societies, by structured time and rhythm. Turner understands the liminoid as the break from such rigidity in the form of leisure time. Thus, the “liminal” is in some way part of societal structure whereas the liminoid is effectively a break with it (Turner 1992, 54–56).

[3] I think the main difficulty with Turner’s model is his view that the liminal phase leads simply to *communitas*, which is an absence of structure. In this regard, Eade and Sallnow criticise Turner on empirical grounds. Turner cites the pilgrimage as being an example of a liminal phase. Eade and Sallnow claim that, certainly in the context of a pilgrimage, there often appears to be evidence of boundary-making procedures and strong animosities between pilgrims while there is also evidence of *communitas* (Eade and Sallnow 1991, 2). Thomas Schwartz levelled a very similar criticism in an early review of *The Ritual Process* (Schwartz 1972, 906). In later writings, Turner refers to various “mundane and profane structures” that the pilgrimage allows one to break free from (Turner and Turner 1978, 10). However, Turner notes that such structures as “markets, hospices, hospitals . . . transport” (Turner and Turner 1978, 22) are part of the pilgrimage itself. I would suggest that it is the sharing of these structures that assist in bonding the pilgrims. They assist in creating *communitas* but they also create structure. Hence, in the Pilgrimage at least, there is a structure on one level and *communitas* on another. Indeed, I would suggest that Pilgrims engage in boundary making procedures because they require some kind of structure in ill-defined and liminal environment. Turner himself points out that for many the liminal is “the acme of insecurity” (Turner 1982, 46) and, as such, a desire for structure might be expected. It will be my argument that OICCU can be seen as an example of boundary-making in highly liminal circumstances. NSL, I will argue, has weaker boundaries in relation to clothing and I will demonstrate the group’s circumstances to be less liminal. Thus, the article will dispute the broadness of Turner’s model.³

**University as a Rite of Passage**

[4] University is a transitional phase. A person enters at around the age at which they reach legal majority. In Britain and the Netherlands students begin their degree at eighteen or nineteen. By the end of the phase, they have a degree and, consequently, potential access to professions to which they would not otherwise have access. Students are also, it might be argued, not quite adults at this point or, at least, are not quite recognised as having this status. Although students are living away from home, their environment can be compared to a school in some respects and their behaviour is regulated, in the main, by the university rather than civil authorities. At many British, although not Dutch, universities students are even catered for at the beginning of their courses as if they were at home. University is an ambiguous space, in which a student is neither child nor adult. At a university such as Oxford, a student is a child in the sense that they live in college, are catered (at certain regulated times) and cleaned for by a college, they are looked after by college authorities with a pastoral tutor and may be required to share a bed-

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room. Also, depending on the college, they may be required to follow certain rules with regard
to attendance at formal dinners, for example. In this sense, university is comparable to a British
public school. However, in many other senses, the student is an adult. Students are effectively
left to organise themselves. They have their own elected government (the Student Union) which
has its own newspaper. There are often other newspapers as well as various societies including
political parties. The level of academic supervision is far lower than at school with attendance
at most classes, at least in certain subjects, being voluntary to a certain extent (Daniel 1999, 10).

However, the last might itself be seen as ambiguous because the Student Union provides free
contraceptives that would not be available to non-students. It might further be argued that the
very fact that students are ambiguous about their own adulthood leads to an over-assertion of
their adulthood. Students at Oxford, for example, will have frequent Balls that they will attend
with far greater frequency than most non-students. However, there is clearly an ambiguity as to
the status of university students.

[5] University is not a clearly marked phase of life within itself, such as adulthood. It is a
period of change, that is not quite one or the other. Indeed university, as with the periods exam-
ined by Turner, also involves segregation although, as with all post-industrial societies, levels
of communication are such that this separation is not absolute. In both Britain and the Neth-
erlands, the majority of students will attend university away from home, separating them from
their family and friends. Of course, unlike in tribal societies, students may bring to university
many articles from their home lives but they are still, in many cases, separated from, at the very
least, the geographical environment with which they are familiar. In many ways, students are
also separated from the town in which they live. They may socialise purely with other members
of their university and attend mainly student bars and functions. However, university would be
liminal in allowing students to meet people from many different backgrounds. As university is
liminal, it allows us to test the broadness of Turner’s theory.

