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Faith-based Organisations and UK Welfare Services: Exploring Some Ongoing Dilemmas

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Faith-based organisations (FBOs) have delivered services to vulnerable people for many years. They are frequently characterised by values also to be found within social work, notably a commitment to social justice. In the context of recent attempts by governments, notably in the USA, United Kingdom and Australia, to 'roll-back' the state, to 'marketise' and 'privatise' welfare services, FBOs are increasingly called-upon to tender for and volunteer to provide public services, including 'social work'. In the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, religious beliefs are central to how many people conduct themselves, especially in response to personal crises and challenges. The authors' previous research indicates that religious beliefs and traditions may have a profound impact (for good or ill or for both) on the actions of both individual service users and practitioners, but that social workers and agencies (whether faith-based or not) are often ill equipped to respond appropriately. They acknowledge both the positive contributions to public welfare of many faith-based organisations and the potential dangers inherent in relying on such agencies for services to vulnerable people. The authors argue that evaluations need to consider the effectiveness, appropriateness, 'costs' and 'benefits' of individual faith-based services in their particular contexts, and that their contribution needs to be analysed in relation to the varied nature and variable impact of such services. Social work has often struggled in its aim of challenging and addressing the structural causes of inequality as its efforts have been channelled towards meeting the needs of the individual. Current policy proposals provide potential opportunities to review and assess the contribution of neo-liberal approaches to welfare and to promote alliances amongst those members of different FBOs and other welfare providers to agree more collective, community-based approaches with an agreed agenda of creating a fairer society.

Keywords: Social work, values, welfare, faith based organisations, dilemmas.

Introduction

Social work, values and welfare

Religion and religious institutions have had a profound impact on the development of social work, although this influence has and continues to vary across contexts (Gray *et al*., 2008; Furness and Gilligan, 2010). Whilst emphasising that 'charity' and 'welfare' are not the same thing as 'social work', Payne (2005) reminds us that the currently dominant idea of 'social work' arises largely from activities in some Western European

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and North American societies in the late nineteenth century which involved particular ways of responding to poverty, deprivation, natural disasters and famine (Gilligan, 2010). The Charity Organisation movement believed that the solution to poverty was to reform the individual. Early on, this took the form of deploying mainly white middle and upper class women to visit the poor in their homes and teaching them life skills, thrift and moral behaviour (Mullaly, 2007: 45). These charitable acts of kindness showed a care and concern for humanity but also expressed anxiety about controlling or regulating unsociable and unacceptable behaviours. The Settlement House movement offered a different approach in its belief that the capitalist system caused poverty and hence focused on reforming society rather than the individual (Mullaly, 2007). The former model of care and control is well documented in social work literature (Day, 1981; Banks, 2004).

Forsythe and Jordan (2002) argue that ethical principles of equal worth, empathy and protection have survived from Victorian times. Guttmann and Cohen (1995) suggest that many of the underlying values of modern social work can be traced to Jewish teaching on social justice, human rights and mutual responsibility while many Muslims would see the concept of social work as responding to the instruction within Islam to help the 'needy' and to 'practice regular charity' (chapter 2, verse 177 of the Qu'ran).

Biestek (1961), a Jesuit priest, along with Butrym (1976) and Timms (1983) asserts that certain principles are universal to the helping professions. Shared traditional values of acceptance, respect, self-determination and non-judgementalism have informed social work's identity for many years. These principles are intrinsically about treating people better and concentrate on the individual problem and assisting people to adjust to existing conditions. There is an assumption that people need help because they have fallen on hard times and little consideration of the contribution and impact of external factors on the situation. Criticism of these values as doing nothing to tackle the structural context in which social problems are produced and reproduced leads to a demand for more emancipatory approaches that work towards creating a fairer society (Dominelli, 2002, 2004; Mullaly, 2007).

The latter approach focused on creating the conditions for a fairer society and was resurrected by radical social workers in the 1960s and 1970s in response to a growing awareness that social problems are a result of wider political and structural inequalities not just failings on the part of the individual (Bailey and Brake, 1975; Dominelli, 2004; McLaughlin, 2008). As radical social work lost official favour, the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) emphasised the need for anti-discriminatory practice that challenges unfairness and for anti-oppressive practice that addresses social divisions and questions power relations in society (Dalrymple and Burke, 1995; Thompson, 1997; Dominelli, 2002). At the same time, uneasiness about the loss of direction of social work contributed to a reaffirmation of a value base that has prevention at its core, while recognition of the negative impacts of managerialism and marketisation on staff morale and service delivery has stimulated collective opposition to these trends in government policy (Jones *et al.*, 2004; McLaughlin, 2008) and a revival in critical and radical thought in the profession (Mullaly, 2010; Lavalette, 2011). Two interconnected types of social movements have emerged in defence of existing social welfare provision and in opposition to capitalism/globalisation. Both challenge individualistic models of social work and market driven approaches to service delivery; campaigning against cuts to welfare and rejecting the dominance of neo-liberal policies and the exploitation of people and the planet (Rogowski, 2011).

