



**What is the social and spiritual impact of
engaging with religious heritage sites on the
wellbeing of individuals outside the Christian
faith?**

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Executive Summary

This study investigated how engagement with Liverpool Cathedral influences social and spiritual wellbeing of individuals outside the Christian faith. The study implemented semi-structured interviews with four participant (two visitors who self-identified as non-Christian, a member of staff involved in hospitality, and one member of the cathedral's pastoral team) and analysed transcripts using thematic analysis. Four key themes emerged:

1. **Motivations for visiting and pathways to engagement:** Visitors often entered the cathedral for secular reasons, but these initial motivations frequently evolved into deeper engagement and repeat visits
2. **Atmosphere, reflection, and spiritual wellbeing:** The cathedral's atmosphere elicited emotions of awe, calm, and reflection for many participants, supporting forms of personal spirituality and mental wellbeing
3. **Social connection and personal support:** Informal interactions within the cathedral provided emotional support and a sense of community. Acts as simple as listening or sharing tea helped alleviate isolation and fostered belonging, even for those not of the Christian faith
4. **Reframing spirituality and the role of religious heritage spaces:** Participants gradually reinterpreted the cathedral's meaning, seeing it as inclusive and personally significant beyond its religious identity. Repeated positive experiences made many feel like they 'belong' in the cathedral, blurring the line between sacred and secular.

Overall, Liverpool Cathedral emerges as a flexible civic, heritage, and religious space that contributes positively to individual wellbeing outside of formal worship. It combines physical grandeur, a welcoming atmosphere, and compassionate social encounters to meet diverse personal and communal needs. The findings suggest that to engage wider audiences, the cathedral should continue to develop accessible entry points and supporting informal outreach.

Contents

Executive Summary	2
Acknowledgements	4
Abstract	5
Introduction	6
Literature Review	8
Methodology	11
Findings	15
Discussion	22
Conclusion	25
Recommendations	27
Bibliography	28
Appendix A	31
Appendix B	35
Appendix C	36

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Abstract

This report explores the social and spiritual impact of engaging with Liverpool Cathedral on the wellbeing of individuals who do not identify with the Christian faith. While cathedrals are traditionally associated with Christian worship, they also function as major cultural and heritage sites that attract diverse visitors with varying beliefs and motivations. The study aims to understand how non-Christian visitors experience these spaces and whether such engagement contributes to feelings of wellbeing, reflection, community, or personal meaning.

Data was collected through a qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews to capture in-depth accounts of participants' experience. The findings suggest that religious heritage sites can offer significant social and spiritual benefits beyond their traditional religious context. However, it is important to note that these experiences are highly subjective and shaped by individual interpretation, with spirituality often emerging through personal reflection, and the development of social capital appearing to be linked to sustained engagement with the cathedral over time, rather than arising from single visits.

Overall, this report highlights how Liverpool Cathedral operates not only as a place of Christian worship but also as an inclusive heritage environment that can positively influence wellbeing among visitors from diverse belief backgrounds. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how religious spaces remain socially relevant within increasingly secular societies and may inform how such sites can engage wider audiences while maintaining their core identity.

Introduction

Project Background

This research project was put together by the University of Liverpool's Interchange program, a registered charity that connects Voluntary and Community Organisations (VCOs) who require research to be undertaken with social science students in higher education looking for research project opportunities. As an Interchange student, I chose to be partnered with the Liverpool Cathedral as this historical landmark has played an important role in my life as a student living in Liverpool. Together, it has allowed me to produce a report evaluating the social and spiritual impact that the Cathedral has on the lives of individuals outside the Christian faith.

The Client Organisation

Being the biggest cathedral in the UK, Liverpool Cathedral is one of the most recognisable landmarks within Liverpool and serves as both a place of Christian worship and a major cultural and heritage site. Designed by a young architect, Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, the cathedral was constructed throughout the 20th century and officially opened in 1978 (The Association of English Cathedrals, 2014).

Today, the Cathedral functions as a vibrant community institution as well as a religious space. It hosts daily services, cultural events, exhibitions, and educational activities. The cathedral is also involved in social justice initiatives and community outreach, supporting projects that address issues such as poverty, racial justice, and social inclusion within the Liverpool city region.

Project Aims and Objectives

This project aimed to support Liverpool Cathedral in developing a deeper understanding of how engagement with its spaces and activities contributes to the social and spiritual wellbeing of individuals outside the Christian faith. Although the cathedral is widely recognised as an important religious, cultural and architectural landmark, there is currently limited evidence of how non-Christian visitors experience and interpret this heritage site.

The primary objective of the research was to explore the perspectives of non-Christian individuals to better understand their experiences of reflection, belonging, and wellbeing within

the cathedral setting. Ultimately, the research aimed to provide evidence-based insights that can help the cathedral strengthen its role as an inclusive community space, inform future outreach initiatives, and support its contribution to the wider social and spiritual life of the Liverpool City Region.

Literature Review

Cathedrals have historically been understood primarily as sacred spaces for Christian worship. However, contemporary research increasingly recognises them as complex heritage sites that perform social, cultural, and civic roles beyond their religious function. This is particularly significant in increasingly secular and religiously diverse societies, such as within Liverpool. Recent consensus data shows that 57% of people in Liverpool selected Christianity as their religion, down significantly from 71% a decade ago. About 29% selected 'no religion', a leap from 18% in 2011 (Liverpool City Council, 2021). These changes highlight a broader societal transformation in patterns of belief and engagement, suggesting that cathedrals must adapt in order to remain socially relevant within contemporary contexts.