Field Work
[6] I conducted fieldwork at Oxford and Leiden Universities as part of research into evangelical
student groups at these universities. I gathered the data over a period of two years of participant
observation with three student evangelical groups for a broader thesis. These were the Aber-
deen University Christian Union (October to December 2002 and February to March 2003), the
Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (April to June 2003 and January to March 2004) and
Leiden University Navigators (September to December 2003). This article focuses on Oxford
and Leiden because I found these universities to be the most different from each other in terms
of liminality. Moreover, I found the evangelical groups to be the most different from each other
in all areas assessed in the broader research such as life-style ethics. I chose the groups because
they operate in two very different universities. While both universities tend to attract students
from professional backgrounds, they attract members of very different national constituencies.
Hence, these two universities (and thus the two largest evangelical groups) were chosen such
that the data were sufficiently broad to be useful. It would not be especially useful, for example,
to compare Oxford University and Cambridge University because they are very similar to each
other in terms of organisation and tradition.

[7] The participant observation itself involved interviewing, surveying and simply observ-
ing members of the different CUs. In both cases, two terms–or one semester at Leiden Uni-
versity–were spent with the evangelical group. Thus, I attended a broad range of the group’s
activities. In both cases, I surveyed twenty-five members and interviewed another twenty-five.
I distributed surveys on a random basis, except that I ensured the appropriate gender balance.
The surveys questioned members as to their background in terms of church, area, schooling,
parental occupation and age. They also enquired into religiosity, conversion experience and life-
style ethics. The interviews drew upon the survey information. I interviewed members, there-fore, such that they were also representative in terms of social background at Oxford, where this was a significant divide. The interviews themselves were informal and conversational. They often took place in a bar, for example, or coffee shop. They were also open-ended. I had a num-ber of questions that I planned to ask on various issues beforehand. The interviews, in essence, developed into conversations. In order to conduct my fieldwork with NSL, I had to teach myself conversational Dutch such that I could understand the meetings. However, I conducted the inter-vviews themselves in English due to the very high standard of English among Dutch students.

**Potential Data Difficulties**

[8] It might be argued that some of that which is perceived to be a pointer towards a lower level of differentiation in NSL than OICCU merely reflects broad cultural differences. It might be argued, for example, that issues relating to sex are more acceptable in Holland and this explains why, in many respects, NSL members appeared to be more liberal than in OICCU. In refuting this, I take the examples of clothing but also sex. I noted no major difference between the kind of clothing worn by female, native Dutch students at Leiden and their equivalent at Oxford in terms of the use of “revealing” clothes. However, far higher numbers in NSL wore revealing clothes than in OICCU. Equally, relatively recent surveys indicate that Netherlanders are only negligibly more liberal towards non-marital sex than British people. Seventy percent of British believe it to be acceptable while seventy-seven percent of Netherlanders do (Widner, Treas and Newcomb 1998, 351). By contrast, no OICCU members believed non-marital sex to be accept-able while twenty-four percent of NSL members did. Clearly, OICCU are much more differenti-atd. Thus, it can be countered that the very fact that NSL does reflect perceived cultural dif-fences between England and the Netherlands demonstrates that it is not highly differentiated from Dutch students. This, indeed, is precisely what we would expect to find if I am correct in the view that Leiden University is less liminal than Oxford and my critique of Turner is accurate in these cases.

[9] Secondly, there was no significant difference with regard to the place of religion in the education systems of Oxford and Leiden Universities. The only difference was that each Oxford college had a Church of England chaplain. Neither university has religious entry requirements for any courses other than ordination courses that both universities run. At Oxford, these cours-es ran at specific colleges at which the students were all trainee ministers. Dutch universities were once institutionally pillarised but this is no longer significantly the case. Thus, for the kind of comparison I am making, I think it is legitimate and useful to compare a Dutch university and a British one. However, it might equally be asked why I have selected fashion for the focus of this article.