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In the UK, social work largely depends on public funding, both for employment and delivery of welfare services (Fook, 2002). The public has become attached to the notion of a welfare state that should be freely available to all. Current cuts to public expenditure may result in certain areas of social work provision, such as frontline child protection services, being protected relative to others, such as support for adults with learning disabilities, which seem at risk of being reduced or of disappearing altogether. If the government continues on this path, then welfare services will be altered fundamentally and qualified social workers will need to seek new employment opportunities. These include being self-employed and working for independent for-profit and not-for-profit providers (voluntary as well as faith-based organisations).

Globalisation has brought wealth to some in most industrial countries, but its continual drive for profit and its beliefs in market solutions and individual responsibility have also widened the gap between rich and poor exacerbating social problems such as poverty, drug misuse, unemployment and inequality and constraining public spending (George and Wilding, 2002). In this context, often in response to extreme circumstances such as environmental disasters, war and political and economic crisis, anti-capitalist/globalisation protesters have, arguably, succeeded on occasions in showing how grassroots groups and communities can open up new possibilities by combining political activism with creative welfare (Lavelette and Ioakimidis, 2011).

These products of economic globalisation should be of concern and interest to social workers as it is important that they develop an awareness and understanding of the influence, impact and relationship between global and national policies on social welfare and their role and identity (McDonald, 2006; Payne and Askeland, 2008).

Social welfare can be theorised in several ways: in terms of 'well-being' that includes medical care, economic and social security and active participation; as relationships that help people secure or maintain their individual or collective welfare or as a discourse which conveys meaning based on cultural constructions and experiences (O'Brien and Penna, 1998; Backstrom and Davie, 2010). In Britain, social welfare operates on a liberal model, where the state takes responsibility for health, education and social care (Backstrom and Davie, 2010). A key value is social justice which includes recognising the equal worth of citizens and their entitlement to having their basic needs met for income, food, shelter, education and health (Cook, 2005). Democratic societies aspire to equity and fair treatment for all citizens but politicians disagree about how these goals can best be achieved. Politicians and policy makers wrestle with how to distribute finite resources in a fair manner. However, if the aim is to punish or reward certain behaviours ('just deserts'), the questions arise as to who determines who is deserving of reward and who is not? Individuals have certain rights or entitlements such as rights to life, personal liberty and freedom of speech, but, when the rights of individuals conflict, whose right takes precedence? Bochel (2005: 206) argues that social structures that do not allow people to achieve their potential are immoral, while paradoxically societies are constructed of social divisions that work in favour of or against those with most/least power or influence.

In terms of social inclusion, there are conflicting political and religious views about individual and collective responsibilities, while debate has persisted over the dangers of creating a dependency culture where those reliant on outside assistance, whether from the state through benefits or private hand-outs, will accept help without any commitment to accepting personal responsibility or attempting self-help or reform (Payne, 2005; Forsythe and Jordan, 2002). In the UK, this was a theme of New Labour social policy (Blair, 2001;

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Butler and Drakeford, 2001; Gilligan, 2006) and is characteristic of arguments in favour of the Coalition government's plans to introduce a universal credit scheme (Department for Work and Pensions, 2010). There are inherent dangers in changing the eligibility criteria for benefits without increasing employment opportunities that provide adequate pay to cover living expenses. The outbreak of riots and looting that occurred in England in August 2011 led to questions about the root cause/s of this social unrest. Government called upon local communities to stand together against a minority of offenders and protect their property and environment. Cameron (2011) said: 'We need to show them that we will address our broken society and restore a ... stronger sense of morality and responsibility – in every town, in every street and in every estate.' He intimated there was a necessity for a number of measures: a benefit system that rewarded work and that was on the side of families; more discipline in schools; action to deal with the most disruptive families; and a criminal justice system that scored a clear, heavy line between right and wrong. Interestingly, Cameron drew no parallels between the morals of those who 'rioted', and well-reported and questionable behaviour by others, such as MPs and bankers. The rhetoric is of punishment (of certain sections of society) rather than of any recognition of the role of the state or the impact of global policies on the lives of 'offenders'. However, the Riots Communities and Victims Panel (2011: 12), in its interim report, notes that while the range of motivating factors they heard varied 'from the need for new trainers to a desire to attack society', 'Many people asked how a wider collapse in values may have contributed to this situation' and 'questioned whether the issues of Bankers' bonuses, MPs' expenses, and a lack of personal responsibility had created a moral vacuum in society.'

