

Temple Tracts: Issue 1, Volume 1

**Faith,
Progressive Localism
and the Hol(e)y
Welfare Safety Net**

Greg Smith



William Temple
Foundation

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Introduction

Last year on a damp October night, in the Town Hall of a unitary local authority in the north of England, I was privileged to take part in a meeting, encompassing a diverse group: the leader of the council, two senior council officers, an Anglican suffragan bishop, the area dean and High Sheriff (who is the representative of the monarch in the county). We spent an hour discussing how churches, faith-based organisations and others could work in partnership with the council and other statutory agencies, on the vital task of tackling poverty together in one of the most deprived localities in England. At the end of the meeting it felt right to all present for the bishop to lead us in prayer, focussing on the Council Leader's need for divine wisdom in his decision making and leadership role. As we said our "amens", the Leader gave his apologies and made his way to the council chamber where the budget committee was about to consider how to implement savings and cuts in excess of £20m in the coming financial year.

I do not know whether similar meetings have taken place in other town halls, but surely there are many places where similar prayers, from bishops, imams, and faithful citizens will be welcome. For in the context of prolonged recession and UK government policies of austerity and public spending cuts, and coupled with the promotion of "localism", local authorities are placed in a crisis situation; they must attempt to match restricted budgets to a recently extended duty for delivering basic welfare support to their poorest citizens. Increasingly they are turning to charities, churches and other faith communities to fill the gap. In response, many have developed or strengthened projects or services such as foodbanks, soup kitchens, job clubs, crime diversion schemes and money/debt advice centres. Motivations and patterns of practice in service delivery are often questioned, while faith-based organisations increasingly engage in consultations, service delivery contracts and partnerships with local government and other statutory providers.

This paper draws both on research reports from the Evangelical Alliance and on the author's experience as a reflective practitioner working with churches and local government in the North-West of England. Case studies of recent consultation events in two northern towns, which brought together religious leaders and activists with public sector officers and elected members, will be offered.

The 20th century philosopher Karl Popper, when considering how to study the policies adopted by institutions, recommended first defining a problem, then treating as a hypothesis a policy which purports to be a solution, and finally testing the application of the policy, taking observations as to whether it fails (is falsified), needs modification, or is effective. So, in our case: The **problem** is growing poverty and inequality, in a political and economic context where there is no possibility (willingness?) to spend public money to support the lives of those who cannot adequately support themselves; especially those who are deemed to be in some sense less deserving.

The proposed **solution** seeks to:

- a) design and implement policies which maximise the number of people who can support themselves through work rather than welfare.
- b) to maintain a residual welfare safety net where the costs of keeping people from destitution are taken from the (central) government purse and devolved to local communities, charities and faith-based organisations.

Using this framework, I will examine the Coalition government's approach to welfare reform, localism and the "Big Society".

Working Definitions

Before proceeding it will be helpful to define some key terms that will be used in this *Temple Tract*.

Religious capital is, 'the practical contribution to local and national life made by faith groups'. **Spiritual capital** meanwhile, 'energises religious capital by providing a theological identity and worshipping tradition, but also a value system, moral vision and a basis of faith'. Religious capital is the 'what': i.e., the concrete actions and resources that faith communities contribute. The 'why' is spiritual capital: i.e., the motivating basis of faith, belief and values that shapes these concrete actions.

For a full discussion see: williamtemplefoundation.org.uk/spiritual-capital-the-evangelical-churches

More recently at William Temple Foundation, we have identified and started talking about progressive localism, which has links with, (but is not identical to) government policy expressed in the Localism Act 2011. Progressive does not mean liberal or elitist. Rather it is something more fundamental than that: an attitude of mind or outlook on life that is, 'outward looking and creates positive affinities between places and social groups negotiating global processes'. The term progressive has been used to emphasise that new alliances between different community and faith groups are not merely defensive, but 'rather they are expansive in their geographical reach and productive of new relations between places and social groups. Such struggles can reconfigure existing communities around emergent agendas for social justice, participation and tolerance'.

See also: williamtemplefoundation.org.uk/never-mind-what-jesus-would-do-progressive-atheism-big-society and publicspirit.org.uk/spiritual-capital-and-progressive-localism

A few other concepts:

Welfare Reform: the policy of the UK government since 2010 in the context of austerity which has reconfigured and reduced in-work welfare benefits, with the ultimate aim of introducing a single, less complex Universal Credit payable monthly.

(Benefits) Sanctions: the discipline imposed by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) on claimants when benefit payments are withheld at short notice when a person is judged not to have complied with the conditions of their job seeker's agreement.