**Clothing and Fashion**

[10] I would submit that clothing styles are particularly salient data upon which to draw in order to understand differentiation in evangelical groups. In essence, clothing and branding are im-portant contemporary means by which differentiation is expressed. The importance of branding as a component of contemporary identity has been highlighted be Hebdige who investigated various sub-cultural groups such as “punkns.” He equally looked at the way in which such groups used their clothes as a means to achieve differentiation and distinctiveness from their broader cultural surroundings (Hebdige 1979, 101). Cosgrove has made a similar point with regard to the use of clothing in relation to the way in which “Zoot Suits” were used by Black Americans to assert themselves and distinguish their identity in the 1940s. Indeed, Cosgrove suggests that such suits became an “embodiment of disorder and black liberty.” (Cosgrove 1989, 7). Of course, sub-cultural differentiation is only one aspect of fashion theory. The literature on fashion theory is substantial. Arthur looks at fashion as a means of expressing social control (Arthur 1999),
Barnes and Eicher examine the way in which fashion is used to express gender roles (Barnes and Eicher 1992), Davis (Davis 1992) looks at the way in which clothes express sexuality. More broadly, Alison Lurie looks at fashion and clothing as a kind of language (Lurie 1991).

However, it is fashion as a means of identifying a subgroup, which is of interest to this discussion. Like Hebdige, McRobbie examines the way in which a sub-cultural group, in her case the hippies, employed clothing in order to assert a sense of identity and in so doing effectively created a brand of clothing or a kind of style of dress (McRobbie 1995, 137). In line with such research, McRobbie examines the prevalence of clothing as a means by which people, and especially young people, are able to construct a sense of group identity. There are, of course, many other ways in which differentiation can be expressed: what food a person eats, for example, or the way a person speaks. Clothing, however, is a very conspicuous and an increasingly significant way of expressing identity. Hence, I have selected it for this article.

OICCU and NSL: Background Issues

There is relatively little on literature on either British CUs or the Navigators. Stoffels (Stoffels 1982) looks at the Navigators’ history and university activities while Dutton (Dutton 2005) looks at how Dutch tolerance influences NSL’s evangelising and compares it to that of Aberdeen University Christian Union. With regard to British evangelical student groups, Bruce (Bruce 1978) looks at a Christian Union and its social context. Bruce (Bruce 1984) examines similar issues. Goodhew (Goodhew 2003) looks at the relationship between the Cambridge University Christian Union and its cultural environment.

I will demonstrate below that OICCU is more differentiated than NSL. It is worth mentioning, however, that this difference is also reflected in other aspects of the groups, a matter I have briefly looked at above. My interviews with sample members of OICCU appeared to indicate, to a great extent, a considerable level of conformity of belief with regard to the issues that appear to be left open to debate. All those whom I interviewed from OICCU claimed to believe in hell and to believe that non-Christians would go to Hell. All of those to whom I spoke claimed to believe in the devil as an actual force in the world. Twenty-four out of twenty-five in OICCU rejected evolutionary theory and all believed in the reality of doctrines such as the resurrection. There was also conformity in terms of social belief. In OICCU, all thought it was acceptable for Christians to drink but none to become drunk. Only one felt it was acceptable for Christians to smoke, only one felt it was acceptable to date a non-Christian and none felt it acceptable to take drugs of any kind. All felt premarital sex was unacceptable.

