

Faith communities in public action

Community organising as a British case study

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Introduction: Faith and public life in Britain

There is something of a paradox facing faith communities in British public life. On the one hand, it is difficult for them to express their views in a manner that will be respected in a secular discourse. On the other, they are increasingly courted by politicians as sources of potential volunteering and service delivery - and as groups that can motivate civic participation.

Liberal political theory, assumes that the stability of Western democracies is best ensured when people's vision of what is good is kept away from the public domain. This assumption is at the root of the difficulties faiths face in expressing their views. John Rawls's *Political Liberalism* is a leading example of the liberal approach. Rawls's idea of public reason demands that public reasoning in democracies must be done according to principles that all should accept as being reasonable. Religious views in the liberal idea of public reason have no place, unless they can be reasonably endorsed by all.¹ Public life is hence a matter of creating a (procedural) framework in which different groups can pursue their visions of the good. The *right* is prior to the *good*. Public life in liberal democracies does not involve agreeing a particular *telos* for our common life - seeking to do so would immediately bring into conflict people who hold different comprehensive doctrines of the good.² If appeal is in public discourse to a particular vision of the good - of the kind any religion will wish to articulate - the speaker may be accused of seeking to impose their views and dogmas on others. But if such teleological language is forbidden, it becomes unclear on what basis, and with what authority religions can contribute to political debate. Priests and imams retreat to being representatives of the particular sectional interests of their members. This ideal of public reason which assumes the priority of the right over the good is at the root of the difficulties faiths face in expressing their views.

If religious views have to be kept away from the public domain to ensure the stability of liberal democracies, why, then, are faith communities gaining increasing attention from the liberal state? The answer is pragmatic. Whilst attendance at worship is indeed in decline in the United Kingdom, there is a far more general decline in participation in voluntary associations. Congregations of faith remain by far the largest and best organised networks of citizens - particularly in inner-city areas where politicians are most anxious about declining levels of participation in the political process. One cannot ignore either the importance of the changing international context since 9/11, which has dramatically confronted liberal democracies with the fact that religious views cannot safely be kept away from the public domain.

The organisation and mobilisation potential of faith communities make them attractive to politicians in two spheres. One is the sphere of **community consultation and engagement**. Churches, mosques and temples remain effective ways for reaching large segments of the community, and for encouraging them to participate in initiatives such as New Deal for Communities and Neighbourhood Forums. Given their demographic profile, congregations can also play a crucial part in the mobilisation of ethnic minority turnout in general elections. The

¹ See John Rawls. *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 1993). For a critique of John Rawls on this point, see Jeffrey Stout. *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 2004).

² To ensure the priority of the right, Rawls famously appeals to the heuristic device of the original position, where people make decisions about the just society under a veil of ignorance: "The parties [in the original position] are not allowed to know the social position of those they represent, or the particular comprehensive doctrine of the person each represent." (*Political Liberalism*, p. 24). In the original position, freed from their belonging to any comprehensive doctrine of the good, people will design principles of justice which will order the society in which they live.

second sphere which makes faith communities attractive to the government is their role in **service provision**. With the government seeking an increasing role for volunteering in local communities, and an increasing role for voluntary organisations in service delivery, congregations of faith are amongst the best placed groups to be recruited to this task.

This paper explores the manner in which faith communities should respond to this growing interest of politicians in them. The first section discusses different theological models of political engagement, concluding that faith communities should see themselves as political bodies. The second section considers the practical implications of such a conclusion, arguing that this should lead to considerable wariness at accepting political overtures. The paper then examines broad-based community organising as an alternative, and more theologically compelling, model of engagement, and assesses the effectiveness of such organising in practice. The paper concludes by arguing that faith communities should best respond to the renewed political interest in them by being contrast *communities* against the prevailing culture. It is collaboration between such communities that effective public action ‘to make poverty history’ can be undertaken. Church leaders and the Ulama have a crucial responsibility for enabling and nurturing this.

1. After Christendom and the Caliphate: models of engagement

Christian and Islamic thought on faith and public life are both in a period of transition. For Christianity, the twentieth 20th century saw the collapse of the Christendom model - the end of the vision of the entire governance of the state as a Christian project. The earliest Christian thought emerged in a context where the faith was regarded with deep hostility by the State - but the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine ushered in a lengthy period in which Church played an active role in governance. In the United Kingdom, at least, this role has diminished substantially in the 20th century.