In light of this, cathedrals can be understood not only as religious monuments, but as institutions embedded within the social and urban fabric of cities. Architectural historians argue that cathedrals have historically functioned as part of a wider urban network, shaping and reflecting the social dynamics of the communities around them rather than existing purely as isolated religious structures (Binski, 1996). This perspective positions cathedrals as communal spaces that hold symbolic value and cultural significance for diverse populations, including those who may not share religious identities traditionally associated with them.

One of the key themes within cathedral studies concerns the role of cathedrals as public heritage spaces that attract large numbers of visitors for reasons unrelated to worship. Research by Francis et al. (2015) highlights how many cathedral visitors engage with these spaces outside of formal religious practice, with motivations often shaped by broader interests in heritage, culture, and the built environment rather than explicit religious intent. This highlights the extent to which cathedrals operate within a wider visitor economy, functioning as accessible cultural landmarks for a wide range of people. However, this perspective primarily frames engagement in terms of patterns of attendance and visitor profiles, potentially overlooking the more personal and experiential aspects of how individuals interact with these spaces.

In addition to their cultural significance, cathedrals also play an important economic and social role within cities. Research on cathedral tourism demonstrates that English cathedrals collectively attract millions of visitors annually and contribute significantly to local economies through tourism and employment (Shackley, 2006). Beyond their economic impact, cathedrals function as venues for events, exhibitions, and community activities, further reinforcing their role as multifunctional institutions within contemporary society (Shackley, 2001).

These insights are particularly relevant when examining cathedrals within secular or religiously diverse contexts. Some scholars argue that cathedral spaces allow forms of what has been described as ‘passive participation’, where individuals who may not actively practise Christianity still experience social or spiritual value through occasional engagement with cathedral spaces or events (Muskett, cited in Francis et al., 2020). Such interactions can generate forms of social connection, belonging, and cultural engagement that contribute to individual wellbeing. Research by Francis and Jones (2020) further suggests that cathedrals can foster social capital by acting as accessible spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds encounter shared cultural heritage. However, these studies often emphasise the outcomes of engagement without fully exploring how such experiences are interpreted by individuals outside the Christian faith.

Furthermore, Liverpool Cathedral’s position within a multicultural city makes it a valuable case study for examining how heritage sites adapt to changing social contexts. As cathedrals increasingly aim to remain relevant within contemporary society, many are expanding their roles to include community outreach initiatives, cultural programming, and inclusive visitor engagement strategies. Research indicates that such developments reflect wider efforts within the Church of England to reposition cathedrals as accessible public spaces that contribute to the social wellbeing of local communities (Church of England, 2018). While these initiatives demonstrate a clear shift towards inclusivity, they often prioritise structured programmes and institutional strategies, overlooking the more informal and everyday interactions through which individuals experience social and emotional support within cathedral spaces.

Gaps in the Existing Research

Despite the growing body of literature on cathedral tourism, visitor motivations, and the social role of cathedrals, several gaps remain. Much of the existing research has prioritised general visitor experiences and the perspectives of those already connected to cathedral communities, such as volunteers or regular attendees (Francis et al., 2021). As a result, the in-depth perspectives of individuals outside the Christian faith tradition remain underexplored within cathedral studies.

In particular, there is limited qualitative research examining how non-Christian visitors interpret their experiences of cathedral spaces and whether these environments contribute to their sense of social or spiritual wellbeing. This gap is increasingly relevant in cities like Liverpool, where religious diversity and secular identities are increasingly prominent.

This study aims to address this gap by focusing on the experiences of individuals outside the Christian faith who engage with Liverpool Cathedral. By using semi-structured interviews, the research seeks to capture deeper, qualitative-rich insights into participants' personal reflections of this space. In doing so, the study attempts to contribute to a more inclusive, individual-focused understanding of how cathedrals function as spaces of social and spiritual value in contemporary society.

Methodology

This study adopts a solely qualitative approach to explore the social and spiritual impacts of engaging with Liverpool Cathedral on the wellbeing of individuals outside the Christian faith. This approach was appropriate given the nature of the research question, which focused on subjective experiences, personal meaning, and emotional responses rather than measurable or numerical outcomes. Concepts such as spirituality and wellbeing are inherently complex and are best understood through the lived experiences of individuals. As Fossey et al. (2002) argues, qualitative research focuses on developing an understanding of how people interpret and make meaning from their experiences within their social worlds. This made it particularly suitable for examining how non-Christians perceived and engaged with a religious heritage site such as Liverpool Cathedral, especially given the diversity of participants' beliefs and backgrounds, which shape how such spaces are interpreted and experienced. In addition, qualitative methods allowed for an in-depth exploration of these experiences by prioritising context, meaning, and participant perspectives (Bryman, 2016), enabling the study to capture rich and nuanced insights within a non-religious or multi-faith context.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection. This approach was chosen because it offers flexibility, allowing participants to describe their experiences in depth while still ensuring that topics relevant to the research question were explored. Particular attention was given to the way that subjective experiences were addressed within the interview design. As noted by Schaeffer and Presser (2003), questions that explore subjective phenomena typically involve two key components: a specific object or context, and an evaluative dimension that encourages participants to reflect on their own experiences. This idea informed the development of the interview prompts, which focused on aspects of the cathedral environment – such as its atmosphere, design, and community outreach – while also inviting participants to consider how these encounters shaped their sense of social connection and spiritual wellbeing. Additionally, interviews were guided by an interpretivist approach, which recognises that meaning is developed through interaction and discussion between researcher and participants (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This perspective encouraged a conversational style of interviewing, allowing participants to speak openly and reflect on their personal experiences within the Cathedral.