I noted a substantial degree of doctrinal conformity among NSL members. Of a sample of twenty-five, all believed fundamental Christian doctrines to be literally true. However, other results were slightly more diverse. Five believed in evolution, five were not sure and fifteen rejected it. Twenty-four out of twenty-five believed that non-Christians would go to hell but many found this very difficult to express. They emphasised that it was up to God, that it was not their place to say or even that they did not like the word “hell” and would prefer to call it something else. Many others claimed they had difficulty believing the doctrine in question. Almost all eventually assented to it but only after much discussion. In relation to social belief, there was also more diversity. All felt it was acceptable for Christians to drink and two felt it was acceptable for them to get drunk. Twenty-three felt it was acceptable for Christians to smoke, in fact most were amazed that the question was asked at all. None would date a non-Christian, but they defined “Christian” in far looser way. Also, six felt that sex before marriage was acceptable and a small minority of male members who claimed it was not admitted to having had premarital sex, which was never admitted to in OICCU. Hence, NSL would appear to be generally more liberal than OICCU. Thus, NSL would appear to evidence an even lower degree of differentiation and control than OICCU. Certainly, in terms of social belief we can see that NSL’s are far more in line with most students. Many were also happy to become drunk even if they did not regard it
as being drunk. Thus, having examined the background to the evangelical groups, I will now demonstrate differences in levels of liminality between the two universities and corresponding differences in fashion between the two evangelical groups.

**Oxford University**

[15] Having looked at fieldwork issues and fashion, I will return to liminality in the specific universities that I am discussing. In the following, I will demonstrate why Oxford University should be regarded as more liminal than Leiden. I will suggest that it is particularly liminal for those who have attended state schools. Oxford students are housed, catered for and partly educated in their colleges. For those who are from private—and especially for those who are generally even wealthier and have attended public schools—the experience of Oxford University is a far less transitional phase than for state school students. If a person has attended public school—which many Oxford students have—then s/he has already lived away from home. Moreover, university does not engender a significant alteration. Such a person may be expected to attend Oxford or Cambridge and, as he is already from a wealthy background, achieving a degree will not necessarily engender any great lifestyle change. Also, for such students, the university experience would ultimately involve less of a transition. Indeed, having attended independent schools it might be argued that, for such students, the various traditions of the university would be far from unexpected. Oxford would also allow such students to meet many others from their backgrounds and the college system—in which certain colleges are *de facto* private school colleges while a few are *de facto* state school colleges—would only compound this.

[16] Oxford would appear to be far more of a transitional phase for those from state schools. Many such students would have never previously lived away from home and would find the traditions of the university very different from anything that they had previously experienced. Being from a less well-off background, achieving a degree from a University such as Oxford might be regarded as a stepping-stone to a substantial alteration in life-style for such a student and, indeed, such a student might not have expected, until relatively recently, to attend such a university. The main point of commonality between the two social groups would be that a large number of students from a small societal faction—only seven percent of British students are privately educated—would ensure that the two groups were far more likely to come into contact than at a university with only a small number of private school pupils. This said, the experience of Oxford would still be liminal for those from public-school backgrounds. Oxford attracts members of the upper-class who hail from and have schooled all around the country. Such undergraduates would have been unlikely to have had intimate contact with pupils from state-schools, adding a further transitional aspect to the experience. Kingsbury makes the same points, arguing that universities such as Oxford are highly transitional (Kingsbury 1974, 115) and remove a student from their sense of location both geographically and socially (Kingsbury 1974, 116–117). Fisher (1994) observes very similar points.

[17] Also, historically, the purpose of Oxford was a transformative one. It took young entry from around the country in order to prepare them for certain professions, such as politics, the law and the church. Both Kingsbury (1974, 7) and Allen (1988, 35) make this point. Hence, university can be seen to remodel members of the upper class. It is still liminal for them even if it is more liminal for those from state schools. Even though Oxford might be perceived as less liminal for those from public schools there would still exist, we might suggest, an atmosphere of liminality, which they would be affected by, simply because Oxford is so liminal for so many of its students. However, we are able to see that Oxford University, for many students, is highly transitional and therefore highly liminal. The university also causes the loosening of social and geographical boundaries for many students. Thus, at a broad level, the university is very liminal.
Leiden University

