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Belief in Social Action: Exploring faith groups' responses to local needs

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Abstract

Over at least the last two decades there has been a growing policy interest in the role of faith based social action. Under New Labour administrations this initially related to their role in neighbourhood regeneration and, subsequently, in community cohesion and the prevention of violent extremism agendas.

After the 2010 election and the subsequent Coalition and Conservative administrations, there has been renewed interest in faith groups' activity in providing local services, although now in a context of austerity and welfare reform.

This Working Paper explores, from the perspective of faith groups themselves, how they are responding to these 'new' agendas. Do faith based organisations have the capacity to fill the increasing gaps in welfare provision? Are they being, or feeling, 'pushed' into service provision but with a loss of voice and policy influence? How do faith-based organisations feel about their roles in a changing landscape?

Further, the report identifies key shifts in multi-faith working in an age of superdiversity, and the future challenges for faith based social action.

Keywords; faith, belief, social action, communities, multi-faith, policy, welfare reform

Contents

1   Background to the study: *"I thought it was a Christian thing…"*

Over at least the past twenty years there has been a growing political, policy and media interest in faith based organisations and the role they play in what is often assumed to be a predominantly secular society. The nature of political interest in faith in the public sphere, has, however, varied over time. Under New Labour administrations there was a strong emphasis on the role of faith based organisations as facilitators of, or barriers to, social integration and community cohesion (Cantle 2001, Cantle et al. 2006). The events of 9/11 in the US and 7/7 in the UK gave birth to another dimension of political and policy engagement with faith, namely the prevention of violent extremism. This became a key focus of the government's engagement in particular with Islamic faith groups, which some argue has had detrimental effects on integration and community cohesion (Allen 2010).

Since then, the financial crisis of 2008 and the introduction of austerity measures, including welfare reform, under the Coalition and subsequent Conservative administrations, have contributed to increasing interest in the role of faith based organisations in responding to the state's retreat from its role as the provider – or at least funder and overseer of – public services and welfare provision (Zehavi 2013). Indeed, Williams et al. (2012, p. 1480) suggest that '*The contemporary reorganisation of the welfare state has typically been regarded as a by-product of neoliberalism (Beaumont, 2008a; Peck and Tickell, 2002), and has been marked by the opening up of a renewed role for faith-motivated groups in the public realm'*.

However, whilst some contemporary political perspectives emphasise faith groups' role as local service providers, their social engagement also takes the form of political activism or community-building activities (Dinham and Lowndes, 2008). It can also take place at a variety of scales: from individual members' activities and relationships, to neighbourhood or local level, to regional, national and international involvement. As such, it is possible to approach the study of faith communities and their social engagement from a number of different perspectives. One of the main lens through which academics have studied faith-based social engagement is by researching the activities of faith based organisations, often identified by their provision of a particular service (or services) together with having a faith-based ethos (e.g. Williams et al., 2012; Beaumont and Cloke, 2012; Furbey and Macey, 2005). Less common, within the social science literature, is the use of local faith 'congregations' as units of analysis. This is approach is more common within, for example, the public theology literature, but this has tended to be less empirical in nature (e.g. Graham, 2008).

It is worth noting that the involvement of faith groups in welfare and wider social issues is not a new phenomenon. Even in terms of relatively recent history, the Victorian era saw the formation of a number of influential faith based organisations, such as the Salvation Army and Barnardo's, as well as strongly faith-motivated political engagement around issues such as the abolition of slavery. Further, some of the current controversies around food banks and religious leaders' criticisms of welfare reform (see for example: Church of England, 2015) have resonances with the 1980s and the conflict between the state and, in that instance, the Church (Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, 1985) as the Conservative administrations of Margaret Thatcher attempted to 'roll back the state' (Thatcher, 1992).

It is also important to acknowledge that faith based social action, or engagement, is not a primarily *'Christian thing'* (Pathak and McGee 2015): a cursory examination of the Charity Commission register

highlights a number of very high profile charities of other faiths, for example, Islamic Relief, Mitzvah Day and Khalsa Aid. Some of the principles associated with Christian social engagement such as charity, service, hope and neighbourliness have similarities for example with zakat and sadaqa which are cornerstones of Islamic teaching, with tzedaka and gemilut hasadim in Judaism, with the Sikh concepts of Wand Chhakna and Wand Ke Chhakna, and with Dana in Hinduism.

Much of the recent literature on faith based social action has focused on the 'demand side': the way in which changing social needs draw out responses from faith groups, the growth of food banks under austerity being a case in point. However, there is also a 'supply-side' dimension to faith based social engagement: changes in theology, practice, size, confidence, resources and capacity of different faith groups over time influence the nature and extent of their involvement in local communities. Furthermore, there are ways in which faith communities resist, subvert, campaign against, government policy (Conradson, 2008; Cairns et al., 2007): the Quaker tradition of 'speaking truth to power' being one such example. Alternatively, they may be oblivious to neoliberalism and national or local level government policy and economic decisions. However, as Jamoul and Wills (2008, p. 2056) point out *'faith organisations are a potentially powerful political resource in the contemporary city…… it is not an engagement that buys wholesale into the mainstream political and economic agenda'*.

The role of faith based organisations in specific communities as well as wider society is complex and shifting as communities become increasingly superdiverse (Phillimore and Goodson: 2010) and are subject to the forces of the global economy and mass migration. Yet much of what passes for debate (particularly, but not exclusively) in the media, has been over simplified and has not really captured the complex and varied meanings and motivations attached to faith based social action, and the ways in which it changes over time in its organisation and focus, including in response to wider social and economic pressures on communities. In the debate on faith schools, for example, education based on religious grounds is often viewed crudely as either a good thing (engendering positive social values) or a bad thing (dividing communities along the lines of religious dogma) – with little attentiveness to the variety of different ways in which this might take place, and the range of differing social and personal implications it may have.

The current study sought to address some of the gaps in the existing literature and empirical evidence base, in order to arrive at a more nuanced picture of faith communities' social engagement, within the context of austerity and of religious and ethnic diversity. In doing so, some of the key questions addressed were:

- How (if at all) do faith groups at the local level identify wider community needs and relate to each other?
- How (if at all) do faith groups articulate or explain the connection between their faith (e.g. teachings, theology, practices) and their engagement with wider community needs?
- How do such organisations organise to address community needs? What is their capacity to respond?
- How (if at all) does grass roots faith based action relate to city wide, regional and national multi-faith structures?
- What influence can faith and inter-faith action have on policy agendas and what are the challenges they face – now and in the future?

2   Defining the Key Terms

'Faith based social action happens when people of faith work together, often with others outside their faith community, in order to achieve real and positive change within their local community, or in wider society.' (Faith Based Regeneration Network, undated)

Religion and faith can be difficult topics to articulate well, partly because of the complex inter-relations between culture, ethnicity, and community, as well as the different ways in which people and groups perceive their identity. For instance, members of a community meeting at a particular 'faith building' or to participate in a particular act of worship or teaching may differ in the extents to which this is, for them, part of a faith commitment and practice, with some perhaps experiencing it more as a family, social or cultural activity. Nevertheless, we have adopted the term 'faith' here because we are interested in the difference that religious faith makes when it comes to responding to local community needs.

The next logical question is: what to add to this? Faith communities? Faith-based organisations? Congregations? There are a variety of ways of talking about gatherings of people associated in some way by religious faith. In this report we refer primarily (although not exclusively) to faith groups. This is because the notion of a 'faith community' raises a significant number of conceptual and empirical challenges, including questions for example about the extent to which faith communities see themselves as communities or what defines a community. The term faith-based organisations would have been inappropriate in view of our methodology, which began with faith buildings and the worshipping communities that gathered there, rather than seeking to identify national faith-based voluntary organisations working locally, which would have likely yielded different results. We did include some faith-based organisations, where they were working out of local faith buildings, but the study focused primarily on the activities of what we might think of as 'congregations'. We did not adopt this term as a descriptor however, because of its strong association with Christianity over other faiths.

