

Faith and the Coalition: A new confidence to 'do God'?

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Alastair Campbell gave the impression that New Labour was nervous about 'doing God' whereas Cameron's King James Bible speech bespeaks a new confidence in dealing with religion. On the basis of her research into changing policy on religion, and its relation to Muslim communities on the ground, Dr Therese O'Toole argues that the reality is rather different.

A new confidence to 'do God'?

In his recent speech commemorating the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible, David Cameron offers an explicit and confident statement on the role of religion, and Christianity, within British public and political life, arguing that although 'People often say politicians shouldn't "do God"', in fact, politicians should recognise 'both what our faith communities bring to our country... and also how incredibly important faith is to many people in Britain'.

By invoking and overturning Alistair Campbell's 'we don't do God', the Prime Minister seems to put clear blue water between the Conservative-led Coalition and New Labour's position on the role of religion in public life. Where Labour hesitated, the Coalition is no longer nervous about religion, and will work more confidently with religious actors.

Is this really so? The project I direct on the Religion and Society Programme has been looking at changing policies towards engaging with Muslim actors, and the impact these have had on the ground.ⁱ Since it spans New Labour and the Coalition, we are in a good position to compare.

Our findings to date suggest that a sharp contrast between Labour and the Coalition's willingness to engage with faith groups may be overdrawn.

New Labour's Approach

As Professor Knott has shown us, the Labour Government actually *did* 'do God' on a variety of policy fronts.

And over its period of office, there was an evolution in Labour's recognition of the importance of religion, particularly in relation to social cohesion. In the **2001 Cattle Report** religion was seen largely as part of the problem – a cause of social division and 'parallel lives'. By 2005, however, Labour was highlighting the role of faith leaders in fostering good community relations, and seeing faith groups, and *interfaith* groups especially, as possessing the ability to generate 'bridging social capital' and *deliver* community cohesion. This shift was echoed at local level too.ⁱⁱ

Nevertheless, there was some nervousness, hesitation, and ambivalence in New Labour's engagement with faith. Its approach towards faith communities was also sometimes seen as

instrumental, viewing faith groups as useful insofar as they possessed attributes that could service government policy agendas – above all the ability to:

- Contribute to government’s active citizenship, cohesion and civil renewal agendas
- Supply resources and social capital that could contribute to a mixed-economy of welfare provision and cohesion
- Offer a route to ‘hard to reach’ communities.

Such an approach raised questions about whether faith groups were actual *partners* in government, and whether government understood faith groups’ motivations for participating in governance.

The Coalition and Faith: Prevent and Near Neighbours

Moving to the current Coalition, the deepening engagement with religion seems set to continue – perhaps with a more clearly-stated confidence, and under the rubric of the Big Society. What does it actually amount to?

Two Coalition policy innovations, its new Prevent strategy (‘Prevent II’), and the recently launched ‘Near Neighbours’ programme, offer interesting insights into how government’s relationship with faith is developing.

The New Prevent strategy

Engagement with faith groups was pursued under the Prevent strand of New Labour’s counter-terrorism strategy, which set out to mobilise interfaith structures to counter perceptions of Muslim isolation, and to partner with Muslim communities to combat violent extremism. That strategy has been much criticised, with many arguing that it stigmatised the Muslim community as a whole by positioning it as a security threat.

My research has investigated this issue, not least by considering the effects on Prevent within Muslim communities.

We find that wholly negative accounts of Prevent fail to take account of:

1. varying practices and perspectives in implementing Prevent (for instance, different local authorities took very different views on how and whether Prevent should be implemented);
2. the active – and growing – agency of Muslim groups engaging with the state – to put it bluntly, it doesn’t do justice to Muslim communities to paint them simply as passive victims.

The New Prevent strategy, announced in July 2011, is a critical response to what went before. There are three main points of difference:

1. It shifts its focus away from the Muslim community as a whole to an intelligence-led approach to focusing on hot spots of extremist activity.
2. It stipulates that there should be no pragmatic engagement with ‘Islamists’ in the attempt to counter extremism.
3. It states that Prevent and cohesion work must be kept separate.

Our research to date suggests that Prevent II will be hard to cash out in practice.