[18] I would suggest that the level of liminality and transformation at Leiden would likely be lower than is the case at Oxford. According to all the NSL members to whom I spoke on this issue, a significant minority of Leiden undergraduates do not even live in Leiden. Due to a combination of factors, such as the size of the Netherlands and that fact that students have free access to public transport, for example, many students either live outside Leiden or they simply choose to continue living with their parents. Also, the university has nothing to do with the housing of students and it is consequently incumbent upon the students themselves to find themselves somewhere to live. Thus, many first-year NSL members to whom I spoke were not living in Leiden and many others had equally lived at home for much of their first year before finding housing with other NSL members. Moreover, even if the student is part of the majority who do actually live in Leiden, according to those to whom I spoke, most Dutch students go home at the weekends. According to my survey of twenty-five NSL members, one out of a sample of twenty-five did not go home at the weekend and this is because he was from Friesland, a considerable distance from Leiden. Of course, such students would certainly be in the minority as the overwhelming majority of students at Leiden are originally from somewhere that is relatively close to Leiden itself. Thus unlike Oxford, attendance at Leiden University does not separate students from their geographical area to any substantial degree. Where it does, most students go home once a week while a small minority, and a greater number in the first year, go home each evening. In this sense, we might suggest that the degree of transition engendered by the university experience is less than in our other studies. Also, the degree of communitas would be lower because there are not even Halls of Residence for students.

[19] Equally, we might submit that there exists less of an opportunity to meet students from a different background or certainly less of an opportunity for communitas to be created with them. Precisely because most Dutch students attend a university that is relatively near to them, they will tend to meet students from a similar part of the Netherlands. Although Dutch universities are no longer pillarised, as they once were, the tendency is still very much for Catholics to live in the south of the country and, consequently, go to university in the south of the country. As such, if one is a Protestant one will tend simply to meet other Protestants at Leiden University from an area relatively close to ones own. Moreover, there is less of a class distinction in the Netherlands than in Britain. Almost all Netherlanders attend state schools. Thus, Leiden Students, regardless of social background, have all attended similar schools. They have more in common than their British counterparts, rendering their contact with each other less transitional.

[20] As such, when compared to Oxford, Leiden is a far less liminal university. If Turner’s model can be broadly applied, we would expect the experience of Oxford University to be less structured than that of Leiden. Thus, the presence of a highly differentiated evangelical student group at Oxford, but to a much lesser extent at Leiden, would at least cast doubt on this view. In the following ethnography, I will look at fashion in OICCU and NSL to demonstrate that OICCU is more differentiated in a more liminal environment.

Differentiation and Fashion

[21] I observed a number of members of OICCU, although by no means the majority, wearing tops that indicated clearly that they were Christians either to other Christians or to the outside world. I observed a number of other t-shirts and sweaters of Christian origin. Among OICCU members, I also observed the wearing of t-shirts bearing references to Word Alive, Soul Survivor and Greenbelt. These events are Evangelical gatherings. Soul Survivor, for example, is an annual festival of Christian music and especially Christian popular music. When I asked members about these clothes, many commented, at first, that they just happened to “like them.” However,
many eventually commented that wearing them was “a way of starting a conversation,” particularly in the case of WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) bracelets.

[22] In general, however, I observed that very little difference in the manner in which Christians dressed and the way in which most Oxford students dressed. However, there were certain subtle differences. I observed male members to dress in a conventional manner in almost all cases. The hair would be relatively short, the clothes relatively fashionable. I observed no male who might be termed unconventionally dressed in OICCU. It was among female members that I found the greatest differences in clothing style.

**Crop-tops, Hipsters and Panties**

[23] I observed differentiation in relation to the above clothing in OICCU. There is a contemporary fashion among young females to wear “revealing” clothing. By this word, I mean the exposing of their midriffs while also wearing “hipsters” and, in so doing, often to expose the rim of their underwear. I would argue that is “revealing” because nearly shows a part of the body that is generally understood to be sexual—i.e., the buttocks or the area just above the pubic hair. Often, the underwear will be a thong meaning that part of the buttocks is exposed. This fashion was very common among female students at Oxford and Leiden.

