

## **Religion and urban regeneration: a place for faith?**

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Religion and urban regeneration: a place for faith?

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Religion and urban regeneration: a place for faith?

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## Abstract

The British government has identified 'faith communities' as a neglected resource in urban regeneration. This article first explores the context of official support for faith involvement in urban and neighbourhood policy and identifies the assumptions underlying key policy documents. These assumptions are then critically explored by reference to the links commonly drawn between religion and 'community', 'neighbourhood' and 'social cohesion'. Attempts to enlist faith groups within this essentially consensual agenda often fail to recognise both the potential divisiveness of religion and also the more positive and radical lessons that often stem from the action, experience and critical analysis of religious organisations and their members.

## Français

Le gouvernement britannique a identifié les 'communautés de religion' en tant que ressource négligée dans le cadre de la régénération urbaine. Cet article explore tout d'abord le contexte du soutien officiel de l'implication de la religion dans les politiques urbaines et de voisinage et identifie les suppositions sous-jacentes aux documents de politique clé. Ces suppositions sont ensuite explorées de façon critique en faisant référence aux liens dressés communément entre la religion et la 'communauté', le 'voisinage' et la 'cohésion sociale'. Les tentatives d'implication des groupes de religion dans le cadre de ce programme essentiellement consensuel, omettent souvent de reconnaître le potentiel de dissension de la religion et aussi les leçons plus positives et radicales, qui proviennent souvent de l'action, expérience et analyse critique, des organisations religieuses et de leurs membres.

## Español

El gobierno británico ha identificado 'comunidades de fe' como un recurso de abandono de la regeneración urbana. Este artículo explora primero el contexto de apoyo oficial en la intervención de la fe en la política urbana y de vecindad e identifica las suposiciones que subordinan los documentos políticos claves. Estas suposiciones se exploran de manera crítica refiriéndose a los enlaces en común establecidos entre la religión y 'la comunidad', 'la vecindad' y 'la cohesión social'. Los intentos de alistar los grupos de fe dentro de esta esencial agenda consensuada falla con frecuencia en reconocer la división potencial de la religión así como las lecciones más positivas y radicales que a veces crece de la acción, experiencia y análisis crítico de organizaciones religiosas y sus miembros.

## **Introduction**

In this article, we develop ideas emerging from recent empirical research funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Farnell et al, 2003)<sup>1</sup> using conceptual and theoretical literatures on religious diversity, the local and the global, and community and social cohesion. Specifically, we analyse the British government's attempt to engage or, perhaps more accurately, enlist 'faith communities' in urban regeneration and neighbourhood renewal. We argue that official understandings of faith organisations are essentially congruent with consensus theory, stressing the potential of religious faith as an agent of community cohesion and neglecting its historical and contemporary involvement in international, national and local conflicts. We also suggest that this approach fails to recognise the complexity and diversity of religious faith and underestimates the extent to which faith organisations bring active and critical agency to 'regeneration'. While faith congregations, organisations and their individual members may constitute clear interest 'communities' and form important nodes in local neighbourhood networks, many also offer an independent and critical presence based on understandings and practices that 'transgress' the boundaries of homogeneous 'community' and transcend a purely local neighbourhood focus. In this process, they challenge their identification by the state as readily biddable instruments for 'social cohesion' and 'partnership' and contest the 'place of faith' assigned by the government.

The article is organised in three sections. First, the policy context is sketched and the official perception of the potential contribution of the 'faith sector' is interpreted by reference to key documents and speeches. The remaining two sections assess the adequacy of this perception in relation to the diverse theologies, experiences and practices of religious groups and organisations. Our discussion offers a critical analysis of the discursive links made by government between, first, religion and community and, second, religion, neighbourhood and social cohesion.

## **Religion, social policy and social welfare**

The agency and latency of religious institutions and traditions has been significant in the history of British social and urban policy and provision. In England especially, the care – and the control – of the established Church of England pervaded social life through its parochial organisation, and Christian social thought has been a significant influence on public policy (Farnell et al, 1994). There are few areas of social welfare that do not bear the imprint of religious motivations, ideas and action, from early 'reformers' and philanthropists to the subsequent, and ongoing, involvement of faith-based organisations and their individual members, both Christian and, latterly, non-Christian.

During the twentieth century, in keeping with a secular modern age and an increasing privatisation of religion, religious organisations were accorded a more subordinate role in relation to both policy making and the provision of social welfare, although churches and religious foundations remained important within the voluntary and community sectors. In the specific context of urban policy and regeneration it is only since the mid-1990s that there has been increasing reference to the potential role of 'faith communities' and official attempts to engage religious groups.

A full interpretation of this tentative turn (or re-turn) to faith would require higher level reference to the crises of modernity, state authority and indeed Christendom in the face of cultural diversity and the challenges of alternative epistemologies. Some of these issues will surface in subsequent sections. Here, however, we identify three more immediate and contingent factors – changes in British political philosophy, the hard experiences of regeneration practice, and recent demonstrations of the involvement of religion in social conflict and division.