Much of the contemporary discourse around social change in Muslim thought was developed in the context of attempts in the early 20th century to re-establish the Caliphate after its decline through the 19th century and its official demise in 1924. Especially in light of the experience of colonisation this restorationist approach was adopted by a number of anti-colonial movements across the Islamic spectrum, creating a fascination with the (Islamic) state as the central pillar for the establishment of Freedom and Justice. However, 20th century Islamic movements’ experimentations with the state have not been a happy experience. Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, Sudan, Afghanistan and other states were built in the name of (different brands of) Islam and have all, in one way or another, not lived up their original ambitions, thus serving to remove some of the lustre from the pursuit of the state. In addition to this a large number of Muslims have begun to live as minorities over the 20th century to whom the pursuit of an Islamic state is either irrelevant or not of local concern. Furthermore, a number of Muslim thinkers have begun to critique the adoption of the nation state in the context of an Islamic project.

How do these communities of faith respond to a context in which the establishment of a theocratic state is either impossible or agreed to be undesirable? In *Torture and Eucharist*, his study of the relationship between Church and State, William, William Cavanaugh distinguishes two models.³ The first model, Humanism, sits very easily with liberal political theory. (Jacques Maritain and John Courtney Murray are its two main protagonists within Christian theology.) What characterizes Humanism is the separation between the state, which is endowed with the legitimate use of coercive force for the stake of public order, and civil society, which is that space of freedom between the state and families. Faith communities belong to the latter, as groups which function independently from the political sphere.

³ William Cavanaugh. *Torture and Eucharist* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). See also his later work *Theopolitical Imagination* (London: T&T, Clark, 2003).

For Humanism, people of faith influence the political sphere by ‘infusing’ it with their religious values. By being members of a faith community, they learn certain values (like loving one’s neighbour as one self), and try to apply these values to decisions that are taken in the public sphere. If for example, the government decides to allocate a higher proportion of its public spending to military expenditures, to the detriment of the education budget, it would be the duty of people of faith to speak out in the public sphere, to infuse the temporal world with the value of peace, and to influence in consequence the government’s decision. It is therefore important that the language being used to influence public policy is understandable and can be accepted by all, independently of their beliefs. In the temporal order, it is important that people of faith engaged in political action do not do so as Muslims or Christians as such, but do so inspired by those values, leaving the space for others to join them in their political action. The Church or Ummah are not allowed to speak and act as bodies in the temporal realm. They have to disappear as distinct social bodies.

The Humanist approach assumes that the values of a community of faith can be separated from both their narrative, and their vision of the human *telos*. It is such a divorce that Alistair MacIntyre has challenged, in a series of works beginning with *After Virtue*.⁴ In this work, he argues that the inability of post-Enlightenment culture to resolve moral and political disagreements comes precisely from their abandonment of teleology. Humanism is asking for the impossible: that communities of faith somehow ‘infuse’ liberal culture with their values - without allowing them to articulate the very *teloi* which give these values their coherence. Such an approach also resonates strongly with Muslim thinkers such as Ziauddin Sardar.

This is made most clear by the question of human *formation*. It may be intelligible to bring children up in a way that enables them to question the moral assumptions of their parents and culture. But one cannot bring them so neutrally that *all* their moral values are freely chosen. Language is *learnt*: if children are not given any guidance as to what counts as ‘goodness’, they will be unable to attach any meaning whatsoever to the word. The liberal state, of course, can simply leave these questions entirely to parents, but that evades the problem rather than solving it. Unless parents are seen as the *owners* of their children, it is not clear why the inculcation of values into children by their parents would be any more satisfactory than by the wider community. The problem is much more fundamental than this: liberal theory requires there to be such a thing as the fully autonomous, free-choosing self, but offers no account of how such a self could ever come to be.

In fact, as MacIntyre goes on to argue, modern liberal culture does embody certain values - and is by no means neutral in its formation of children. Education in the capitalist state forms children in a quite a particular way, and embodies a particular vision of what human beings are for - and what motivates them. The vision of the utility-maximising consumer may leave a certain moral emptiness (of which our society is increasingly aware), but that does not make it morally neutral. Liberalism is in fact a substantive moral tradition⁵ - but relies on a ‘neutral’ self-image that denies this.