Neo-Liberalism: the economic doctrine that has dominated global economies since about 1980. It measures everything in monetary values, advocates maximum freedom for entrepreneurs and capitalists, and generally favours reductions in taxation, the rolling back of the scope of state intervention and the power of individual consumer choice over against the collective bargaining power of organised labour.

Post-secularity: A new visibility of religion in public life is now powerfully shaping academic debates and theories. Almost forty years ago, for Peter Berger, the term 'secularisation' described a process 'by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols' (1973: 113). Now Berger and others are using terms such as desecularisation to describe the resurgence of 'furious, supernaturalist, fundamentalist or conservative expressions of religion' (1999: 6) in politics and public life. Jurgen Habermas meanwhile, refers to, 'a postsecular self-understanding of society as a whole, in which the vigorous continuation of religion in a continually secularizing environment must be reckoned with' (2005: 26). This suggests that the idea of postsecularism is not

describing the replacement of secular culture by a vibrant public expression of religion. Rather, secularism now competes within the public sphere with some unexpected expressions of an emergent and confident religion.

Poverty, inequality and welfare in Britain: the current context

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is one of the most respected research organisations funding and publishing a wide range of academic and applied studies on UK poverty. Their recent report (MacInnes et al, 2014) suggests that 13 million people in the UK currently live in poverty. Despite some movement off welfare benefits into employment, low pay and the variable and precarious nature of employment contracts and conditions mean many working people remain in poverty. In 2013, household incomes fell in real terms for the third year in a row. Incomes of the bottom tenth have fallen further and for longer and are now 8 per cent below their level in 2002/03.

Changes to the way the welfare system operates have worsened the experience of poverty for many of those affected, whether through rising sanctions, longer waits for assessment or poor job outcomes through welfare-to-work programmes. Other research (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009) presents the evidence that inequality is bad for everyone's health and wellbeing, not only that of the poor. According to the Equality Trust (2013), the UK is one of the most unequal societies in the world. (The richest 10% of households hold 44% of all wealth. The poorest 50%, by contrast, own just 9.5%.)

In this context, and following the global banking crisis of 2008-9 the coalition government legislated in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 to restructure the benefit system, impose more restrictive conditionality for working age benefits and to reduce welfare spending. The key reforms (see Eckley & Sefton, 2013) aimed to move most claimants onto a single monthly benefit payment (Universal Credit), encourage personal responsibility for budgeting, incentivise the transition of claimants (including those with health and disability issues) from benefits to work, to reduce the under occupancy of scarce social housing resources and to transfer some of the responsibility for emergency payments and social fund loans to local councils.

Responsibility for community care grants and crisis loans for general living expenses was given to local authorities. Each was tasked with designing a Local Welfare Assistance Scheme (LWAS) to provide broadly comparable support to residents. In practical terms, LWAS cover the costs of (or provide directly) essentials such as beds and cookers for those leaving institutions or fleeing domestic violence; provide goods for people with disabilities to help with independent living; enable families to replace broken white goods and essential furniture; and enable vulnerable individuals to afford food and heating (Perry et al., 2014).

With this background, we have seen an unprecedented rise in food poverty and the response in the proliferation of foodbanks across the UK. The *Emergency Use Only* report (Perry et al., 2014) jointly researched by Trussell Trust, Oxfam, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and the Church of England, examined why people are turning to foodbanks, how foodbank use fits with their wider coping strategies, and what might be done to reduce the need that leads to foodbank use. They found that Trussell Trust foodbanks in the UK distributed parcels to feed 913,138 people 2013-14. This is an increase from 346,992 in 2012-13 and 128, 697 in 2011-12. The authors note that The Trussell Trust is only one of a huge number of food aid initiatives in the UK, with the wider food aid landscape being both diverse and difficult to document. It is therefore impossible to accurately estimate the numbers of people fed by food aid providers in the UK, either in total or on a monthly basis.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty released a 2014 report confirming the scale of the problem, and extended analysis to cover food supply and waste issues, making policy recommendations which became controversial in political debate. Commenting on the preliminary recommendations, Frank Field MP and Bishop Tim Thornton said: “The poorest households have most felt the pinch over the past decade, meaning the last resort of turning to foodbanks has become a reality for an increasing number of people... Our proposals would save charities money, put downward pressure on food prices and provide healthier options to families relying on voluntary support.”

