

Blurred Boundaries between the Religious and Secular in Homelessness Services

Sarah Johnsen

(Senior Research Fellow, Heriot-Watt University)

Introduction

Faith-based organisations (FBOs) have always been key players in the provision of services for homeless people. Most of today's homelessness services are, or historically were, affiliated to religious bodies. I recently led a study, funded by the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society programme, exploring what, if indeed any, difference the 'F' in FBO makes to what is provided and how it is provided. Ultimately, my colleagues and I wanted to know, if you're a homeless person using these services, do you: a) notice any difference between faith-based and secular services?; and b) care?

We visited secular and faith-based services (hostels, day centres, and soup runs) and interviewed a total of 150 service managers, frontline staff and homeless people – representing a spectrum of religious (and non-religious) identities: Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Hare Krishna, Sikh, agnostic, atheist and variations thereof. Some services were small, run by volunteers, and charitably funded; others large professionalised establishments supported, in part, by public money.

Our findings indicate that the influence of the 'F' in FBO is not as obvious as is typically presumed. They should also allay the fears of those who are suspicious of FBO 'motives'.

Commissioner anxieties and changing FBO practices

The Commission on Integration and Cohesion recently noted that commissioners administering public funds often feel 'squeamish' about supporting FBOs, given anxieties that they might use taxpayers money to promote religion, or discriminate against certain groups. We found no foundation for such anxieties, in the homelessness sector at least.

It is true that in the past some FBOs did expect homeless people to 'sing for their supper', by attending worship or scriptural study, for example. Such practices have however been discontinued by virtually all. Support as regards spirituality is *available*, and greatly valued by some users – but engagement with this is, with very few (charitably funded) exceptions, *optional*.

Further, we found no evidence of FBOs excluding homeless people on grounds of metaphysical stance, religious identity, sexuality or other classification. Faith-based homelessness agencies, like their secular counterparts, aim to be very inclusive of service users.

That said, there is a 'glass ceiling' for staff without faith in some FBOs. No organisation involved in the study required frontline staff to profess a faith, but a few required this of senior managers. This practice is lawful, but means that staff without faith cannot be

promoted above a certain level – and some interviewees questioned the justifiability of this where agencies receive public funding.

Are faith-based services different?

That issue aside, our research showed that faith-based homelessness services are not as different from their secular counterparts as is commonly presumed. Most contemporary secular services actually grew out of faith-based initiatives, and their values are strikingly similar. Furthermore, staff teams in both faith-based and secular agencies almost always contain a mix of people of faith and no faith, and often from a range of religious backgrounds.

Recent years have witnessed a reduction in the ‘visibility’ of religion in many FBOs, for two reasons: first, a number of commissioners have placed restrictions on the expression of religion; and second, FBOs have of their own accord reduced their outward ‘religiosity’ to avoid appearing unwelcoming to people of other or no faith.

Consequently, many of the homeless people we spoke to find it difficult to discern differences between faith-based and secular services. Most will tell you that there are no systematic differences in the quality of service provided, or legitimacy of ‘care’ expressed by staff. In fact, there will often be disagreement amongst users as to whether or not a particular project is ‘religious’, and if so, how ‘religious’ it is.

We found that some homeless people give overtly faith-based services a wide berth because they have had negative experiences of religion in the past. Others seek them out because they want to explore spiritual matters or seek the support of believers. The majority, however, are relatively indifferent – as long as they can choose whether or not to participate in, or talk about, anything ‘religious’ (which, as I have already noted, is almost always the case).

Divergent stances on interventionism

The key thing defining homeless peoples’ service preferences is in fact what organisations expect of them. There is at present a debate within the sector regarding how ‘interventionist’ services should be. Stances on this fall along a spectrum. At one pole are ‘non-interventionist’ agencies which allow homeless people to ‘be’ and do not require any commitment to change. Some homeless people will only use these services. The approach has however been deemed ‘irresponsible’ by some commentators for allowing vulnerable people to continue behaviours (such as drug misuse) which are profoundly detrimental to their wellbeing.

At the other pole are ‘interventionist’ organisations who insist that service users ‘engage’ with support to address their problems. Interventionist approaches can be very effective with some individuals, and are being increasingly endorsed by Government. They have however been severely criticised by campaigning groups for excluding the ‘hardest to reach’ and exacerbating their already very difficult circumstances.

Contrary to what is often presumed, we found that it is the secular agencies which are most sympathetic toward interventionist 'rehabilitative' approaches (with some notable exceptions), whilst faith-based agencies tend to eschew these and favour non-interventionist, unconditional approaches.

These are complex issues, based as they are on the different weighting individuals and agencies accord to welfare and liberty. They are also highly emotive, given the vulnerability of people affected and potential for interventions to harm, rather than (or as well as) help. FBOs are, and will continue to be, central to debates on such issues.

Conclusion

Our research concluded that faith-based homelessness services are not as different from their secular equivalents as is usually assumed. Some observers may consider this a good thing; it allays fears about proselytism, for example. But it also presents a challenge to FBOs. For, if their aim is to provide a qualitatively different service experience, and for the influence of their faith to be evident within that, it seems that many homeless people are not noticing.

Faith is a key factor 'calling' many individuals to work with homeless people, and sustaining them in their (often challenging) roles. Yet it seems that staff without faith are motivated, and sustained, by an equally strong urge to 'do something' about homelessness. The motivational 'source' may well be different, but the outward expression of their 'ethic of care' is, in the eyes of homeless people, much the same.

Our research thus suggests that whilst the spiritual support provided by FBOs 'adds value', the distinctiveness of faith-based services should not be exaggerated, given a blurring of boundaries between the religious and secular.