Religion, and the Rise of Social Capitalism: The role of faith communities in community development and urban regeneration in England

Paper for Community Development Journal

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ABSTRACT

At the dawn of a new century and millennium many people, community development practitioners included tend to take stock of their past and articulate their hopes and fears for the future. If the moment is invested with a degree of spiritual significance as it has been by Christian believers and others alike, it is appropriate to review the interaction of faith, values and community work. In this article based on research commissioned by the UK government and carried out through a Christian charity the Shaftesbury Society I aim to describe some of the faith based community work that is currently being undertaken in urban areas in England, and to identify some of the key themes and conflicts which make such work distinctive.

This study is particularly significant in the context of three important trends. Firstly one can observe a growing significance of religion in a diverse and plural global society where communities of identity are increasingly important and the dangers of international conflict defined in religious terms are alarmingly evident. Secondly the communitarian turn in political philosophy and a widespread nostalgia for the mythical age of neighbourly neighbourhood communities has renewed interest among academics, politicians and many religious people in "building community", and in the concept of social capital. Finally in the UK (and elsewhere) there is a changing political context where cross sector partnerships are heavily favoured, which gives new opportunities for participation by organised groups in civil society, among which faith communities are an important category.

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Urban Religious Diversity

Globalisation and large scale international migration has in the last half century brought to most of the major cities of the world minority ethnic groups from many different backgrounds. In North America, Australia and Europe religious diversity is well established (e.g. Bourma 1996, Smith 1996). London, Birmingham and Manchester are no exceptions; for example in my own recent research on Newham (Smith 2000) we documented 294 religious organisations serving a population of less than a quarter of a million, with all the major world faiths, and denominations of Christianity represented. Most of the "congregations" are composed of people from ethnic minorities. Pentecostalism and Islam are the rapidly growing and confident religions which may be checking the tide of secularisation which the Western world has experienced for centuries. In this context religious (rather than national) identity has become highly significant to many individuals. Even though traditional orthodox and dogmatic belief systems may not be widely accepted even within communities of faith, religious communities maintain a role as a forum for social interaction, mutual support and personal networking. It is but a small step from this to organised social action, community development and political involvement, and many faith communities are continuing or developing a tradition of active involvement in these fields.

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Communitarianism and Social Capital

If the 1980's was the decade of the New Right, where individualism and market forces ruled supreme, the 1990's might be called the decade of the New Middle. The demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1989 may have symbolised the end of socialism as an economic system. However before long in both East and West policy makers were speaking of the need to reconstruct civil society. Etzioni (1994) in the USA and the

Demos think tank in the UK popularised the political philosophy of communitarianism and had significant impact on the approach of Clinton and Blair respectively. Since materialistic socialism was now dead, the Centre Left was more willing to talk about values and ethics, and to re-examine some of the religious roots of socialism. This was perhaps most clearly seen in the growing influence in the UK of the Christian Socialist Movement and the presence of several of its members as ministers in the New Labour government of 1997.

Robert Putnam (1995) in lamenting an American society where his research (contested among others by Portes 1998) showed that more people went "bowling alone" than in organised community groups, spoke of declining social capital. Various academic articles took up the theme (see Smith 1998, Sharp 1999 for critical reviews of the concept and application to urban Britain) although few have yet made the link with religion (Greeley 1997, Smith 2001). Politicians on both sides of the Atlantic talked of a democratic deficit and even the World Bank began to promote participation in development, on the understanding that economic capital worked most effectively when social capital was also invested. Thus the concept of "social capitalism" became popular in which the market was self evidently the best solution to economic scarcity, but in which community development also had an important role. The most cynical interpretation is that the "community" provides cheap or free labour in the welfare roles that the state and the taxpayer are reluctant to fund. A more generous view is that a healthy civil society develops norms of trust and reciprocity, and networks of mutual aid not governed by crudely rational market calculations.