The contribution of faith groups to welfare

Several recent reports have documented the important contribution that faith communities are making towards emergency welfare provision for those who face poverty and destitution. This can be described (as in the title of this *Temple Tract*) as “the holy safety net” that seeks to support those who fall through the increasingly holey safety net of statutory provision. The coalition government in its early days, and David Cameron in particular, laid great stress on voluntarism, under the slogan of the “Big Society” and welcomed the efforts of faith groups. Many churches (especially in the conservative evangelical world) embraced the rhetoric, even arguing that the church should never have given-up on and handed over to the state the scripturally mandated diaconal ministry to the poor. Others drawing on the welfare state tradition of Temple, Beveridge and Tawney were more cautious and critical of austerity programmes which impacted most heavily on the poorest. But for the most part churches and faith-based organisations simply bore witness to increasing need and did the best they could to meet it, organising donations and volunteers, and often hoping that such service in their local community would renew their purpose, engender goodwill and extend their outreach beyond the congregation.

In June 2014 the *Good Neighbours* report by Church Urban Fund & Theos stressed that,

churches are engaged in a wide variety of projects aimed at providing essential material and emotional support to local people – this has been well established by previous studies. We also found, however, that churches promote and embody ‘neighbourliness’ – building, and helping people build, relationships of mutual support. In this way, they are more than just providers of various community projects and social action initiatives, since strong relationships and social networks can help communities become more resilient in the face of social and economic challenges.

Meanwhile others suggest that Christians and people of faith involved in social action projects and volunteering in their local communities, ‘are likely to be a vital base of support for any future election-winning progressive coalition’ (Birdwell & Littler, 2012). There is clear evidence that religious people in the UK are more likely than non-religious people to volunteer regularly in their local community, to feel a greater sense of belonging to their local community and Britain, and to have higher levels of trust in other people and social institutions (Birdwell & Littler, 2012). Religious people are also more likely to feel they can influence decisions locally and nationally.

Various reports from the 21st Century Evangelicals research programme, which I have managed since 2011, provide further evidence of extensive faith-based involvement in social action and welfare provision. Research shows real and growing concern about poverty, homelessness, and broken families and communities. Over a third (34%) of those surveyed in a 2014 poll on politics, believed poverty/inequality to be the most important single issue facing the UK in the run up to 2015 Election. The results suggest a profile of an Evangelical community who on issues of economics, social justice and welfare provision are more likely to be progressive or leftward leaning, while at the same time more traditional and conservative than average on issues of personal morality such as euthanasia, abortion, and marriage.

In a chapter on Evangelicals and social involvement in the forthcoming book of the project (Smith, 2015) I present evidence and make the case that Evangelical Christians are the extreme case of the active citizen, with higher rates of volunteering, civic engagement and political activism, than any other religious, or non-religious group. One survey suggested that over 80% of more than 12,000 evangelical respondents volunteer at least once a year in a church activity serving the community and over 37% do this at least once every week. The corresponding figures on this question for 3,595 Christians of non-Evangelical convictions were 70% and 26%, and for the 920 non-Christians 60% and 24%. This compares with a baseline figure for the general population as reported from the 2007 government citizenship survey of 39.2% who were involved in formal volunteering in the previous 12 months.

In the same survey an attempt was made to correlate levels of engagement with measures of spiritual capital. 46% of evangelicals who pray daily and 48% of those who read the Bible daily volunteered at least fortnightly compared with the average of 43%. Similar small but statistically significant differences could be seen for volunteering in Christian organisations and attitude statements about volunteering as a Christian duty. These figures might suggest that higher levels of spiritual capital are associated with a greater propensity to serve. However, it may simply be the case that such people are those who are most committed to their local church congregation, or that intervening variables such as age and life-stage (e.g. people early in their retirement years are prolific volunteers) explain more than fervency or content of belief and religious practice. Indeed Putnam and Campbell (2010) found evidence from the USA that it was belonging to a religious group (bonding social capital) rather than strong believing which explained high levels of volunteering and civic engagement.

In November 2013 a panel survey asked, 'Are we good neighbours?' with 1,497 responses from Evangelical Christians who answered a range of questions about their involvement in community life in the neighbourhoods where they lived. The findings suggest that it may well be the case that evangelicals in the UK are activists mainly within the context of the bonding of their own church sub-culture. For example 59% of our respondents said they were involved actively in at least one church social action or community outreach project. However only 21% were actively involved in any secular project or activity. They listed a wide range of practical projects in which they and their local churches were involved: foodbanks, money advice centres, job clubs, soup kitchens, youth cafes, intentional mission teams. The vast majority stayed within the Christian cocoon, with little evidence of partnerships with secular voluntary bodies, or statutory authorities. 82% attended churches which were involved in partnerships with other local churches but only 35% were in churches which had partnerships with secular or statutory groups. Comments from respondents suggest that church projects are mostly self-funded from within the Christian community rather than via grants or contracts from public bodies although charitable trust and lottery funding is sometimes sought.

