Review Article
Religion, Social Welfare and Social Policy in the UK: Historical, Theoretical and Policy Perspectives

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Introduction

Social science researchers in the UK now accept that religion has returned to public life (Spalek and Imtoual, 2008; Dinham and Lowndes, 2009), after what has been described by Gorski (2005) as a considerable period of 'intellectual and political repression' that began in the post-World War II era. This lasted until around the beginning of the 1980s when political events such as the 1979 Iranian revolution, the rise of the 'moral majority' in North America and the spread of religious political mobilisation across the world, forced social scientists to recalculate their predictions about the effective demise of religion which had been considered to be a direct consequence of processes of modernisation (Casanova, 1994; Gorski, 2005; Habermas, 2006).

To this end, Europe is of particular interest. For a long time, this has been considered the 'quiet continent' (Madeley and Enyedi, 2003: 1), the exception to an otherwise intrinsically religious world (Casanova, 1994). Yet the growth of non-Christian religions in Europe, the greater willingness of politicians from both left and right persuasion to engage with issues of faith, the increasing debates around issues of civil liberty in relation to religious expression, and the general loss of appetite among some social science academics for materialist Marxist analyses of social life, are but some of the ways in which the religious profile of Europe has been changing (Gorski, 2005). Nowhere has this change been more prominent than in the UK, and England in particular, where scholars have been rather silent on the role of religion in public life and social policy, at least until the last few years.

This silence may be explained by deeply rooted cultural and historical factors in British society (Wolffe, 2007: 325) such as a national Church which, in the early twentieth century, gave up political and administrative power to the new modern secular welfare state, and pioneering British liberal thinkers such John Locke (seventeenth century), who helped challenge the universal claim of religious identity. Thus liberal religious traditions, such as Reformed Protestantism in England, have been more susceptible to decline than their more conservative counterparts in the other British nations (Wolffe, 2007). This issue reflects a certain level of ambiguity in religious identity in Britain since it points to an apparent contradiction in the separation between church and state (Madeley and

Enyedi, 2003). For instance, the 1701 Act of Settlement remains unchallenged, with the British monarch acting as 'supreme governor' of the Church of England; indeed the upper chamber of the House of Lords continues to include twenty-six unelected senior bishops of the Church of England (Madeley and Enyedi, 2003). In Scotland, the Presbyterian Church also has an established status by law (Beckford, 2001).

It is against this backdrop that this review article takes stock of what we know about the role of religion in social policy in the UK from a variety of mutually reinforcing perspectives: historical, theoretical and applied policy. The argument is structured around these three key themes. The first section considers how religion has shaped the historical development of social welfare provision in the UK at both state and non-state levels; the second section looks at the state of the theoretical literature and compares the UK with European and North American scholarship; third section looks briefly at the British social policy context and how this has changed in relation to the role of religion in social policy and social welfare since the Blair era. Due to limits on space, this review does not include discussion of the profile of social deprivation in relation to religious identity in the UK. A full review can be found in Jawad (2012).

Taken from the long-term historical perspective presented in this review article, it will become clear that religion has been an institutional driver, both in the private and public spheres, and in advocating social welfare action both at state and non-state levels. It should also be noted that the literature on religious welfare provision is international, and great in geographical scope, with particular presence in the development studies literature. However, this review article focuses only on social policy-relevant scholarship in the UK, and where relevant, considers Europe and America.

The historical perspective

Discussion of religion in British social policy scholarship has remained confined to brief historical references (Page and Silburn, 1999; Lowe, 2005), with the exception of the longer historical study by Prochaska (2006) (also a historian). This section brings together an array of sources normally left out of the view of social policy scholarship. It shows that from a historical perspective, religious welfare in Britain has much wider connotations than charity or volunteerism. Instead, it is firmly concerned with the nation-building initiatives of political leaders in Britain since early medieval times – including and up to Beveridge in the 1940s (Prochaska, 2006; Jawad, 2012). These initiatives were expressed in terms of political concern with civic order and social harmony, ethics of the good life and the basic constitution of human identity. Due to the need for concision, the focus of the discussion here is from the Reformation era of the 1500s to the establishment of the welfare state in the 1940s, with the understanding that until the 1500s any form of social welfare provision in Medieval Britain was under the purview of the Church or Feudal system (Midwinter, 1994).