Establishing rapport with participants was relatively straightforward, as the informal and flexible nature of the interviews helped participants feel comfortable discussing their thoughts and

feelings. Prior to conducting the interviews, three hours were spent within the cathedral to allow for familiarisation with the space, alongside informal observation and casual conversations with visitors and staff. This initial engagement helped to develop contextual understanding and informed the design of the interview process. In total, four participants were interviewed, each representing a different relationship with the cathedral. This included two visitors who self-identified as non-Christian, a member of staff involved in hospitality, and a member of the cathedral's pastoral team. This range of participants allowed for insights into both external visitor experiences and internal perspectives on how the cathedral facilitates engagement and support.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded using a Dictaphone and subsequently transcribed to ensure accuracy in capturing participants' responses. The data was analysed using thematic analysis, enabling the identification of recurring patterns, shared experiences, and key themes across the dataset. This process involved latent coding, where transcripts are reviewed and segments of texts were assigned initial codes that captured meaningful features relevant to the research question. These codes were then grouped into broader categories to identify patterns across participation. From this analysis, four key themes were identified: (1) 'motivations for visiting and pathways into engagement', which explored how individuals initially encounter the cathedral and how this develops over time; (2) 'atmosphere, reflection, and spiritual wellbeing', focusing on the emotional and reflective impact of the cathedral; (3) 'social connection and personal support', examining how interactions within the space contribute to feelings of belonging and wellbeing; and (4) 'reframing spirituality and the role of religious heritage spaces', which considers how participants reinterpret the meaning and function of the cathedral beyond its traditional religious context. Together, these themes provide a structured framework for understand how individuals outside the Christian faith experience and engage with Liverpool Cathedral.

Limitations:

As with most small-scale research projects, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the number of interview participants were relatively small, consisting of only four individuals. As a result, the findings cannot be generalised to all visitors to Liverpool Cathedral or to wider

populations engaging with religious heritage sites. However, the smaller sample size also enabled the development of a strong rapport with participants, facilitating deeper, more meaningful conversations that provided rich qualitative insight.

In addition, two of the interview participants were closely connected to the cathedral, including a member of staff in hospitality, and a volunteer within the pastoral team. These individuals may have a stronger personal or professional attachment to the cathedral and therefore could be more inclined to present their experiences in a positive light. This introduces the potential for bias within the findings, particularly in relation to perceptions of the cathedral's social and spiritual impact.

A further limitation relates to the context in which the research was conducted. As the study was carried out within the cathedral itself, participants' responses may have been influenced by their immediate surroundings, potentially encouraging more favourable accounts. While this setting was valuable in capturing in-situ experiences, it may also have shaped how participants articulated their feelings and experiences.^f

Ethical considerations:

Ethical considerations were an important part of this research due to the nature of the research and research questions, which involve human participants and the discussion of personal experiences related to wellbeing, spirituality and individual beliefs. Prior to participation, all individuals were informed about the purpose of the study, what their involvement would include, and how the data would be used in the Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix A). Participants were provided with clear information about the research and informed consent was sought and received through a Consent Form (see Appendix B) before taking part in the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix C).

There were also considerations relating to anonymity and confidentiality. Due to the specific roles held by certain participants within the cathedral, it was possible that they could be identifiable through contextual details, even when names and personal identifiers were removed. To minimise this risk, participants were anonymised and referred to using pseudonyms throughout

the research. Personal identifying information was not collected at any point during the study, and interview excerpts were carefully chosen so participants could not be known through context. This ensured that participants could share their experiences openly without concern that their identities would be revealed. Furthermore, data collected from the interviews were stored securely and used only for academic purposes related to this study.

Given that the research explored themes related to spirituality, personal reflection and wellbeing, sensitivity was particularly important during data collection. Participants were not required to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable, and care was taken to frame questions in a respectful and non-assumptive manner. In addition, the research was conducted with awareness of the cathedral's role as both a place of worship and a public heritage site, ensuring that data collection did not interrupt visitors, staff, or ongoing activities within the space. Interviews were arranged in a quiet and appropriate spaces so that participants could speak comfortably without disruption – this was either in the café, or a quiet space within the cathedral.

Findings

This chapter presents the key findings from the qualitative analysis of the interview data, structured around four central themes, and supported by excerpts from the interviews to help illustrate participants' experiences. These themes reflect recurring patterns in how participants experience and engage with Liverpool Cathedral, while also capturing variations in perspective based on individual backgrounds and level of involvement. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout, with participants referred to as *Participant A*, *Participant B*, *Participant C*, and *Participant D*.

Motivations for Visiting and Pathways into Engagement

Most of the participants described a variety of motivations for initially visiting the cathedral, many of which were not directly related to religion. Instead, visits were often prompted by architectural interest, curiosity, or the cathedral's prominence within the city. For example, Participant A explained that their decision to visit was influenced largely by an interest in the building itself rather than faith, stating that *"regardless of religion, it's just an impressive structure...I'm interested in how it was built"*. This highlights how the cathedral's architectural significance can attract individuals who may not otherwise engage in religious spaces.