This diagnosis implies a more antagonistic relationship between communities of faith and the modern liberal state. Liberalism assumes that public discourse can remain in the realm of the ‘right’ and not make judgements about questions of the ‘good’. Communities of faith need to resist this by continuing to nurture and form human beings in a manner that enables them to reach their *telos*. Tolerance and freedom can be *part* of what constitutes a good and flourishing human community - they cannot be the whole.

MacIntyre and Cavanaugh conclude that communities of faith in fact have to *be* political bodies in themselves. Instead of trying to influence the public sphere, the Church and Ummah are themselves *public spaces*.

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981).

⁵ See especially Michael Sandel. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 1982).

For Cavanaugh, the Eucharist cannot but make political claims which contradict the liberal state. The Eucharist is a *political* act in itself, because “to participate in a communal and public discipline of bodies is already to be engaged in a direct confrontation with the politics of the world.”⁶ There is no distinction between the sacred and the secular. Cavanaugh goes further arguing that, “the Eucharist is the true ‘politics’ because it is the public performance of the true eschatological City of God in the midst of another City which is passing away.”⁷ The Church has to be a “contrast society”, i.e., “a counter-performance of the body to that of the state.”⁸ The Church gathered around the altar does not simply dispersed into civil society, the liturgy does more than generating motivations to be better citizens. The liturgy generates the body of Christ which is a social body, a public presence irreducible to a voluntary association of civil society.⁹

In the Humanist model, the Church only provides values and inspiration. On that account entering the public have involves *going out from* the worshipping community. Cavanaugh rejects this model: engagement with public life is “a question of what kind of community disciplines we need to produce people of peace capable of speaking truth to power.”¹⁰ Instead of “lobbying”, people of faith should be “witnessing”. They should create alternative spaces - with different practices.

As we observed above, Islam also regards theology as a discourse which needs explicit articulation in public space. The wedge drawn in modern liberal theory between the neutral laws of the state and the private pursuit of the good is quite alien to the Qur'an and the concept of *Shariah* (Islamic law). The basic Objectives (*Maqasid*) of the *Shariah* are designed to protect life, faith, intellect, progeny, and property. They are the foundations of an Islamic understanding of social justice - in which the ordering of the public realm is necessarily based on obedience to its Creator, and must be an embodiment of his care for all that he has made. The Qur'an asserts: “...*Be just: this is closest to piety...*” In fact man is viewed as God's steward (*khalifah*) whose role is to care for the natural order and for life on earth. In a similar vein to the Eucharist, on a day-to-day basis, Muslims are reminded through the practice of the pillars of Islam: *salah* (prayer), *zakah* (alms), *sawm* (fasting) and *hajj* (pilgrimage) that actions that are deeply spiritual are not devoid of political consequences. The congregational prayer is often held as an example of a community in harmony with believers standing in rows and functioning as one body. Fasting and charity sensitise the believers to those who lead less fortunate lives and make the war against global poverty a vivid reality. The pilgrimage symbolises equality and the breaking of barriers between nations, classes and tongues.

The Islamic discourse around social justice encourages people of different faiths to find common ground and work together for good causes. The Qur'an states: “...*join together in pursuit of good and pious things...*” It further clarifies that the differences among people are there to be explored rather than to be obstacles to interaction:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other, (not that you may despise each other)...

For, If God had willed he could have made you all one people...

Muslims are urged to look beyond their own needs and rights, which are important, to realise that their true role is to be of service (*khidmah*) to all the people around them.

In summary, then, contemporary Islamic and Christian communities, especially in the West, have had to think beyond the patterns of Caliphate and Christendom. We have argued that the Humanist solution (in which theological discourse retreats from the public sphere) is

⁶ *Torture and Eucharist*, p. 12.

⁷ *Torture and Eucharist*, p. 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁹ *Theopolitical imagination*, p. 83.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

unsatisfactory. The Church and Ummah must find a way of continuing to be public spaces in a pluralist world.

2. Implications for political practice

At the beginning of this paper, we identified community consultation and engagement, and service provision as two areas where the government is keen to engage congregations of faith. In this section, we will explore the attempt by the state to mobilise faith communities alongside other voluntary associations, and evaluate it in the light of the foregoing discussion.