First, although the inclusion of ‘faith’ predates New Labour, there are clear links between this and Tony Blair’s general crystallisation of the Third Way as a statement of the values necessary in a ‘modernised’ social democracy. Blair’s emphasis on the principles of ‘responsibility’, ‘community’, ‘partnership’, ‘social inclusion’ and the ‘social cohesion’ of civil society invite a consensual and functionalist view of religion. Government is recast here as:

... an enabling force, protecting effective communities and voluntary organisations and encouraging their growth to tackle new needs, in partnership as appropriate. (Blair, 1998: 4)

This language owes much to a specific ethical variant of communitarianism (Levitas, 1998; Johnson, 1999; Rodger, 2000). The concept of ‘community’ is made to work hard to distinguish the new ‘progressive’ politics from those of Old Left statism and New Right individualism. Yet it is defined in essentially conservative terms. The community is associated with shared moral values, where – within strong families and through effective parenting – social and civic obligations are learned, and where self-reliance, mutual aid and volunteering are practised. Community is seen largely as place-based, where relations form around local institutions, including religious ones (Hill, 2000). Such places are socially ‘cohesive’ and the link between the requirements of this political project and the promise of religion, defined in sociologically functionalist and consensual terms, is evident. Blair himself made this connection in a subsequent speech:

Our major faith traditions – all of them more historic and deeply rooted than any political party or ideology – play a fundamental role in supporting and propagating values which bind us together as a nation. (Blair, 2001)

A second stimulus to the official embrace of faith has been the continuing wide gap between aspiration and achievement in the involvement of ‘the community’ in urban regeneration practice. Despite the incorporation of community participation as a criterion for funding, first from the Single Regeneration Budget and later from such programmes as New Deal for Communities and the recognition of Local Strategic Partnerships, the community often remains a very subordinate partner (Mayo and Taylor, 2001). Finding ‘social capital’, accessing local networks, building ‘community capacity’ and securing genuine community representation has frequently proved elusive. In such a context, some policy makers, and indeed researchers, have turned eventually<sup>2</sup> to religious congregations, organisations and their individual members for untapped potential, particularly in districts where religion may form a much more salient element in personal and collective identity than across Britain as a whole.

An early development, pre-dating New Labour, was the formation in 1992 of the Inner Cities Religious Council (ICRC). This body includes representation from five of the largest religious traditions in Britain – Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh

– and is described as a forum where faith representatives and the government ‘can work together on urban renewal and social exclusion’<sup>3</sup>. It formed part of the Urban Policy Unit, with the role of “taking forward the agenda of the Urban White Paper” (DETR, 2001:1) and it also “relates to the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit and its work in enabling communities to participate in making towns and cities better places to live in” (DETR, 2001:1).

Two subsequent developments serve to indicate the direction of policy. Centrally, in 1997 the DETR produced a second edition of its guidance handbook on ‘involving communities’ in regeneration. This included a new chapter on the involvement of ‘faith communities’, which argued that:

... the contribution that faith communities can make to regeneration is significant. They can help regeneration partnerships to understand the needs and concerns of people living in particular areas, or groups of people with particular needs.... In terms of their active membership, churches, mosques, temples, synagogues and gurdwaras are often among the most substantial community-based organisations within an area. They have as much right to contribute to discussions concerning regeneration as residents’ or tenants’ organisations. (DETR, 1997: 149)

Faith communities are commended both here and in the government’s more recent Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy in essentially pragmatic terms. Engagement with them is seen as a way of recognising diversity, a good “point of entry into involving the community” and reaching those commonly not engaged in the political or regeneration process:

Faith groups may offer a channel to some of the hardest to reach groups. A pragmatic approach will be taken to funding faith groups, recognising that they may be the most suitable organisation to deliver community objectives. (Cabinet Office, 2001: 52)

Next, the Local Government Association (LGA), the ICRC, the Home Office and the government-supported Inter Faith Network collaborated in the production of a guidance manual for local councils working with faith organisations. This linked engagement with ‘faith communities’ to “the wider context of the modernisation of local government” (LGA, 2002: 7) and commended faith communities as having:

- existing substantial involvement in their neighbourhoods and communities;
- local networks, leadership, management capacity and buildings to contribute to regeneration;
- memberships that include ‘hard-to-reach’ people with whom official regeneration initiatives are not connecting; and
- a particular willingness of members to volunteer. (LGA, 2002: 7–10)

This document makes an explicit and affirmative link between faith communities and ‘cohesion’:

Most of our towns and cities are places of great diversity – that is one of their strengths. Faith is an element in this diversity. But the benefits of diversity cannot be taken for granted. Relations between faith communities – and in turn between faith communities and local government – can make a significant contribution to promoting community cohesion. (LGA, 2002: foreword)

Most recently, the development of the government's partnership with faith communities has become consolidated within the Home Office and its Faith Communities Unit. The government's interest in working with faith organisations was reaffirmed by this department in a new report (Home Office, 2004).

In summary, the relative lack of success in securing genuine and sustainable community involvement and empowerment in regeneration has prompted a wider casting of the net to include religious organisations. In other words, policy has been prompted both by 'Third Way' principles and the pragmatic concerns of practice.

Finally in this section, government policy may also be increasingly prompted by the apparent implication of religious identity in social conflict, rather than cohesion, as signalled by the 'riots' in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in 2001 (Cantle, 2001; Ouseley, 2001). Such events may have intensified the quest for the engagement of 'faith' in urban regeneration and its implications for 'community', 'neighbourhood' and 'social cohesion'. They also serve to underline the historical and continuing centrality of religion in the construction of the contemporary world (Allen and Macey, 1994; Kumar, 1995) and its significance as a power resource that can be used either positively or negatively at state, community and individual levels. Like potent secular ideologies, it can unite or divide, include or exclude; it can provide the impetus to struggle for social justice or it can legitimise cruelty and oppression; it can promote social cohesion or conflict.

In the remaining sections of the article we critically assess the tensions involved in these connections drawn by government between faith communities and urban regeneration.