The term social action was initially chosen because of engagement with Alinsky's (1971) work on community organising, in which it is used to encompass direct campaigning and lobbying, for instance Citizens UK. Under the Coalition and subsequent Conservative administrations, the term has been used, amongst other things, as 'encouragement' for communities to take on the management of local assets and services (Cabinet Office: 2015). In practice, however, the forms of social action reported by participants predominantly took the form of individual or collective service provision of some kind, rather than a more politicised citizen organising approach. Exceptions to this tended to be at the city-wide or national scale, where there was a greater emphasis on finding a voice in public and political debate.

Throughout the research, the terms inter-faith and multi-faith seemed to be used interchangeably by participants. Some referred to inter-faith dialogue but were actually referring to Christian, inter-denominational structures. The term multi-faith arguably corresponds better with the shift noted in our research towards different faith groups working together on particular issues, rather than engaging in dialogue with one another for its own sake. As such, we have tended to adopt that term in this report.

A multi-level methodology was employed to take account of a variety of geographical scales as well as different perspectives on faith-based social engagement. This involved:

- Fieldwork at a **community/postcode level** in the fifth most deprived neighbourhood in the city studied. It has a population of approximately 31,000 of which 88% are from Black and Minority Ethnic or 'not born in the UK' groups. Two thirds of the population is Muslim, followed by Christian (21%) and Hindu (5%). The major languages locally, other than English, are Bengali, Punjabi and Urdu followed by Mirpuri, Polish and Somali. The population is also substantially younger than the city and national averages. It is also a rapidly changing community with recent GP registration data showing that people from 170 different countries of origin had mover there between 2007 and 2010.

  Faith groups and organisations were selected by drawing on an audit of local religious buildings. Interviews were conducted with 13 local religious leaders and activists in faith groups. These were recruited through the research team's existing knowledge of the neighbourhood and via snowballing techniques with research participants identifying other key informants. Whilst there are more churches in the area than other faith buildings, representatives from local Mosques as well as the main Temple and Gurdwara were involved in the research.

- Fieldwork at **city/regional level and national level.** This included participants in multi-faith forums, as well as regional/national organisations that corresponded with the groups/denominations active at a local level. Organisations and interviewees were identified with support from the Faith Based Regeneration Network (a national membership based multi-faith umbrella body). In total 17 such interviews were conducted with representatives from four main religious groupings (See Table 1).

- A further three interviews were undertaken with **academics** undertaking research into faith based social action (total interviews; 33)

The response rate to requests for interview was, in one sense, disappointing. Less than 60% of those initially contacted agreed to be interviewed, in spite of some repeated requests. In the opinion of some of those who were interviewed, this may reflect the wider financial situation of faith based organisations and, in particular, multi-faith groups. Interviews were conducted during 2014, at a time when cuts to the budgets of some such organisations (e.g. regional multi-faith forums) meant that they were in the process of closing or had moved from having paid staff to relying on sessional staff or volunteers. In short they lacked the capacity, rather than necessarily the willingness, to engage. It should also be noted that while the larger proportion of Christian interviews at the local level does not reflect local population in terms of its faith composition, it does reflect the different numbers of religious centres/buildings in the locality. Further, some leaders were 'speaking for' much larger groups than others in terms of the numbers of individuals involved.

Table 1: Interview Profile

Level	Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Sikh	Interfaith	Academics	Total
Local/community level	6	2	1	2	2		13
Regional/Sub-regional	2				2		4
National	4	2	1	2	4	3	16
Total	12	4	2	4	8	3	33

In addition to these individual key informant interviews, the research also involved a systematic literature review. This was conducted initially using a Web of Science search on the keywords: 'faith' and 'social action'. This yielded a variety of papers from across the social sciences and religious studies, which were then assessed for relevance to the current study, and grouped according to the kinds of research question they addressed. Further searches were undertaken using the names of different major faiths, and grey literature – particularly regarding the relationship between government and faith groups – was also drawn upon.

Two workshops were convened to enable practitioners to engage with, corroborate, and further contribute to the research findings. The first of these was called to get feedback on the emerging findings from research participants. This session had 17 participants from four faith groups: Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and Christian, the latter including a variety of different denominations. The second workshop recruited a wider audience of 30 representatives from both secular and faith based organisations. The aim of this session was to open up initial findings for discussion from a range of different perspectives.

Although some 70 different people from various faith groups were involved in the research, resources limited its overall scope. Some of the limitations of the current study are as follows:

- By starting at a local level and focusing on faith based action in a deprived urban community, the findings may not be reflective of the nature and outcomes of such action in different kinds of communities. For instance, the research does not offer a full picture in terms of the activities of faith based organisations in affluent or even (marginalised) rural communities.

- Exploring the specific theological motivations of those involved in faith based social action was not the primary purpose of this research; however, participants were asked to explain why their faith groups provided the services or responses that they did to social issues. Here there were some commonalities between different religious groups. Interviewees tended to draw on narrative theologies, stressing the importance of stories and encounters to understand individuals and communities. It is worthy of note – and perhaps further future investigation – that more politicised accounts which attempted to address the structural nature of inequalities – such as those one would associate with liberation theology – were almost wholly absent from narratives and explanations offered, and indeed the responses described, at a local level (Hope, Timmel and Hodzi 1984).

- The focus on faith based groups/organisations associated with religious buildings means that the study does not capture all organised faith-based social engagement in the local community studied. Indeed, not all faith based social engagement will occur in the context of

the kind of faith groups studied here: some will be less formalised, or make take place within the context of secular organisations or charities with their origins in, but currently with weak or less obvious links to, specific religious beliefs.

- Representatives from Black majority churches were interviewed, but the research did not reach Christian groups from newly arrived communities – e.g. African 'warehouse' churches. Similarly, whilst both Shia and Sunni Muslims were involved, there was no participation from Sufi and other Islamic groupings. Equally, the community studied does not have a substantial presence of Buddhist or Jewish communities and this is reflected in the overall sample at the city, regional and national multi-faith forum interviews.

Finally, the research focused on those active in faith based organisations rather than secular agencies working in the same postcode locality. The current working paper could, therefore, be criticised for presenting a single, faith based, narrative on social action and failing to open up a secular/religious dialogue on austerity, welfare reform and responding to needs. That narrative, however, has a value in its own right and the 'stories' are reflective and self-critical – rather than putting a simple gloss on faith based interventions in and with communities. Further, Baker (2009) argues that there has been a fundamental move in recent years from the expression of religious belief through acts of piety to a more pragmatic expression of faith through engagement with wider localities and communities. This has been referred to as performative theology. The extent to which the current research evidences this 'paradigm shift' is open for further discussion. It is hoped that these gaps, or limitations, can be addressed in future research in this field.

4   A Patchy Picture? Literature Review

The inter-disciplinary literature review focussed on three key themes:
- The role of faith groups are service providers in communities, and their potential for building communities and social capital
- Dimensions of inter- and multi-faith working
- Extremism and counter terrorism measures in relation to faith

These informed the focus of the primary research and are considered in turn below. However, the literature review offers only a partial picture, or backdrop, to the empirical research. In one sense, this is owing to the limitations of time and space: there is not room here to consider the many possible facets of and perspectives on the relationship between faith and policy, or indeed faith and politics, in great depth. As Adam Dinham commented in a recent keynote address at a conference on Philosophy, Religion and Public Policy at the University of Chester, *'the public sphere is infused with religious people and ideas'* (2014).

Another, and perhaps more significant limitation of this review (hence the title of this section) is that whilst the study seeks to explore a variety of major faiths and their social engagement – the literature in this field (or at least that available in English) has a predominantly Christian starting point (Pathak and McGee 2014). Faith remains an under-developed theme in much of the political studies, social policy and community development literature (Dinham and Shaw 2012). Studies of other religious groupings in the UK have tended to concentrate on profiling those communities (CLG

2009a and 2009b; CitySikhs: British Sikh Report 2014), understanding their experiences, and exploring the relevance of this for policy-making (e.g. Beckford *et al.*, 2006): with only very limited attention given to their role in wider civil society. Academic writing which starts from a religious studies base has tended to focus on the theological underpinning for social action or charitable actions in for example Christianity (e.g. Graham, 2008), Islam (Sadeq, 2002) and Hinduism (Dan Basu, 2002), rather than on the nature, outcomes and impact of those actions themselves. Our focus in what follows is on policy approaches, discourses and research-based evidence directly relating to faith communities and their role in service provision, responding to austerity and building community over the past twenty years.