Barry Knight's report on *Voluntary Action* (commissioned by the Home Office in the early 1990s) argued that there is a deep tension between the original aims of charities (be they religious or secular), and their increasing role as partners of the state. He identified two different kinds of voluntary action:

The first force: This is authentic voluntary action, prophetic, vision led, reformist, independent of government, pursuing independent energy for moral purposes. It is 'first' because it is the primary or 'raw' energy that the human being uses...

The third force: This is part of the wider social economy. It acts philanthropically on sub-contract from the state... The state oversees performance and pays for work done on the basis of independent evaluations to ensure quality control. It is 'third' because it is older and follows behind the state and the private sector...¹¹

Knight's conclusion, based on considerable empirical research, was that

Organisations that follow the state into new contracting arrangements can no longer think of themselves as sufficiently independent to warrant the title 'voluntary'. They could call themselves 'non-profits'... or part of the 'third force' repeatedly described by senior civil servants as forming an important partner with state and private organisations in regeneration arrangements. 'True' or 'authentic' voluntary bodies will remain independent... This will be the 'first force' of voluntary action, in the sense that it is primary, nearer to the root definition of voluntary action... of being undertaken out of free will for a moral purpose - policy driven, rather than resource led.¹²

The reasons for this are clear: it affects the ability of an organisation to campaign, say, for elders' rights, if they are also responsible for the delivery of 'meals on wheels'. Their ability to challenge statutory policy would be compromised by their contract bid - and their role in relation to the recipients of the services would be deeply ambiguous.

The implications of this for our argument are very serious. For congregations of faith to become "resource led" would be to betray their very essence. Our account of the role of faith communities in public life points very clearly to Church and Ummah being "first force" organisations. If congregations are to be "contrast societies" to the values of capitalism, they must be free to "pursue independent energy for moral purposes."

It is significant, in this context, to note the change in the meaning of the word "charity". The Authorised Version of the Bible uses it to translate *agape* in 1 Corinthians 13. "Charity" in this sense describes a relationship of loving mutuality: humans are called to live in "charity" with one another. By 1811, when the Revised Standard Version is written, "charity" has changed in meaning, and so *agape* is translated "love". The primary meaning of "charity" is no longer about a relationship, but an activity - "giving voluntarily to those in need". (The Oxford English Dictionary gives both meanings, but is clear that the latter is the primary one in modern usage.)

The two meanings of "charity" illuminate Knight's dichotomy: he is asking voluntary associations to decide whether they exist to promote a moral vision, or simply to offer practical help. From the argument of the preceding section, communities of faith exist first of all to do the

¹¹ Barry Knight. *Voluntary Action* (London: Home Office, 1993), xvii.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 297-8.

former. Indeed, they go beyond Knight's characterisation of "first force" voluntary organisations. "Charity" (in the older sense) is not simply that which the Church and Ummah *promote* - it is that which they *embody*.

Agape is constitutive of the Church: it is a "contrast society" founded on the communion created by, and received in, Christ's Eucharistic self-offering. The Qur'an likewise summons into being an Ummah founded on "charity", on a shared vision of the human *telos*:

Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and discouraging what is wrong: they are the ones to attain felicity.

3. Community organising: an alternative practice

This section will argue that broad-based community organising can help congregations to be "contrast societies" in the manner we have advocated. Broad-based community organising involves building an alliance of congregations, schools, trade unions and other voluntary associations to work together on issues of common concern. It was pioneered by Saul Alinsky in the slums of Chicago in the 1930s, and initially faith communities were not a major constituent in the alliance.

Alinsky's work involved building a 'relational culture': encouraging people in neighbourhoods to share their stories, and identify the ways in which they believed their areas needed to change. When people were in relationship, with common concerns, they were in a position to challenge those with the power to deliver change (be that environmental improvements, better pay for workers, or improved public services.)

Increasingly, as this work developed, congregations of faith became its most important and effective constituent. As Alinsky's work became nationally organised within the Industrial Areas Foundation, congregations of faith were key to building an alliance which also included trades unions, residents associations and schools. Over the last sixteen years, the work of the Citizen Organising Foundation (COF) has sought to adapt and apply this approach in the United Kingdom.