### **Religion and 'community'**

We have seen that government policy sees faith communities as having the potential to enhance community involvement in urban regeneration. In this section we question assumptions regarding the socially integrative function of religious faith; sketch the diverse and complex engagement in regeneration and social action of faith groups; and assess the extent to which faith organisations and their members can contribute to policies and practices marked by community and association as processes, rather than authoritarian end states.

In negotiating the treacherous definitional terrain surrounding the idea of 'community', it is common to distinguish between communities of interest or identity and communities of locality or place (Mayo, 2000), although this is a distinction that is prone to collapse. Hence, a collection of people may share a distinct 'interest' in a locality and its future, and 'place' can be an important element in personal and collective identity within an interest group (McDowell, 1999; Byrne, 2001). Nevertheless, this article makes an heuristic distinction between the broad idea of community as a sharing of interest and identity, and more placebased definitions that connect with the idea of 'neighbourhood' considered in the next section. This device is designed to allow the development of some distinct observations regarding faith communities and public policy.

### ***The underside of 'community'***

In both its generic sense and in its association with religious faith, 'community' is used discursively as a 'warmly persuasive word' (Williams, 1976) in elaborating strategy for achieving 'social inclusion'. It has long carried an evaluative and conservative tone and is used to express nostalgia for vanished solidarities, often imagined and romanticised. Albrow et al suggest that community has been:

... a potent myth to reinforce efforts to shape the ever-changing contemporary reality, to stabilise the state, contain disorder and limit the consequences of seemingly uncheckable forces of modernity. As such, it was intimately connected with the myth of cultural integration. (1997: 25)

As a policy objective in today's world, however, there are several reasons why this romantic notion of community seems progressively less congruent with 'social cohesion'. First, idealised homogeneous 'community' in a context of 'globalised' and postmodern diversity is increasingly problematic and open to objection<sup>4</sup>. Second, groups defined as communities often have less internal coherence and unity than is implied by the term. Third, both these observations apply in the context of religious faith as much, if not more, as in other communal settings.

To develop the first of these themes, there has long been awareness in political philosophy of the 'underside' of community. Specifically, 'community' can be a powerful principle and expression of exclusion. As Young argues:

The ideal of community privileges unity over difference....Community is an understandable dream ... but politically problematic ... because those motivated by it will tend to suppress their differences amongst themselves or implicitly exclude from their political group persons with whom they do not identify. (1990: 300)

The growing cultural diversity associated with globalisation and migration brings challenges to previously legitimate authorities and renders encounters with "persons with whom we do not identify" increasingly frequent. In such a context any attempt to impose a 'national community' through centrally driven 'social inclusion' policies rooted in moral communitarianism seems problematic (Collins, 2000). In reality, a more Balkanised resurgence of 'community' is occurring whereby people's response to outsiders is the creation of diverse forms of 'refuge' that constitute 'purified' communities (Sennett, 1966). 'Community politics' in such a context are often exclusionary, defensive, divisive and reactionary at a time when increasing diversity points to the need to find ways of 'negotiating difference', 'transgressing' the normal boundaries of interaction (Amin, 2002) and learning to live in:

... social relations without domination in which persons live together in relations of mediation among strangers with whom they are not in community. (Young, 1990: 303)

Second, however, the internal homogeneity of such introverted and exclusionary communities should not be overstated or their internal politics neglected. The definition of community is a function of power relations, contested on the basis of material inequalities and the differing experiences, interests and perspectives of, for example, women and men or young and old (Mayo, 2000). In particular, internal differentiation between community members may result from their varying experiences of migration or residential stasis or uneven exposure to life outside 'the community' and opportunities or pressures to embrace a degree of cultural hybridity

(Amin and Graham, 1999). 'Community' remains a process of social construction despite the pressures towards 'purification' sketched above. This tension between the quest for an ideal communal 'home' and the actual internal diversity encountered in real communities of interest, identity and place is evident – perhaps especially evident – in 'faith communities'.

Finally here, therefore, we point to the particular ability of religion to embody this external separation and internal authoritarianism that marks the 'underside' of 'community'. As expressed by a senior Anglican:

There is a particular danger in religion.... For all religions claim to mediate the absolute. It is easy to topple over the brink and identify that absolute with the finite and fallible human structures through which that absolute is disclosed to human beings. In short, religion can reinforce religious communities and religious organisations in being impervious to criticism and thinking their claims override all others, even basic human rights. (Harries, 2002: 78)

Thus, religion can provide the most total of all 'total environments' as currently expressed on both global and local stages in Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and other religious fundamentalist or separatist movements and communities. On the other hand, when explored from within, many faith groups contradict external impressions of static and consensual communities, graphically confirming the observation that "small-scale societies are inherently pluralistic" (Heelas, 1996: 8) and encompass difference and controversy<sup>5</sup>. This signals that 'faith' may be more complex, variegated and problematic than suggested in official statements on the potential role of religious organisations in urban regeneration and renewal.

The capacity of 'religion' to confound an assigned civic integrative role is the focus of the next section of this article. In the remainder of the present section, however, we explore further the very different approaches of various faith traditions to social engagement and identify a different 'place for faith' in regeneration from that which predominates in official UK government policy.

### ***Social engagement and the complexity of 'faith'***

The concept of 'faith communities' is a comparatively recent addition to public policy discourse. An extended exploration of this development is required<sup>6</sup>. The emphasis here, however, is on the way that this concept can serve to obscure the enormous diversity within and across faith traditions and organisations, including in their forms of social engagement and understandings of 'regeneration'. Hence, the idea of 'faith communities' can encourage a view of 'the faith sector' as a relatively unified component of the wider voluntary or community sectors. This view of 'faith' is reflected institutionally by the inclusion of a single *de jure* or *de facto* 'faith seat' on regional assemblies and partnership boards.