Current literature considers the period of the Reformation which began under Henry VIII's rule in England to be the defining starting point for the history of welfare provision (Kahl, 2005). The spread of Calvinism and Lutheranism across Northern Europe in the sixteenth century saw the emergence of more secular forms of political rule taking root, thereby requiring new forms of public social welfare to replace the old system of poor relief that was administered by the medieval Catholic Church. In England, this saw the passage of the Act of Relief for the Poor in1597, known later as the 1601 Poor Law (Whelan, 1996),

which nevertheless was be administered by the local churches. Cunningham (1998) and Innes (1998) note that from this period up until the mid-eighteenth century, there was no real separation between state and non-state action in the social welfare realm. The terms 'charity', 'philanthropy' and 'welfare' denoted areas of social intervention as opposed to specific ways of addressing social problems. As Cunningham (1998: 2) argues, the English Poor Law was itself sometimes referred to as 'legal charity'.

According to Innes (1998) therefore, the Reformation was crucial in setting European countries on specific social policy trajectories, as a mainly Protestant North and a Catholic South. The main features of this Protestant/Catholic divide in welfare provision were that in the former welfare was mainly co-ordinated by the state through local, municipal or parochial bodies, and in the latter the church continued to dominate welfare provision through religious orders and confraternities (Innes, 1998: 21). Innes (1998) further notes that the practice of institutional care for the 'impotent' poor (the young, old, sick, homeless and vulnerable) was also begun by the church and later developed into poorhouses or 'hospitals' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Christian understandings of morality, social order and rehabilitation of the poor through education and religious faith underpinned the key changes taking place at this time in relation to social welfare in Britain.

The ninteenth century was a period of vibrant intellectual and social activity among Christian groups. It also saw the birth of British, and in particular English, liberalism, which forged deep links with the Christian Evangelical revival of the time: together, these two currents would lay down the foundational stones of the future welfare state. Brent (1987) emphasises how liberal Anglican politicians of the 1830s paved the way for university and school education reforms under William Gladstone in the 1870s, the establishment of a national system of elementary education for the poor in England and the dampening down of sectarian cleavages between Protestants and Catholics. A project of nation-building was in the making here which gave paramount importance to the role of education in social progress. The emergence of the Victorian Christian Socialist movement in the 1840s and 1850s under the leadership of well-to-do Anglican academics was a key development. Prochaska (2006) explains that the attachment of nineteenth century Liberalism to individual freedom came from conceptions of the human personality in Christianity. The ideas of the Christian socialists were more closely concerned with issues of social justice and poverty, and they challenged directly the main intellectual trends of the time, namely Political Economy and Benthamite Utilitarianism (Norman, 1987).

Yet the centrality of nineteenth-century Christian virtue and social service could not withstand the mounting pressure of mass poverty and urban deprivation (Prochaska, 2006). Major social transformations, such as declining religious observance in Britain, the economic recession of the 1930s, a swelling British population with social needs, and two world wars in the early twentieth century, meant that the state had to replace the church as protector of needs and guarantor of social order (Davis *et al.*, 2008). Prochaska (2006: 150) describes this transition effectively in terms that show the connection between Christianity, democracy and social policy as follows:

> In a representative democracy, social policy had shifted from the local to the national, from the religious to the secular, and the parish and the congregation bowed to the constituency…the ministerial, civil-service state had dislodged civic pluralism, whose foundations lay in Christian notions of individual responsibility. The shift from voluntary to state social provision was

significant not only for social policy but also for religion. Christian institutions were conducive to the growth of grass-roots democracy, but democracy in its representative form proved less conducive to Christianity.