UK Government Policy

Partly as a result of these ideological developments from about 1992 onwards there has been a sea change in Central Government Policy in relation to the role of Faith Communities in partnership with the State. Similar policy initiatives under programmes labelled Charitable Choice and Faith Based Welfare can be seen in the contemporary USA. (summarised in the collection edited by Dionne and DiIulio, 1999). In Britain this change began with the establishment of the Inner Cities Religious Council as a consultative group within the Department of Environment

(now DETR) and the development of its role under the New Labour regime. The DETR has issued guidance to local authorities and regeneration partnerships advising how to encourage the participation of faith communities in urban regeneration work (DETR 1997) and has recently through the Christian Shaftesbury Society commissioned research and good practice materials for faith based community development work (in which I have been involved : Shaftesbury 2000), and through the Church Urban Fund on potential involvement of faith communities in the New Deal for Communities programme (CUF 1999). There is also much discussion as to how faith groups can be involved in the newly created Regional Development Agencies.

The work of the Social Exclusion Unit has also touched on faith communities and the Active Community Unit of the Home Office has recently published a consultation paper for the SEU on self help (Home Office 1999). In this it is clearly stated

> *Funders should recognise that faith groups may well be the most suitable voluntary and community organisations to deliver general community objectives, and should be prepared to provide sustained financial support for this. learn with and from one another. …..Strong community based organisations are a key starting point for any disadvantaged community. In many cases faith groups, of all denominations, will be the strongest around and yet their potential may be overlooked by funders and others engaged in programmes of community development. .....Faith groups exist in all areas and at different levels across Britain. Many poor communities in particular have seen a rise in the number of residents of different faiths and cultures as the ethnic composition of these areas has changed. Many faith organisations are highly responsive to the needs of local communities and have over time expanded their role to include community action programmes*

The research;

The research commissioned and carried out through Shaftesbury took the form of an evaluation of their own community worker scheme in the context of a wider comparative study of community work undertaken by religious groups. Shaftesbury community workers operate in a variety of styles, situations and organisational contexts but for the most part are attached to local Christian congregations and carry out neighbourhood based community development. They are offered training, mentoring or supervision and a mutual support and development group centrally through the organisation. In depth evaluations of eight of the seventeen schemes was undertaken in 1999. At the same time another 8 external community work projects were evaluated, of which 5 were associated with Christian churches, one was a Sikh Gurudwara, one an Islamic Centre and the other a secular project initiated by a Tenants Association. The in depth work took place in inner London, on housing estates in three towns in the South of England, and in urban areas in the Midlands and North of England.

In addition to the in depth studies a postal survey was circulated through a number of religious networks for community work. The questionnaire used both multiple choice and open ended questions to investigate the basis of each project's work, the experience of partnership in urban regeneration and value issues and conflicts which were felt to arise from the religious base of the work. Replies from over 140 faith based community projects were received, many of them with accompanying documentation. Finally a focus group involving most of the Shaftesbury community workers and a small number of indepth interviews with their managers provided an overall understanding of the ethos of the scheme.

The overall picture…

The findings from the research (a fuller account of which can be found in the project reports and web site (Shaftesbury 2000) can be grouped into the following ten key themes.

1. Faith Communities in England do have considerable resources, in terms of buildings, membership, staff and volunteers and in some cases finance which could be used more extensively for the common good. Many such groups and their resources are located in areas which are ripe for regeneration faith communities and are in an excellent geographical and social location to reach members of ethnic minority communities. In general Faith Communities do have a concern for the welfare of the whole community in which they are set, and have already made considerable efforts to apply their resources for the benefit of the community.

2. The postal survey and the in-depth work reveal that most groups work hard but struggle to find funds. They cite factors such as poverty in the locality restricting their giving or charging base, and it being difficult to reach the initial take off point. Most of the money in faith based community projects comes from religious sources (on which over just half the projects in the postal survey draw) or charitable trusts. There appears to be a wide gap between the culture of faith communities and that of statutory agencies and major secular funders, and some evidence that powerful individuals may be in a position where they can and do block funding to faith based projects.