Such simplification of religious 'faith' reflects the limited 'religious literacy' that informs the formulation and implementation of policy, a concern made more acute by the marked religious diversity of many urban areas in Britain. This diversity is a central concern of the sociology of religion. It is neither possible nor appropriate to explore this terrain fully here<sup>7</sup>, but it is important to underline the complexity of 'faith' and to illustrate the many different forms of social engagement by faith groups. Use



is made here of Castells' typology of three forms and origins of identity building by social movements (Castells, 1997), for both faith groups (and their individual members) and non-religious organisations share many similar, historically intense, challenges to their identity and role:

In a world of global flows of wealth, power and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes a fundamental source of social meaning. (Castells, 1996: 3)

Castells has identified three types of response to a world "increasingly structured around a bipolar opposition" between the corporate global network society and the preservation of personal and collective identity (1996: 3). First, legitimising identities are offered by dominant institutions (principally capital and the state) to encourage participation in the approved institutions and processes of civil society. Here, religious congregations and organisations may take their place along with occupational groupings, trade unions, political parties and other civic associations. Second, if legitimising identities are expressed within the 'network society', resistance identities stem from outside it, as people build 'trenches of resistance and survival' on principles that counter those of dominant institutions. In the process they produce communities or communes with identities based variously on nationalism, religion and spirituality, natural philosophies, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age and territory.

Resistance identities are essentially defensive, expressing "the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded" (Castells, 1997: 9). Finally, project identities involve moving beyond the defensive to build a new identity to transform society in the manner of feminism in the twentieth century. Such movements produce social subjects working together to achieve a different life. These three types are not discrete – hybrids are common and groups and organisations change in emphasis over time. For example, bad experiences in roles within the institutions of civil society may engender among people and groups at the grass roots new 'resistance' identities, which may displace or combine with their earlier 'legitimate' identities. Or the knowledge and skills gained through involvement in both legitimising and resistance activities can equip people to assume radical project identities.

Castells' scheme has application to many faith groups, their present social missions and their likely responses to an invitation from the state to fuller engagement in official regeneration programmes. Our recent research (Farnell et al, 2003) found many Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh groups undertaking a wide and very substantial range of activities that could fairly be described as 'regenerative', serving a variety of people and their needs. This work often extended beyond the local faith membership and into the wider district and city<sup>8</sup>. Such activity corresponds quite closely to Castells' 'legitimising' type as faith groups offer caring, supporting and empowering services that augment state welfare. So, too, does the involvement of individual religious believers, in disproportion to their numbers, with the wider voluntary and community sectors and with local partnerships. Yet such activity can also often inform (sometimes radical) social critiques of the 'disconnecting' processes that impact upon the locality and its people. The frequently frustrating experience of seeking funding for locally perceived priorities or of participation as subordinate players on various partnership boards can serve to delegitimise dominant definitions of civil society and provoke demands for new priorities and

processes. In particular, many are led to challenge the difference that ostensible 'regeneration' makes for poor people and places and the reality of grass-roots empowerment (Farnell et al, 2003; Davey, 2001).

Alongside these expressions (albeit often socially critical) of 'civil religion', religious belief is also prominent in social movements of resistance. As developed more fully in the last section of this article, some readings of all religious traditions can offer strong totalising responses to the hyper-connection, disconnection, segmentation and overall perplexity induced by global liberalism. Thus:

Neo-tribal and fundamentalist tendencies, which reflect and articulate the experience of people on the receiving end of globalisation, are as much legitimate offspring of globalisation as the acclaimed 'hybridisation' of top culture – the culture of the 'globalised top'. (Bauman, 1998: 3)

Such religious movements and their organisations offer a defensive alternative world, sometimes an important means of getting by, especially for members confronting exclusion. Theologies here are commonly pietist, making a strong distinction between the spiritual and the social, emphasising the former<sup>9</sup>. There are also, of course, graphic examples of religious fundamentalist movements that pursue radical or reactionary social change, thus displaying 'project' identities.

Finally, therefore, religion can be the motivation for transformational projects. These may be politically conservative in their goals and centred on 'extending the fold' through proselytising, rather than moving outside it to a more open and networked social engagement. However, religious faith can also motivate and inform progressive and inclusive social engagement and projects that confront dominant institutions with progressive radical challenge. As noted above, these may stem from the experience of dissonance between attempted 'legitimising' civic roles and the actuality of life in 'disconnected' places. But action outside the officially sanctioned box may also be prompted by non-pietist, more 'earthy' social theologies (Farnell et al, 2003).

'Project identities' are explored further below where we assess the capacity of faith groups to contribute to a redefinition of community as 'process'. The preceding discussion can be summarised as demonstrating the fallacy in assuming a homogenous 'faith sector' that can be readily assimilated into regeneration partnerships.

### ***Community as process – a different place for faith?***

We suggested above that 'faith communities' are defined in current public policy essentially as repositories of values and moral traditions, and sources of volunteers, networks and material resources (notably buildings) to help in the 'delivery of community objectives'. Even where they are identified in a social inclusion discourse as manifestations of cultural diversity, the emphasis remains on the functional potential of faith groups to supply the glue for 'community' integration. Hence, the offer may be one of enlistment into an agenda where, returning to Young's argument, 'community' serves to deny difference (Young, 1990) yet in a context in which 'the coexistence of diverse traditions and also cultural variety ... is likely to increase rather than diminish' (Bauman, 2000: 85).

