

Religious Organisations in an Age of Shrinking Welfare

I went into faith-based welfare with the Church of England work on leaving university – an eye-opener which convinced me that this was a vital part of our national life which deserved more attention.

This talk is based on various research projects I have led over the last 10 years. More immediately, it is provoked by a network funded by the Religion and Society Programme in 2010-11 which brought together young people of any faith engaged in social action in local communities.

This made me stop and re-assess my thinking on the future of faith and welfare in this country - because these young people are, after all, the generation who will be taking forward this work in the future.

What struck me most was that today's young people appear to be nowhere near as binary about the secular and the religious as previous generations. They see religion as normal – their reaction to it is 'uh-huh' not 'oh no'.

I'll come back to why this matters for the future of faith-based welfare at the end. But first let me analyse how that domain has developed over the last 15 years and what issues this raises.

I begin with New Labour. It is not widely recognized just how much New Labour invested in the whole area of faith and welfare – both in terms of policy and funding. I undertook a research review for CLG in 2008 which found that Labour introduced eight major national initiatives and ten major funding streams which could be accessed by community-based faith groups, as well as two funding streams specifically for faith-based social action.

This research revealed three ways in which Labour valued faiths:

1. as repositories of resources – staff, volunteers, networks, buildings and money
2. as active citizens – meaning that they volunteer more, give to charity more and even vote more
3. as 'good at community' and especially at generating social capital which was important for integration.

In terms of funding streams, the biggest was the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund in 2005-07. This distributed £5m to 338 faith-based social action initiatives and 238 interfaith projects. And there was a conscious attempt to ensure a distribution across traditions. Christians received 17.3%; Muslims 16.9%; Hindus 13%; Sikhs 12%; Jewish groups received 10.8%; Buddhists 9.4%; Baha'i 7.3; Jain 4.8% and Zoroastrian 3.3%. 'Others' got 5%.

These funding initiatives were mirrored with governance mechanisms designed to improve faiths' participation in civil society. The achievement here was rather more shaky. At national level the Faith Communities Consultative Council was appointed to advise the Secretary of State. But though it caused considerable controversy amongst bodies like the National Secular Society, in fact it met only twice. I think it's true to say that at government level, New Labour never quite worked out how to engage effectively with religion.

But at regional and local level there was more success. Government introduced a local authority duty to consult faith communities in community planning, and places

were allocated for faith participation on regional assemblies. Faith groups were encouraged to take part in Local Strategic Partnerships, with great effect. In research in 2006, of 112 faith organisations surveyed, 84 were part of their LSP and a further 71 in an LSP sub-group; 9 on a PCT board; 10 on a Crime and Disorder Partnership.

In addition, generous funding for regional faith fora was made available in all nine English regions via the Regional Development Agencies. Also notable was the setting up of the Faith Based Regeneration Network. This is an umbrella body networking grass roots projects with each other and with policy-makers, and it has grown to become one of the most important co-ordinating initiatives in the whole faith and welfare area.

In policy terms, all these New Labour initiatives cohered around a recognition *and valuing* of religious plurality – **of ‘multi-faith’** – and an enthusiasm for building good relations within, between and beyond different traditions.

So far so good. What New Labour did was to realize the importance of faith for welfare and social cohesion. That is a huge achievement set against a secular ideology surrounding welfare provision which had – since the 1960s – either ignored or actively opposed the contribution of faith to the welfare landscape of this country.

But before Charles Clarke and David Blunkett get too happy, let me suggest some serious deficits as well. I’ve already mentioned the failure in effective engagement with religion at government level. Another fly in the ointment came along in the form of the Prevent strategy. Targeted at preventing radicalization by engaging at local level with Muslim communities, this cut across what was being achieved elsewhere in three ways:

-First, it confused community cohesion with prevention of extremism. This was bad for community work and, according to the researchers at the previous Westminster Faith Debate, it was bad for counter-terrorism too.

-Second, by focusing solely on Muslims, it undermined the whole thrust of the multi-cultural approach which had emphasized working *together* and forging links, not separatism.

-A final criticism is that in many cases it never really became a genuine partnership between faith and state. FBOs often felt they had to dance to local and national government’s tune, and to deal with cumbersome - sometimes compromising - demands and regulations.

Now to the current government’s emerging approach to faith and welfare.

Let me start with the positive. It has fully taken on board the importance of the faith contribution. It also wants to deregulate and leave faiths to do work in which they are already expert. All this, of course, fits with the whole idea of smaller state, bigger society.

However. Let’s look more closely at what this means in practice. Above all, government funding is largely being withdrawn. Two of the nine regional faith fora are closed or dormant. The remaining seven have made redundancies. The Faith-based Regeneration Network is in the final two years of what is being called ‘tapered funding’ after which it must be self-sufficient or close.

Also, what the Coalition has done through the Near Neighbours programme, is to select the CofE as its favoured partner to lead the faith-based welfare contribution.

To return to the perspective of the young people involved in faith work with whom I began, this is all highly problematic. This generation doesn't remember a national church. They've grown up in a context of religious plurality, and multifaith RE, in which belonging has given way to new kinds of believing, and in which they get their religion not from their parents and grandparents, but from the internet, and each other. They remember 9/11, 7/7 and the Arab Spring. They expect religious diversity. Making vicars into gatekeepers won't wash with their friends and peers of other faiths and none.

I agree with them. I also think that the state should shrink in relation to faith, but not disappear altogether. It must play an enabling role, providing a framework which helps distribute power, wealth and capacity round providers and service users of all faiths and none. This is essential for cohesion in local areas, and nationally.

Umbrella bodies like FbRN are essential to achieving this. They keep the channels of communication open between grass roots projects, and between them and policy-makers. They don't need much funding but they do need some. They add huge value.

To conclude: young people recognize a welfare economy which includes the full range of faith traditions. Policy should promote the participation of them all. Unlike previous generations, this one is baffled both by the secular insistence that faiths stay out of welfare, and by the anachronistic idea that the Church of England should lead the charge.