The significance of faith communities in this work is precisely that they are a "social body". An alternative reality is celebrated week by week in worship. And yet, like associations of volunteers, faith communities are under increasing pressure in late capitalist society. Changing patterns of work, family life and consumption - documented in works such as Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* mean communities of faith are in numerical decline in the UK; find it increasingly hard to find members willing to take on leadership roles; and inevitably have their own "social body" pervaded and influenced by the wider context.¹³ There is a real danger that worship becomes seen as another commodity. Instead of a diverse range of people being gathered into one act of worship, different places of worship, and different services within the same place of worship, attract different "niche markets".

When a congregation of faith joins a broad-based organisation (such as London Citizens, the COF affiliate for the metropolis) the first activity which it engages in is *renewing its own relationships*. A programme begins which includes housegroups, discussions after worship, and - centrally - 'one-to-one' relational meetings. Members of the congregation are identified who have the skills and enthusiasm to lead this process, and training is provided by London Citizens' paid staff.

In a multi-faith area for "social bodies" such as churches and mosque to be a witness to God's peaceable kingdom, there will have to be relationships *between* these "contrast societies". London Citizens' "Community Dialogues" form the next stage of this process - bringing into

¹³ See for example Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) which documents the way in which faith communities are changing in the United States.

relationship members (and not simply clergy) of different congregations.

There is a delicate balance to be managed here - one which MacIntyre explores in more detail in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*.¹⁴ Communities of faith need *both* to be rooted deeply in their traditions (to avoid the encroachments of the false 'diversity' of secular capitalism) *and* to be engaged with other such counter-narratives. COF has sought to do this by combining programmes and training which operate across cultures and faiths with activities within each faith tradition. Within the Christian community, for example, a monthly set of *Gospel for Today* notes is produced for congregations, relating the Sunday lectionary readings to the local context, and to London Citizens' work.

Formation was identified earlier as a key theme: and this is reflected in London Citizens' and COF's work. When leaders of faith communities come together to reflect and pray, again and again concern is expressed about the impact of the wider capitalist culture on congregational life - and especially on the formation of young people.

It is also this concern that compels congregations of faith in broad-based organisations to act for political change. The politics practiced within the Ummah and the Body of Christ is in tension with the politics of capitalism. Low pay, contracting out of public services, the increasing sense that education at school and university is a *commodity* - all of these have a direct impact on family and community life. The "contrast societies" of these congregations need to act in concert to challenge the pressures worshippers experience as parents, employees and consumers.

In this first half of our treatment of broad-based organising, we have sought to explain its theological *raison d'être* - the part it plays in helping communities of faith to be authentic "contrast societies". The second half will provide an empirical evaluation of the work, and its effectiveness in promoting an alternative social reality.

4. Community organising: an empirical study

(a) Methodology

Our empirical evaluation of broad-based organising will use Amartya Sen's Capability Approach as a tool of analysis. This approach has developed largely in the area of poverty reduction - and has rejected the tendency in neo-liberal economics to assimilate incomes to well-being. Sen identifies five reasons for not assimilating incomes (or commodities) to well-being: personal heterogeneities (like gender, illness, age), environmental diversities (like living in a warm climate or cold makes the commodity requirements different), variations in social climate (like public educational arrangements), differences in relational perspectives (differences in customs and habits make the commodity requirements different) and distribution within the family.¹⁵ A focus on commodities does not allow us to understand what these commodities are actually doing for the life of the individual.

Given these limitations of the commodity approach, human well-being is best characterised in terms of what people are or do (like being healthy, reading or writing, taking part in the life of the community), which Sen calls 'functionings'. And more specifically, as he considers freedom as one of the most basic aspects of human life, well-being is to be assessed not as much in what people are or do, but in what they are *able* to be or do should they choose so (like being able to be healthy, being able to read and write, being able to participate in the life of the community), which Sen calls capabilities.¹⁶ A capability is "a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being," it "represents the alternative combinations of things a

¹⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London: Duckworth, 1990), chapter X.

¹⁵ Amartya Sen. *Development as Freedom*. (Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 70-1.

¹⁶ See for example Amartya Sen. *Commodities and Capabilities* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1985); 'Well-Being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984'. *Journal of Philosophy*. 82/4 (1985): 169-221; *Inequality Re-Examined*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

person is able to do or be.”¹⁷

While functionings are distinct aspects of living conditions or different achievements in living a certain type of life, capabilities are real notions of freedom and reflect the real opportunities people have to lead or achieve a certain type of life. What matters, is not so much the achievements in themselves, but the freedom to achieve them. Sen illustrates this by contrasting a fasting monk and the starving child. Both show the same levels of nutritional deficiency, but the monk has the capability to be adequately nourished, in contrast to the starving child.