Bauman argues that the achievement of a non-oppressive integration in these conditions of radical diversity requires a readiness to:

... recognise sense and dignity in alternative ways of life, to seek and find grounds for peaceful and solidary coexistence which are not dependent on compliance with one homogeneous and uncontested pattern of life. (2000: 86)

Such integration requires a willingness to relinquish cultural purity and to develop a toleration of ambiguity, uncertainty and disorder (Sennett, 1971)<sup>10</sup> where there are “social relations without domination in which persons live together in relations of mediation among strangers” (Young, 1990). Sandercock develops an explicitly utopian model of ‘cosmopolis’, a city marked by people’s willingness to engage respectfully and fearlessly with ‘the other’, to learn and to change by ‘transgressing’ across communal and cultural boundaries in “spaces of urban negotiation” (Sandercock, 1998; Davey, 2001). This integration-in-plurality emphasises longterm process and mediation whereby groups sharing a common culture and/or interests (communities) learn to work democratically in culturally diverse associations and forums.

What might religious organisations and their members contribute to this? To what extent can they depart from their government-allotted role as functionally integrative ‘legitimising’ communities and contribute to this potentially more openended and transforming process? An initial answer may be ‘not a lot’. Religious movements can present some of the most powerful and uncompromising expressions of introversion, authoritarianism and social disengagement in the face of globalisation and related cultural changes, a tendency underscored in the next section. Indeed, many would fail Young’s criteria for democratic representation as they practise various forms of discrimination and inhibit individual development (notably of women but also often of the wider ‘laity’).

Yet, other religious traditions are more open, reflective, socially engaged, and committed to dialogue and to long-term learning and change. Therefore, while one response to current challenges is to retreat into certainty, another is to embrace change and its associated risks. To give a concrete example, there is widespread immediate and practical concern within the major faith traditions in Britain about the increasing disconnection of younger people from civic and religious participation (Farnell et al, 2003). In the case of Christian networks, this is expressed in an increasing variety of boundary-crossing experiments in new ways of ‘being church’ (Davey, 2001; Wier, 2002).

Our recent research (Farnell et al, 2003) suggests that some faith congregations, organisations, projects and individual members operate in ways that are consistent with this alternative model, challenging official perceptions of the place of faith. First, although there remains a clear bias, rooted in history, to white Christian representation and involvement in urban regeneration, there is increasing involvement by members of other major faiths. While this participation might often be seen as ‘civic’ or ‘legitimising’, many develop strongly critical perspectives on the principles and practices of public programmes, some of which are essentially consistent with the principles of tolerance, mediation and negotiation in diversity sketched above. For example, it is common for faith spokespeople to contrast their own long-term perspective with the immediacy of secular regeneration targets. This

longer view is underlined by the presence of faith groups as enduring worshipping congregations that both pre-exist and survive government initiatives (Farnell et al, 2003). And while some faith-based initiatives are themselves topdown, many involve close listening to 'the other'; negotiation of activities with actual and potential users; tolerance of risk, informality and uncertainty; and a refusal to assume congruence between official indicators of regeneration and users' perceived priorities and needs. This reflects an understanding of 'community' (and perhaps democratic association and participation) as a long-term and ongoing process that formal programmes can actually disturb.

Second, the research encountered several examples – Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh – of the provision by faith communities of centres, sometimes highly impressive, often near or adjacent to places of worship but for use by people beyond the 'faith community'. In some cases these are cross-faith ventures or are based on a mix of faith-based and public funds. Such places, addressing recreational, training and social needs, offer meeting places and the prospect of people beginning to 'transgress' the boundaries of their 'normal' lives and to experience 'relations of mediation' as common concerns and objectives are explored across a range of faith and non-faith experiences.

Third, some of the clearest examples of inter-faith meeting and of faith–secular encounter have occurred in political campaigns in opposition to government policy. Here, faith occupies a rather different and less consensual place than that envisaged by the state. For example, faith-based and secular groups have combined in the 'community organising' tradition of Saul Alinsky (Furbey et al, 1997) to form local coalitions to fight campaigns on issues identified through processes of one-to-one listening<sup>11</sup>. Elsewhere, Christian–Muslim dialogue has been developed through campaigns against the conflict in the Gulf in 1990 and that in Iraq more recently. Such activity offers contexts – still few in contemporary Britain – in which transgression occurs, otherness is encountered and diversity is negotiated and embodied in democratic organisation.

This section has questioned official understandings of 'faith communities' and the incorporation of 'faith' within a functionalist understanding of community and of social integration. We have noted that the complexity of 'faith' is understated by government and that religion operates in various, sometimes quite radical ways, and contrary to official expectations.

## **Religion, neighbourhood and social cohesion**

We now focus on the government's attempts to harness faith communities in the pursuit of neighbourhood regeneration and social cohesion in contexts of religious and ethnic diversity. For it is in inner-city neighbourhoods that the challenge of 'otherness' is most acute and where religion often plays an important, if not central role in people's lives.

### ***Religion and ethnicity***

We noted earlier that government policy on the involvement of faith communities in regeneration is essentially pragmatic and implicitly functionalist. In fact, there also seems to be some acknowledgement within government thinking of

phenomenological theory, though there is little, if any, of conflict approaches. Within a functionalist perspective, religion is a kind of 'social glue' that binds individuals and groups into the social and cultural order (Durkheim, 1915; Parsons, 1965); within a phenomenological framework, it provides a symbolic universe, or sacred canopy, that gives meaning to a world of otherwise potential chaos (Berger, 1967).

