

## **Religion, Social Policy and Social Capital in the UK: Taking Stock, Engaging Policy**

Workshop Report for Policy World (The UK Social Policy Association)

A one day workshop, co-organised by Rana Jawad (Warwick University), Ghazala Mir (Leeds University) and Chris Baker (William Temple Foundation), was held at the University of Warwick on 6 May on the theme of religion and social policy in the UK. The aim of the workshop was twofold: first, to take stock of the changing context of social welfare reform in the UK, and the particular prominence of religious groups within this process; second, to consider the practical implications of the role of religious groups for engaging with policy.

The workshop, which was funded by a small grant from the Social Policy Association, together with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the William Temple Foundation occurred at a time of increasing prominence of religion and religious groups in British social policy (particularly since the 1990s) and is one of the most controversial developments in the recent history of welfare reform in the UK. The 2007 Welfare Reform Act was accompanied by a string of seminars which the Department for Work and Pensions held around the UK, one of which took place in Manchester with the title of ‘The Role of Faith-Based Groups in Welfare Provision’. Other important developments in the policy context include the establishment of the Inner Cities Religious Council in 1992 (with permanent representation by Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu organisations), the elaboration of national guidelines for local councils to consult and collaborate with religious organisations through the DETR’s (Department of the Environment, Transport and Regions) 1997 handbook and later in 2002 through the LGA’s (Local Government Association) good practice guide for local authorities.

There have also been various major funding initiatives through the Department of Health, the Home Office, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund (which provides grants for faith-based organisations to build their professional capacities to be able to compete for government grants). Current government policy documents stress the importance of supporting faith groups with further government grants in order for them to carry out social and public welfare roles at community level.

It is argued that Tony Blair has been one of Britain’s most openly religious leaders and a key architect of the increasingly faith-friendly politics of Britain. In key speeches addressing the Christian Socialist Movement in 2001 and then Faithworks (the movement led by Rev. Steven Chalke, founder of one of the UK’s most socially active Christian organisations, Oasis) in 2005, Blair seemed to embrace faith-based welfare as a kind of missing link in British social policy which tied the ends of the (new) political rhetoric of welfare pluralism, social capital, partnerships and community participation. Of course, increasing the public role of faith-based welfare is a long-standing feature of conservative politics with contemporary influential advocates in the UK being William Hague and Iain Duncan Smith.

Official policy discourse appears then, to portray religious welfare as a progressive step for the future of social policy in the UK - almost as if it were a natural step - as faith-based welfare proponents highlight the historic and immense future potential of the Church and other newer faith groups in alleviating social problems and offering vital social support services to different segments of the population. Yet, what appears to be a progressive and almost natural step forward for advocates of faith-based welfare is strongly criticised in media, academic and policy circles as a regressive step for social policy which strikes a blow to the very heart of the welfare state and the important gains it has achieved in making British society more egalitarian, free, just, and tolerant.

It was in the spirit of fostering critical debate about the role and contribution of religion to social welfare in the UK, and in bringing together a critical mass of researchers and practitioners, that the workshop was held. Originally planned to host only 25 delegates, the event attracted wide interest from both religious and non-religious circles. In the end, over 50 people attended drawn from a wide variety of policy, academic, funding and voluntary sector bodies. These included the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and voluntary sector groups such as MIND, Leicester Council of Faiths, The Salvation Army and the British Humanist Society.

The major themes of discussion in the workshop were highlighted in the presentations made by the three key note speakers:

Mr Maqsood Ahmed, OBE who is senior advisor on Muslim Communities in the Department for Communities and Local Government began with the government perspective on the increased role of faith groups in social policy, and particularly in fostering social cohesion. Mr Ahmed's presentation stressed the following points in the work of the CLG: an affirmation of the role and contribution of faith based groups and organisations to community life and cohesion; a reassurance that faith groups are not just seen as deliverers of public service but that their role is much wider and deeper. In terms of future policy, the CLG would be seeking to strengthen the role of faith institutions and faith leaders, build better connections with local places and foster civic capacity and leadership; and finally, nurture community leadership and deepen local engagement.

Rev. Martin Johnstone, executive director of Faith in Community Scotland, an anti-poverty multi-faith organisation working in the poorest neighbourhoods in Glasgow gave a comparative view of the role of faith-based welfare in Scotland. Reverend Johnstone described the Scottish social policy context and emphasised several key issues which had wider resonance for the rest of the UK: (1) the need for faith to be better understood by policy-makers and for the process of policy making to be better understood by the faith communities; (2) faith groups (in Scotland) though also in the rest of the UK, are located within the section of government which is primarily concerned with community safety as opposed to community regeneration. This, argued Rev. Johnstone, betrays the sense that religion is being understood as being more likely to cause problems as opposed to solve them. There are good grounds for that suspicion but, on balance, faith has more to give; (3) there is confusion amongst some policy-makers in Scotland, as in the rest of the UK between race and religion.

Religion is sometimes conflated into a subset of minority ethnic culture. Religion is important within BME communities but not exclusive to them.

John Clarke, Professor of Social Policy at the Open University offered a more cautionary note highlighting the potential threats and challenges of the increased involvement of religion in social policy in the UK – albeit acknowledging that this was a historical relationship with deep roots in the development of British social welfare. Professor Clarke’s presentation highlighted the perennial search of the state for cost effective services and thus, that religious groups need to be conscious of the terms of their engagement with government. Moreover, he argued that the citizens need to have the state as their ultimate point of reference and it was a danger to think that religious groups could replace that within the social welfare sphere.

Presentations were also made by the workshop organisers (Jawad, Mir and Baker) who discussed findings from their own research on the role of religion in the public sphere encompassing a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives. These included a mapping of some of the key contributions of faith-based organisations to social welfare in the UK. Here, Rana Jawad took a pragmatic approach to what religious groups can contribute on the ground, arguing that social policy researchers could help facilitate dialogue with policy-makers and objective evaluation of the contemporary and historical role of religious groups in British social policy.

Ghazala Mir outlined findings from a JRF funded study on the role of faith communities in ‘bridging’ activity, or social interaction between diverse groups. A model for evaluating individual, group and civic relationships demonstrated four levels of bridging, each of which has different implications for social relationships and social justice. Findings from the study indicate that a more equal distribution of resources, capacity and power is needed to enable those from socially excluded groups to participate at higher levels of bridging. Furthermore, policy aspirations of social justice as a foundation for cohesion are more likely to be developed through activity that moves beyond contact and consensus to address social exclusion.

Dr Chris Baker outlined some of the ongoing field work on spiritual and religious capital within the UK currently being undertaken by the William Temple Foundation for the Leverhulme Trust. These concepts (emerging from faith-based praxis) attempt to communicate the importance of faith-based motivation as well as faith-based participation in welfare projects, and are intended as a contribution to both social capital theory and religious literacy within the social policy field.

The workshop concluded with a statement of intent to set up a network of researchers and practitioners which would be particularly focused on sharing experiences and developing debate on the engagement of faith groups in social policy. There was particular recognition in this respect, of a lack of debate within academic social policy circles of the role of religion and this was reflected in policy-makers’ lack of understanding about religious groups’ contribution to the social welfare sphere. Many suggestions were made as to what the next steps might be for developing research and policy dialogue. Some of these included supporting the capacity of religious groups to develop their role in the public sphere, developing more research on the connections between religion and health, fostering more debate between disciplines such as theology and sociology, raising awareness in government on the need to think

beyond social cohesion and perhaps to what religion can do more widely for human wellbeing.

A very rewarding day and thanks to the Social Policy Association!