For a start, it will be extremely hard to disembed 'Islamists'ⁱⁱⁱ (some of them self-described) from their often very active roles in civic engagement and voluntary action in many local areas (e.g. the extensive work and contribution of the East London Mosque in Tower Hamlets).

And, it is often the case that participation within the public domain is a mechanism for producing moderation in dynamic ways – which is surely preferable to insisting on moderation as an entry criterion for engagement.

Furthermore, many people at local level charged with implementation will find it hard to disentangle Prevent and Cohesion – and many still see cohesion work as vital to a successful Prevent strategy. As a West Midlands Counter-terrorism Police report concluded: 'if the separation is taken literally the ability of Prevent delivery to be effective will be undermined.'

Our research finds that over the last few decades a rich landscape of highly diverse, and politically literate and mature, Muslim civil society organizations has developed. This marks a significant change since the late 1980s – and may yet provide a strong counterbalance to attempts to simplify or reduce Muslim organisation and representation. Top-down, reductionist approaches to working with Muslims are likely to make the goals of Prevent harder to achieve.

Near Neighbours

Turning to Near Neighbours, this is a Coalition initiative that releases £5million of funding to 4 areas in England, with the aim of promoting interactions across faith and non-faith groups. Launched last year, it offers small pots of money of between £250 and £5,000 to local groups for projects that bring people of different faiths together, through a simple application process.

In many ways this 'Big Society' initiative seems designed to give greater autonomy to faith groups and let local communities generate their own solutions. What is novel is that the programme is being administered by the Church of England, which allocates the funding, and applicants require the counter-signature of vicars from the parishes in which proposed initiatives are to take place.

There is certainly unease among some, including Church of England clergy, about the Church being placed in this role. To others, the reach and richness of the Church of England's infrastructure, as well as its history of interfaith work, are valuable resources which will make this programme work.

Some non-Christians share this positive view. As one Muslim said to us, Near Neighbours might 'achieve the results that the Prevent agenda wanted to achieve', at the same time as providing minorities protection under the wing of the Church of England. Others point out that Near Neighbours' emphasis on funding interfaith activities is a necessary corrective to the mono-faith, Muslim-focused basis of Prevent funding.

Nevertheless, it is clear that take-up by religious minorities of the available funding is a challenge for the Near Neighbours programme, given the lack of knowledge on the part of many non-Anglican/Christian groups about the structure of the Church of England parish system. Indeed, almost all Eastern London funding so far has been channelled to Christian organisations.

The role of the Church of England in acting as a broker of funding and arbiter of local interfaith activity resonates with the tenor of Cameron's King James Bible Speech, in which he declared that we should not be afraid to acknowledge the centrality of Christian values in British society.

However, the religious landscape of the UK has changed in the last few decades. Whilst the Church of England has seen declining membership, other forms of faith have been growing in strength and visibility – perhaps underlining the strength of *multi-faith* approaches.

Can the Church of England really provide a core, but not co-opted, public role? Is it able to represent the nation - and its many faiths - as a whole? Near Neighbours provides one test of how the Church will navigate its role as a core religious actor within a diverse, multi-faith landscape.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what we have seen under *both* New Labour and the Coalition is a gradual move to take religious identities and faith communities more seriously.

Labour did it with some nervousness about 'doing God', and often in an instrumental or 'top-down' fashion. Yet the results have largely been positive, and have helped faith communities, perhaps especially non-Christian ones, become increasingly vocal and effective actors in civil society – one testament being the development of a highly plural and politically mature Muslim civil society.

Cameron's speech holds out the promise of a greater confidence in government in 'doing God', but there are real questions about how the Coalition sees faith engagement within a dynamic, *multi-faith* landscape. Whether the Coalition takes forward what New Labour and faith communities of various hues have achieved remains to be seen.

ⁱ See <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/ethnicity/projects/muslimparticipation/>

ⁱⁱ This approach was echoed at local level. In Birmingham, for example, the City Council's first **Community Cohesion strategy**, published in **2006**, makes very little reference to religion. But its **2007-2010 Equality Scheme** has a stated aim of promoting 'harmony and understanding between different faith groups with the view of promoting community cohesion'.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Islamism' may be broadly defined as 'as a form of political activism that is defined and bounded by Islamic faith' (Githens-Mazer 2008), but as many argue the implications of this vary considerably.