The capability approach emphasises that what matters in social policy is the expansion of the freedoms people have to do or be what they have reason to value. Sen deliberately avoids identifying what it is that people have reason to choose and value. He insists that the capability approach only “specifies a space in which evaluation is to take place, rather than proposing one particular formula for evaluation.”¹⁸ Ultimately, the choice of relevant capabilities has to be related to the underlying social concerns and values within a particular society.

From our earlier argument, there are theological grounds for preferring the capability approach to one focussed on commodities. Faith communities ultimately see commodities as a *gift*, as a means by which God enables human beings to relate to one another and to him. For Christianity, this is rooted in a sacramental understanding of the world. In the Eucharist, in which God enters the physical world to feed his people, and in that feeding, to join them to social Body of the Church. The capabilities approach is open to such a sacramental understanding: the question of what people to have “reason to choose and value” is related to the question of their *telos*. In *Divine Economy*, the Christian theologian D. Stephen Long argues:

What theology has to do with economics cannot be given a single answer sufficient for all time. Nevertheless... from an orthodox theological perspective, the central question must be: How does any particular [answer] position human beings to receive from God those theological virtues which allow them to serve well within God's economy?¹⁹

The capability approach deliberately leaves the definition of well-being and poverty undetermined, as Sen himself does not wish to engage in these theological, and teleological debates. (His approach, then, is compatible with the demand that theologians maintain the *priority* of their language over that of the economists.²⁰) However, the capability approach is not silent about the components of human well-being. In affirming the value of “freedom”, defined as ‘the opportunity one has to accomplish what one values’, it emphasises that people should not be seen as passive patients of social welfare institutions, but “have to be seen as being actively involved in shaping their own destiny.”²¹ Each person has to be seen as a “doer and a judge” instead of a “beneficiary”.²² This is why the most fundamental freedom inherent in Sen’s approach to development is that of “individual agency,” that is, “the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world.”²³ In that respect, the capability approach grants a fundamental role to the public debate and democratic decision-making, or in more generic terms, to the ability to participate in the life of the community and to take decisions in matters that affect one’s own life and the life of fellow-human beings. This ability “to do something not only for oneself but also for other members of the society” can even be considered as “one of the elementary freedoms that people have reason to value, [...] even among people who lead very deprived lives in material

¹⁷ Amartya Sen. ‘Capability and Well-Being’. In M. Nussbaum and A. Sen. *Quality of Life* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 30.

¹⁸ Amartya Sen. ‘The Concept of Development’. In Behram and Srinivasan, eds. *Handbook of Development Economics*. Vol. 1. (Elsevier: North Holland, 1988), p. 18.

¹⁹ D. Stephen Long. *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (Routledge, 2000), p. 270.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

²¹ *Development as Freedom*, p. 53.

²² ‘Well-Being, Agency and Freedom’, p. 208.

²³ *Development as Freedom*, p. 18.

terms.²⁴

(b) Fieldwork and analysis

In February 2005, fieldwork was carried out among London Citizens communities (in East London, the organisation is known as TELCO Citizens, and in South London as is South London Citizens). The methodology that was followed consisted in focus discussion groups after Church services, and semi-structured interviews with members of the Citizens Organisation. (During the fieldwork, TELCO held one of its smaller assemblies, at which teams were commissioned in each member church, mosque or other group to deepen the relationships within that particular body.)

The discussions evolved around three key questions: 1) What is the motivation to join the community organisation?; 2) What is the major benefit of the existence of community organisation; and 3) Why joining a community organisation and not a traditional political body?

When asked about their motivation to join the London Citizens, the most overwhelming response was the possibility of doing things *together*, and making changes in the local community *together*:

“It’s your community, you are here, you can make changes, otherwise, who else is going to make the changes needed? [...] My motivation to join South London Citizens Organisation is to make changes. But for this, you need to get together. [...] We can do things when we are together, when there’s unity. As an individual, you cannot do much, but together you can do things. And people know local needs.” (focus group, parish of St Matthew’s, Brixton)