On progressive localism

The inclination of Evangelicals to deliver their social action projects from within the safety and comfort zone of their own faith communities may well be common to other faith communities. In my own experience over four decades as a community work practitioner I have encountered many Catholic, Hindu, Sikh and Muslim community associations which have struggled to find a vision and a mode of service delivery that is inclusive to the wider local community. Such a silo mentality may present a significant barrier to the development of broad partnerships and coalitions for social justice that are implied by the term progressive localism. However, there is some evidence that in multi-faith urban areas such as inner London it is possible to overcome some of these barriers by the process of broad based community organising as practised by organisations such as London Citizens (Bretherton 2010, 2014).

Two recent Evangelical Alliance initiatives are also significant in this area. The *Faith in the Community* report which was produced in partnership with Christians in Parliament surveyed 155 local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales on their involvement in partnership with, and relationships with, faith groups. The report highlights many positive relationships and examples of good practice and in many cases a common agenda of providing services for the needy and vulnerable. However, the picture is patchy and potential barriers are highlighted such as capacity to engage, poor religious literacy within local authorities, a clash of organisational cultures, the requirements of equalities legislation and other forms of regulation, and suspicions of faith groups being exclusive and evangelising. One proposal that has emerged from the All Party Parliamentary Group for Faith and Society is a “Covenant for Engagement” facilitating joint working between local authorities and faith groups, recently adopted by Birmingham City Council.

At the same time many progressive local authorities, especially across the north of England are reassessing their roles in a new context of financial stringency, out-sourcing of services, and centrally imposed policies of localism. This reassessment has been made even more significant following local devolution debates triggered by the referendum on Scottish independence of September 2014. Manchester Evening News asked the question ‘Should Greater Manchester follow Scotland's example and strive for independence?’ Government announcements on the HS3 fast rail link across the Pennines and the idea of a ‘Northern Powerhouse’ have helped to bring localism higher up the political agenda.

Some councils are seriously reassessing their priorities and value bases through processes known as Fairness Commissions. The transfer of responsibilities for public health and wellbeing from the NHS to top tier local authorities was especially important here. The North of England Fairness Conference in February 2014 was a significant gathering of councils and voluntary, community and faith sector representatives from across the north ‘concerned about the health and economic inequalities which seem to disproportionately affect those living in the North and continue to grow in these times of austerity’. Several faith representatives were present at this conference and it was significant that in this public arena, issues of ethics, values and faith commitments were clearly articulated, by keynote speakers such as Professor Richard Wilkinson from the Equality Trust and Councillor Simon Blackburn, Leader of Blackpool Council. In one of the sessions the director of Public Health from Blackburn with

Darwen Council referred at some length to the work of Latin American Liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff. Examples such as this can be seen in the framework of geographies of postsecular rapprochement (Cloke, 2011) in which the accounts of postsecularism by Klaus Eder and Jürgen Habermas (2005) are used to explain how the hushed-up voice of religion is being released back into the public sphere in some settings.

Case Studies

In this next section I will describe a two case studies of faith-based involvement in the processes of progressive localism taken from my work as the Development Co-ordinator of Together Lancashire, the local expression of the Church Urban Fund's Together Network. One of our major priorities in our work to "Tackle Poverty Together" is to build or strengthen local networks of churches and Christian social action projects and to encourage and equip them to engage in partnership with secular and statutory stakeholders. As part of this process we have convened a number of events and gatherings, building on the impetus given by the *Faith in Community* report. To date three main conferences have taken place in Blackpool, Preston and Morecambe, each involving over 60 church, voluntary sector and council representatives, and in two areas there have been subsequent meetings and conversations to develop emerging agendas.

Blackpool

Blackpool is a famous seaside resort still "noted for fresh air and fun" on the Fylde Coast of Lancashire. The town, according to the 2011 census, has a population of 142,000 (with less than 5% from ethnic minorities). Blackpool is also a significant centre for the LGBT community. Blackpool Council is a unitary authority currently controlled by the Labour Party but which has previously seen Conservative administrations. One MP is Labour, the other Conservative. With the decline of the tourist industry and the lack of other major industry, indices of urban deprivation show that Blackpool moved from 12th most deprived district in 2007, to 6th in 2010. Four Church of England parishes in the Blackpool area fall within the hundred most deprived parishes of over 12,000 in England, with the parish of St. Peter ranked second. There is a surplus of low and substandard multiple occupied housing in properties that were once boarding houses for working class holiday makers, whilst the reputation for fun parts of the town have become a magnet for single homeless and vulnerable people, many of whom are struggling with addictions. One result is some of the lowest male life expectancy in the country.