[24] With regard to female members of OICCU, I observed the wearing of crop tops or at least high cut t-shirts but one did not observe the wearing of hipsters at all at OICCU. In other respects, the clothing worn by female OICCU members did not appear to be especially differentiated from that worn by non-members. Like many of their non-Christian counterparts, I observed female CU members wearing trousers and, in the warmer months at least, tops which might be regarded as fairly revealing. However, the hipster brand of trouser was not observed. A possible reason for this absence is the seemingly sexual nature of such a form of dress. To dress in such a manner reveals the midriff. Hence, we might understand such a fashion to be highly suggestive and thus the rejection of it by female CU members might appear to be congruous with the attitudes of such members towards sex, which we have previously discussed. Equally, I also did not observe among OICCU females the contemporary fashion for leaving the top of their pants exposed and we might explain such an absence in a similar fashion to that of hipsters. When I questioned female members as to why this was, the response, in most cases, was that they felt this fashion to be “too sexual.” A few said they had no difficulty with it but made remarks like, “I don’t have the figure for it” or “If only!” However, after further discussion, it was found that female members did not think it was appropriate for them to wear such clothing. Many commented that it was “provocative” and, as such, was “unhelpful,” particularly at a CU meeting. They commented that it had negative “associations” and, as such, was “not good witness.” One girl even commented that, “I wouldn’t want people to think I was a slut! It’s just not helpful. It’s just the right thing for me to wear.” I also asked female members whether they felt the use of such clothing would be acceptable to the broader group. Most felt that it would not be. They were correct in this feeling. All members to whom I spoke felt that it would be unacceptable for members, whether at CU meetings or in general, to wear “revealing” and “provocative” clothes. Many had difficulty in defining precisely where there would “draw the line” but certainly suggested that the hipster and crop-top fashion would not be “helpful.” When I mentioned another fashion among young women of wearing trousers such that the upper half of their bottom is revealed and then wearing a wide belt around the waist, most members just laughed. A small number commented, “I’ve never seen that!” They did not find such a fashion acceptable. The male members did not seem to find it acceptable either. Almost all male members whom I interviewed in both groups responded to the initial question about hipsters and crop-tops with some kind of joke, “Depends what their figure’s like!” “Well . . . as long as I can watch!” “I’m sure I’d be interested” and so on. Further discussion, however, seemed to indicate a distaste for such clothing if worn by CU members. Members felt that that such clothing was
provocative, would prevent concentration if actually worn at CU, would distract people from Christianity, was “unhelpful,” was “bad witness” or was “not really appropriate.” Male members felt that they would have no problem with a Non-Christian wearing such clothes even at a CU meeting. Members felt that they were inappropriate and “unhelpful” for a CU member. Even having said this, some members felt it necessary to make jokes.

**Christian Clothing in NSL**

[25] The kind of clothing worn by male NSL members was the kind of clothing that I observed among Dutch students outside of NSL. I did not observe male members wearing “Christian” clothing at any point. Unlike students in OICCU, I noted larger numbers of men adopting a more individualistic style in the form of long hair, for example, or stylistically scruffy clothing.

**Female Fashions in NSL**

[26] Among women, the kind of clothing was perhaps in general more conservative in terms of the exposure of flesh and so forth than among other Leiden students. The majority, though perhaps not a large majority, did not wear what we might understand as revealing fashions. When I spoke to them about this, they explained it in a similar way to their British colleagues. Some said such fashions were “too sexual” and immodest while others became embarrassed and made jokes such as “Perhaps I need to lose a little weight to wear such clothes!” or “I do not have the figure for such clothes” or “They would not look good on me!” But in contrast to the situation among female members of OICCU, the rest did wear such fashions. I regularly observed female members to be wearing hipsters and crop-tops together, although I only observed one female member reflect the fashion of deliberately exposing the top her pants. When I asked her about this and informed her that I had not noted such a fashion before in other such groups the woman concerned was amazed. She felt there was nothing unchristian about it and that how a person dressed had nothing to do with what one believed. Others who wore hipsters said they were just ordinary people who happened to be Christians and as such wore clothes that everyone else wore. Female members tended to agree that highly provocative fashions were not appropriate for Christian women but they did not feel that the wearing of the kind of fashions to which I referred were sufficiently provocative. They did, however, agree that the kind of fashion in which part of the female’s bottom is left exposed was not appropriate and was indeed too provocative. Male members to whom I spoke seemed to agree with their female counterparts. None of the members to whom I spoke seemed to believe that the hipster with crop-top fashion was inappropriate for Christian girls. Many remarked that such a style was simply “fashionable.” Neither did any male members hold any objection to female members wearing very short mini-skirts although I never observed any female members doing this. Male members again emphasised that clothing which was “very sexual” was not appropriate but they found it difficult to articulate precisely what that was. One member joked, “Perhaps if they walk around and they are naked then this is not good!” He then thought about this remark and decided that nudity was probably preferable to revealing forms of clothing because it was not necessarily trying to be seductive. When I suggested the kind of highly revealing fashion to which I have previously referred, many members laughed and all seemed to agree that such a fashion would not be approved of.