Similarly, visual and creative motivations were also evident within interviews. Participant B described visiting the cathedral primarily as a photographer, noting that the scale and aesthetic qualities of the building made it particularly appealing to capture. They explained that the cathedral is *"just such an impressive building visually"*, suggesting that its role as a cultural and visual landmark plays an important part in drawing visitors. These findings indicate that engagement in the cathedral often begins through secular interests, rather than explicit religious motivations.

However, the interviews suggest that initial visits can lead to more sustained engagement with the cathedral over time. Half of the participants described how casual or incidental visits developed into more regular interactions with the space. This reflects what can be understood as 'pathways into engagement', where individuals gradually build a relationship with the cathedral beyond their

original reason for visiting. Participant D highlighted this process when discussing how visitors sometimes enter through informal aspects of the cathedral environment, explaining *that “a lot of people come in for the café who maybe wouldn’t come into a cathedral”*. In this sense, spaces such as the café can act as a bridge between the public and the cathedral itself. Participant D went on to explain how this initial visit to the café encourages visitors to explore the rest of the cathedral.

This idea was reinforced by participants who described how visitors often return after their initial experience. Participant C observed that many individuals who first enter the cathedral out of curiosity or tourism may later engage with the spaces in more meaningful ways, noting that *“people come in for lots of different reasons, but sometimes they end up staying, talking, or coming back again”*. Such interactions suggest that the cathedral functions as more than simply a tourist destination, instead, providing an environment where relationships with the space can develop over time.

In addition to physical features of the building, interpersonal interactions were also identified as contributing to ongoing engagement. Participants working within the cathedral described how conversations with visitors can lead to deeper forms of connection, particularly for individuals who may initially enter without a clear purpose. As Participant C explained, visitors sometimes arrive simply to look around but later engage in conversation or reflection, indicating that the cathedral provides opportunities for interaction that extend beyond its architectural, historical, or religious significance.

These findings suggest that motivations for visiting the cathedral are diverse and often rooted in non-religious reasons. Furthermore, the interviews demonstrate that these initial motivations can evolve into broader forms of engagement, highlighting how the cathedral operates as both a cultural landmark and a space that encourages continued interaction. Importantly, Liverpool Cathedral’s accessibility as a heritage and communal space appears to create meaningful entry points for individuals outside the Christian faith, laying the foundations for later experiences of spiritual wellbeing and social connection.

Atmosphere, Reflection and Spiritual Wellbeing

A key theme that emerged across the interviews was the significance of the cathedral's atmosphere and the ways in which this environment appeared to encourage reflection, emotional responses and forms of spiritual wellbeing. Participants frequently described the space in terms that suggested feelings of awe, calmness, and personal reflection, even when they did not identify as religious. This indicates that the cathedral functions as a space that supports experiences often associated with spirituality, beyond the traditional sense of the word.

Several participants highlighted the emotional impact of entering the cathedral, particularly in relation to the scale and architectural design of the building. For example, Participant A described the cathedral as creating a sense of wonder upon arrival, explaining that *"when you walk in, it just feels massive...it's kind of awe-inspiring"*. This reaction suggests that the physical environment of the cathedral plays an important role in shaping how visitors experience the space. The scale, lighting, and overall design appear to contribute to an atmosphere that encourages people to pause and reflect, which participants associated with a feeling that the space was distinct from everyday environments.

In addition to awe or visual impact, participants also described the cathedral as a place that allows them to step away from the pace of the surrounding city. Participant C emphasised this aspect when discussing why people spend time within the cathedral, noting that *"sometimes people just need a bit of space, somewhere quiet where they can sit and think"*. This suggests that the cathedral may serve as a form of refuge within the urban environment, providing visitors with an opportunity for reflection that may not be easily accessible elsewhere within the city. Seen from this perspective, the atmosphere of the cathedral appears to support forms of emotional and mental wellbeing.

Importantly, while participants often framed their experiences in emotional or atmospheric terms, there were also indications that these responses could be understood as forms of spirituality, even when not explicitly labelled as such. For instance, participant D observed that *"people tend to slow down when they come in...it changed the mood a bit"*, implying that the cathedral environment has a noticeable effect on visitors' behaviour and emotional state. This contrasts slightly with Participant A's description of the space as "awe-inspiring", which emphasises an immediate and sensory reaction to the scale of the building. Together, these accounts highlight different dimensions of experience within the cathedral: while some

responses are characterised by awe and visual impact, others can reflect a more gradual shift in behaviour and emotional state.

This variation is significant, as it suggests that spirituality within the cathedral is not experienced in a uniform way, but instead emerges through multiple forms of engagement with the space. For some individuals, the sense of awe may represent a moment of transcendence or heightened awareness, whereas for others, the act of slowing down and stepping away from everyday routines may create a space for reflection and emotional processing. In both cases, these experiences align with broader understandings of spirituality as involving a shift in perception, attention, or sense of self, rather than requiring formal religious belief.