Faith and Social Policy

As in other policy areas, one can trace both continuities and disjunctures between the approaches taken by successive New Labour governments, and those of the Coalition and Conservative administrations. Blair (e.g. 2005), Brown and Cameron have each publicly applauded the role of faith communities, both in meeting needs and helping to foster active citizenship. In some respects this reflects the broader emphasis on associational life within the Third Way and Big Society discourses respectively, for instance, speaking about the Big Society, Cameron (2011) asserted that: *'Tradition, community, family, faith, the space between the market and the state - this is the ground where our philosophy is planted.'*. Many of the wider policy issues around the relationship between the third sector and the state are therefore highly relevant to faith communities and faith based organisations. Such issues include:

- the role of volunteers and their willingness to be actors in implementing government policy.

- the implications of accepting government funding on values and ethos (e.g. Buckingham, 2010; Ebaugh et al., 2005; Cloke et al., 2007).

- the challenge of campaigning for social justice whilst also acting as delivery partners with government; the potential to be used as a cheap way of providing welfare services, with statutory 'safety nets' having been withdrawn (Dinham and Lowndes, 2008; Faith Based Regeneration Network, 2010).

- the lack of religious literacy and understanding in the public sphere, which can make it difficult for motivations and values to be discussed in a way that is both sensitive and widely comprehensible (ibid.; Smith, 2004; Farnell et al., 2003).

Efforts have been made to render some of these issues more transparent and navigable for policy makers (e.g. Miller, 2009; Chapman, 2012), but much remains to be done for such awareness to become widespread in the political sphere, and indeed, for communication that is at the same time confident, considerate and nuanced, to become commonplace in the public sphere.

What are faith groups doing in terms of social engagement?

In response to the question, 'what do faith groups do for their wider communities?', the Christians in Parliament (2013) *Faith in the Community* report tells us: 'lots'. Expanding on this, findings from their survey of 155 local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales showed that faith groups were identified as providing food banks, Street Pastors, debt advice, caring for the young and the elderly, anger management and a wide range of other activities. A recent Church Urban Fund report into the influence of churches in deprived neighbourhoods focussed on twelve case study churches. These

churches were engaged in their communities in a wide range of ways, which the report categorises into five key areas: meeting basic material needs (e.g. night-shelters, foodbanks, hot meals); employment (e.g. job clubs); life skills (e.g. financial education, support); children and young people (e.g. schools work, youth clubs) and neighbourliness (community gatherings; hospitality; building trust and belonging) (Bickley, 2014). These reports highlight the significance of faith communities' provision of longer term and informal interventions, as well as the crisis provision that has been foregrounded in recent media coverage of food banks, for example.

Research on Muslim communities in England conducted by the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) suggests that the services and activities provided by these communities are often established within ethnic as well as religious groups. Amongst the Bangladeshi Muslim community, for example, mosques and other Islamic establishments were found to offer a wide range of services from personal or matrimonial advice to funeral provisions, Arabic and Islamic courses and some engagement with 'youth at risk' including preventative work around issues such as gangs, drugs, homelessness and anti-social behaviour (CLG, 2009a). Within the Pakistani Muslim community it was found that as well as the provision of social and educational services and faith-related activities by mosques, there was a strong 'secular' civil society including support and welfare groups, charities and political organisations. For example, it is noted that there has been a tendency for these communities to set up their own separate services (e.g. leisure centres) rather than use mainstream ones (CLG, 2009b). This highlights the challenge of distinguishing between faith communities, cultural groups and ethnic groups, and whilst in some cases these may correspond with each other, often the situation is more complex.

Locating similar information about the service provision activities of other major faith groups in the UK has proved difficult. One explanation for this may be that, as Warren (2009) asserts, Hindus and Sikhs in Britain have tended to establish more secular community service organisations, rather than religious ones. It may also reflect the different resources and priority attached to research and reporting amongst different faith and cultural groups.

Williams et al. (2012, p. 1479) offer a helpful summary, stating that the activity of faith groups in the UK *'embraces a range of welfare arenas, including support for children and youth, the elderly, homeless people, and asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, and a range of welfare activities relating to housing, poverty and debt, disability, and community regeneration'*. Faith groups clearly play an important part in meeting welfare needs through the provision of services: however, they can also contribute to wellbeing in other ways, including through the relationships they foster, both within and beyond their particular faith group, denomination or congregation. We return to this theme in the section on social cohesion and social capital below.

Building community, social cohesion and social capital

In addition to direct service provision, faith communities and their activities are frequently seen as a means of building community and encouraging citizens to be actively involved in their communities. Faith has been identified as an important factor in motivating civic engagement: for example, the 2005 Citizenship Survey showed that those who actively practice a religion were more likely to volunteer than others (Home Office, 2005). More recently, work on the British 'civic core' showed that members of this civic core – those that contribute 90% of volunteering hours, four-fifths of the amount given to charity, and nearly 80% of participation in civic associations – are significantly more

likely to say that they are 'actively practicing their religion', than those outside it (Mohan and Bulloch, 2012). However, whilst this tells us something about the extent of the contribution that people of faith make to society, it says little about the nature or quality of the relationships they build along the way, and understanding these is essential if we are interested in the influence of faith in and between communities, which are of course relational in nature.

One way in which scholars have sought to conceptualise such relationships is through the lens of 'social capital', which – in its most influential formulation - refers to networks and relationships between individuals, and the trust, reciprocity and shared values that these give rise to (Putnam 2000). Social capital has become a prominent, albeit contested concept, both in the academic literature and in the public and political sphere, largely due to the influence first of New Labour's Third Way, and then the Conservative/Coalition's Big Society project, both of which have emphasised active citizenship, civic renewal and the strengthening of local communities. At the same time, a growing body of reflection and research on the role of faith in relation to social capital has arisen (e.g. Smith, 2002; 2004; Furbey et al., 2006; Warren, 2009; Baker and Smith, 2010). For example, in their study of *Faith as Social Capital*, Furbey et al. (2006, p. 50), conclude that: *'faith communities contribute substantial and distinctive bridging and linking social capital through their co-presence in urban areas, their connecting frameworks, the use of their buildings, the spaces that their associational networks open up, their engagement in governance, and their work across boundaries with others in the public domain'*. Depending on their values and the way in which these are expressed in practice, faith communities can play an important role in creating social environments in which individuals feel accepted and valued, and within which a sense of belonging can be nurtured (e.g. Buckingham, 2010; Conradson, 2003). The bonding capital nurtured within such communities can play an important part in integrating and supporting those who would otherwise be marginalised. For example, reporting on research on broad-based community organising in London, Jamoul and Wills (2008, p. 2052) stated that: *'At a time of democratic disengagement and the decline of social capital, faith organisations are often havens of association, support and solidarity in the contemporary city, particularly for ethnic minority groups'*.

However, concerns have also been raised about the potential co-option of faith communities and faith-based voluntary organisations by government through the political use of the social capital concept (e.g. Furbey et al., 2006; Smith, 2002; 2004). There are fears that political demands for faith communities to serve as the 'social glue' in local communities may prevent them from fully exercising the values and purposes upon which they are based. One approach to this problem has been to develop further concepts which capture additional dimensions or characteristics of faith communities. In a report arising from a study of community regeneration through churches and church-based projects in Manchester, Baker and Skinner (2006, p. 12) develop and define the concepts of spiritual and religious capital as follows:

> *'Spiritual capital refers to the values, ethics, beliefs and vision which faith communities bring to civil society at the global and local level. It also refers to the holistic vision for change held within an individual person's set of beliefs. Spiritual capital in this form… relates to intangibles such as ideas and visions…*
>
> *Religious capital reflects the pragmatic and functional outworkings of spiritual capital…[it] is put into practice by faiths – in institutional or network form –*

> *supporting practical work within their own communities, as well as participating in other areas of social and public life for the benefit of wider society'.*

Their report goes on to identify different 'strands' within each of these forms of 'capital'. Further work by Baker and Smith (2010), has sought to apply these to a diverse range of spiritual and religious groups. A particular advantage of this approach, perhaps, is that whilst it can identify points of agreement or commonality between faiths and denominations, it also highlights significant variations that correspond with differing theologies and worldviews. In this way it demonstrates the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding and working with faith communities than has often been found amongst policy makers, politicians and in the public sphere more broadly.