3. The in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted show how the definitions of community development accepted in the profession are broadly shared by many Christians employed as community workers. As a result of this there are some significant examples of good practice in community development in faith based communities, and some growing understanding (sometimes slow learning) about principles and practice. However, at the same time there is some tension with traditional theologies and priorities in churches and faith communities

4. Faith communities traditionally feel more at ease with an informal relationship style of management, but that some of them are learning fast to be better equipped for a more “professional” voluntary sector environment. The quest for a happy balance between informality, with good open personal relationships, and a competent management of the work and the workers, is an important one for faith based community work. The development of the projects that we have studied suggest that

capacity building initiatives are vital and appropriate skills can be acquired or transferred. The mentoring role of suitable agencies is appreciated by projects which are linked to them.

5. The evidence from both the postal survey and the in-depth fieldwork suggests a number of equal opportunity type issues remain problematic for certain faith communities, particularly those of an evangelical Christian variety who find it hard to condone homosexual practice and non Christian religious world views and rituals . While such boundaries of faith and conscience continue to be significant it is unrealistic to expect faith communities to be at ease with the requirements of blanket or mechanistic equal opportunities statements.

6. In numerical terms our research shows that Christianity dominates the field of faith based community work, although we are also aware of an important and well established Jewish contribution. There is some evidence in our in-depth work that some groups in other faith communities are beginning to undertake well organised community work. All of the faith traditions in which we carried out work have spiritual, theological and value resources which can be applied in community work. However such progressive values are not shared universally or clearly across the whole of any faith community, and we discovered examples where they had been contested, and opposition to community work had come from co-believers as much as from unbelievers. Our research encountered many faith groups who believe that elements within the secular establishment are prejudiced against religion as a whole, and this mistrust mitigates against enthusiasm for and sometimes prevents partnership working.

7. The overall picture from our research is that most faith communities have a long history and a generic understanding of and response to needs in a community. Many faith based projects resist the notion of community work as a professional or specialist activity and seek to offer service which is informal, available and responsive whenever and however it is needed.

8. The evidence about monitoring and evaluation is that the majority of projects in our research understand the value of the monitoring process and do something to assess the impact of their work. On the other hand a number of them do it reluctantly and do not own the evaluation process. For many, the most useful measure is felt to come from individual users voting with their feet and the feedback they give. Many projects stressed the importance of telling and listening to stories. Change in individual lives is often valued more than high output numbers.

9. Thousands of volunteers each week to make a contribution to community life via faith based community projects. People of faith believe that their spiritual motivation provides and extra degree of commitment and perseverance in the community work they undertake, as well as a different quality of care. However this may lead to problems such as burn-out of staff and tension between employees and volunteers.

10. There are many examples in our data where faith communities have become involved in wider partnerships and networks for the regeneration or general benefit of the whole community. In some cases they have taken a substantial role in proactive networking and partnership building, maximising the network or "social capital" resources they already possess. Some of this depends on the vision and drive of key individuals, perhaps a vicar, a community worker or a council officer who happens also to be active in a faith community. It is less common to find deep involvement in formal regeneration partnerships for the aims and visions of faith based community work only partially overlap with those of state sponsored regeneration initiatives, and some feel positively excluded by the culture of such schemes, although very few see regeneration as conflicting with their concerns.

Issues emerging for Faith Communities

The issues emerging from the research which confront faith based community work, and its relationship with public policy in Britain today fall into two main categories. The first concerns values and the second professional practice.

All the major religious traditions permit readings of core spiritual values which may be seen as broadly conservative or broadly emancipatory. Community development as a body of theory and practice in general prefers the latter stance. Many congregational bodies and religious institutions, which tend to be dominated even in deprived urban areas by the aspiring or arrived middle classes are more likely to favour the former. One result can be tension, dissonance, or dissidence among community activists or community work staff employed by a faith community. While most congregation members will be happy or active to promote charitable welfare activity in which the givers remain in control of the situation they are less at ease with notions of community empowerment or radical political action. Developing and imparting theologies compatible with community development is an important task for religious leaders and community workers operating in such settings.

