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Believing and Belonging: Faith Institutions and Social Capital

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Abstract
Recent UK government policy has increasingly sought to make use of the presumed capacity building potential of faith institutions, a potential that can be leveraged by the neighbourhoods in which they are embedded. Faith institutions are thought to promote 'social capital', that is trust, shared values and effective social networks, a contribution that is all the more critical in the depleted social fabric of poor urban neighbourhoods. There are concerns, however, that faith institutions deploy their social capital in differentiated, not to say unequal ways in relation to women, gays and lesbians. We have sought to look more closely at these issues and at the nature of the social capital deployed. Drawing on interviews with lay persons and clergy from a range of faith institutions in a deprived, multi-faith urban districts in the United Kingdom we discuss how those institutions' social capital – their social networks and 'shared norms' - impact on adherents and the wider locality.

1. Introduction

Broadly defined 'social capital' represents the collective efficacy stored in social relations, the norms, standards and sense of trust embedded in social networks within a locality or community of interest. Amid speculation that social capital is in decline religious involvement and religious institutions have been identified as important sources and carriers of social capital. Indeed one important authority has deemed faith communities as 'the single most important repository of social capital in America' (Putnam 2000:66). This paper seeks to contribute to the exploration of how and in what form religious institutions may contribute to social capital of particular geographic communities. It does so by addressing questions and issues that perhaps pertain more particularly to a European context and that, in any case, have been ignored by the current body of research on faith and social capital. Although there is not the space here for a discussion on the meaning of 'social capital' we deploy the concept critically. To do this we draw on our qualitative data assembled from a range of interviews with laity and clergy in a number of faith institutions in the West Midlands. Our intention has been to look more closely at the nature of social capital that faith communities create and to pose critical questions: what are its limits and who and who does not benefit from it. Most importantly we consider the implications for identity in an ethnically diverse, disadvantaged urban environment.

A number of investigations offer support for the contention that religion generates social capital. Religious affiliation has been linked to higher levels of formal volunteering, learning civic skills, informal care giving, and participation in small support groups. Park and Smith (2000) for example, found that religiosity positively influences levels of volunteering in the localised community because participation in the religious sphere brings with it the development of skills and

attitudes reflective of helping others. Wuthnow (2002) found a positive correlation between membership of a faith organisation and 'bridging' social capital which is all the more difficult to sustain because it requires that people look beyond their immediate social circles and depends on institutions being capable of and wanting to nurture co-operation among heterogeneous groups. Finke and Dougherty (2002) in their cross-denomination study of the impact of seminary training found that seminary training augments social capital in the sense that seminary-trained clergy are more heavily invested in professional networks but that it was not easily transferable. King and Furrow (2004) developed a three dimensional model of social capital to demonstrate the link between social interaction, trust and shared vision which enable social ties associated with religiousness to influence positively the moral behaviour of young people.

The research literature reveals several limitations. First it is largely focused on religiously inspired behaviour in the United States and is implicitly framed by the powerful and perhaps exceptional role that faith plays in American society and politics. This is not to say that the gulf between 'secular' Europe and a 'religious' America is so great that the research linking faith and social capital is not transferable but that it requires contextualisation and comparative analysis. In the British and European context Davie and others detect a steadying of religious belief across European populations and that church attendance is not the best indicator of adherence - 'believing without belonging' as she puts it (Davie 1994). In this European context the relationship between religious activity and social capital is likely to be contingent, 'differently related in different social contexts' (Davie 2002:330).

Second it has not taken into account the shifting dynamics of religiously inspired social network behaviour and how that behaviour fits within a broader pattern of identity formation for individuals and faith collectives. Third, it obscures the political conflicts and missions that faith institutions have engaged in and the purposes to which accumulated social capital is used. For example the conservative faith networks activated in the US elections of 2000, 2002 and 2004 marked the culmination of a relatively recent intensity of political engagement from the specifically evangelical social networks which paralleled the loss of influence by the once influential mainline liberal denominations. Finally the research has left unexplored the issue how religion may or may not mobilise resources for groups and organisations seeking to expand democratic participation or further the interests and consolidate the identity of marginalised social groups. The latter issue remains central to our own investigation.