When considering the issue of faith and community cohesion, there is also a more sinister side which cannot be ignored: faith – often in association with, or as an aspect of, culture or ethnicity - can sometimes be a factor that divides communities, leading to isolation, segregation and in some cases tension or violence. A Home Office report commissioned following riots in parts of Oldham, Burnley and Bradford in 2001 found that *'separate educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, places of worship, language, social and cultural networks, means that many communities operate on the basis of a series of parallel lives'* (Cantle, 2001, p. 9). Given this lack of contact, the report suggests, it is not surprising that ignorance frequently develops into fear, particularly where extremist groups of different persuasions exploit this to undermine cohesion. Again, though, it should be noted that it is difficult to distinguish here the influences of faith, ethnicity, culture and other factors.

Countering this, however, faith communities can play a part in building bridging (between groups), as well as bonding (within groups) social capital (Baker and Smith, 2010; Harris and Young, 2010), and empirical studies have documented the potential for effective relationships to develop between congregations of different faiths and between these and secular organisations (e.g. Jamoul and Wills, 2008). Indeed, building harmonious relations with those of other faiths or none is seen as by many people of faith as integral to practising that faith. However, as Baker and Smith (2010) observe, this is also influenced by geography, denomination and education amongst other factors. It has also been noted that *'bridging and linking remains a relatively fragile dimension of the activity of many faith communities, mainly because it relies on a small number of highly motivated people with the vision to see opportunities beyond the more immediate needs of bonding.'* (Furbey et al., 2006, p. 25).

Variations in the generation of bridging and bonding social capital within and between faith communities of differing characteristics cautions against assenting to a simplistic view that such communities are homogenously ready, willing and capable suppliers or creators of social cohesion and vibrant civil society (e.g. Smith, 2004; Williams et al., 2012). Such a view would overlook some of the disjunctures, social and spatial inequalities and political and theological differences which in practice produce a more complex and contested relational landscape. It would also underestimate the impact that many faith communities would claim, limited as it is to inter-personal relationships, rather than those relating to a deity, or to personal or societal transformation or renewal. In view of this it is unsurprising that employing social capital as a concept for understanding faith communities. In *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* Luke Bretherton argues that *'Use of the term 'social capital' as opposed to political, institutional, or more organic metaphors, conceives of economics as the most basic or fundamental way of thinking about how to organize human society'* (Bretherton 2010, p. 40),

a notion contradictory to the faith about which he writes. Adam Dinham's book, *Faith and Social Capital after the Debt Crisis* expresses a similar concern and argues that viewing the contribution of faiths to society solely through the lens of social capital not only serves to marketise and distort their contribution, but is also too narrow to apprehend the scope of their influence (Dinham, 2012). Nevertheless, measures of volunteering, giving and other forms of civic participation point towards the significant contribution that faith communities make to civil society in the UK, and relationships and connections within local communities represent a useful – if incomplete – way of understanding these.

Inter-faith work in the literature: Multi-faith, inter-faith, or inter-denominational?

Research on inter-faith work reveals a spectrum of activity, including that which is based primarily around contact and dialogue between faith leaders, that which seeks to build face-to-face relationships between individuals of different faiths at a grass-roots level, and that which is oriented around addressing particular social or community issues, bringing together people of different faiths to do so (see for example Lowndes and Chapman, 2005). One of the challenges with intentional inter-faith activities is that they tend to be relatively limited in reach. In their multi-faith analysis of faith engagement in British urban governance, Dinham and Lowndes (2008, p. 831) draw attention to the *'power and capacity differentials between faith traditions'* which influence their ability to engage and network with other faith groups, noting that resource constraints and other priorities may limit such involvement. A study of inter-faith work in Burnley and Blackburn, found that: *'while interfaith activities of many different kinds all make some contribution to community cohesion, the numbers involved are generally relatively small and the capacity to engage many others in a more secular age is probably quite circumscribed. There is much 'preaching to the converted''* (Billings and Holden, 2008, p. 33; see also Furbey et al. 2006). The positive side of this, as Catto (2014) points out in her more recent study of inter-faith work in Coventry, is that the work is *'sustained by passionate and committed individuals and friendships'*, but securing wider engagement in these relationships and activities remains a challenge. Stringer's (2013) analysis of diverse discourses about religion suggests that this is also the case in Birmingham: he comments that whilst inter-faith engagement intensified after the events of 9/11, much of this involved key leaders in faith, business and public services, and it *'has had little impact on ordinary discourses about religion within the city at large'* (p. 134). Like Billings and Holden (2008), Stringer highlights the significance of schools as inter-faith contexts, and notes that Birmingham has been particularly successful in developing inter-faith work in educational settings.

The idea of working together to achieve practical or political change – rather than primarily for dialogue – seems to have become more prominent within inter-faith work (e.g. Catto, 2014). Jamoul and Williams (2008) describe how the identification of shared values around charity, service and public engagement across many of the major faiths enabled London Citizens to enlist a 'diverse alliance' of faith and secular groups in seeking to revitalise political life. There also appears to be a growing recognition of the need to openly acknowledge differences in the beliefs and values of different religions and sub-sections within them (e.g. Bailey, 2009; Dinham, 2014): an awareness that has been seen as lacking both in policy and media debates, and in wider society (Stringer, 2013; Farnell et al., 2003; Smith, 2004)

There have been subtle but significant differences in the way in which different administrations have addressed faith groups. New Labour's approach can be characterised as strongly multi-faith, and this has attracted both praise and concern. The establishment of Regional Faith Forums and the development of an inter-faith strategy within the Department for Communities and Local Government represented a significant investment in inter-faith dialogue and action, particularly as a means of building social cohesion. O'Toole (2013, p. 4) suggests that in spite of its limitations *'the results [of New Labour's approach] 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'*. However, there has also been criticism of the way in which faith communities were often addressed as a homogenous group, with insufficient attention being given to differences in values and practices (Furbey and Macey, 2005; Miller, 2009). New Labour's approach has also been critiqued as being somewhat instrumental, valuing faith communities only in so far as they contributed to government agendas (O'Toole, 2013; Furbey and Macey, 2005).

Concerns about instrumentalism were also raised in relation to the Coalition's approach to faith groups, particularly in the light of public sector budget cuts (e.g. Williams, 2010). A point of departure from the previous administration, however, was what some have identified as the revalorisation of the Church of England (Dinham, 2014) and an assertion of the centrality of Christian values within British culture (e.g. Mason, 2014). The Near Neighbours programme, established in 2011, has been presented by some as an example of this, although its aims are to *'bring people together in religiously and ethnically diverse communities, creating friendships, building relationships of trust and helping people to transform their neighbourhoods together'* (Near Neighbours, 2014, p. 1). Funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government, this Near Neighbours included a small grants programme to help local faith and community groups in London, Leicester, Birmingham, Bradford, Burnley and Oldham launch initiatives to boost the level of social action and social interaction in their neighbourhoods (ibid.) The funding was administered by the Church Urban Fund – the Church of England's agency for urban social engagement. The allocation of this role raised some concerns both within and beyond the Church of England, but support has also been expressed for this decision, including from representatives of other faiths (MacLaren, 2013; O'Toole, 2013). An evaluation of the programme shows that 35% of participants in the projects funded were Christian, 35% were Muslim, and smaller proportions were of other faiths or none (Near Neighbours, 2014, p. 2).

Whilst Near Neighbours represents some – albeit relatively small scale – recognition of the importance of inter-faith work, the Coalition's withdrawal of funding for the Regional Faith Forums suggested that this was being afforded a much lower political priority. However, there is a sense in which the emphasis on grass-roots projects that involve shared activities is reflective of a wider shift in inter-faith work from dialogue towards engagement and action in response to shared challenges within communities. It also seems that the concept of community or 'shared space' at a local level is being used as a means of bring groups together around shared concerns (Jamoul and Wills, 2008).