Closely linked are the value issues of inclusion and exclusion, equal opportunities and valuing diversity. Exclusive theologies which define a single narrow way of salvation militate against serving the whole local community, let alone involving them as partners in the work or in decision making about community life. They can also restrict groups from working in partnership and networks with other organisations and sectors which may be perceived as “ungodly”. This could be particularly unfortunate given the current new opportunities for partnership working that are emerging in Britain.

The second group of issues faced by faith communities involved in community work are more practical. Funding and resources is a major concern, both in terms of capital for the development and maintenance of suitable buildings and for employing well qualified, experienced and motivated staff. Faith communities with a long tradition of volunteering and philanthropy are particularly vulnerable to being co-opted by the state into doing something for nothing. This is neither just nor in the long term likely to produce sustainable high quality community services, and therefore should be resisted by religious groups when they enter into partnerships or contracts with the authorities. On the other hand the long term, organic and informal nature of much faith based community work has much to commend it and should in many circumstances be preferred to a project managerialist approach which may prevent

flexibility, joined up solutions and a relatively stress free working environment. Faith groups have much to gain from capacity building training and mentoring agencies, but these agencies and the funders of community work need to be sensitive that they do not impose a self defeating ethos of bureaucratic professionalism. .

Issues emerging for Statutory Bodies

The welcome new openness of the UK government to working in partnership with faith communities needs to be tempered by a realisation that they have many barriers which need to be overcome. These include:

- The reluctance of local Councils to take faith groups seriously. In one London Borough for example it is only in the last twelve months that the Social Services Department has sought to become aware of faith communities by commissioning some small scale research about the possibilities of religious agencies tendering for contracts for community care. Other departments remain silent, sometimes even embarrassed to deal with the religious sector, with the exception of planning who have needed to react (usually by way of restrictive enforcement) to planning applications by mosques, temples or churches, and Education who need to consult with faith groups over the syllabus for Religious Education, and working with faith based schools.
- The resulting sense of exclusion that many faith groups feel from the concerns and power structures of local government and regeneration agencies
- The dominance of mainline long established, well resourced and networked Christian organisations in providing meeting places, activities and services in the local community.
- The lack of resources, skills and capacity of most of the newer religious groups, the very groups that are best placed to reach socially excluded minorities, to enter into partnership or contract relationships with the state.
- The mismatch of primary aims between statutory regeneration and social welfare agencies and the faith communities, many of whom are almost exclusively concerned with “spiritual” agendas or where they are keen to provide welfare services are only familiar with informal and voluntary mechanisms to do so.

- Problems of equal opportunities in staffing and service delivery, as faith groups are likely to wish to employ only believers, and in practice may tend to discourage or exclude service users who are uncomfortable with their specific faith ethos.
- The huge difficulties that statutory agencies are likely to encounter as they seek to contact and win trust in faith communities, and as they attempt to seek out "representative" leaders with whom they can do business.

In order to overcome some of these difficulties new long term strategies need to be devised. These will need to include:

1. A major educational and awareness raising programme for the decision makers and officers of statutory agencies, including appreciation of the valuable existing contribution made my religious groups to community life, social capital and preventative approaches to social welfare.
2. Proactive community development and consultation work by staff (or arms length agencies) who are well funded and trained, in networking and outreach. This needs to proceed by "leg work" and consultation visits to "home grounds" of faith communities of urban areas.
3. Allocation of substantial resources towards capacity building, mentoring and training for religious organisations who may wish to get involved in partnerships for local regeneration or community care.
4. A lightening up of some of the bureaucratic regulations over such issues as equal opportunities, funding applications and project monitoring which are alienating for many of our local faith communities.
5. Intensive work to build networks and partnerships for the common good which may bridge some of the chasms that currently exist between competing faiths, and organisations within the different major faith communities.

If some of these difficulties can be overcome there is indeed at the beginning of a new century a new and exciting opportunity for faith communities in Britain to develop a constructive contribution in partnership with the state in urban regeneration and community development.

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