Faith-based organisations: characteristics and contributions

Faith-based Organisations (FBOs) provide a wide range of services at local, national and international levels. Davies-Kildea (2007: 1) argues that 'how the spiritual and religious dimensions shape the fundamental values and character of services provided' is critically important in their contribution, while their capacity to address spiritual issues initiated by service users 'adds significantly to the range of benefits these organisations provide'. Individuals who are actively religious are also more likely than others to be involved in volunteering (Low *et al.*, 2007) and faith is suggested as a key driver in civic engagement (Putnam, 2007; Kartupelis *et al.*, 2005; Dinham and Lowndes, 2008).

Hope (2007), cited in Ferguson and Woodward (2009), identifies five aspects of the third sector that are significant: proximity and closeness to people it serves; particular strengths that make it more innovative in its response and approach to service delivery; ability to establish different relationships to those established by a statutory organisation; an independence from the state that allows more creativity; and, lastly, an appreciation of their political role so they can lobby and give voice to marginalised groups. All agencies, including FBOs, offering welfare services are well placed to be instrumental in raising awareness about the needs of those using their services and in actively working with others to transform and change society so that there is a more equitable treatment and concern for the poorest or oppressed groups in our society.

In the UK, Rochester (2007) points to limitations on the capacity of FBOs to provide services. They highlight that FBOs are usually membership associations and will want to

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make sure that they meet the needs of their members and maintain a balance between delivering 'member' and 'public' benefits. They suggest that local faith-based initiatives are effective in tailoring resources to specific local needs, but that their localism may not easily transfer to wider service delivery. They note that they 'may be ill-adapted to engaging with the complexities and compromises of public funding and the unsympathetic officials who administer it' (ibid: 44). They also consider the likely impact on faith-based organisations of embracing the public service delivery agenda, suggesting that these might include 'a major shift in the nature of their activities and the identity of their users' and 'pressure to replace volunteers with paid staff and to employ professionally qualified specialists' (ibid: 46). They conclude that, while FBOs may not have the potential to contribute to the delivery of public services on the scale that politicians' rhetoric suggests, they do have a role to play in services to meet social need.

A comparative study of the role of churches as agents of social welfare in eight European countries provides some interesting data to challenge some of our assumptions about the nature of the welfare state as well as the future role of faith organisations as social care providers (Backstrom *et al*., 2011). Their research findings indicate that faith-based organisations are likely to have an increasingly greater role as welfare providers and thus in maintaining social cohesion, but that they also rely on a low membership base to deliver services (Pettersson, 2011: 15). Churches can have different functions: as vanguards where they highlight new areas of need; as improvers to enhance existing welfare provision; as value-guardians to defend and advocate for various human values; and as service providers where welfare may be primary, complementary or supplementary to mainstream services (Pettersson, 2011: 33).

Few studies have considered how the religious and spiritual motivations of FBOs have shaped the values and character of the services they provide. This is, in part, because FBOs are not homogeneous entities. Jochum *et al*. (2007) highlight contending definitions of, and some confusion about, what is a 'faith-based organisation'. They note that in many instances faith-based organisations deliver services or undertake community-based activities in partnership with 'secular' organisations, and observe that many organisations are 'shaped by faith' but do not necessarily engage in activities that are explicitly religious (Harris *et al*., 2003). Research into volunteering also suggests that while some volunteers see their involvement in services as a way of expressing their religious beliefs or as a direct consequence of them, others are motivated more by a feeling that they are part of a particular community and tend to share many of the same motivations of volunteers in general (Boeck *et al*., 2009). Jochum *et al*. (2007: 9) propose an eleven-point framework based on the work of Sider and Unruh (2001) for classifying faith-based organisations and, in particular, matters such as the extent to which faith identity determines who is employed and who controls policies or the significance of religious/spiritual experience in evaluating the effectiveness of activities. In the context of the provision of public services, they suggest that it is useful to ask:

- What type of services do faith-based organisations provide and who are these services aimed at?
- Can faith-based organisations maintain a balance between delivering 'member' and 'public' benefits?
- What is the added value of faith-based organisations in service provision?

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- Can faith-based organisations keep faith separate from the social and community work they do?
- Are differences in values between a religious and a secular agenda compatible with faith-based organisations delivering public services?
- What is the impact of delivering more public services on faith-based organisations?
- Does public service delivery lead to greater equality or does it erode the diversity of provision? Jochum *et al.* (2007: 23).