This distinction between different forms of experience is particularly relevant in understanding how individuals outside the Christian faith engage with the cathedral. Rather than participating in structured worship, participants appear to engage with the space through varied and personal forms of reflection. As participant C noted, *“there are people who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious...we might talk about music, films, or other cultural things...and through those conversations we often find common ground”*. This highlights how engagement with spirituality within the cathedral is often informal and conversational, allowing individuals to engage with spirituality in ways that feel accessible. Collectively, these accounts suggest that the cathedral facilitates a quieter, more introspective mode of engagement, supporting a form of ‘everyday spirituality’ where meaning is derived from interaction between the individual, others, and the environment (Ammerman, 2014).

Social Connection and Personal Support Within the Cathedral Space

Beyond individual experiences of reflection, the interviews revealed that engagement with the cathedral also has a social dimension that can influence wellbeing. Participants described how the cathedral environment and network within it can facilitate interactions between visitors and staff, often creating opportunities for conversation, support, and a sense of connection. Importantly, these interactions were not limited to individuals who identified with the Christian faith, indicating that the cathedral functions as a space where social wellbeing is fostered through informal engagement rather than solely formal religious participation.

One of the most significant aspects emerging from the interviews was the role of conversation within the cathedral space. Participant C, who volunteers within the cathedral, described how visitors frequently enter for reasons unrelated to religion but may later engage in discussions about personal experiences or concerns. They explained *that “sometimes people just need someone to talk to...they might come in just to look around, but then they start talking about things going on in their lives”*. This highlights how the cathedral can act as a setting where people feel able to express personal thoughts or difficulties, even when their initial visit was casual. As such, the social environment of the cathedral appears to contribute to aspects of emotional and social support.

A particularly powerful example of this emerged when one of the participants was discussing how visitors experiencing bereavement sometimes return to the cathedral after the loss of a partner or loved one. Participant D explained *“and then they come in for the first time without them...we have quite heavy conversations where you’ll just take a cup of tea over and they’ll be upset, and they’re talking to you about life... and then a week later they’ll be in here again, and then a few weeks later they’re part of the congregation”*. This account illustrates how engagement with the cathedral can evolve from a moment of personal vulnerability into an ongoing social connection. Importantly, the interaction described here is not initially framed in religious terms; instead, it begins through simple acts of care and conversation. Over time, these informal encounters may even open up pathways toward deeper forms of engagement, potentially reshaping individuals’ perspectives on religion and their relationship to the cathedral itself.

The provision of small gestures, such as offering tea or listening to a visitor’s experience, demonstrates how support within the cathedral often emerges informally through everyday interactions rather than a structured pastoral intervention. Participant C emphasised this when discussing how conversations with visitors often develop naturally, noting that *“it’s not always about religion...sometimes it’s just about listening”*. This statement is particularly significant in relation to the research question, as it demonstrates how individuals outside the Christian faith still benefit from engaging with the cathedral environment through social interaction and emotional support.

At the same time, the cathedral’s atmosphere may also reduce the sense of isolation that some visitors experience in urban environments. As participant D observed, the presence of others

within the space and the opportunity for casual interaction can create a welcoming environment where people feel less alone. They suggested that the cathedral provides “*a place where people can just come in and be around others*”, indicating that engagement with the space may contribute to feelings of connection even when direct conversation does not occur. This highlights the broader social function of the cathedral as a communal environment rather than solely a religious institution.

Overall, these accounts suggest that Liverpool Cathedral’s contribution to wellbeing extends beyond private reflection to include everyday forms of belonging and human connection. For individuals outside the Christian faith, these informal social encounters appear to make the cathedral not only a place to visit, but a space in which support, comfort, and a sense of community is fostered.

Reframing Spirituality and the Role of Religious Heritage Spaces

While earlier themes highlighted the pathways into engagement, emotional atmosphere, and social interactions within the cathedral, a broader pattern emerging from the interviews was a shift in how participants understood the role of religious spaces themselves. For several participants, engaging with the cathedral appeared to challenge assumptions about what cathedrals are for and who they are intended to serve. Rather than being perceived as solely a place of worship for Christians, the cathedral was increasingly described as a space that could hold personal meaning for individuals regardless of religious identity.

This shift was particularly visible among participants who initially visited the cathedral for non-religious reasons. As discussed previously, motivations such as architectural interest or photography often acted as entry points into the space. However, over time, participants began to describe the cathedral in ways that extended beyond these original motivations. Participant A, for example, explained that “*regardless of religion, it’s just an impressive structure*”. Yet later reflections suggested that their experience of the space was not purely architectural, as they also described the cathedral as “*a special place when you’re inside*”. This shift in language suggests that engagement with the cathedral may also alter how visitors start to interpret the meaning of the space itself.

Importantly, this reframing was not limited to emotional responses but also influenced how participants viewed the relationship between religion and everyday life. The interviews indicate that some visitors who might not normally enter a religious setting became more open to engaging with the cathedral once they experienced it as a welcoming and reflective environment. In this way, the cathedral appears to blur the boundaries between religion and secular spaces, allowing individuals to interact with aspects of spirituality in ways that feel accessible and personally relevant.

The interviews also indicate that this reframing of religious space was reinforced through interactions with staff and the wider community present within the cathedral. Participant D described how many visitors initially enter the space with uncertainty about engaging with religion, noting that *“a lot of people come in, and they’ll say they don’t really want to talk to a priest”*. However, the same participant explained that visitors often become more comfortable over time, particularly when they realise that the cathedral is a place where informal conversations and support is available. As discussed previously, this can lead to deeper engagement with the space, with Participant D observing that *“you’ll see them come back again and again, and eventually they feel like they belong here”*. This highlights how repeated engagement with the cathedral may gradually reshape how individuals view both the space and their relationship with it.