2. Faith institutions and social capital: the study and its findings
Our investigation was based on the disadvantaged urban centres of Sandwell and Birmingham. Within each centre the research included a narrower geographical focus on specific districts: West Bromwich in Sandwell and Moseley in Birmingham. In each locality our fieldwork moved along lines of faith networks

– new to us, but recognised within the communities – and led us to interfaith forums as well as to interviewees who were active within those networks. Interfaith forums provided the opportunity for participant observation and a range of informal interviews on which notes were made. The interviewees from faith institutions, both lay and official, provided the qualitative data as to how, and in what manner, their institutions were, or were not, able to strengthen those assets embedded in local social relationships that we deem as 'social capital'. Those interviews were recorded on tape and have subsequently been transcribed verbatim.

We purposely selected areas with diverse ethnic make-up that were also struggling with deprivation and the loss of economic rationale. We sought out the views of adherents from not only mainline Protestant denominations and Catholic churches but also from Hindu, Sikh, Quaker, Buddhist and Muslim faith communities. Our aim was to draw out the voice and opinion of those adherents directly and to encounter cultural and ethnic specificities of social capital.

We are aware that academic attention given to faiths and interpretations of faith contributes to the legitimation of a 'truth' about what is authentic, pure and real about a faith [1]. This in turn shapes and influences the lived experiences of belonging to a faith community. These narratives can quickly become folded into contemporary critical events such as September 11th 2001 which deeply affected general perceptions of diverse Muslim communities in Britain and resulted in a heightened awareness of 'difference'. The Muslims we interviewed were particularly cautious as they eloquently described their communities as under 'siege' and 'close surveillance'.

A number of emerging themes have arisen from this field work and reveal a striking confluence in behaviours as the various faith institutions wrestle with the constraints, dilemmas and cultural context of early 21st century Britain. Resources are limited and are patched together from different sources. In general the cost of upkeep of mosque or church was a constant preoccupation and major expansion or new build was not possible in the foreseeable future. An Anglican church in Sandwell was the single exception; it had an ample endowment on which it could draw for some of its activities.

In terms of social outreach the number of people available to develop partnerships with local voluntary agencies and to provide personnel for service provision or community activities was also relatively small but all institutions were undertaking it. Partnerships included working with local Sure Start programmes,

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[1] Indeed, writers such as Bhatt (1998) in terms of Hinduism and Islam and Oberoi (1997) in terms of Sikhism, highlight the influence of colonialism and imperialism in conceptualising and determining contemporary interpretations of these faiths. For Bhatt (1997) the discourse employed by contemporary revivalist and fundamentalist religious movements, respectively Hindu and Muslim, can be traced back to the colonial period.

youth groups and Deaf youth groups, inter-faith groups, broad base citizens' organisations, luncheon clubs and day centres for older people among many.

Through most of the faith institutions we encountered, at least as our interviewees presented them were committed to notions of social justice and the vitality of their own locality. Virtually all those we interviewed indicated that their particular institution had developed social commitments characterised by multiple projects however small and declared the willingness to tackle multiple sources of need despite limited number of people at the disposal of the specific institution. A sense of wanting to hold the local community together, or to piece a community together out of the remains of an older one that had fragmented was evident in many of the responses.

Interviewees said their institutions were facing division and disappointment over loss of adherents, smallness of the resources compared to the size of the tasks they wanted to tackle. This was matched by redeployment of staff and re-organisation of committees to try to maintain both horizontal ties across their locality and vertical ties to their own hierarchy. Only from the mosques did we hear assertions that growth over the last dozen years or so had been significant. For most of the faith institutions wrestling with conflicting attitudes, with in-groups and out-groups, 'fringe and core', were common experiences reflecting wide differences in attitudes, and the extent of commitments within those institutions. How to mobilise commitment within the larger body of adherents, whether Christian or Muslim was a common preoccupation among those we interviewed. Pushing particular partnerships or initiatives forward within their respective hierarchies was an issue within the Church of England deanery and, as it happened, within the Quaker arrangement of monthly and yearly meetings. All the institutions with which we had contact used much broader more intuitive forms of taking stock of what had been achieved over a previous year; none had formal performance review systems and were generally scathing of the mechanistic notions of success or failure associated with defining public sector effectiveness.