Organised religion is still predominantly Christian with the major denominations of the Church of England, Methodism and Roman Catholic churches well represented, albeit with generally declining and ageing congregations. Evangelical, Charismatic and Pentecostal churches are also active in the town, but appear to be vigorously independent, and sometimes fragmented and competitive. The Churches Together Network has struggled to keep ecumenical Christian networks operating, and there have been significant divisions in and between churches over sexuality issues and the inclusion of the LGBT community. The Council has convened an interfaith forum for over a decade, and the Muslim community, represented by a single mosque, the Jewish orthodox and reform synagogues, Hindus and Buddhists have been involved in this forum. Currently the faith forum is seeking to reconstitute itself as an interfaith group for the whole of the Fylde Coast so that some of the minority faith groups who have relocated into the more prosperous neighbouring districts of Fylde and Wyre can legitimately take part.

For many years Christian churches have offered support to the needy and vulnerable people in Blackpool through a range of charities, soup kitchens, night shelters and hostels, community centres and social enterprises. With increasing food poverty and the onset of welfare reform Together

Lancashire worked intensively in 2012-13 to bring together some of the key players in food poverty work. Launched in October 2013 the Blackpool Food Partnership, managed by Methodist Action North West and supported by Blackpool Council and Sainsbury's, brings together most of the foodbank projects and many of the churches in the town. It operates from nine depots in various churches and provides emergency parcels of food to people referred through the council's care and urgent needs scheme. This partnership approach and application via the council's call centre also allows signposting and cross referral to other agencies in order that underlying issues such as debt, addictions or employment training can be addressed. In the last 18 months some £36,000 worth of food has been distributed.

Following the launch of the Blackpool Food Partnership in October 2013, Together Lancashire brought together 60 church, community and council representatives for a day conference in November 2013 to explore additional ways of working together. Speakers included the Bishop of Lancaster and the Leader of the council, who was happy to speak publicly about his own recently emerging Christian faith and church commitment. Subsequent meetings involving senior church leaders, Councillors, senior council officers, members of the faith forum and one MP, has identified further areas for partnership working, which include support for the council-led Christmas toy appeal, involvement in the Blackpool Better Start programme for families with pre-school children, the development of the council's ethical policy guidelines, and the possibility of a "Faith Sector Covenant". Church leaders from the Archbishop of York to local pastors, have been involved in various events and conversations at the Town Hall, and have taken opportunities to pray for and with Councillors who face many difficult decisions at a time when budget cuts imposed by central government amount to many millions.

Local partnerships between churches and Blackpool Council are undoubtedly made easier by the fact that a significant number of elected councillors, and some senior officers, are people of faith. However, this does not mean that tensions and conflict are totally absent. One of the most difficult areas has been around homelessness and housing issues. The nature of the housing market in Blackpool is such that many needy and vulnerable single people from the wider region and beyond have been drawn to the town. Most of them are unskilled, often without work, especially during the winter months, and are struggling with addictions or a history of offending behaviour. They bring extra demands on local services, when there is a shortage in the supply of social rented housing, and do little to boost the image of the resort as a destination for families and more affluent visitors. The council wishes to deter additional immigration of such people, and in order to do so has extended the local connection rule so that only residents who have been in Blackpool for three years or more are eligible for housing support. In addition some well-established church-linked projects for homeless people such as the Street Life emergency night shelter for homeless young people, have lost council grant funding or contracts. Many church leaders and Christian activists are angry that this has happened and feel that their faith, based as it is on love for all, and God's grace even for the most undeserving individuals, requires that all should be treated with dignity and justice as fellow human beings and offered unconditional help. Some of the church projects are unwilling to place any eligibility criteria on their beneficiaries and continue to offer free food and, if possible, shelter and support to anyone they encounter. They see conditionality, and pseudo-professional approaches to policies and procedures as managerial obstacles to dealing with whole persons in the way Jesus would have done.