Another important aspect is the idea that spirituality within the cathedral is often experienced in subtle and personal ways, rather than through formal religious practices. Participant B reflected on this indirectly when discussing their visits, explaining that *“even though I’m not religious, it still feels like somewhere important”*. This statement captures a key tension within the findings: some participants did not necessarily identify with Christianity, yet they still recognised a sense of meaning or significance associated with the cathedral environment.

Together, these accounts suggest that engaging with the cathedral can lead people outside the Christian faith to reconsider how they understand both spirituality and religious heritage spaces. Rather than viewing the cathedral solely as a site of Christian worship, participants increasingly described it as a place that could hold personal, emotional, or reflective value regardless of religious identity. Conclusively, the cathedral appears to operate as a space where traditional distinctions between religious and secular experiences become less clearly defined. The social and spiritual impact of engaging with religious heritage sites may not only be reflected in

immediate experiences of wellbeing, but also in the way individuals begin to reinterpret the meaning and accessibility of these spaces, over time.

Discussion

The findings of this research demonstrate that Liverpool Cathedral operates not only as a site of religious worship, but as a multifunctional space that supports both social and spiritual wellbeing in ways that are accessible beyond formal religion. Participants entered the cathedral with largely secular motivations (architecture, photography), consistent with research that cathedrals are increasingly visited as cultural and heritage sites (Francis et al, 2015). This aligns broadly with secularisation theory, which argues that traditional forms of religious participation are declining (Bruce, 2002). However, the findings also challenge this narrative. While many participants did not come for worship, they continued to engage over time, indicating that religious spaces remain socially and culturally relevant. In other words, the significance of the cathedral is transformed rather than diminished in a secular context.

This transformation is particularly evident in participants' experiences of spirituality. Consistent with previous research (Francis et al., 2021), participants described experiences of calmness, reflection, and awe within the cathedral. However, unlike traditional interpretations of spirituality, these experiences were not framed in explicitly theological terms. Instead, participants articulated a more individualised and implicit form of spirituality, often emerging through atmosphere and environment rather than belief. This supports wider discussions around 'spiritual but not religious' identities (Ammerman, 2013); yet, rather than indicating a clear separation from institutional religion, these categories are often fluid and overlapping, with individuals continuing to engage with religious spaces and symbols, albeit in a more personalised and situational way (Woodhead, 2010). This fluidity highlights the importance of context in shaping how spirituality is experienced and expressed in practice. Consequently, spirituality can be understood as emerging through situated encounters with meaningful environments (Knott, 2005; McGuire, 2008).

In addition to spiritual impact, the findings highlight the cathedral's role in supporting social wellbeing. Participants described how informal interactions within the cathedral, particularly with staff and volunteers, created opportunities for conversation, emotional support, and connection. Notably, these interactions were often unstructured and not explicitly religious, contrasting with traditional models of pastoral care, which tend to emphasise formal, clergy-led support rather than informal, relational exchanges that occur within everyday life (Krause, 2009). For example, accounts of bereavement support demonstrated how simple acts of listening and

care can evolve into ongoing relationships with the space and contribute significantly to individuals' sense of social wellbeing. This indicates that the social value of cathedrals may lie not only in organised community activities, but in their ability to foster everyday forms of human connection and support. These forms of informal care and support may also reflect underlying Christian values, such as compassion and care for others, which continue to shape the cathedral's environment, highlighting the continued importance of Christianity in structuring social connection, even for those who do not identify with the faith.

Importantly, the findings also reveal differences in how these social dynamics are perceived. While visitor participants often described their engagement as temporary or incidental, staff participants emphasised the longer-term relationships that develop through repeated visits. This contrast highlights how the cathedral can function as both a transient space for reflection and a site of sustained social belonging. It is important to note that this variation is shaped by differing levels of familiarity and personal investment in the space. Visitors who typically engage on a one-off or occasional basis are more likely to experience the cathedral as a momentary environment for reflection or casual interaction. In contrast, staff, volunteers, and visitors who engage regularly develop deeper social ties and a stronger sense of attachment, allowing the space to function as a site of community and belonging over time. These differing modes of engagement shape not only how the space is used, but also the kinds of wellbeing outcomes it produces. Such variation demonstrates that wellbeing outcomes are not uniform but instead shaped by individual pathways into engagement.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this study lies in its exploration of how individuals outside the Christian faith reinterpret the meaning of cathedral spaces. While cathedrals have historically been known as sacred sites of Christian worship, participants in this study increasingly describe Liverpool Cathedral as an inclusive environment that holds personal and emotional significance regardless of religious identity. This supports arguments that cathedrals function as 'hybrid spaces' (Shackley, 2001), combining religious, cultural, and civic roles. However, the findings extend this concept by demonstrating how such spaces can facilitate forms of spirituality and wellbeing that emerge through interpretation, atmosphere, and experience rather than formal belief or institutional affiliation. In this sense, the cathedral actively blurs the boundaries between religious and secular experience, reflecting wider arguments that Anglican cathedrals are increasingly softening the distinction between sacred and secular by

accommodating activities and meanings that may traditionally be understood as non-religious (McKenna et al, 2022).