They note that the contribution of some faith-based organisations (e.g. NCH or the Children's Society) is often similar to that of secular organisations, and that such agencies are usually seen as part of the mainstream voluntary and community sector, while at the other end of the continuum some faith-based organisations prioritise promotion of faith over all other matters. Boeck *et al.* (2009: 56) meanwhile note that 'many of the issues facing faith based volunteering are similar to those facing all volunteers and volunteering organisations'.

Gilligan (2010) concludes that there is no single type of faith-based approach to social work, but that there is a basic dichotomy between two broad and contrasting groups: 'fundamentalist or exclusive' and 'liberal or open'. He suggests that the former 'begin with the view that the experience of, or adherence to, a faith is an essential starting point not only for eventual spiritual salvation but also for a fulfilled and satisfying life in the present', while the latter see faith as 'a motivation for action, but not necessarily as an essential part of that action' (ibid: 61–2).

There is a limited knowledge base from which to compare the outcomes for those using faith- and non-faith-based services, and limited evidence to determine what specific characteristics of faith-based efforts influence favourable or unfavourable outcomes. In the context of the US government no longer financially supporting the poor but, instead, providing them with work-incentive-based services, Cnaan and Newman (2010) argue that the federal government, especially, has increasingly abdicated 'safety net' services aimed at helping people cope with the hardship of poverty. They note, however, that while the general public and politicians have turned away from the poor, faith-based communities and their congregations and organisations continue to care for and actively serve those with the least resources. US FBOs were offered financial incentives and opportunities under the Charitable Choice programme to deliver services. In the UK, plans are in place to set up the Big Society Bank using funds invested by four high street banks and from dormant banking accounts to support social enterprises including faith-based initiatives as part of the Big Society initiative (Alcock, 2010; Ainsworth, 2011).

There is ongoing suspicion and anxiety from different quarters surrounding the motivation of the UK government to involve FBOs in the business of community development, urban regeneration and welfare services (British Humanist Association, 2006; Milbourne, 2007; Heins *et al.*, 2010). The Big Society is the latest version or 'vision' of building or mending a 'broken Britain' that aims to capitalise on the time and resources of FBOs, other voluntary sector and not-for-profit organisations to replace state provided services. However, others may argue that all major faiths have a duty to assist individuals and groups in need through personal charity and services and that such social values exemplify principles of active citizenship (Jochum *et al.*, 2007: 76).

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Some ongoing dilemmas

In the USA, in the context of the withdrawal of direct state support, Cnaan and Newman (2010) question who is now available and willing to look after the poor and needy? The UK is facing a similar question as drastic cuts to local government budgets impact on all sectors of service delivery and result in the further dismantling of state welfare provision (see for example, Butler, 2010; BBC, 2011). Current economic and social policy will affect certain sectors of the population more adversely because of their social position and at a time when the demand for support services may be even higher. In this context, the authors recognise that FBOs will adopt very diverse approaches to involvement in and delivery of services at both local and national levels.

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) notes that there are more than 25,500 faith-based charities operating in England and Wales and, in Britain, as elsewhere, faith-based social work and social care agencies already provide a significant proportion of services in particular settings, such as work with the homeless or adoption services where they account for about 15 per cent of the national caseload. Alongside the rest of the voluntary sector, they can extend the range of interventions available in a locality and, sometimes, provide alternatives which challenge the bureaucratic nature of services offered by statutory agencies; for example, in social work with asylum seekers and refugees (Northwest Region Development Agency (NRDA), 2009; Furness and Gilligan, 2010). Some FBOs may respond to the call to 'make a significant contribution to the well-being of society' and, 'to deliver publicly funded services' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010: 1) by seeing this as an opportunity to have greater prominence and visibility in political and social affairs whereas others seem likely to remain more cautious.

The British Humanist Association (BHA) expresses general and specific concerns about the use of public money to fund religious organisations to provide services (BHA, 2007). It suggests that the state should remain neutral on matters of religion and belief and that 'This is impossible when the Government is proposing to pour millions into funding religious organisations – many of which are evangelical and proselytising organisations' (British Humanist Association, 2008: 1).

In the United Kingdom, the DCLG (2010) states that equalities legislation is clear in requiring religious organisations providing public services to adhere to the requirements of discrimination law in the same way as other organisations and that they will

> understand that public money is not for use for purely religious purposes and that making the provision of services conditional on the unwanted taking part in an act of worship would not be acceptable.

Problems arise when religion and secularism are seen as binary opposites (Dinham *et al*., 2009) and it may be helpful for many of those involved to recognise that there are variations in praxis both across and within different religions and non-religious traditions (Macey and Carling, 2011).