As a device for promoting social cohesion, we suggest that this model of religion may have utility in mono-cultural contexts structured by singular, locally defined world views within which people subscribe to uncontested norms and values. But if such situations ever existed in reality, they are most certainly not the norm in the British cities to which government policy on social cohesion is directed. As Miles (1989) observes, this has serious implications for the likely success or failure of policy initiatives:

As has been said on countless occasions concerning the unity of theory and practice, if the analysis is wrong, then it is likely that the political strategy will not achieve the intended objectives. (1989: 5)

We suggest that the government's policy on faith communities, urban regeneration and social cohesion has been developed with a damaging lack of reference to the large literature that exists in the field of ethnicity and religion. Both theory and research in this area point strongly to the frequently negative consequences for inter-ethnic relations of an association between religion and ethnicity. For example, Wagley and Harris (1958) and Yinger (1986) stress the strength of religion as a central component of minority ethnic identity, which at first sight appears to support the logic of the government's focus on religion as a source of cohesion. However, this has to be assessed in the context of other research. Rex (1991), for instance, found that this identity is frequently transnational in its orientation and source of influence. Several other theoreticians and researchers suggest that fundamentalist (or extremist) variants of religion tend to flourish, first, in situations of rapid social change and/or conflict (Macey, 1993); second, in response to the crisis of modernity (Bauman, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 1991; Kepel, 1994); and, third, among people who are in transition from one society to another, such as South Asians in Britain (Neilsen, 1984; Robinson, 1988). Thus, Turner (1991) observes that religion can be particularly divisive within an ethnically or culturally diverse political collectivity like contemporary British society. What are the implications of this for government policy in relation to religion and neighbourhoods?

### ***Religion and neighbourhood***

The New Labour government in Britain has located religious groups within a place-based neighbourhood agenda. Here they are seen not only as distinctive communities of interest with values and commitments to bolster social cohesion, but also as communities of place with local roots, offering a practical local engagement and helping to articulate local interests. However, we suggest that this definition of neighbourhood is problematic, in terms both of spatial scale and of the varying psychological and social significance of neighbourhood for residents (Kearns and Parkinson, 2001). Also, the relative importance of local neighbourhood identities and networks and their importance for social cohesion in a globalising world are uncertain. We argued earlier that globalisation and its related changes might increase the significance of space and place. However, in addition to the local neighbourhood, "there are many other sources [of social identity] partly dependent

on our individual and collective time-geographies and action-spaces within the urban arena” (Forrest and Kearns, 2001).

Faith groups are not to be identified simply with locality or neighbourhood. Of course, place has an importance, both practical and theological, in many religious traditions. Religious congregations, organisations and projects are often local and particular spaces and places are understood as sacred. Indeed, in some theologies, the local neighbourhood and also its people are seen as sacred and ‘the parish’ is a key principle of organisation and field of service and mission. In all faiths, however, this localism exists within, and often in tension with, membership of universalistic world religions, which are cultural carriers of globalisation (Kumar, 1995; Waters, 1995). An example here is when Muslims are expected to prioritise the *ummah* (the international Muslim fellowship) over other, more local, aspects of their lives.

More materially, the compression of space and time exerts similar effects on faith communities as those on other social groups. At the city level, Christians increasingly travel longer distances to participate in worship and other activities. Many of the largest, and growing, religious congregations and centres are ‘gathered’ from well beyond the immediate neighbourhood. Moreover, members live in a globalised world in which a communications and transportation revolution has given people access to a wide spectrum of places and events, cultures and belief systems and, for some religious groups, a more diverse membership drawn from all parts of the world. This parallels their encounters with the greater social diversity of the wider neighbourhood and the world beyond and such developments and experiences encourage understandings that transcend the purely local or parochial and express “a deeply embedded transnationalism” (Davey, 2001: 32). This challenges official assumptions regarding the perspectives that faith groups and representatives might bring to urban regeneration since they are present both in local places and in the global “space of flows” (Castells, 1996: 410ff). Local embedding and global awareness can inform strong independence and intellectual and practical opposition to dominant interests<sup>12</sup>.

However, this growing openness to the world is not universal and it is worth pausing at this point to question the meaning and the extent of the diversity that is stressed in government policy and in much recent social science. For the reality is that some British cities are diverse only in terms of overall population statistics, while everyday social life involves residential and social segregation where interaction across ethnic and religious boundaries occurs to only a very limited extent. Some of these are the very cities and neighbourhoods that the government is targeting and in which it sees faith groups as constituting “... a channel to some of the hardest to reach groups” for whom they are “... the most suitable organisations to deliver community objectives” (Cabinet Office, 2001: 52). That the government is concerned at the potential and, indeed, actual conflict that exists in such neighbourhoods and cities is clear from its emphasis on the need to develop community cohesion, but its focus on the role of religion in this process invites closer investigation.

### ***Religion and social cohesion***

Government policy on social regeneration now demands that projects demonstrate ‘value added’ in relation to social cohesion. This approach has undoubtedly been influenced by the violent public conflict that took place in a number of Northern

English towns and cities in 2001 in which both ethnicity (Pakistani) and religion (Islam) were implicated (along with class, gender and generation). Presumably, subsequent policy has been to develop cohesion across ethno-religious boundaries since, arguably, much of the conflict in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham was a result of too much cohesion within communities to the point that people live 'parallel lives', separated residentially and socially by ethnicity and religion (Cantle, 2001; Denham, 2001; Ouseley, 2001).

However, this crystallises some of the issues raised in this section in relation to the links between ethnic identity and religion; local versus global orientations and influences; the divisive role that religion can play in situations of ethnic diversity; and the tendency for fundamentalist or extremist variants of religion to flourish in such contexts. The city of Bradford is used here to illustrate the fallacy of assuming that religion and ethnicity are unproblematic or can easily be used to promote social cohesion.