**Mr. and Miss Leiden**

[27] Hence, the NSL would appear to reflect, in terms of their clothing, less of a sense of differentiation than OICCU although some sense of difference is still perceptible. This difference adds credence to my critique of the broadness of Turner’s model. It demonstrates, contrary to Turner’s expectations, that NSL are more loosely structured than OICCU even though OICCU operate in more liminal circumstances. Indeed, one particular NSL event might be understood to con-
firm this very point. Each year, Leiden celebrates its liberation from the Spanish in 1575 with a large street party. In order to lampoon this, NSL held an event in a Leiden bar a few days before called “Mr. and Miss Leiden” in which members were invited to come dressed as pauperen–working-class, Leiden local people. Almost all of those who attended obliged with the female members, particularly, adopting the revealing and sexual fashions that they perceived to denote pauper vrouwen. I even noted women who generally wore relatively conservative clothing take part in this contest—for a man and a woman would be crowned Mr. and Miss Leiden. As such, most of the women wore ostentatiously revealing clothing: hipsters, crop tops, trousers deliberately worn low, low cut tops, mini-skirts, fish-net stockings and huge amounts of make-up. Of course, by adopting such styles the members were making a satirical point and were doing so on a particular occasion. But I would submit that the very fact that they were ever prepared to wear such clothes—particularly as part of an event organised by NSL for this very purpose—perhaps demonstrates a rather different attitude towards the body. Surely, I would not be exaggerating in claiming that some evangelical Christians would never dress in such a manner even to make a comical point.

Diversity

[28] I have previously mentioned the way in which the NSL represent, at least to a degree, the diversity of styles worn more generally by Leiden students. I do not wish to exaggerate the extent of this observation as it centres around one female member. One particular member of NSL was a Goth. Although this style is just as pertinent in Britain, I failed to notice any such people in OICCU. NSL, however, had one member who was a Goth and who generally wore Gothic clothing. This style has Satanic connotations, according to some NSL members to whom I spoke, but it was tolerated even so. When I spoke to other members about what they thought of this all exclaimed that, although they had no desire to wear such clothes themselves, this did not affect the extent to which the member concerned was a Christian in their view. Many disagreed over whether they thought that Gothic clothing had Satanic connotations. However, even those that did take this view claimed that they did not find the Gothic member’s clothes offensive in any way. A few remarked that they would find the clothes offensive if they said something blasphemous. But they were all certain that she was an NSL member and was a Christian and for the members I interviewed this was the most important point. The member tended to be referred to as “de Goth” or “de Goth meisje” and her membership of NSL was in no way perceived to be problematic by anyone to whom I spoke. Members preferred simply to make comments such as “She has her own style” and “She’s special” or “That’s just what she likes to wear.” Hence, it was essentially considered acceptable for this particular member to express her membership of another cultural subgroup even at NSL’s religious meetings. Certainly, we might suggest that the differences in the attitudes of members towards issues of dress might reflect the way in which NSL is less differentiated than OICCU. In OICCU, I noted a clear border with regard to what was acceptable in terms of clothing. Male and female members of both groups made this point. Essentially, the wearing of very low-cut trousers such that midriff was exposed was considered to be unacceptable. By contrast, this kind of fashion was not considered to be unacceptable in NSL and I noted a number of female members whose clothing reflected precisely this fashion. In NSL, the only fashions considered unacceptable were those that, even if only to a small degree, actually involved a woman exposing herself. In this sense, the level of control exerted by NSL over the clothing worn by its members would appear to be at least marginally lower. To a degree, this might be seen to reflect a society in which attitudes towards issues such as sex are perhaps slightly more liberal than in Britain. However, these attitudes towards sex did not appear to be shared by the majority of members of NSL. Hence, it might equally be suggested that in having a lower level of differentiation NSL reflects the differences in liminality and so forth, which we have previously noted in relation to the sample universities.
Conclusion