Counter-terrorism and extremism

Shortly after the 2010 election, Andrew Stunell MP gave a speech entitled 'Keeping faith in the Big Society' in which he stated that:

'Faith communities make a vital contribution to national life, guiding the moral outlook of many, inspiring great numbers of people to public service, providing succour to those in need. They are helping to bind together local communities and improve relations at a time when the siren call of extremism has never been louder.'

This quotation points towards another strand that has underpinned government engagement with faith communities under later New Labour, the Coalition and Conservative administrations: the prevention of violent extremism (Allen 2010). The 'Prevent' programme within New Labour's counter-terrorism strategy aimed *'to mobilise interfaith structures to counter perceptions of Muslim isolation, and to partner with Muslim communities to combat violent extremism'* (O'Toole, 2013, p. 2) and has received much criticism on account of the way in which it added to the stigmatisation of Muslim communities (Thomas, 2010). However, O'Toole (2013) suggests that a uniformly negative analysis does not give sufficient recognition either to variations from place to place in the implementation of Prevent, or to the agency of Muslim communities in engaging with the state (see also: Back et al., 2009).

Prevent was revised by the Coalition government, and the resultant Prevent Strategy published in 2011 included some key changes. It sought to separate out counter-terrorism initiatives from those intended to promote integration and cohesion more broadly and to shift the emphasis away from the Muslim community as a whole and onto specific areas of extremist activity as identified by intelligence (HM Government, 2011). O'Toole (2013, p. 3) suggests, however that this is likely to be difficult to implement, pointing out for example that *'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'*. Responses to recent controversies about the alleged influence of Muslim beliefs within certain Birmingham schools – branded the 'Trojan Horse' issue – suggests that there is some way to go in fostering effective communication and discussion in the public sphere around faith, values, culture, and extremism. However, this situation also gave faith groups and other civil society organisations an opportunity to speak hopeful and measured messages into media debate that was often otherwise alarmist in nature (e.g. Fawsett, 2014).

It is difficult to underestimate the complexity of faith-based social engagement in the contemporary city, given the variety of activities, motives, theologies, and organisational structures involved. As Beaumont (2008b) puts it: *'as the state reformulates its role in welfare provision in the urban context, new spaces are opening for the involvement of faith based organisations in a myriad of ways, often contradictory and politically and ideologically contrasting.'*. And yet, the current socio-economic context, coupled with the religious and ethnic superdiversity of most major UK cities means that understanding these issues and the ways in which they influence wellbeing and community at a local level is perhaps more important than ever. It is beyond the scope of this research project to address issues around Islamophobia and the Prevent agenda in detail in the discussion that follows. However, their significance and impact does need to be borne in mind when seeking to understand the relationships between faith groups, wider local communities, and government.

Having reviewed some of the policy and conceptual issues pertaining to faith groups' engagement with local communities and wider society, in the following section we explore some of the challenges, concerns and observations arising from our empirical research.

5   Key Findings: Five Faithful Statements

As part of the process of analysing and interpreting interview material, five 'faithful statements' emerged. These were derived from the interview data and represent views or scenarios reported by some participants, but were intentionally polemical in nature, in order to stimulate further debate and reflection.

Table 2: The five faithful statements

Statement 1
Any rational debate about the role of faith groups has been hijacked by Islamophobia, 'Trojan horse', the prevention of violent extremism agenda and an aggressive secularism
Statement 2
The state has withdrawn. The voluntary organisations left when the money ran out. Faith groups are all that is left here
Statement 3
We are working with the most vulnerable people at a time when there is increasing public hostility to welfare
Statement 4
We are administering the new poor laws for the 21st century…without the resources.
Statement 5
Inter faith works … when you do/do not leave God at the door?

Statement 1: Rational debate on faith groups

The starting point for discussions on faith based social action, both in individual interviews and in focus groups, was the identification of motivations or values and, to a limited extent, their theological basis. Some similarities were identified between Christian concepts of charity or good works, Sewa in Sikhi (service/being welcomed in) and Masaleh in Islam (being beneficial).

> *"The concept of service is deeply engrained but now it goes beyond the Gurdwara."* (Sikh academic)

Another respondent commented that:

> *"…. being a Muslim it's my duty and my faith saying that I must work for reward from my creator, my God, my Allah, that he's given me everything, you know, he's given me life, he's given me health, he's given me everything. So I like to do something for humanity."* (Interview at local Mosque)

Faith-based explanations of social engagement were not all the same, however, and in many cases, interviewees explained their actions and values in relation to the specific sacred texts, stories, central figures or teachings of their faith.

> *"We follow the teachings of Guru Ravidass Ji who was born in the 14th century. Yeah he was born in the 14th century and his teachings still apply today and he talks about equality, he talks about everybody living equally and everybody having the same standard of living, food, shelter, water. So there's lots of things he talks about in the 14th century that still apply today."* (Interview at local Temple).

> *"Jesus told this story about people who just walked past, but then somebody who stayed and helped, and it didn't have to be an important person who stayed and helped, it was just somebody who was willing to not be bothered about the religion or the race of the person who was wounded, they were just there to help them, so I suppose that says something about why we are here, we are here because we are following Jesus Christ…"* (Local Christian interview)

What also emerged, though not universally, was that, for faith to be understood in wider society and remain relevant in a changing and difficult world, it had to be visible – not in terms of buildings but in practice:

> *"The Church cannot simply be for Sunday or the Mosque for Friday prayers. The community needs to see what faith really means, in action and in their daily lives."*
> (Local Multi-Faith interview)

This, internal, view of the collective and individual motivations for social action was then counter-balanced by a mystification, or even controlled anger, around how this was perceived in secular society. Religions, externally, were 'universally' seen as monolithic, as under attack by a radical secularism which had assumed that religious belief systems are irrational and irrelevant, or that religious dogma was incompatible with liberal society. In this, the work of Richard Dawkins (2006) was cited as "*the secular extremism that has its parallels in religious extremism, but is never talked about in that way.*" (National Multi-Faith interview).

This was particularly the case with Muslim interviewees, both locally and nationally. Secular misunderstandings, not to say hostility, to Islam had, for them, informed a completely inappropriate (secular authority) response to the Prevention of Violent Extremism agenda and the Trojan Horse affair and stifled any debate on the role of Islam in social welfare:

> *"The whole Trojan horse and faith schools debate just lacks any sense of history or understanding of communities. So in areas where 90, over 90% of children are Muslims that is seen as Muslim's taking over our schools. But no-one says in rural areas where over 90% of the population is white – isn't it awful, white people are taking over our schools."* (Regional Multi-Faith interview).

In a sense these responses were self-defence against a perceived external threat to faith groups. A threat which had become reflected in changing language:

> *"It's sad and I cannot see it changing – but religion has become a dirty word so now we talk about faith and faith groups."* (Regional Multi Faith Interview)

However, beneath this, more nuanced views emerged. Statutory agencies trust in, or distrust of, faith groups was viewed as a key issue. In a number of cases interviewees cited Local Authorities being reluctant to finance, or support in other ways, faith based services as these were seen as a means of proselytising – rather than being for community benefit. Others reported more positive relations, with faith based interventions (particularly work with children, young people and older people) being welcomed as statutory services were reduced, or withdrew.