In Bradford, ethnicity (Pakistani)<sup>13</sup> and religion (Muslim) combine to form a relatively closed community whose interaction with other residents (Asian, black and white) is frequently marked by conflict. The major public disturbance in 1995 and the riot in 2001 received considerable national and international media coverage. What is less well known is that these incidents built on routine public violence and harassment, which, like the disturbances, is mainly perpetrated by young men from the Pakistan Muslim community (Macey, 1999a and 2002). The people and property targeted are non-Muslim – Asian, black and white, young and old, male and female. The exception is that young Muslim women are also verbally and physically assaulted (Macey, 1999b). Religion is invoked both to define targets and to legitimise violence against them. For example, gay men and lesbians can be assaulted because they offend against the Islamic prohibition on homosexuality; British public houses can be burned down because they breach the Islamic prohibition on alcohol (and getting rid of them serves the additional purpose of discouraging residual whites from staying in 'Muslim' areas). Young Muslim women are accused of bringing dishonour to Islam in a variety of ways but significantly in terms of 'Western' dress and/or behaviour, so they deserve to be beaten (Beckett and Macey, 2001).

This is not the place to discuss the many complex reasons for such behaviour. We cite it only to illustrate the extent to which religious teaching can be distorted to serve the interests of a particular, minority constituency<sup>14</sup>. There are further features of the Pakistani Muslim community in Bradford and its ethno-religious culture, however, that suggest that particular difficulties may arise in involving them in neighbourhood regeneration and social cohesion. Some of these relate to social inclusion, which constitutes another of the government's concerns, and raise questions around self-exclusion versus social exclusion. Here, both the short- and long-term impact of racism must be considered. When the Pakistani Muslim community settled in Bradford nearly half a century ago, it was confronted by racism, including 'far right' political groups. In such situations, a common reaction is to retreat into older, more traditional forms of religion and ethnicity, and to construct relatively impermeable boundaries around the self (Wallman, 1986). This interacted with the community's concern to maintain the language, religion and cultural traditions of its homeland (the latter two being frequently conflated) so that, then and now, many Bradford Muslims retain a transnational, rather than a local or

international focus. This is linked to a highly negative view of the indigenous population because 'the West' is seen as a corrupting influence (Ballard, 1994; Shaw, 1994). Within this historical and contemporary framework, integration is resisted and minimum contact with all things Western is enabled through the creation and maintenance of Muslim enclaves that provide for the material, cultural and spiritual needs of the community. Pakistan is referred to as 'home', extended holidays are taken there and considerable sums of money are exported both to relatives and for the purpose of building houses (referred to as 'mansions' and viewed as a source of high status). Many people do not speak English (particularly women); conservative, non-English speaking imams are brought from Pakistan (Lewis, 2002); and more than 50% of marriages every year are arranged between a Bradford Muslim and a partner from Mirpur<sup>15</sup>.

Thus, the Pakistani Muslim community in Bradford is an extreme example of the 'hard to reach' groups being targeted by government policy on religion and regeneration. It is also an example of a highly cohesive community where religion provides the 'social glue' and world view that enables it to maintain separation from, and antagonism towards, wider Bradford (and British) society. This may not be quite the outcome that the Prime Minister has in mind when he proposes working with faith communities to enhance integration and deliver community objectives<sup>16</sup>.

Our concern in this section has been to highlight some of the difficulties and tensions inherent in government policy on involving faith communities in *neighbourhood* renewal and social cohesion. This is not to suggest that there is no place for faith in these projects; it is to propose that a more theoretically informed analysis is necessary. In identifying the positive contribution of 'faith', some specific recent empirical findings can usefully be underlined (Farnell et al, 2003).

Mainstream traditions within the major world religions connect the spiritual and the material. These theological understandings are a strong motivation for involvement in urban regeneration. Thus, religious commitment leads many individuals and groups to play a major part in local social action (see note 7) and to engage directly in both local and global struggles for social justice. Faith organisations and their members can bring to the table a local knowledge, history and orientation that delivers and sustains regeneration initiatives yet may also challenge the assumptions and implementation of official programmes. Their authority derives from their deep anchorage within Britain's poorest places where religious leaders are often almost the only professionals who do not to commute to work.

There are further reasons, both philosophical and pragmatic, for recognising the involvement of faith communities in urban regeneration. The former include, first, the fact that, for many people, faith is inseparable from their ethnic/cultural identity and a key motivation for social engagement. Second, a genuinely evidence-based and enquiring secular social science and social policy should not embody a premature dismissal of faith-based activity. Then, more instrumentally, in areas of dense minority ethnic settlement it is sometimes only through religious networks that contact can be established with and between people. Also, religious organisations often own the only buildings that are available for use by all who live in a given neighbourhood and in which meetings and a wide range of social and educational activities can take place. While many of these encounters involve a single ethnic or



religious group, some are genuinely boundary-crossing, perhaps representing tentative steps towards an associative social cohesion. Areas characterised by residential segregation frequently offer few opportunities for interaction across the socially constructed barriers of ethnicity and religion. Such places open possibilities for people to begin to discover more fully a shared humanity with 'the other'.

## **Summary and conclusion**

Government urban regeneration and neighbourhood renewal policy in the United Kingdom now includes a 'place for faith', although religious groups and organisations are perceived in pragmatic and consensual terms. Instrumentally, they are identified as locally significant communities offering values, resources and volunteers, not only to develop and maintain their own projects, but also to underwrite the community participation now built formally into official programmes and institutions. They are linked functionally to a particular communitarian agenda as potential agents of social cohesion. This article has critically assessed these understandings of 'faith' and has questioned the assumed relationships between religion and community, neighbourhood and social cohesion, pointing to a complex reality marked by conflict as well as consensus.

