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Introduction
Social Policy and Religion in Contemporary Britain – Taking Stock and Moving Forward

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This themed section in *Social Policy and Society*, exploring current trends within British social policy and welfare provision in the light of the re-emerging role of religion, is timely for three reasons.

First, it develops a field of enquiry and body of knowledge that has grown rapidly in the last ten to fifteen years, broadly coinciding with the election of the New Labour government of 1997 to 2010 which saw the emergence of the philosophy of the Third Way, designed to steer a middle ground between the worst excesses of state bureaucracy and the deregulated market. The Third Way required a strong third sector, or civil society, able to withstand the coercions of both state and market and in which citizens could enjoy the benefits of pro-market regulation within localised settings of responsibility and accountability.

Crucial to this attempt at squaring the circle between personal rights and communitarian responsibilities was the idea of social capital. American sociologist and political philosopher Robert Putnam had argued that communities high in the prevalence of social capital, that is 'social networks, and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Putnam, 2000: 19), had better rates of health, educational achievement, more absence of crime, and so on. Within the American context, Putnam claimed a special place for faith groups as producers (or 'incubators') of social capital, and as bulwarks against its erosion. He has since developed further thinking along these lines, with concepts such as 'moral freighting' (2011: 477) to explain the higher levels of civic participation and neighbourliness from those citizens who are members of religious groups than from their secular equivalents.

This Durkheimian-inflected view of religious groups as both expressions of, and conduits for, social norms and cohesion was highly influential in UK policy formation, and has been further reinforced by a slew of reports and policy initiatives since 9/11 and 7/7 (for example, Local Government Association, 2002; Farnell *et al*., 2003; Northwest Development Agency, 2003; Lowndes and Chapman, 2005; Inter Faith Network, 2005; Commission on Urban Life and Faith, 2006; Furbey *et al*., 2006; HM Government,[1] 2008, 2011; Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008; Dinham *et al*., 2009) highlighting the material goods religious groups provide within the civic realm in tangible forms of social welfare,[2] as well as non-material goods, such as articulating the norms and

values by which society should live (the so-called moralising agenda). Strong opinions against the re-emergence of religion as a politically significant force have been articulated by a minority of secular writers (Dinham *et al*., 2009: 21–41).

Second, this issue appears at a time when the political norms and values underpinning current social policy are fluid and unclear. This uncertainty and flux emerges from an apparent lack of clarity about the concept of the Big Society, which replaced the Third Way as a policy framework with the election of a Conservative-led coalition government to replace New Labour in 2010. Apologists for the term, which is said to be at the heart of Prime Minister Cameron's vision for British society,[3] seem energised by it, but no one seems able to give a precise definition. Rather, what we have are a series of descriptive accounts. For example, the official website for the Big Society reports that the Government 'indicates' that the Big Society is communities 'feeling empowered to solve problems in their neighbourhood, having the freedom to the influence and discuss topics that matter to them, and a more local approach to social action and responsibility'.[4] Jesse Norman, a Conservative Member of Parliament, refers to it as a 'set of interlocking ideas, even a philosophy: a concerted and wide-ranging attempt to engage with the twin challenges of social and economic decline, and to move us towards a more connected society' (2010: 195).

The House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, in its summary, suggests it has three interlocking policy areas: to open up public services to new providers, to increase social action and to devolve power to local communities (PASC, 2011: 3). However, the idea of the Big Society continues to lack recognition within the public at large (PASC, 2011: 14) and lacks coherence across Whitehall. The most sustained criticism would appear to be that in a time of austerity and large cuts to welfare budgets by both central and local government, there is neither the time or human capital to grow local replacements (PASC, 2011: 22–26).

However, the Conservative-led coalition government is still keen to promote the general remoralisation agenda of religion (as in David Cameron's public lecture on the role of religion on the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible in December 2011)[5] as part of the general shift towards an explicit appeal for a return to ethics and values as a restorative component for the drive to mend 'Broken Britain'.[6] This appears to be the basis therefore of a morally rather than financially based incentive for faith-based engagement in the Big Society.

Finally, the global re-emergence, or new visibility (Ward and Hoelzl, 2008), of religion as a politically and socially significant force, and its continued resilience and mutation even in the exceptionalist West (Woodhead and Catto, 2012), has seen the recent growth of new conceptual tools by which to understand these 'new' shifts in the public sphere. Examples of these new tools would include the postsecular (Habermas, 2005, 2006), the deprivatisation (Casanova, 1994) or the desecularisation (Berger, 1999) of the public square, de-differentiation (Heelas, 1998), cross-pressured identities (Taylor, 2007), the new multiculturalism (Modood, 2007) and spaces of rapprochement (Cloke, 2011). The time is therefore ripe for a continued conceptualisation of this new, complex and fluid social welfare landscape, based on empirical research into the lived realities and practices of faith-based social and political engagement.

All of the contributions in this themed section are written by leading researchers and in some cases policy advisors in their field, and aim to shed light on the various strands of debate highlighted above. They will explore the following three areas: the

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historical involvement of religion in social welfare in the UK; new developments in the policy context which have led to a more faith-friendly climate, including discussion of some of the key concepts which now occupy public policy such as the Big Society; and empirical research about the actual contribution of faith groups in the UK to social welfare and human wellbeing, broadly defined, including a theoretical discussion of religion and wellbeing and practical suggestions of how to incorporate religion into social work.