In this atmosphere of mounting social pressure, Archbishop William Temple was the first to use the term 'welfare state' in contrast to the 'power state' of the Nazi regime of the 1940s (Temple, 1942; Davis *et. al.*, 2008). He recognised and supported a neutral and social democratic Keynesian approach to government and public provision as a way of dealing with the urgent needs of the British population after the Second World War (Davis *et al.*, 2008: 32). Thus, Temple advocated for a taxation system and the nationalisation of the banking sector (Davis *et al.*, 2008). The Church's approach in the inter-war and post-war period was increasingly characterised by compromise and adaptation due to dwindling funds, membership and personnel (Prochaska, 2006). So as Church adherence declined, secular welfare state provision grew. Yet some of the last vestiges of the religious voluntary social order of the nineteenth century continued in the social work and community action of the university settlement movement, whose alumni included some of the most distinguished figures of the modern British welfare, such as William Beveridge and Clement Atlee (Bradley, 2009). Beveridge held in high regard the philanthropism of the Victorian nineteenth century and retained a sense of the legitimate place of religious belief in a social cohesive and progressive society as evident in his third report, *Voluntary Action*:

> The lives of the pioneers . . . show how much of their inspiration for service to society most of them owed to their religious belief. Diminished influence of the Churches must be taken as one of the changes in the environment of voluntary action. Now this religious force for good is less widely influential than it was in the nineteenth century. It must be revived or be replaced by some equally good alternative, if that can be found. (Beveridge, 1948: 322–3)

The theoretical perspective

Academic theorising about the role of religion in social policy can be classified in two main ways: the form which the relationship between religion and social policy has taken and the content of this relationship. The first dimension is based on the historical-institutionalism approach which is much more international in origin and scope, and which informed research beginning in the 1970s on the role of Catholicism in the welfare state formation of continental European countries (Wilensky, 1981). This is perhaps the more developed dimension of research on religion and welfare state formation, and has been led by the work of historical sociologists in the European Continent and North America (Wilensky, 1981; Heideneimer, 1983; van Kersbergen, 1995; Manow, 2004; Gorski, 2005; Kahl, 2005). This is a macro-perspective which looks at the institutional configuration and political cleavages that occurred in Western Europe and North America and the role of religious parties and welfare organisations in developing or holding back public spending and state welfare provision. The processes studied include broad state–church relations, industrial modernisation and the socio-political cleavages resulting from political mobilisation. In the UK contemporary scholars mostly discuss the institutional role of religion in social welfare within the context of the voluntary sector (Stewart, 2007) and the UK's heritage of mutuals and friendly societies or community development and

local governance (Chapman, 2012; Dinham and Lowndes, 2009). Passing mention is given by Page and Silburn (1999) to Christian Socialism as a political and ideological force in British welfare state development.

So it is more at the level of how religion matters at the individual level and what contribution it makes to the rest of society that British scholarship has most made its mark in the last decade or so (the dimension of content noted above). British scholarship in this area is led, so far, by scholars who, strictly speaking, are situated outside the traditional disciplinary boundaries of social policy and have primarily framed their research in terms of the political place of religion in the public sphere; its role in community development, social cohesion and social work practice (such as Farnell *et al*., 2003; Davis *et al*., 2008; Ashencaen-Crabtree *et al*. 2008; Dinham and Lowndes, 2009; Atherton *et al*., 2011; Furness and Gilligan, 2010). Jawad (2012) has most recently attempted to engage with this subject from a social policy angle, which broadly considers how well the mixed economy of welfare paradigm serves the conceptualisation of religion as a factor in social welfare.

In terms of the historical-institutional approach in the Continental European literature, Manow (2004) argues that this approach is especially relevant for the analysis of welfare regimes from the perspective of religion because it highlights the significance of state–church configurations in the development of welfare, as well as the moral values that motivated political activism in European welfare state development. These were especially evident in church–state conflict over education legislation, the influence of Catholic and Protestant parties and conflict over control of the provision of social protection services. Similarly, van Kersbergen and Manow (2011) and Gorski (2005) emphasise the links between values and institutional formations in the welfare regimes of Western Europe, which makes the study of religion ever more pertinent. They argue that in many respects the welfare state is not the culmination of the struggles of either labour movements or social democratic parties, nor was welfare state development in Europe necessarily delayed by religion (Offer, 2006; Manow and van Kersbergen, 2009). Rather, religious political mobilisation, particularly of the Catholic political parties such as in Italy and Germany, played a fundamental role in pioneering social legislation in the formative periods of the welfare state from the nineteenth century up until the Second World War. This is why the dividing line between countries of a Catholic or Protestant confessional background is important since welfare provision was directly shaped by either Catholic social teachings or Social Protestantism[1] (Casanova, 1994; Manow, 2004; Kahl, 2005). Indeed, as Gorski (2005: 163) further notes:

> corporate-conservative welfare states were most likely to emerge in predominantly Catholic societies, such as France and Italy... liberal welfare states emerged only in areas heavily influenced by Reformed Protestantism (that is England and its settler colonies)... social democratic states emerged only in the homogenously Lutheran countries of Scandinavia.