Preston

Preston as a local authority area has roughly the same population (132,000) as Blackpool and besides being deadly rivals on the football field, they have significant different characteristics. With city status awarded in 2002 Preston has aspirations to be the third city of the northwest, (after Manchester and Liverpool). It has a hinterland of rural villages extending northwards to the edge of the Forest of Bowland, but excludes the contiguous urban area immediately to the south across the river Ribble. Yet Preston City Council is only a second tier district authority within the area of Lancashire County Council, whose headquarters, County Hall is immediately across the road from the mainline railway station. Both councils currently have a small Labour majority, but have recently been under Conservative control. With a thriving university and large student population Preston is well connected by rail and motorway to the rest of the country. Public Services, the retail sector and two large military aviation factories offer employment opportunities which make the greater Preston area somewhat more prosperous than the average for the region. Preston still was the 45th most deprived of 326 districts in 2010 and two Anglican Parishes rank in the 300 most deprived parishes of over 12,000 in England.

The population of Preston has long been diverse and multi-faith; Caribbean and South Asian settlers arrived in the 1960s, joined by East African Asians in the 1970s, while in more recent years a large Eastern European migration has made Polish one of the most frequently spoken languages. The University of Central Lancashire has attracted numerous students from China, Africa and many other areas of the world. 11.2% (nearly 16,000) of the population are Muslims, and 2.4% Hindu, with over 900 Sikhs forming the largest Sikh community in Lancashire. 61% identified as Christian in the 2011 census. A couple of electoral wards on the inner east side of the city have a Muslim majority population, and there are a dozen or so mosques, a couple of Islamic schools, as well as two Hindu temples and three Sikh gurdwaras.

Christianity in Preston was historically dominated by the Roman Catholic Church, and though numbers of practising Catholics have been in steep decline, there is still a strong institutional and cultural presence through schools, Catholic social clubs and the presence of religious orders. The Church of England (in both Anglo Catholic and Evangelical varieties) was also well established in the area along with Methodism, although both these denominations now have ageing and declining congregations. Other non-conformists such as Baptists, the Salvation Army and the URC are relatively tiny. Since the 1970s when the Free Methodists seceded from the Methodist church they and similar charismatic evangelical churches have been a significant force. Formal ecumenical structures in Preston are not particularly strong or active, although the once in 20 years celebration of Preston Guild in 2012 did bring together all the churches for a range of activities which culminated in a grand ecumenical service and the procession of 91 churches on a sunny afternoon in early September. Since 2003 there has been a Preston Christian Action Network which has attempted to co-ordinate and support the work of Christian social activists and community projects linked to the various churches. This now operates under the umbrella of Together Lancashire. In both of these groups independent Evangelicals and Methodists play a leading role, with Roman Catholics included wherever they are willing, while Anglicans appear somewhat in the background.

In such a multi-faith environment, local authority usually prefers to deal with local faith communities through the structures of the Preston Faith Forum which was started by the council a decade ago, but now has a life and structure of its own. Together Lancashire works happily with the Faith Forum, and their shared events have been supported actively by the City Council and County Council.

Faith communities and faith-based organisations play a significant role in welfare services and community social action projects in Preston. Preston Homeless Forum brings together a range of statutory, secular voluntary and faith-based organisations who provide services ranging from supported tenancies and housing advice to drop in soup kitchens. There is a network of job clubs supporting unemployed people to get back into work, many of which are based in churches and minority community organisations. Other groups offer debt counselling and money management courses. Preston also has a strong Street Pastors branch, working in close collaboration with the police and other agencies. The Salvation Army is the leading foodbank ministry in the city, and offers food parcels and additional support to people on referral from a range of agencies. They have deliberately chosen not to apply for local authority funding and rely on a charitable response from the community, questioning the strings which may be attached with council funding, and the target culture, detailed monitoring and categorisation of human need. Interestingly some of the most substantial donations of food come from collections organised by Muslim communities, and the City Council also promotes the foodbank and places collecting boxes for donations in the Town Hall and other premises. Other foodbank services have recently emerged co-ordinated by groups of churches in the outlying areas of the city. A number of these are supported by local authority funding.

The Faith in the Community conference in November 2013 brought together nearly 60 people and operated in a similar way to the one previously described in Blackpool. However, the flavour of the day was distinct to match different local realities. Keynote speakers again included an Anglican bishop and the council Leader, but also a leading female Muslim community activist. Clergy, especially from Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, were noticeable by their absence and although a number of Muslim, Sikh and Hindu activists attended, no “leaders” from these communities were at the conference. In 2014 when a second event took place a similar pattern of attendance was observed.