Collectively, the findings highlight the evolving role of religious heritage spaces within contemporary, increasingly secular societies. While Liverpool Cathedral remains rooted in its identity as a site of Christian worship, it also operates as a flexible and adaptive environment that accommodates a wide range of personal, social, and emotional needs. This reflects broader shifts in how religion is experienced, where engagement is often more individualised rather than strictly tied to formal belief or practice (Davie, 1994). The ways in which participants described their experiences within the cathedral provide a clear example of this shift.

Building on this, the findings also highlight that such experiences are shaped not only by the cathedral's physical properties, but also by its symbolic associations with religion, history, and tradition. Feelings of awe and reflection may therefore arise not simply from architectural features, but from the meanings attached to the space itself, demonstrating how individuals actively interpret and repurpose religious spaces in line with their own beliefs and experiences. This raises important questions about the extent to which similar wellbeing outcomes could be replicated in non-religious settings, as spaces lacking these symbolic associations may not evoke the same depth of emotional or reflective response. As such, the impact of the cathedral is best understood as a combination of material, social, and symbolic influences within a wider cultural context. This reinforces the idea that, although engagement is increasingly individualised and situational, it remains subtly shaped by inherited religious meanings that continue to structure how such spaces are experienced.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the social and spiritual impact of engaging with Liverpool Cathedral on the wellbeing of individuals outside the Christian faith. Drawing on qualitative interviews, the findings demonstrate that the cathedral contributes to wellbeing in ways that extend beyond formal religious participation. While many participants initially engaged with the space through casual and simple motivations such as architecture or photography, these encounters, over time, developed into complex experiences of spirituality, emotional support, and personal meaning. The cathedral therefore functions not only as a site of Christian worship, but as an accessible civic and heritage space where diverse individuals can engage in ways that feel personally significant. The Cathedral's physical environment, religious symbolism, and social dynamics play a key role in fostering these outcomes, supporting moments of reflection alongside opportunities of connection.

Importantly, the study highlights that wellbeing within the cathedral spaces is not immediate or uniform but emerges gradually through ongoing engagement. Rather than producing instant transformation, the cathedral facilitates an evolving process of meaning-making, shaped by informal interactions and growing familiarity with the space. This underscores the need to understand wellbeing as dynamic and relational, rather than fixed or measurable in singular moments.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. The small sample size and the inclusion of participants closely connected to the cathedral mean that the findings cannot be generalised to all visitors or wider populations. Additionally, the in-situ nature of the research may have influenced how participants articulated their experiences. Nonetheless, these limitations are balanced by the depth of insight generated through qualitative method, which enabled rich, nuanced accounts of how individuals interpret and experience the cathedral in everyday contexts. As such, the study offers valuable exploratory insight into an under-researched area.

Crucially, these findings highlight that the cathedral's Christian identity does not act as a barrier to engagement. Instead, when expressed through atmosphere and everyday practices of care, it enables individuals outside the faith to form meaningful connections with the space. Ultimately, this study shows that Liverpool Cathedral can operate as a site where social, spatial, and

symbolic elements converge to produce inclusive and deeply personal experiences of wellbeing within a contemporary secular context.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and subsequent discussion within this study, several recommendations can be made to support and enhance Liverpool Cathedral's continued role as an inclusive space for wellbeing:

1. Continue to strengthen informal pathways into engagement

The findings highlight the importance of informal entry points, such as the café and events like the light show, in attracting individuals who may not initially feel comfortable entering a religious space. These spaces act as accessible gateways, enabling visitors to engage with the cathedral on their own terms before potentially developing a deeper connection. Expanding and maintaining these entry points could support more sustained engagement.

2. Recognise and support the value of informal social care

The research demonstrates that everyday interactions, such as conversation with staff and volunteers, plays a significant role in supporting social wellbeing. These forms of engagement are often unstructured yet highly impactful, suggesting that part of the cathedral's value lies in its capacity to facilitate informal care and connection. As such, continued support and encouragement for staff and volunteers in communication and pastoral sensitivity may help sustain this aspect. At the same time, it is important to recognise that such support cannot be fully implemented without losing its authenticity.

3. Develop further research into long-term wellbeing impacts

Given the small-scale and short-term nature of this study, future research should explore how engagement with the cathedral shapes wellbeing over longer periods and across more diverse groups. This is particularly important as the findings show that social and spiritual wellbeing are not immediate outcomes, but develop gradually through repeated visits and evolving relationships with the space and people. Longitudinal research could therefore provide a richer, more accurate understanding of how meaning-making and social connection unfold over time, offering stronger evidence of the cathedral's sustained impact.

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Appendix A

Participant Information Sheet – Interview

1. Research Question

What is the social and spiritual impact of engaging with religious heritage spaces on the well-being of individuals outside the Christian faith tradition?

2. Version Number and Date

1 19/02/26

3. Invitation Paragraph

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask me if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. Please also feel free to discuss this with your friends and relatives. I would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to.

4. What is the purpose of the study?

Liverpool Cathedral seeks to deepen its understanding of how engaging with its spaces and activities contribute to the social and spiritual well-being of people from all backgrounds and beliefs.

The purpose of this study is to centre the perspectives of people who do not identify as Christian in order to understand how Liverpool Cathedral may support their spiritual and social wellbeing.