The UK has tended to follow a liberal Capitalist economic model of welfare, but with a mix of universalism/state provision such as in the National Health Service and the national pension system (Hornsby-Smith, 1999; Manow, 2004). The Dutch employment benefit system appears to follow the continental 'welfare without work' regime and yet this is a country that Esping-Andersen has included in the Social Democratic mould. Like van Kerbsergen's (1995; 2009) argument for the Catholic countries, Manow (2004) also argues that anomalies in the welfare regime approach may be better explained by

looking at the two different types of Protestantism, Orthodox and Reformed. Thus, Manow (2004) argues that consideration of the impact of Reformed Protestantism in the Western European countries, where it has been most dominant, can help to explain the peculiarities of some of the countries which do not find an easy fit in Esping-Andersen's welfare regime typology, namely the UK, Holland and Switzerland. This is particularly the case in reference to the dualism of publicly funded minimum social protection programmes and private, group-specific insurance schemes in these countries.

Manow (2004) argues that the influence of Reformed Protestantism in these countries, which share the same ancestral roots as North America, is the reason why they were 'late' welfare state developers and also institutionally different. The UK for instance, only introduced the social legislation that had been sweeping Europe since the late 1800s between 1906 and 1911, but very quickly, thereby introducing the four main types of publicly funded social insurance schemes simultaneously (Heidenheimer, 1983; Manow, 2004). Thus, Protestantism developed close ties with liberal currents, as in Switzerland against centralised state control, but, equally, it developed radical forms of Liberalism which opposed right-wing politics. This was the case of Christian Socialism in the UK as highlighted in the previous section. Based on this discussion, it is possible to classify the countries of Europe along religious/welfare state provision lines as follows Heidenheimer, 1983):

(1) The Catholic countries of Southern Europe such as Spain, Italy, Greece, Cyprus and, to some extent, France, where moderate to high levels of religiosity prevail (with the exception of France) and low levels of religious pluralism exist, leading to an emphasis on charity and voluntary action in welfare.
(2) The Protestant Northern European countries with low levels of religiosity and high levels of welfare state provision, which may also be sub-divided into reform Protestant and Lutheran traditions, thus distinguishing between Germany and Sweden on the one hand and Switzerland, The Netherlands and Britain on the other. Notably, strong Catholic presence exists in some of these countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands.
(3) The English speaking world which notably includes the USA, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, all of which experienced a late onset of the welfare state (even though quick and comprehensive once finally implemented as in the case of the Britain in 1906 and then 1945), where strong liberal political traditions now operate in a context of religious pluralism.

Britain is in an ambiguous position here. Contemporary British scholarship implicitly situates religious welfare in the voluntary sphere as part of the mixed economic of welfare paradigm and does not distinguish between secular and religious organisations. Chapman (2012) has explored the ways in which secular and voluntary organisations are similar, arguing that it is the faith dimension itself which is the most distinguishing feature, yet what this faith dimension actually entails has not yet been made clear, and remains poorly explored in the existing literature. The most succinct contributions have been around the concept of social capital (Furbey *at el*. 2006; Baker, 2009) as defined in the original work of Robert Putnam. Scholars such as Baker (2009) have examined notions such as religious capital and spiritual capital as ways of conceptualising not only the material resource base of religious groups in the UK but also the role of human trust and relationships.