> *"I have found a big change in the last … in ten years, I suppose, moving away from when, if you were wanting money and you were a faith-based organisation, you really had to sell yourself as a secular organisation, in order to get the money, to now you can comfortably apply as a faith-based organisation, and there is much more acceptance through funders that you are doing a good job, so….I think that is quite an important change."* (Christian Methodist interview)

This issue of trust was not a one-way process: to engage with statutory services and funding streams, faith organisations may compromise their vision:

> *"Having been involved in numerous (government led) community regeneration initiatives (City Challenge, New Deal for Communities) that hadn't achieved what was hoped for – there was a recognition that the Church had 'secularised' itself in order to join in with these initiatives, and in doing so had lost the spiritual dimension that it could offer."* (Christian Methodist interview)

Compromise could also be linked to language. In some cases, faith organisations felt unable to engage with the statutory sector as religious leaders lack sufficient English language skills. More common, however, was the view that faith based organisations lacked the skills (or perhaps will) to express their interventions in secular, rather than spiritual, terms: the language of outcomes, targets and performance indicators; this despite the development of various faith based toolkits for community engagement, regeneration and evaluation over the last decade (Ahmed et al., 2004; Miller, 2007)

Statement 2: The State has withdrawn

A consistent, though contested, theme in the locality based interviews, and across faith groups, was the withdrawal of state services:

> *"A lot of the libraries around here are closing down, a lot of the advice and information centres are closing down, the neighbourhood offices are closing down, you know, so there's a range of services that traditionally the local authority provided which they are no longer, so we clearly see where the gaps and the needs are and we will try and help fill those."* (Hindu Temple interview)

This had been compounded, in the area involved in the study, by the ending of area based initiative (ABI) funding regimes. Voluntary organisations, with their roots in the community, had become reliant on such monies (from Urban Programme in the 1970s all the way through to Neighbourhood Renewal Fund in the mid-to-late 2000's) had closed. Larger voluntary organisations, often with main

bases outside the area, had withdrawn services as they became financially unsustainable. This, for some, was not an entirely negative phenomenon:

> *"The strength is being around for a long time. Of being an anchor in a community. One good thing about the recession is it has sorted out those that are committed to an area for the long haul and those that parachute in only when money is available."* (City wide multi-faith forum interview)

Indeed, the longevity of some faith groups, as opposed to relatively short term regeneration initiatives, was seen as faith groups' defining difference:

> *"Faith (groups) work at the grass roots and there is a very strong pastoral care element to all faiths so they are able to respond to crises as they arise. They can work long term, so seeing people through the crisis and slowly helping them to move on."* (Multi-faith Forum interview)

However, this in turn meant that faith buildings had a higher profile, *"a more visible presence"* (City wide Christian umbrella organisation) in the locality – but could struggle to make their role, beyond religious services, understood:

> *"So in some areas faith buildings are the only thing left and there is a lot of work happening in those places but it's hidden and uncelebrated." (*City wide inter faith forum interview).

What austerity, and the perceived withdrawal of the state, had brought about was not only increasing levels of demand but a change in the services offered by all the major religious groups interviewed.

> *"What we're seeing the need for now is advice, assistance and advocacy where people need help filling out forms, benefits, assistance generally, and also accessing the free food that we offer. We've certainly seen a big increase in people coming here for food and we do get people coming in asking for money as well. Money we don't give, we have a policy that we will not give out money because we don't know what the money's going to be used [for]."* (Hindu Temple interview)

> *"The services have changed a lot, not because of new arrivals from Europe or Africa but because of the government's cutting a lot of things; we are trying to bridge that gap. So the services have changed quite a lot. People come in our office every day asking for money, some other time we give clothes to people. We support local food bank provider with different food. Some time we buy shoes for someone who didn't have any."* (Christian Baptist interview)

Similarly, a Gurdwara reported that the free hot meals they provided on a daily basis, traditionally for around 400-500 elderly Sikhs now drew almost four times that number on some days – and from Polish, African and newly arrived Kurdish communities. Indeed, for Sikh, Hindu and Muslim respondents, austerity (and the reduced capacity of welfare systems to meet needs) had re-focused their charitable activity. This was in part seen as a demographic change, but, crucially, a response to community needs within their direct locality. Whilst, for example, first generation Sikhs had focused

their political and charitable efforts on the Punjab, for the third and fourth generations, meeting needs in the immediate vicinity was as, if not more, important than supporting causes in place of origin.

> *"I think what has changed in the last 5 years, possibly longer, is the community itself. The first generation were very active – but around Indian politics and the Punjab – for example campaigns for an independent Sikh state. Now there are generations with weaker ties to the Punjab – maybe not spiritually or culturally, but certainly politically. There is more attention paid to what is happening to Sikh communities in the UK now – simply because whole families, generations, live here now and were British born and educated."* (National Sikh organisation interview)

It was not only that austerity measures, and faith groups' responses to these, were re-shaping services to meet increasingly basic needs of food and clothing, but they had fundamentally changed the relationship between statutory bodies and the areas they serve:

> *"The local authority no longer has the capacity to really understand challenges to communities at the very local level so that role is increasingly being undertaken by faith groups." (*National Multi faith forum)

Statement 3: We are working with the most vulnerable people

Faith groups focusing their efforts on the most vulnerable groups in society was a consistent theme in interviews at the local, city/regional and national levels Within the locality involved in the study, services were identified which worked with destitute migrants and refugees, asylum seekers, adults with mental health, drug or alcohol problems as well as homeless people and those living in, or on the margins of, poverty.

These needs were identified less by quantitative and systematic research (City Sikhs/British Sikh Report 2014), and more by 'being there', with key informants often living as well as working in the locality:

> *"On a weekly basis we have different people knocking on our doors saying: 'Can you help us, we don't have food.' We realised that there is need. This has not been there for years ago, and it is a new need that community members are presenting to us."* (Christian Methodist interview)

> *"It's simply that people present themselves at the door…and faith groups themselves are not immune from all the issues around."* (Regional Multi-faith Forum interview)

> *"Well we know what the needs are of our community because they come in and tell us and we deal with their queries on a day to day basis, so we're very confident in our own particular Ravidassia community, about their needs."* (Ravidassia Temple interview).

To argue that such local knowledge focused services exclusively, or even predominantly, on the most vilified in society (Jones, 2011) would be to misrepresent the range of other open and more 'mainstream' services offered by faith based groups: play-schemes, youth provision, day centres, drop-in/social and fitness activities, amongst others. Further, questions were also raised (see following sections) about the capacities of such groups to respond to the range, and increasing volume and complexity, of local needs.

That commitment to locality and local needs could, in austere times, be exploited, or even abused, in policy and financial terms:

> "Sometimes faith groups can be in some ways taken as an advantage as well……
> In the context of funding and so forth …it's aware [government] that churches or
> faith organisations will [stay/provide services] because they are so committed to
> the area and the people…. basically, they will carry on doing that, we don't even
> need to fund them because they will get the money from the church or
> somewhere else." (Christian Methodist interview)

However, the attention to vulnerable groups (groups seen as 'under attack' by the media and some politicians) was reported as a unifying and strengthening function in faith based responses to need:

> "There are, have been, differences between churches. But the issue of food
> poverty has been a unifying force. There is a view within government that we are
> anti-government when we talk out about poverty, but this is not the case. Space
> for dialogue has been closed down but that in itself has united people. There is an
> unprecedented unity around poverty – see End Hunger Fast and the open letters
> signed by all church leaders over Lent. Opposition from Government has actually
> strengthened resolve and unity." (Christian national umbrella organisation)

Despite that perceived greater unity (within and across faith groups) at a local and regional level, respondents were pessimistic about engendering wider change:

> "The political climate is not conducive to making changes around social justice.
> There is a real democratic deficit which is growing. People have a sense of the
> inability to influence political processes. There is a loss of personal agency and I do
> not see that getting better in the short term." (National Christian umbrella
> organisation interview)

On a national level, when religious leaders have raised issues of poverty, or questioned the direction of policy in recent times, they have been criticised by (some) politicians for stepping outside their religious remit into matters of party politics and the state. This resulted in (not always un-amused) bewilderment at political responses to faith leaders raising uncomfortable issues:

> "If you can't read the gospel and see that there's a priority to the poor, then
> there's something kind of wrong with that." (City wide Christian inter-
> denominational forum)

Statement 4: We are administering the new poor laws

There was consensus across faith groups that they were being pushed or expected to deliver, if not administer, aspects of welfare reform: to 'pick up the pieces' of human lives left outside safety nets, other services and welfare benefits in austere times.

There was, indeed, resistance to the idea that faith based organisations could, or should, administer the new poor laws. It was not their role (or within their belief systems) to distinguish between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. As one focus group participant asked, *"Do we even have the resources to do this?"* – an issue addressed in the final sections of the current report. In reality, what emerged from analysis across interviews was that faith groups were not 'administering' the poor laws, or more accurately, current welfare systems, but filling increasing gaps in that system.