The members and officers of Preston City Council are far more cautious than those in Blackpool when it comes to talking about their own faith. The Leader of the council describes himself as being from Northern Irish Presbyterian background but not actively practising, though significantly influenced in ethics and values by this religion. Other councillors are known to be lapsed Catholics, occasional churchgoing Anglicans, or leading and faithful members of Muslim and Hindu communities. However, as in Blackpool, they recognize that a progressive council and most of the faith communities share common values around social justice and serving the community, and are happy to work together wherever possible. There are some good examples of partnership around urban regeneration and neighbourhood renewal programmes, and even some funding arrangements, such as the recent grant from the council to an Anglican parish in the most deprived area of the city which will enable it to renovate its rather run down mission hall for use as a community facility. Another example is a service level agreement with a faith-based community centre to play the lead role in the city’s rough sleepers’ strategy and “no second night out” programme. There are moves by the council to develop credit unions, financial inclusion strategies and local economic strategies such as green energy production

and a Preston pound as a local currency which could cash in on the potential for progressive localism, and which people of faith could gladly support.

Common values and sticky issues

If we compare the patterns of faith and council partnerships between the two local authorities, and with Morecambe (which we have not space to discuss here), it is clear that for the notion of progressive localism to work it really does have to be local. Because of the varied needs, the different religious makeup of the community, the distinct cultures, and even specific personalities in local councils responses are inevitably different. Faith groups will be likely to have similar concerns to the local authority about poverty and need and are often moved to respond with charitable help to fill the holes in the welfare safety net. Yet the mechanisms and politics in each place is likely to differ. While this may have strengths in providing locally responsive and locally rooted services, the downside is that welfare provision risks becoming a postcode lottery rather than a universal entitlement. Such a situation may well have the Christian founders of the British Welfare State, Temple, Beveridge and Tawney, rotating in their graves!

Some sticky issues on the worldviews of faith groups and the statutory sector are likely to collide. When it comes to the matter of exclusion from receipt of services, the reverse of what might be expected has been observed. Despite their formal equal opportunities policies, it is the public sector, rather than faith-based organisations, which is more likely to exclude; for example by the local connection rule for housing support, or the conditionality of in-work benefits leading to sanctions and withdrawal of support from the “undeserving” and uncooperative claimant. Often when people slip through these gaps, facing homelessness, they are made welcome and included in faith-based programmes. On the other hand, there are situations where some people of faith may seem overzealous and come into conflict with official policies and practices. The practice of prayer is not usually one of them; councils remain neutral on this and are content to offer physical and temporal spaces where prayer can be offered by those who wish to take part, such as multi-faith prayer rooms and civic services in cathedrals or at cenotaphs. It is not even claims about the existence of God or supernatural interventions that trouble the public sector, since these can be constructed as personal preferences and confined to a private realm. It is only when people of faith feel so committed to their beliefs that they explicitly present them as truth claims, and when they perceive their beliefs as normative or binding on others that there is real difficulty. Such conflicts are rare in the field of the welfare safety net, and instead are more likely when faced with issues defined by some religious people as depravity, such as same-sex marriage; or as heresy, blasphemy or unbelief, such as directly conflicting claims about Jesus Christ in Christianity, Islam, and secular humanism.

Other perspectives and challenges to progressive localism and faith based involvement

The emerging patterns of faith-based involvement in welfare and progressive localism, described and largely supported in this paper, are open to critique. In the first place a neo-liberal critique as typified by government and right-wing reaction to food poverty debates will stress individual responsibility, the need for restraint on government spending and the welfare dependency argument. This argument sees poverty and worklessness as the result of personal failings, of laziness, fecklessness and irresponsibility. It will seek to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor. Such an analysis has always been tempting for people of faith, especially for evangelical Protestants who stress the importance of the individual before God. It has effectively been countered by Tawney (1926), more recently by the Joint Public Issues group (see: jointpublicissues.org.uk/truth-and-lies-about-poverty-group-study-materials) and by me at theprimitiveranter.blogspot.co.uk/2014/10/inequality-social-justice-and-dwp-my.html.

A second challenge may come from radical secularists. This argument considers that religion simply has no place in public life and the state should make no provision for or through religious organisations. Faith should be a purely private matter for the individual and should be banished from the public sphere. The provision of welfare support and all other government services should be provided equally on the basis of individual human rights. While there is some attraction in this approach to equality, and it may be preferable to the random variation or postcode lottery of localism, it fails on a number of grounds. Individual human autonomy is a deficient understanding of human personhood, a similar error in fact to that of neo-liberal economics based on rational choice. People are not mere individuals but are socially grounded, in families, in local neighbourhoods, in communities of interest and in institutions ranging from a local pub, church or mosque to nation states, and global market structures. Secondly radical secularism fails to understand the historical context of the UK (or at least England) in which toleration of diverse beliefs is set in the context of an established national church. Nor does it engage with the current post-secular reality where faith and its institutions have become more salient, and perhaps more valuable, in a society where the power of government has diminished. Further, radical secularism makes a dubious claim that it alone is neutral, when in fact it is a quasi-religious ideology, in which unbelief or non-belief claims dominance over every other competing world view.