The emphasis in British scholarship on the role of religious organisations in the voluntary sector and urban governance has led to a focus on community development issues, drawing particularly from the work of radical political activists of the 1940s to 1960s, such as Saul Alinsky and Paulo Freire (Bretherton, 2010; Dinham and Shaw, 2011). Here, religious organisations are seen as agents of social change and initiators of local democratic politics, ready to get their hands dirty, live among the most deprived communities and help them bring about their own social transformation, guided by key principles such as empowerment and participation (Dinham and Shaw, 2011). As part of this broad governance approach, Weller (2009) also examines the engagement of faith groups in local governance and via multi-faith forums and how they offer opportunities and challenges for civil renewal. Bäckström *et al*.'s (2010, 2011) European-wide research on Church-based social welfare provision highlights some of these issues further. The main European church bodies have preserved their positions as the main religious social welfare institutions, such as in prison chaplaincy (Beckford, 2001). For Pettersson (2011), these Church groups symbolise the new wave of voluntary social action of our times and are thus central players in the new 'social economy'. Nevertheless, Bäckström *et al*. (2011) note the inherent tension in religious involvement in social welfare in Europe: religious groups have been a useful resource for the welfare state but they are more problematic as sources of moral values in society. This perspective is also linked to new developments in the British social work literature as can be found in Bowpitt (2000) and Furness and Gilligan (2010) who recognise the religious roots of social work practice in the UK and advocate a holistic strengths-assets-based approach to needs assessment and problem solving. In this sense, religion is taken into account as an aspect of identity and a dimension of the coping strategies which families and individuals can call upon.

In some respects, the welfare state symbolises the twentieth century's utopian dream of the modernist, secularist political project. Inglehart and Norris (2004) note that, for a time, this replaced religion as the main source of social purpose for the advanced capitalist democracies. Indeed, they rest their entire study on religion and secularity on the conclusion that religious influence diminished in the rich countries of the world that were able to develop efficient and secular welfare states. But in the twenty-first century the situation is changing again as commentators note that Europe is now entering an age of post-secularity when interest in spirituality and religion is returning (Beaumont and Baker, 2011). This can be seen in the UK context as described in the next section.

Religion in the UK policy context

Although UK policy has made significant strides in facilitating the engagement of local and national government with religious actors and organisations since the late 1980s, the discourse surrounding the contribution of religion to society remains unclear in some respects.

Various pieces of legislation have come into place in Britain which not only seek to prevent discrimination against religion but actively endorse the freedom of religious practice (or none), depicting this as a vital component of human welfare (Furness and Gilligan, 2010): Article 9 of the Human Rights Act 1998 enshrines religious freedom; the Children Act 1989 for England and Wales as well as the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 requires due consideration of the religious background and needs of 'looked after' children (Moss, 2005); the UK's Department of

Health 1991 Patient's Charter stipulates 'respect for privacy, dignity and religious and cultural beliefs' (Gilliat-Ray, 2003: 335). Most recently, the Equality Act of 2006 makes it unlawful to discriminate against anyone because of their religion or belief (or lack of religion) in a variety of areas such as in their workplace and in the provision of goods and services and education to them Furness and Gilligan, 2010: 20–1). Furness and Gilligan (2010: 21) also discuss in more detail guidance by the Department for Communities and Local Government relating to the Equality Act 2006 on the provision of social care and social services. This requires public authorities to ensure that members of the public are not prevented from accessing services on the grounds of their religion, and allows local authorities to fund care homes run by religious organisations for people of their own religion, provided that people of other religions are able to access similar services elsewhere.

This legislative context has had an influence on social policy as well. A number of official policy documents have been released since the New Labour government came to power which explain the potential collaboration between government and faith groups, and indeed what the strengths of religious social welfare provision are. Most of the documentation relates to the New Labour government. The Coalition government have not departed significantly from the principles advocated by New Labour of encouraging religious groups to deliver welfare services and supporting social harmony. However, the Coalition government's political discourse now focuses more on concepts such as localism, volunteering and the Big Society. Thus, government policy remains concerned with knowledge development and capacity building to enhance collaboration and dialogue between faith groups and government agencies. No systematic evaluation of the achievements of religious welfare organisations has yet been performed, since their collaboration is determined by the terms of engagement set for all voluntary sector organisations, and as a result the distinctly faith element of religious organisations is not always clear.

A key document was published in 2004 by the Home Office's Faith Communities Unit, *Working Together: Co-operation between Government and Faith Communities*, which stressed the value of public authorities at all levels working in partnership with faith communities and gaining 'faith literacy'. The report highlighted examples of good practice to increase knowledge of religion among staff members and consult better with faith communities among key government departments and agencies, such as The Department for Trade and Industry, Jobcentre Plus and the Crown Prosecution Service. In 2006, a White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, also emphasised the role of inter-faith work in local communities. Another important document during the New Labour era was the Department for Communities and Local Government's *Face-to-Face and Side by Side* (2008) which offered further evidence of the activities that religious actors and organisations were engaged in and provided further guidelines for local authorities on how to integrate faith communities into their planning and delivery.