New configurations of welfare will mean new providers entering the 'care' market and social workers may opt to set up private enterprises as well as continuing to work in the statutory and voluntary sectors. Some FBOs already employ social workers and

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securing care contracts may encourage them to encourage their staff and volunteers to train as social workers in greater numbers.

Conclusion

There are many different groups of stakeholders and a wide variety of potentially conflicting perspectives to be considered when exploring issues related to the involvement of FBOs in the delivery of social work and social care services. This article has attempted to consider some of the most pertinent issues.

Faith communities are diverse in their theologies, values and organisation, and engagement with them requires 'religious literacy' (Farnell *et al*., 2003; Boeck *et al*., 2009). Government bodies considering funding FBOs need to be clear about what they want from such partnerships and to assess which organisations can achieve particular objectives, while FBOs will want to protect their, identities and independence. As Jochum (2007: 52) notes:

> Where statutory funding and/or procurement can help them to achieve their goals and enable them to work in ways that reflect their strengths and values, then they should take up these opportunities. But they should be wary of doing so if these conditions are not met. Similarly, statutory bodies should be willing to commission services or otherwise financially support faith-based organisations where they can help to achieve particular policy outcomes, for example to engage with a particular community.

FBOs may already play a special role in relation to otherwise 'hard-to-reach' groups such as the homeless or asylum seekers or members of their faith but their work may not always be welcomed by the broader community or by the state. At the same time, the state has a responsibility to ensure that some services are universally available and that all are provided without prejudice or bias based on religious beliefs or their absence. Boeck *et al*. (2009) note that while many FBOs are open in their response and are engaged very positively with the whole community and with other faith communities, some have difficulties in complying with aspects of the equal opportunities policies which accompany public funding. A government seriously concerned with the more effective and appropriate delivery of services to its vulnerable citizens does not need to ask 'is this cheaper?' or 'is this in line with our ideology?', but to address questions such as those posed by Smith (2002) in relation to the involvement of faith communities in community development. Do FBOs have the capacity to deliver services? Are FBOs able to demonstrate that they are equally or more effective than other organisations in delivering social care and social work services? Is there any added value in a service being provided through a religious group? Will they, for example, mobilise volunteers more effectively? Can FBOs reach and involve socially excluded sections of the community more effectively than others? Will they give equal priority to the needs of their membership and others?

Equally, it seems essential, before entering agreements to provide services, that FBOs ask not only 'is this a useful and cost effective arrangement?', but also ask further questions: 'Will we be able to maintain our value systems and religious ethos, while being accountable for public funds and policy delivery?', and 'Can we retain sufficient autonomy to continue to act as advocates for the oppressed and dispossessed and as critics of government policies?'.

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In the forthcoming search for alternative models of welfare provision, there is an opportunity to review the role of both 'for profit' and 'not for profit' organisations. FBOs share similar convictions to social work in their belief that people can change for the better with support and encouragement to take action to help themselves. There appears to be consensus amongst the major political parties that the benefits system is in need of major overhaul to discourage what they see as unnecessary dependency. However, there also needs to be a safety net for those who cannot find employment, are disabled or have ill health and for more jobs and training opportunities for those not in paid work.

Comparisons can be made with some of the tensions and dichotomies evident in social work in respect of improving individuals' circumstances whilst at the same time striving to change the structural conditions that cause poverty. Just as social work needs to review and question the effectiveness of its commitment to tackling discrimination and oppression, so FBOs need to evaluate the part they play in challenging injustice and unfair treatment. In the absence of adequately funded public services and the predictable reluctance of private organisations to tender for unprofitable contracts, there are dangers that FBOs will be used as an inadequate safety net for those in greatest need and that the fact that they are providing such a safety net will be used to rationalise further cuts in services for poor and vulnerable citizens. Some FBOs may 'view poverty and human suffering around us, not only as a socioeconomic challenge but a God-given opportunity and obligation' (Ondari, 2001) and appear accepting of the conditions that have created disparities in wealth. Other FBOs are concerned that compliance with service level agreements could change their priorities and divert them away from campaigning, advocacy and lobbying activities towards service provision within externally dictated confines. They fear that reliance on state funding will further hamper them in voicing opposition and criticism.

In the authors' view, social workers and FBOs are well placed to understand the impact of poverty on the lives of service users. They need to 'make the invisible, visible' by advocating on their behalf (Craig, 1998), forming alliances with service user groups (Craig, 2002) and working with a range of voluntary sector organisations, to become part of a wider social movement committed to principles of social justice and structural change (Jordan, 2001; Thompson, 2002; Mullaly, 2010).

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