There were, however, different approaches to 'picking up' the pieces and responding to community needs. To simplify, three such responses could be identified at a local, but also national, level - faith based organisations that:

- Focused primarily, if not exclusively, on the spiritual needs of their members or congregations: buildings were only open for worship and religious instruction
- Offered a range of other services, but for their members and/or members of the same faith.
- Opened up buildings and resources for wider community use: for those of faith and those of no particular faith

> *"Gurdwaras can certainly be a major resource in a community. At present though I would say there are three responses. This is a faith building. This is a faith building that serves the Sikh community. This is a Gurdwara that aims to serve all in the community. It is an ongoing and changing struggle."* (Sikh National organisation interview)

> *"Opening up churches, for example to others which can feel very threatening. It needs a leap of faith to open up a building because there is a fear of losing ownership."* (National Christian umbrella body)

However, the danger of focusing on buildings, important as they may be as community resources, was also noted. Churches, Mosques, Gurdwaras and Temples can be liabilities as well as assets:

> *"Buildings can result in people going around in ever decreasing circles. The buildings get seen as liabilities with people running around just trying to keep the building going."* (Focus group participant)

Within Christian practice, there has been an argument that this 'opening up' approach is least likely within Evangelical churches – though interviewees argued that this was changing. In reality the picture was more complex. The extent to which faith based organisations 'reached out' to others depended often on the character of an individual cleric or Gurdwara President – either by leading social action themselves, or by being seen to give permission for others within their membership to do so. Taking on such roles was not without its tensions. How, participants asked, do faith organisations resource outreach or community services whilst also adequately resourcing their core religious purpose and providing pastoral care for individual members?

The models which underpinned faith based interventions in communities also varied. In a minority of cases Mosques, Churches and Gurdwaras had taken on Local Authority (and other statutory) contracts to deliver care services, education and training provision or develop supported accommodation schemes. Others retained a charity ethos – of doing good works 'for' the poor – relying either on fundraising though member donations or on monies from charitable foundations.

Two other models emerged, driven partly by beliefs and, more pragmatically, by financial considerations. Some respondents, particularly within the Anglican tradition, spoke of how they tried to avoid endorsing a form of charity based on a deficit model of individuals and communities. In these cases, faith groups were seeking to 'work with', rather than 'give to' people, adopting an asset based community development (ABCD) which, *'Is founded upon the belief that everybody has something to give, and proposes that sustainable change only occurs when community members are committed to achieving it.'* (Eckley, 2014)

The model, championed by amongst others the Church Urban Fund (CUF, 2013) recognises the role that social networks – and particularly 'encounters' with others – play in enhancing the quality of people's lives and building more cohesive and sustainable communities (Putnam, 2000) within which people can discover together the power they have to change things for themselves. The adoption of ABCD approaches has moved into the mainstream policy context in terms of promoting health and wellbeing, strengthening resilience (Norman, 2012) and bringing about behavioural change (CLES and NEF, 2013).

In some instances, again within the Anglican tradition and the Gurdwaras interviewed, a more social enterprise approach has been taken: using assets to generate income that can then cross subsidise other, difficult to fund activities. Examples included offering managed workspaces at slightly below commercial rent; using faith buildings or those attached to them for functions, weddings and conferences; as well as offering commercial services such as interpreting and translation.

It will be interesting to see which of these approaches – securing grant making trust monies, contracting, relying on donations or social enterprise (or a combination of all four) - will be the most sustainable in the context of ongoing austerity. Or will a reliance on a finite pool of volunteers mean that faith based action is sustainable – but without the capacity to respond to a diversity and complexity of needs?

Statement 5: Inter faith works…when you do – or don't – leave God at the door

The final faithful statement is a particularly contested one. For some involved in both inter-denominational and multi-faith forums, the notion of leaving God at the door lacked any meaning:

> *"Inter-faith work does not work when you leave God at the door. That defeats the point of coming together. It's about creating space to work out what our differences are and what we have in common."* (Regional Multi-faith Forum interview)

For others:

> *"(There is) a post ecumenical way of working that focuses on issues and things happening rather than just talking about what beliefs certain churches shared or did not share."* (City wide Inter-denominational Forum)

In a multi-faith context, what emerged from particularly city wide and regional issues was that, if such forums only focused on the finer points of theological difference, they risked becoming irrelevant in terms of wider communities and social action: *"Explicit theological language does not help in working in diverse communities"* (National Christian Umbrella body).

However, theological debate was important for some in terms of understanding, for example, Islam and therefore being able to challenge Islamophobia. The 'leaving God at the door' argument stressed that *"faiths know they have differences, and so what"* (Focus Group participant) and where such forums had been successful was often in combination with Trade Unions, local politicians and other (secular) activists where they had tacked difficult issues *"together and head on"* (Focus Group participant). Examples included challenging 'No Mosque Here' campaigns and the English Defence League 'parachuting' into culturally diverse areas, and post-riot community mediation.

What was commonly acknowledged were the difficulties of building and sustaining multi-faith structures at a time when government funding for such activity had been almost completely withdrawn after the end of the Labour administrations' investments in building the capacity of the faith sector:

> *"I think the main thing is still hard to bring people together because people – most of the faith groups don't see the need for it and they tend to stay within their own group, and are really just interested in their own faith and not the faith of another group. And so it's very, very difficult. I think they have the desire to do it and they have respect for other faiths, it's not that they don't want to really, it's the encouragement that they need and something to be able to."* (Christian Inter-denominational Forum Interfaith).

However, loss of funding was not the sole (or perhaps even the dominant) factor in changing multi-faith initiatives. What was described, over recent years, was a shift away from structures (seen as bogged down in issues of representation) to a more relational basis:

> *"It's an interesting time for inter faith organisations. The formal ones are falling away. Some were only held together by money and have disappeared altogether. So what seems to be thriving is more informal (work) around specific issues – rather than religion talking to religion on faith issues."* (National Inter-denominational Forum interview)

And

> *"9/11 gave inter faith work a new urgency, but not in the old, formal ways which often resulted in tension between faith groups and the Local Authority. For example the faith leaders group is very informal and based on personal friendships between leaders in the different faith … the real energy in faith and*

indeed inter faith work lies outside the formal and formalised structures." (Multi-faith activist interview).

Whilst this way of working may address the perceived ineffectiveness of those traditional structures, whether a networked and personalised approach to multi-faith working can also be inclusive remains to be seen.

6   Discussion: Towards new forms of literacy

To paraphrase Terry Eagleton (2014), our data endorse the view that – with regard to the significance of faith in the UK's urban communities – rumours of the death of God have been greatly exaggerated. Dinham (2009) argues cogently that we have moved from a secular, to post secular society. Religion, as hoped by some, will not simply fade away. What emerged from the research was, at least in some quarters, a view within faith based organisation that they were seen as somehow monolithic by the state and secular society. This, as they pointed out, ignored the complexities of faith and social action. There were as many differences within faith groups (and indeed between individual Churches and Mosques) to austerity and welfare reform as there was between religions. The picture is not 'black and white' but much more greyscale.

Yet, there was a tendency in faith based groups to see the state, or secular society as equality monolithic. A number of participants from faith groups expressed antagonism towards, or at least a distrust of, the secular. Indeed, just as viewing faith groups as homogenous and broadly equivalent to one another is unhelpful and problematic, there is also a danger of over-simplifying 'the secular', and portraying it as ubiquitously greedy, consumption-driven, or cynical. This, however, suggests that greed and selfishness are universal secular values: something that would be challenged by, and probably offensive to socialists, Marxists, environmentalists, Trade Unionists and those active in the commons movement, amongst others. There are, after all, secular as well as faith-based counter forces to unbridled capitalism, consumption and inequality.

In addressing the original research questions (page 4), in particular, how do faith organisations respond to wider community needs, some debates returned to a, potentially sterile, faith versus secular, us versus them dichotomy.

Perhaps, then, there is the need for greater secular, as well as religious literacy; a literacy that explores ideologies, convictions and belief systems more broadly rather than relying on that crude dichotomy of religion versus the secular. Such discussions are vital in developing answers to questions about the nature of the societies we live, or aspire to live, in; and about the role, influence and legitimacy of corporate, governmental and religious actions and their consequences for marginalised communities. These are not simply a matter of theoretical or academic interest, but rather have important implications when it comes to considering alternative and innovative forms of collaboration in meeting social needs in the context of austerity, as well as increasing religious and ethnic diversity.