Dinham and Lowndes (2009) categorise these different types of arguments for state–religion partnership in three ways. First, a 'resource-focused rationale' which emphasises the material resources that religious organisations own and which they can put to the use of their local communities. For example, buildings can be rented out and used as venues for meetings and service provision. This resource approach tends to be favoured by national policy-makers. Second, a 'governance-focused rationale' which emphasises the capacity of religious groups to represent their community interests to government and,

also, to facilitate the implementation of policies among local communities. Participation in local strategic partnerships is a key example of this. The governance approach tends to be favoured by local stakeholders. And, third, a 'normative focus', which has gained least presence in policy rhetoric, and in some ways is the least understood since it emphasises the way in which the moral values and vision of religious welfare organisations can help improve social welfare. The normative focus tends to be emphasised by religious groups themselves.

However, various authors warn against a naive view of partnership between the state and religious organisations. Farnell *et al.* (2003) and Bretherton (2010) warn against a variety of challenges as follows:

> (1) government underestimates the difficulties that religious groups face in accessing government resources since they do not always have the expertise and resources for making grant applications nor are they always comfortable with the ethos of competitive commissioning; (2) by entering into partnership with government, religious organisations may need to change their identities and compromise their religious missions; (3) government does not understand fully the way in which religious organisations work nor what the impact of their services areas; (4) religious groups themselves do not fully appreciate what government expectations are of them; (5) by developing closer links with the state and accepting a service delivery role, religious organisations may alienate their local membership. (Jawad, 2012)

Under the current Coalition government, the Big Society rhetoric is opening up opportunities for religious organisations to access government funding more directly and work in partnership in the provision of social welfare services (Chapman, 2012). The 'right to challenge' and 'right to provide' clauses mean that private or community-based organisations may be able to take over the provision of services from local authorities if they have the capacity. In her review of the opportunities and challenges facing collaboration between local government and religious or humanist groups, Chapman (2012) thus concludes that better forms of partnership and engagement between local authorities religious groups can enhance both policy-making and service delivery, as well as participatory and representative democracy. But such partnership also presents difficulties, such as deciding when and how best to engage such groups, and how to deal with potential barriers to engagement, concerns over proselytisation and equalities issues. The success of the partnership, argues Chapman (2012), depends very much on the personal efforts invested by policy-makers, practitioners and religious and humanist groups. Strategies for successful engagement might include, for example, developing a deeper sense of trust and rapport between local government and religious groups, developing the capacities of religious groups to be able to engage in policy-making, equipping policy-makers with better understanding of religious groups and basing projects on the priorities of the local communities.

Conclusion

In order to do justice to the topic at hand, this review article has focused the discussion of social policy on the British context, and has sought to highlight the key historical and theoretical trends which show that religion has been much more than a force in the private spheres of the market and voluntary sectors. Historical and theoretical perspectives assert

that religion has played the role of hand-maiden in the development of the modern welfare state, and in many ways symbolising the antithesis of the secular, liberal egalitarian values that have come to define the core identity of advanced capitalist democracies. Therefore discussion of what potential contribution religion can make to social welfare in modern Britain needs to move beyond ways of thinking that emphasise minimising a potential social threat or keeping the beast firmly locked away in the private sphere. It is hoped that this review article, and indeed the whole themed section, will help show the merits of social science research into the role of religion in social welfare, and therefore open up wider debate about the public/private divisions of modern society in line with other intellectual currents such as the feminist movement. As van Kersbergen (1995) put it, one can study madness without being themselves mad. It is clearly important that social policy scholarship engages in more depth with the subject of religious welfare since it is in the sphere of public service provision that the debate about the role of religion in public life will become most critical in the years to come.

Note

1 See Jawad (2012) for a full theoretical discussion and Kahl (2005) for in-depth discussion of the different social policy pathways that social assistance took in Catholic and Protestant countries.

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