Jawad gives an overview of the key literature on religion and social policy which illustrates two key arguments: first, that religion, and Christianity in particular, has played a central role in shaping the institutional development of welfare provision in Britain since the earliest recorded documents. This influence reached a pivotal moment in the aftermath of the Second World War when the Church of England deemed it natural and necessary to hand over the responsibility for social welfare to the secular welfare administration, with the understanding that this state was aligned with the general social teachings of the Christian faith. Second, that research on the role of religion in public action and on its contribution to modern society has increased in the last few years in social science subjects, such as social work, sociology and politics, but not in social policy. Yet, religious organisations are very active in the British social welfare context, and social policy itself is a subject deeply connected to moral philosophical debates about the good society. The review article therefore explores these deep institutional and normative connections.

This is followed by an article in which Baker proposes some new conceptual frameworks, emerging from contemporary empirical research, by which to understand and map the evolving relationship between the state, the market and religion. In line with other contributors, he argues that the re-emergence of ethics discourses and the continuing de-centralisation of the welfare state offers religion an unexpected and enhanced role, but that lack of religious literacy and strategic policy frameworks are likely to result in a missed opportunity to utilise to full effect the motivation, skills and resources that religions can bring.

Dinham's contribution critically reviews the history of multi-culturalism and multi-faith social care work in the UK, which has represented an incoherent view of religion and has now been largely dismantled as official government policy. Challenges therefore remain as to how the UK can best channel the richness and plurality of its religious traditions in relation to the complex political and welfare challenges that lie ahead.

Davie's article places the UK tradition of faith-based social care and policy within a European-wide discourse based on extensive empirical research. Not only does this research show the on-going importance of religion within public life in 'secular' Europe, but that patterns of secularism and welfare provision are closely interlinked. She concludes that the church in Europe remains a vital part of the on-going transition within welfare regimes, and suggests that previous policy attempts to police and restrict religion from the public sphere are being reversed through processes of de-differentiation.

Furness and Gilligan consider the continuing presence of religious values within modern social work and social care training, and argue that the present tendency to functionalise and instrumentalise religion in current policy agendas risks losing its distinctive and often critical role in public life. Alongside developing typologies of faith-based engagement in social work, they also argue for the inclusion of religious-based practice and discourse as part of a necessary collective response to structural inequalities in British society, rather than the recent focus on individual care.

Jawad then reviews both new and existing research on what religious welfare provision actually 'looks like' on the ground. The article offers examples from key social policy areas, namely education, health, poverty-reduction, housing and urban regeneration to explore the variety of ways in which religion is entering the social policy field through both state and non-state welfare provision in the UK. This helps to illustrate how religious welfare organisations fulfil their role as voluntary sector organisations within the broader framework of the mixed economy of welfare, but also potentially serve a much more socially transformational role through their emphasis on the social bonds that tie them to service-users and the importance of paying attention to the social and ideational needs of the latter. This challenges the conventional Utilitarian view of wellbeing and emphasises the moral nature of social policy making. Jawad proposes the concept of 'ways of being' to illustrate this conceptually.

Finally, Hussein's article explores policy developments in relation to issues of social integration and social cohesion from a Muslim perspective. It looks at the gap between the popular debates on Muslims and the actual lived socio-economic reality of most people of Muslim background and then goes on to look at aspects of identity formation and Muslim identity politics in the UK. The article concludes by emphasising the need to move beyond identity politics and communitarianism and asks where the real divides in society are – between religious and ideological groups or within them?

As a first attempt in constructing an introductory debate on the subject of religious welfare provision in the UK from the analytical perspective of social policy, it is hoped that this themed section will not only help fill a gap in social policy knowledge, but also move the debate on the future of social policy forward.

Notes

1 The Prevent Initiative launched in 2007, see also http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/counter-terrorism/review-of-prevent-strategy/ [accessed 17.03.2012] and http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/counter-terrorism/ prevent/prevent-strategy/ [accessed 17.03.2012].

2 See for example *Faith in England's Northwest: How faith Communities Contribute to Social and Economic Wellbeing*, NWDA (2005), which estimated that the premises, volunteers and visitors attached to over 2,500 faith communities was worth up to £94.9 million annually to the regional economy.

3 See David Cameron's 2009 Hugo Young Lecture in which he said, 'Our alternative to big government is the big society' see http://www.conservatives.com/ News/Speeches/2009/11/David_Cameron_The_Big_Society.aspx [accessed 17.03.2012].

4 http://bigsocietysbigmouth.org/about-the-big-society?gclid=CKq0xoKRza4CFY YmtAodQlrtBA [accessed 04.05.2012].

5 This is an extract from a lecture given by David Cameron given in Oxford on the 16 December 2011. 'The Bible has helped to shape the values which define our country. Responsibility, hard work, charity, compassion, humility, self-sacrifice, love . . . pride in working for the common good and honouring the social obligations we have to one another, to our families and our communities - these are the values we treasure. Yes, they are Christian values. And we should not be afraid to acknowledge that. But they are also values that speak to us all – to people of every faith and none. And I believe we should all stand up and defend them', http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/king-james-bible/ [accessed 17.03.2012].

6 See Centre for Social Justice, http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/ default.asp?pageRef=361 [accessed 17.03.2012].

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