An assessment of clothing demonstrates that OICCU is more differentiated than NSL. This difference in the level of differentiation fits in with the background information on the two groups that demonstrates similar differences in other areas. This is exactly what I would expect as Oxford involves a higher level of liminality than Leiden. It demonstrates that, at least with these two groups, the more liminal a university is, the more structured and differentiated its main evangelical group is. Thus, liminality leads not to “anti-structure,” as Turner would argue, but to *communitas* on one level and greater structure on another. As such, the fieldwork calls into question the broad usefulness of Turner’s model of liminality and *communitas*. OICCU members were also the most likely to wear clothes that conspicuously identified them as being Christians. NSL members, for the most part, did not wish to do so. NSL were also the least differentiated with regard to sexual styles of clothing and clothing diversity. Most female members were happy to wear revealing styles or did not object to them. Equally, most male members did not object to such styles and nobody objected to a certain member dressing as a Goth. In OICCU, male and female members did object to such styles, showing a higher degree of differentiation. Fashion is an important means by which student evangelical groups express differentiation. And the more liminal their circumstances, the more distinctive in their fashions student evangelical groups appear to be.

Notes

1. I should emphasise that I am not attempting to reach a broad methodological conclusion or advocating a meta-theory. I fully appreciate that two groups is insufficient to achieve this. Indeed, it might be argued that twenty such comparisons would not be sufficient. I merely aim, drawing upon the data, to dispute the broadness of Turner’s theory, which will be discussed in greater depth below.
3. That is to say, a particularly prestigious and expensive private school at which pupils tend to board in term time. Eton is a famous example of such a school.
4. The article will look at universities and student evangelical groups as examples of a liminal phase and the dynamics of liminal space respectively. As such, I think one comparison, within the space limitations of an article, is sufficient. If the article were attempting to assess university evangelical groups in themselves then I accept that it would be useful to assess a larger number.
5. I do accept, however, that the issue of smoking is a cultural difference. Far higher numbers of Dutch students appeared to smoke than British students and NSL reflected this.
6. Equally, it might be argued that OICCU is more confrontational simply because Britain is, perhaps, a more secularised country than the Netherlands. I would counter that, even if this is so, why would English Christians wish to join a highly differentiated group in a phase which is liminal if Turner’s model is broadly accurate?
7. The word “Pillarisation” refers to the way in which Dutch society was vertically divided between Catholic and Protestant “pillars” until around the 1970s. During this period, Protestants and Catholics lived in different areas, attended different schools, hospitals and shops, read different newspapers and would rarely inter-marry. There were also separate universities for Protestants and Catholics and Leiden University was Protestant. It now admits Catholics but as most Catholics live in the south and Dutch students tend to attend their local university there are very few Catholics at Leiden University. For a more in depth discussion see Rooden (2002).
8. Naturally, there are other examples of differentiation, particularly through embodiment, upon which I could have drawn. Davies (2002) looks at various examples of embodiment in Christian ritual ranging from Charismatic activity to participation in the Catholic Mass. Charismatic activity could be seen as an example of differentiation from the perspective of non-Christians. But, as stated above, I have chosen clothing because it is such a significant component of modern identity.
10. Kingsbury also compares going to university to “an engagement,” which, like university, is a time of transition between two statuses (1974, 28).
11. I draw upon my own participant observation because, as far as I am aware, there is very little research in this area or at least with regard to these universities.
13. Thus, it is possible to conclude that most students would respond very differently to the kinds of questions that I posed to OICCU and NSL members.

References


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