5. Why have I been chosen to take part?

You have been invited to take part because you are a visitor of the cathedral and you do not identify as Christian – the study specifically focuses on the experience of non-Christian visitors. Participants are approached randomly within the Cathedral.

6. Do I have to take part?

Participation is completely voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw their participation at any time, without explanation, and without any disadvantage.

7. What will happen if I take part?

- Semi-structured interview: I will be asking you a few questions related to the topic, but, think of this more as a conversation – if you are interested in any particular topic, we can change the direction of the conversation, it's very flexible.
- The duration of this interview will be around 15 minutes, after this, you will not need to do anything more!
- Your responsibility, as the participant, is just to answer honestly.

8. Are there any risks in taking part?

There are little to no risks in taking part, the questions being asked are solely about your experience of the cathedral, no questions regarding personal details will be asked.

9. Are there any benefits in taking part?

Your responses will directly help the Liverpool cathedral to improve their services, activities and inclusivity.

10. How will my data be used?

The responses you provide within this interview may be used in my research report to Liverpool Cathedral. Your responses will be stored safely and will be destroyed once the report has been sent out.

11. How will my data be destroyed?

The data you provide will be permanently deleted once the final report has been sent out and my university account has been shut down.

12. What will happen if I stop taking part?

You have the right to withdraw at any point prior to the end of the interview. After this, it is no longer possible to withdraw as no personal information will be collected.

13. What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?

If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let us know by contacting Dr. Lynn Hancock (lynn0406@liverpool.ac.uk) and we will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to us with then you should contact the Research Ethics and Integrity Office at ethics@liv.ac.uk. When contacting the Research Ethics and Integrity Office, please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher(s) involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.

14. Who can I contact if I have further questions?

Principal Investigator:

Jack Mariscal

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Lynn Hancock

14. summary box

Research Question	What is the social and spiritual impact of engaging with religious heritage spaces on the wellbeing of individuals outside the Christian faith tradition?
What is the purpose of the study?	To centre the perspectives of people who do not identify as Christian to help understand how Liverpool Cathedral may further support their spiritual and social wellbeing.
Why have I been chosen to take part?	You have identified as non-Christian. Participants have been chosen randomly.
Do I have to take part?	No, you do not have to take part. You have the right to withdraw at anytime prior to the interview.
What will happen if I take part?	I will be asking you a few questions regarding your experience of the cathedral. This will take around 15 minutes.
Are there any risks?	There are little to no risks, no questions about personal details will be asked.
Are there any benefits?	Your responses will help the cathedral to further improve their services

How will my data be used?	Your data may be used in my research report.
What will happen if I stop taking part?	You have the right to withdraw prior to the end of the interview. After this, you may no longer withdraw from the study.
What if I am unhappy or there is a problem?	Please contact Dr. Lynn Hancock at lynn0406@liverpool.ac.uk

Thank you for reading.

Appendix B

Participant Consent Form – Interview

Version number & date: 1 19/02/25

Research ethics approval number:

Title of the research project: What is the social and spiritual impact of engaging with religious heritage spaces on the wellbeing of individuals outside the Christian faith tradition

Name of researcher: Jack Mariscal

Participation in this study is restricted to individuals aged **18 years or over**. By agreeing to take part, you confirm that you are at least 18 years of age at the time of participation. Individuals under the age of 18 are not eligible to participate in this research.

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated [19/02/25] for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that taking part in the study involves an audio-recorded interview

3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to stop taking part and can withdraw from the study at any point prior to the end of the interview, giving any reason and without my rights being affected. In addition, I understand that I am free to decline answering any particular question or questions.

4. I understand that I cannot ask for access to the information I provide, and I cannot request the destruction of that information

5. I understand that the information I provide will be held securely and in line with data protection requirements at the University of Liverpool until the 15th of July, after this point it will be permanently deleted.

6. I understand that signed consent forms and interview responses will be retained in the University of Liverpool's m-drive until the 15th of July.

7. I agree to take part in the above study.

Participant name:

Date:

Signature:

Name of person taking consent:

Date:

Signature:

Principal Investigator:

Jack Mariscal

Hsjmaris@liverpool.ac.uk

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Lynn Hancock

Lynn0406@liverpool.ac.uk

Appendix C

Question Sheet – Interview

Draft

Important:

These questions are largely provisional, acting as a guidance. Because this is a semi-structured interview, I will follow the topics that the participant wishes to discuss, allowing their voice, experiences, and priorities to guide the direction of the conversation.

Questions:

1. General Engagement

- ☐ What first motivated you to visit Liverpool Cathedral?
- ☐ How often do you come here, and what do you usually do during your visits?
- ☐ What stands out most to you about this particular Cathedral?

2. Social Wellbeing

- ☐ How do you usually feel when you enter the Cathedral?
- ☐ Do you experience any sense of belonging, community, or connection here?
- ☐ As a non-Christian visitor, how welcomed or comfortable do you feel in the space?
- ☐ Are there any interactions with staff, volunteers, or other visitors that have shaped your experience?

3. Spiritual or Emotional Wellbeing

- ☐ As a non-Christian, do you still experience moments of calm, reflection, or personal spirituality while here?
- ☐ How would you describe the overall atmosphere of the Cathedral?
- ☐ Do aspects such as the architecture, music, lighting, or artwork influence how you feel? If so, how?