3. Discussion
We approached our study with a critical orientation – and were intent from the outset to identify any limitations to the acquisition and impact of faith based social capital. How far does faith generated social capital become available to all within a given community? Are there boundaries which implicitly define who in effect is able to draw on such social capital? Who patrols these boundaries and in whose interest do they do so?

In order to examine the limitations of faith based social capital it is important to address the issue of religious interpretation. Interpretations of religion are dynamic (Afshar 1998; Yuval-Davis 1997 and Oberoi 1997); they change over time, within locations and within individuals and thus must be understood contextually. When examining faith organisations within a given time and

location, such as in the multi-faith city of Birmingham, we need to do this in relation to the forces and circumstances that have shaped the interpretation of faith and perception and practices of faith based communities.

3.1 Power

Within this context, power cannot be seen as simply belonging to one group and not another. Rather power operates within a complex multi-dimensional matrix, which is dynamic and also contextual (see for example Brah 1996 on multiaxiality of power and Sinha 1995 on power relations within the colonial context). Understanding power in this way also enables an understanding of the ways in which modalities of difference such as generation, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and class, are intersectional and also impact on interpretations of faith, and therefore shape the lived experiences of belonging to a faith community. To understand the limitations and challenges to the acquisition of faith based social capital, requires us to go beyond the scope of examining faith in isolation, and attend to various aspects of individual subjectivities such as gender and sexuality.

3.2 Belonging

All communities have rules and narratives of belonging that help distinguish between members and non members. These group narratives place boundaries based on behaviour or practices that establish a sense of commonality on one side and difference on the other (Hall 1996; Anderson 1983; Cornell and Hartmann 1998). However, belonging also carries certain obligations for members as requirement for membership. The particularities that mark the distinction of a group may differ within and between groups, yet having rules for belonging are present with all communities. The practices or the enforcement of certain rules, symbols and regulation serves to mark such group boundaries. It is in this context, that feminists in particular have highlighted how women are used as symbolic boundary markers, and the surveillance of their behaviour is used to define the boundaries of belonging (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989 and 1993; Pettman 1996).

Gender, as we discovered, is important in demarcating how the shared benefits of social networks were distributed within ethnic and religious boundaries. It is in this context that we question whether the acquisition of faith based social capital is available to everyone within a community especially when the regulation of one sex is more accountable to enforcement of a group's rules and regulation. Interestingly in our interviews we probed these issues and where it was addressed directly our interviewees tended to make a distinction between faith and 'custom and tradition', which they assigned to a 'cultural sphere'. They said it was the latter that shaped the way women's roles are allocated within faith institutions themselves rather than the faith itself. As we argue below we found validity in this distinction while acknowledging that in practice it is difficult to disentangle the two.

In the context of Islam, Haleh Afshar (1998) highlights how such a process of masculinisation over time has reduced the possibilities for Islam to empower women. For Afshar (1998:9) it is 'conservative male interpreters of history' who have removed the importance and presence of Muslim women, from Islamic text and history. One important aspect of Islam that links in with the position and behaviour of women is the practice of the veil. In certain contexts, wearing the veil is a necessary part of belonging to a particular community, and negation of this can result in exclusion and worse. The veil continues to be a point of contention over its appropriate interpretation, and these debates over the women rights and responsibilities within Islam continue and indeed in the wider society, and Muslim women remain at the forefront of establishing an equal stake in Islam (Afshar 1998).