Final Thought

I have argued that the growth of poverty and inequality and the neo-liberal project to roll back the hard fought for protections of citizens via state welfare, have led to a constructive reaction by churches, people of faith and others of goodwill, to fill the holes in the welfare safety net. But a holy safety net on its own is hardly sufficient to meet that need. Where central government has delegated, or more truthfully abandoned, many of its responsibilities to local authorities, without providing sufficient resources for the task, there are opportunities for creative partnerships. And in a context of post-secular progressive localism there are public spaces in which values and beliefs can be publicly articulated and where apologetics and religious dialogue can take place.

However, the public sphere is also one of politics and contestation, and while politicians are often despised and distrusted there must be new opportunities for the resurrection of participatory democracy, as emerged during the 2014 independence debates in Scotland. There are straws in the wind that provide evidence of some possibilities of a partnership between government and the people, rather than of government being unequally yoked with global capitalism. Many in the churches and in progressive politics are becoming enthusiastic about the potential of Catholic Social Teaching and the rebuilding of a political commitment to the common good.

While welcoming the “common good” debate, and acknowledging that there are affinities between common good ethics and the political analysis and Christian realism of the William Temple Foundation, there needs to be a critical engagement lest a politics of the common good loses its edge for social justice and simply becomes another version of a majoritarian middle way. A doctrine that appears to be promoted largely by the great and the good in the establishment of church and state almost certainly will fail to give voice to the concerns of more marginalized citizens. It could so easily lack the fire that the spirit put into the bellies of the biblical prophets faced with the oppressive rulers of their age. It could paper over the cracks of the class struggles and identity-based conflicts of our *kairos* moment. Rather than leading to a wholesale transformation of social and political institutions of the kind that was achieved through the work of William Temple and his allies in the 1940s, it could represent a regressive localism, taking us back to the pattern of faith-based charitable provision for the needy. That would be a rather feeble attempt to sew a few holy patches over an extremely holey and unsafe welfare net. As Jesus warns, ‘No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old’ (Luke 5:36). For new times we need to see some fresh thinking, a wider and younger base of active democratic engagement, and a renewal and transformation of the major institutions of our society.

Reflection

In the light of arguments above, consider the following questions:

Does faith-based involvement in progressive localism appeal to you?

Do neo-liberalism, individualism, secularism have positive features we can work with?

What is the future of welfare provision in the UK? How can we work to prevent it becoming merely a holey, or a holy, safety net?

How far does our understanding of the causes of poverty condition the way we respond? Do you see the main causes as individual failure, sin, failure in local political and economic structures, or in oppression by the rich and powerful?

How much hope do you see in the possibility of a renewed democratic politics with a major emphasis on the importance to the common good?

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Further Reading

Web resources

Evangelical Alliance research reports: <http://www.eauk.org/church/resources/snapshot/>

Especially relevant are:

[Faith in politics?](#) - Survey conducted in August/September 2014, report published in February 2015.

[Are we good neighbours?](#) - Survey conducted in February 2014, report published in August 2014.

The Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics has resources for Christian thinking about politics:

<http://klice.co.uk/index.php/resources/election2015>

Together For The Common Good <http://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/>

Together for the Common Good encourages people of goodwill, especially Christians of different traditions, to work together, alongside people of other faiths and secular allies, to become agents of change for the Common Good. See in particular my recent blog post which touches on many of the ideas in this paper's Final Thought:

<http://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/viewpoints/blog/reader/the-common-good-who-and-what-is-it-good-for.html>

The Gather website has stories of Christians working together in towns and cities across the UK

<http://www.wegather.co.uk/stories/>

If you have never been to Blackpool look at <http://www.visitblackpool.com/> And if you don't know

Albert and the Lion listen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKovQRzIQwI>

Once in every 20 years Preston Guild takes place, interpreted here not so much as a carnival but as a generational liminal ritual, through which a new generation of citizens, and organized groups, including churches, are initiated into the status of Proud Prestonian. See my presentation to the British Sociological Association Socrel Conference, Durham, April 2013:

<http://gregsmith.synthasite.com/preston-guild-gregs-presentation-at-bsa-socrel.php>

And a video of the Preston Guild Churches Procession

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3lvldGfsIA>

Churches in another Lancashire seaside town recently held a day conference bringing faith groups and the public sector and produced this pair of ["Help in Morecambe videos"](#) to show what they are doing.

Books and articles

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