The importance of the community, of this sense of ‘being and doing together’ is crucial at each stage of the work of broad-based community organising. It is not the individual who is trying to make changes on behalf of his or her community, but the whole community who participates in the changes. These words of a woman who is a member of Telco through her parish, best describe the functioning of broad-based community organising: “First, we acknowledge the problems of the local community together. Second, we address these problems together. And third, we take actions together to solve the problems. We take actions united around a common cause.” Another churchgoer described her involvement with Telco as a way of “promoting justice for the underprivileged, and doing this with people of my own Church and others, *as a community*.” (emphasis added)

At the Telco general assembly, the opening address by the guest speaker, the Rt Revd Thomas McMahon (Catholic Bishop of Brentwood), summarised the whole ethos of broad-based community organising: “It is better together. [...] We are responsible together. [...] We can bring more transformation in this world if we can do it together.” And this was the theme that ran throughout all the major speakers of the assembly, individuals working together, as a community, can achieve more than alone.

Among the achievements that broad-based community organising has achieved are securing a living wage, affordable housing, cleaner and safer streets, a better environment. Within the framework of the capability approach, broad-based community organising has indeed expanded the ‘freedoms that people have reason to choose and value’, and has reduced poverty. It has expanded the ‘freedom to walk on the streets without fear’, it has expanded the ‘freedom to be adequately sheltered’, it has expanded the ‘freedom to earn a decent living’, it has expanded the ‘freedom to live in a clean environment’. For example, when asked about what Telco is doing in the community, a churchgoer passionately replied: “Have you come here in Canning Town ten years ago? It was smelly, full of pollution, nobody wanted to live here. Now, with Telco it’s clean, you can live here, and want to live here.”—Telco had run a successful campaign aiming at closing down a soap factory that was making the air in Canning Town non-breathable. In other

²⁴ Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen. *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 106.

words, Telco is thus successfully promoting the freedoms that local people have reason to choose and value. It might not reduce the monetary poverty of the families living in East London (and in that sense, one would not find a negative correlation between the existence of Telco and the numbers of people living below the poverty line in East London), but Telco does increase people's agency, people's capacity of shaping their own destiny. A Roman Catholic priest summarises Telco's achievements as follows: "That Telco makes people economically better off is very small. One of the biggest achievements of Telco is that people have a sense that they can make a difference rather than letting things happen for them."

One of the major reasons for Telco's success in promoting people's freedoms has to be found in the scope it gives to people to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. People have become 'actors' and no more 'beneficiaries' of actions that are being made for them. Through broad-based organising, people are becoming agents of their own lives. Broad-based organising helps people to be citizens again, it gives them voice:

"It is about empowering and enabling people who are not usually involved in saying things. People become disillusioned, disenfranchised, and they aren't citizens anymore. They need to be empowered." (focus group, St Matthew's, Brixton)

"If Telco didn't exist, it would strip people of their voices. [...] We are a big voice when we speak together. [...] We can express what we need as a community, safe environment, affordable housing." (focus group, St Margaret, Canning Town)

Broad-based organising is not a mechanism for delivering services (such as health centres, schools, etc.), but is about mobilising people to get political change. It is about organising the people so that they, themselves, can make changes in the local community, from the zebra crossing in front of the local school to the living wage campaign. This sense of becoming agent of one's own life cannot be disconnected from the community to which the individual belongs:

"The greatest benefit of London Citizens Organisation is that people who would otherwise not come together have come together. Different churches come together (Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Muslim, atheist, communist) and work together for the common good. What we would miss the most if this didn't exist is meeting people from different cultures and working together with other people." (focus group, parish of St Matthew's, Brixton)

Broad-based community organising does not empower the individual to make actions, but it empowers the community as a whole. In that sense, it is not as much the agency of individuals which matters, their capacity to act, but the agency of the community, the capacity of individuals *as a community* to act. For example, Telco does not have individual members, but groups. It is only through the group, through belonging to an institution (a Church, a trade union, a school or other) that one is able to participate in broad-based organising.

Broad-based community organising appears to be a new form of political involvement, taking over the role of traditional political organisations, which have lost touch with the people they are supposed to represent:

"They [politicians, local authorities] promise but things don't happen." (focus group, St Matthew's Church, Brixton).