We have observed that many faith congregations and organisations already make a significant contribution to the 'legitimate' work of civil society through their own 'regenerative' activities in and through their involvement in official schemes. Here religion can be said to contribute to social cohesion and 'regeneration'. However, other faith traditions 'resist' such engagement and develop introverted or militantly sectarian responses to, for instance, the challenges of globalisation and social diversity. Some of these responses provide disturbing reminders of the exclusive and reactionary underside of 'community'. This was illustrated above by reference to the combined impact of religious, ethnic and machismo identities in Bradford. In such cases, religion contributes to what may be viewed as divisive internal cohesion that militates against wider social cohesion across ethno-religious boundaries.

We have also suggested that faith groups may present a progressive and radical challenge to their government-assigned 'place' in urban policy and practice. First, 'legitimate' civil involvement in faith-based initiatives and in a long succession of official programmes can generate both expertise and frustration that often informs and prompts critical challenges to government policy and the interests of dominant regeneration partners. Second, theology and personal and collective biography often combine to ensure that faith groups do not offer simply a local perspective. Rather, they contextualise neighbourhood problems within a wider, frequently global, perspective and, in so doing, offer a radical critique of the, often narrow, analyses underlying area-based initiatives. Local action here may reflect 'project identities' linked to wider urban, national or global campaigns. Finally, in our empirical research (Farnell et al, 2003), we encountered significant examples of faith-based activity that begins from community identity, but moves decisively beyond this to contribute to greater recognition and valuation of difference. This is reflected in a willingness to work in associative democratic forums, where boundaries are 'transgressed' and differences negotiated, informed by a long-term presence and commitment to careful listening to subordinate voices. All this informs critical perspectives that are likely to

challenge the 'place of faith' prescribed within a conservative communitarian discourse.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>The interpretations of these data are those of the authors, not necessarily of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The authors differ in their understanding of, and commitment to, religious faith. Robert Furbey is a Christian and Marie Macey is an agnostic.

<sup>2</sup> This study (Farnell et al, 2003) was one of the first in the field after over a decade of intense study of community participation and partnership working.

<sup>3</sup> See Taylor (2000) for an account of the origins of the ICRC.

<sup>4</sup> In the next section we develop this observation in relation to the interpenetration of the 'global' and the 'local' and its impact on ostensibly 'neighbourhood' faith groups.

<sup>5</sup> Heelas makes this point in the context of an exploration of detraditionalisation.

Internal pluralism is often compounded as people from relatively traditional societies migrate to Western cities. This may be particularly evident within religious groups and congregations in poorer urban districts that become the object of 'urban regeneration'. For example, within the Catholic congregation in Burngreave, Sheffield, more than twenty different languages are spoken (Farnell et al, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> In the recent research to which the authors contributed, the idea of 'faith communities' was interpreted by some as denoting 'non-Christian faiths' or as a way of referring to minority ethnic status. This was particularly the case in districts with large ethnic minority populations where officials are uncertain in addressing residents' ethnic and religious identities. Also, although recent policy has stressed a new inclusion of religious organisations, the concept of 'faith communities' may denote the marginalisation of religion in secular society as Christianity is displaced from its earlier status as the foundation for a 'national community' to that of just another interest community.

<sup>7</sup> Davie (1994) provides a review of this field.

<sup>8</sup> A study of Christian churches in the Yorkshire and Humber region alone identified 6,500 ongoing social projects being used by more than 150,000 people, involving over 50,000 church members and employing 3,000 staff (Yorkshire Churches, 2002).

Such data are not currently available for the other major faiths, but our research located significant social initiatives, again often serving non-members, provided by Hindu, Muslim and Sikh organisations.

<sup>9</sup> More introverted religious groups of this kind are under-represented in our research (Farnell et al, 2003) since, not surprisingly, they proved 'hard to reach' and inclined to decline to participate in our research. However, the researchers also encountered examples of the internal diversity of apparently homogeneous religious 'communities' stressed earlier in this paper. For

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example, within some black-majority churches there was evidence of generational tension between the definition of the church as a protecting 'home' for older people and the search by some pastors and younger members for more open and networked social engagement.

<sup>10</sup> Sennett suggests that this toleration is a means and a sign of human maturity.

<sup>11</sup> The East London Community Organisation ([www.telcocitizens.org.uk](http://www.telcocitizens.org.uk) – last visited 3 October 2004) and IMPACT in Sheffield ([www.impactsheffield.org.uk](http://www.impactsheffield.org.uk) – last visited 3 October 2004) are two examples of the community organising approach that derived from the ideas of Saul Alinsky in the United States dating from the 1940s (Furbey et al, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> 'Thinking globally' and 'acting locally' characterised the Jubilee 2000 campaign on debt relief in which religious groups played a prominent role. This is explored by Davey (2001).

<sup>13</sup> Although for ease of recognition, we use the term 'Pakistani', most Bradfordians of South Asian origin are from the Mirpur district of Pakistan, which is a very poor, highly traditional and rural area.

<sup>14</sup> The majority of Muslims point to Islam's essential commitment to, indeed insistence upon, peace and non-violence.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, there are many exceptions to the generalised description given in this section, including the young men whose violence is described in this paper. Other young people, particularly women, are making effective use of British education and employment opportunities.

<sup>16</sup> It should also be noted that such objectives are likely to be defined by male, self-styled, community 'leaders' and to be highly traditional and unrepresentative of the views or needs of women and young people, and to reinforce the boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim society.