Such debates are not easy. Even within inter-faith dialogues there are *"two elephants in the room: gender and sexuality."* (Academic interview): these have not been touched upon here, but would be rich topics for further study. Opening up discussion beyond and between 'the religious' or 'the secular' may reveal other elephants – and demonstrating the practical impact of such debates, in practice, is equally difficult. But as a research participant reminded us, in ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse communities *'Governments close down the spaces for dialogue at their peril'*.

7   Conclusions: Conflicted Faith? Tensions in faith based social action

Findings from the current locality study echo those of the Christians in Parliament (2013) Faith in the Community report: different faith groups in the area were 'doing lots' in terms of welfare provision (e.g. food and clothing), other services (such as youth provision) and ameliorating (if not ending) some of the worst effects of poverty as far as they were able to with the resources they had access to, and amongst the people they came into contact with.

Yet, across faith groups, concerns were expressed around the capacity to respond to increasing levels of need – and sustain those responses. One interviewee noted that "*You can do a lot for £5,000*". But doing a lot for £5,000 places a heavy reliance on volunteers.

> *"Volunteers are a finite resource. This is illustrated by the limits in the capacity of food banks to respond to demand. There needs to be a realism about what churches can achieve."* (Christian Methodist interview)

> *"It's getting harder for people to volunteer, particularly with welfare reform. People can't almost afford the time to be not looking for jobs in what is a difficult climate now. I think that's been noticeable in three years actually. Some people I can think of that used to volunteer have said no I can't, I've got to go and do training or whatever."* (Christian inter-denominational initiative interview)

> *"Things have changed. So there used to be a bit of money for churches to do things in their community [mentions area based initiative]. That's gone so there is a greater reliance on volunteers doing lots of little things. It may be a sticking plaster rather than a solution, because I worry about the capacity to respond."* (City wide Multi-faith forum interview)

Volunteers may also lack the skills, knowledge and support to effectively respond to complex individual needs: or, in marginalised communities, have support needs themselves:

> *"I am quite sure if we were a church in a white suburban area, with like well qualified people, the volunteers who would come in would be such that we could give them specific jobs to do, they would be able to do it, whereas our volunteers need a lot of training and support and love and attention, in order to be able to do things."* (Christian Methodist interview)

There may also be issues of leadership or skills mismatches as different faith groups 'open up' to address wider community needs:

> "The Cleric has a very public role. But they are trained as theologians, but really need a whole different set of skills. How to build relationships, managing assets, fundraising, project management, partnership building…but this is not what they are trained to do." (National Christian umbrella group interview)

> "Now a lot of these Gurdwaras have done a lot of good work but we felt that they lacked a certain professionalism that professionals like us could contribute – things like business planning, risk assessments, safeguarding…" (Sikh National organisation interview)

Of further concern, with the exception of Muslim interviewees, was the perception of a lack of youth engagement in formal religion and faith based action and the implications this had for sustainability. The picture was, however, uneven. Whilst respondents reported a decline in attendance and an ageing profile of congregations in established Churches there was also a reported growth in new, mainly evangelical, youth movements. Similarly, Sikh interviewees noted:

> "There are all sorts of issues, in particular language, with a number of third generation Sikhs not speaking Punjabi, or the traditional forms of Punjabi spoken in the Gurdwara. The experiences and approaches of the older first generation are not seen as relevant to their lives. It is not about a falling away of spirituality or Sikhism. It's about finding their own voice. So, yes there has been a falling off of attendance at the Gurdwara, but Sikh youth organise their own events, such as weekend camps. They are increasingly confident, but the Gurdwara is a place for receiving holy texts: it does not provide a space for dialogue and reflecting on faith and identity." (Sikh academic interview)

This was not seen as 'falling of' of spirituality or spiritual needs, but an acknowledgement that new forms of engagement were needed – in particular the use of new technologies and social media (see for example the international Sikh website: http://www.everythings13.org/about/).

An additional concern was the perceived 'fragmentation' within faith groups. The growth, again, of house Mosques to meet the needs of particular Muslim communities – e.g. converts/those newly arrived from Africa – who, it was reported, felt excluded from the religious establishment. Similarly, there is perhaps less representation in public debate from newly developing charismatic Churches or those that drew on traditions from their countries of origin: including African Churches and, for example, Romanian Pentecostal traditions.

This 'fragmentation' was seen as contributing to a lack of strategic voice for faith based social action, with competing voices between denominations within religious groups as well as between different faiths:

"Post 2010 there has been the closure of faith policy fora across the country and a move to a social enterprise approach – or a reliance on philanthropy that is not really accountable to anyone. It has become more competitive and less relational and there is a sense of false optimism – 'the money has disappeared but we are going to remain positive'." (Academic interview)

Some respondents felt that faith organisations lacked voice an influence with Government – and that Government was *"not willing to listen anyway".* (Muslim interviewee):

"But then Government itself is in retreat and lacks capacity itself. Power is getting further and further away from local communities and the power really is with the international corporates. So decisions that affect communities may not be taken by government or local government but is a corporate boardroom in another country." (National Christian umbrella organisation interview).

"Faith groups respond to local needs. That is a real strength, but the weakness is a lack of strategic voice." (Regional Multi-Faith Forum interview)

Some reflections on faith based social action and policy influence:

"Faith groups respond to local needs. That is a real strength, but the weakness is a lack of strategic voice." (Regional Multi-Faith Forum interview)

*"There is a huge gap between what is happening on the ground and policy, policy influence. There is a political presumption that faith groups have abundant capacity to respond to needs. But it is not a level playing field and support is needed, particularly for new and emerging faith groups [mentions Black/African churches] and there are definitely differences between inward and outward looking groups. That is not a criticism. It's not selfishness, but is, in the case of Black Churches, a response to racism. No one is helping us so we need to help ourselves." (*Academic interview)

"Our campaigns have a focus on voice. Developing the capacity of Churches and the poor themselves to take action and achieve changes in policy and attitudes It's difficult...members need to take a robust attitude and speak out to rebut some of the government rhetoric about poverty. We want a dialogue with government on poverty, but that has fallen on stony ground." (Christian national umbrella group interview)

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If faith groups lack voice with the political parties – how can they influence the impacts of a globalised economy on excluded communities?

So far this discussion of 'conflicted faith' has focused on issues of capacity and voice: why? For all those interviewed, their faith was a driver for social action: faith, in the words of one interviewee faith was *"personal but never private"* and had to be expressed in deeds *"rather than just preaching."* Serving others was fundamental to the tenets of Christianity, Islam, and the Sikh and Hindu belief systems. Interviewees felt they had to address community needs, yet felt conflicted in doing so. The growth of foodbanks was seen as evidence that faith based groups could be flexible, responsive and address immediate and pressing needs. They were also, however, a cause of embarrassment, and sometimes shame. What should be celebrated, in an advanced western economy, was not the opening of foodbanks but their closure – when they were no longer needed.

This feeling of conflicted faith had been made more acute by the changing nature of services described in the findings. Services were frequently referred to as addressing the most basic of human needs – food, accommodation and clothing – rather than the perhaps more traditional interventions around individual and collective wellbeing: play groups, youth provision and social support for older people.

"With the increase of elderly people and people in need or struggling in our community, I feel that the church will be doing a lot of work to bridge the gap … but to my understanding there shouldn't be there any gap." (Christian Methodist interview)

"Once you get involved you do start asking the question – how long do we keep pulling people out of the river before we go upstream and see who's throwing them in?" (National Christian Inter-denominational organisation interview)

There are serious questions about the capacity of faith groups to 'pick up' the casualties of a rolled back state and welfare system. If, with limited resources, all those casualties cannot be 'picked up' what are the consequences – or alternatives? Participants in the research both at a local and national level, felt that faith based social action was at a crossroads. With continued austerity, hard choices were to be made.

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Below the Radar

This research theme explores the role, function, impact and experiences of small community groups or activists. These include those working at a local level or in communities of interest - such as women's groups or refugee and migrant groups. We are interested in both formal organisations and more informal community activity. The research is informed by a reference group which brings together practitioners from national community networks, policy makers and researchers, as well as others who bring particular perspectives on, for example, rural, gender or black and minority ethnic issues.

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