Culture and cultures are dynamic discursive narratives that change over context, space and time, although often are assumed to be fixed (Gillespie 1995). The use of culture here in a generic sense is applied to conceptualise two aspects of subjectivities linked to faith and belonging. Whilst religion and culture can be theorised as separate entities, in lived experience they are rarely separable, particularly when both draw on the same or similar benchmarks for appropriate, morally right behaviour for those that belong to a community. For faith communities of South Asian origin, who share similar cultures based on their countries of origin, also share a moral code known as *izzat* which controls and restricts the behaviour of their communities' members. This traditional unwritten law operates to forbid any act that dishonours the community and essentially the family. *Izzat* is damaged when any individual's behaviour brings *'Sharam'* (disrespect/shame) to the family (Gillespie 1995; Wilson 1978). Although, *izzat* affects both men and women, it disproportionately affects women, and contributes in the construction of women as the 'honour' of the family and the 'community. Asian women are at risk of being ostracised and labelled as 'outcasts' for failing to maintain such *izzat*. The pressure to maintain this honour can often lead to a silencing of actions which may bring shame, for example. To women who have experienced familial violence and who may remain silent as a consequence (Khanum 1992; Sahgal 1992).

A small amount of research has also documented the importance of izzat, in terms of the experience of gay and lesbian men and women from south Asian communities now in the UK (Yip 2004; Khan 1996). Whilst many of the services, including social outlets available for gay and lesbian groups are not specifically for individuals from south Asian origin, with exception of projects such as NAZ based in London, there are limited services that address the particularities of the gay South Asian experience. In Birmingham, the Saathi group now focuses on social events and Mayisha focuses more on emotional support. However, faith based gay and lesbian groups are still a rarity. In terms of empirical research, Yip's (2004) work on Muslim British born gays and lesbians is insightful in highlighting the importance of obligations that individuals face in order to belong to a faith based group. Yip (2004) highlights how religious narratives work to

emphasise the importance of heterosexuality, combined within cultural pressures such as *izzat* which restrict individuals from coming out. Those individuals from South Asian Muslim backgrounds that did choose to disclose their sexual orientation to their immediate family members, especially mothers, were often asked to refrain from coming out to the wider community and family. The importance of maintaining *izzat* was central to this pressure to hide their sexuality from wider community. Whilst Yip (2004) relates much of this to religious obligation, he also suggests barriers of culture and ethnicity as important factors.

These experiences are not limited to South Asian faith based communities however. For example one of our respondents, involved in a lesbian and gay organisation, stated that he had been active in a faith organisation which openly accepted his sexual orientation, yet were not so accepting of his relationship with a married man. Issues of morality therefore remain a central feature of faith based communities whilst intersecting with religious and ethnic boundaries.

This is not to say that any seeming negotiation of the faith based communities' borders/boundaries or belonging/acceptability will automatically result in the exclusion of individuals and therefore diminish the opportunities for social capital. Nevertheless factors of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and so on will help structure and determine belonging to that faith community. Moreover, there are alternative ways of gaining social capital for those who feel excluded from faith based organisations, for example through other forms of mobilisation which may maintain ethnic, cultural and religious associations (see Kawale 2003 and Gopinath 1996).

4. Conclusion
In this paper we have drawn out the particularities of faith based social capital with the emphasis precisely on those institutions and linked social networks that have fallen outside the research investigations thus far. In effect we are pressing the concept of social capital to reveal itself in a more differentiated, context-specific way. This process enables us to see how faith organisations motivate individual involvement by distributing 'selective incentives' to participants and how the expressive dimensions of participants' experiences become critical to their social engagement through their constructing and reconstructing their identity (Wood 1999).

Certain forms of religious culture enables and encourages democratic political organising around a social justice agenda while other forms constrain it (Wood 1999). Our respondents described faith institutions that had developed vastly different cultures largely shared by each institutions' adherents in general but in relation to specific engagements, projects and community involvements was more circumscribed and patchy. Their assumptions and perceptions of the world were embedded in multiple networks and urban social landscapes based on ethnic identity, religious commitment, and shared experience. Further questions arise from our research: Does trust, a key component of faith based social

capital, rest on hidden forms of coercion or social pressure? How do social norms embedded in faith networks confirm or undermine the construction of the identity of adherents? Are some forms of social capital more effectively leveraged in achieving political goals than others? By addressing such questions we hope to cast further light on the specific nature of social capital generated by faith institutions, particularly in relation to its political impact.

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