"The people of the City Council, these people don't have time for you, you have to queue, and if you succeed in talking to someone, they don't listen to you. The parish priest, the leaders of Telco, they listen to your words, and they take it forward. [...] Political parties are very distant from the people. Telco is closer to the people. It's 'people's power'." (focus group, St Margaret, Canning Town)

"With Telco, we can voice our views more clearly, we can voice what's happening to us in the community, what's troubling us. In the bigger organisations, they have their own English." (focus group, St Margaret's Church, Canning Town)

“When I looked at local governments, I didn’t find there what was relevant. In our place, it’s hopeless to write to the MP (it’s all Labour, there’s no opposition). The local government is not a place where you can influence things.” [A Catholic nun]

A leader points for example out that broad-based organising is about recovering what has been lost, about learning the art of politics, as a way of negotiating the changes that matter in the community, and learning how to do it together. Political parties and trade unions started as people’s movements, responding to the needs of people (like better working conditions, maximum working week, sickness leave, paid holiday, etc.), but these institutions have become, as he describes them, ‘fossilized’. They have become disconnected from the reality of people’s lives. Telco is recovering that mobilising power of traditional political channels in a new modern and dynamic way, especially by bringing people together who would not otherwise be coming together (Muslim, Christians, atheists, agnostics, etc.). He characterises broad-based organising as “a form of citizen action which is reviving mobilisation at the grassroots level.” Telco enables traditional political channels to be re-connected with what is happening at the grassroots level.

This is why broad-based organising is not an alternative to traditional politics, but a necessary complement. Telco relies on traditional political channels for change. What is key in Telco’s approach is building relationship with those who are in power (like the Mayor of London). In some sense, Telco fulfils a rather traditional advocacy role, by applying pressure on the government, national and local, to influence its policies. For example, words like ‘living wage’, ‘affordable housing’, which had been initiated with Telco campaigns, have now become filtered in the main political agenda. The way broad-based organisation works is thus mainly through ‘adversarial politics’, as Drèze and Sen would put it.²⁵ In that respect, it is crucial to have total independence from government funding. Telco is mainly financed by the fees of member institutions (and by various charitable trusts). This not only ensures freedom to enter in adversarial politics with the government, but also ensures accountability between Telco and its member institutions.

Broad-based organising is currently strongest amongst Roman Catholic congregations. In London, they combine a number of features: large numbers of people, often from culturally and economically marginal groups; a strong body of teaching on social justice, and an established position in British society - but not always at the heart of the Establishment.

Anglicanism and Islam, by contrast, have had lower levels of involvement - despite the fact that both also have theological commitments to social justice. (St Matthew’s Brixton is the only Anglican member of South London Citizens, and Telco’s 35 members include only two such parishes.)

Islamic involvement in The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO) is partly documented by Neil Jameson in his article on “British Muslims - Influencing UK Public Life: a Case Study”. Many important parallels exist between the ideas of broad-based organising and the theological foundations of the Islamic pursuit of social justice. The concept of working together with a sense of organisation, discipline and collective spirit for issues of common concern is one very familiar to Muslims, particularly in a pluralist culture.

There are, however, a number of factors that make involvement in broad-based organising difficult. The Muslim communities still retain vivid memories of migration and are currently only into the second and third generations. In this context it is often felt that the basic infrastructure needs of Muslims are not adequately met – be that in terms of Islamic education for the young, availability of places of worship, recreational facilities for youth or challenging discrimination and Islamophobia. Hence a subconscious hierarchy of needs often operates within the Muslim communities in which they do not always realise that it is only through co-operation with others that some of these needs can be met.

²⁵ See Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen. *India: Development and Participation*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

A second reason could be more complex and subtle. Much of the language used by Community Organising and its methods are designed to challenge centralised power. The idea is that power should be widely dissipated and that as Citizens, we all have the right to power and to hold those who do wield power in our name to account. Yet the Muslim community is currently under a severe spotlight in terms of its political allegiances and activism. It is a community that is trying to show how British it is and how mainstream it is, rather than declare its radical credentials. Terms such as ‘radical’ prove the case at hand – one can quite legitimately be a radical feminist, or a radical socialist, such labels even bringing a sense of kudos! But a ‘radical’ Muslim is worrying! The actions and assemblies of broad based organising require a confidence and a willingness to ‘rock the boat’ that the Muslim communities do not yet possess.

And perhaps a final reason, possibly the most common, is that there is much ethnic, racial and religious diversity among Muslims despite the common bond of faith that ties them together. In this context one important difference relates to the perception of the state and power, and the degree of democratic experience. Those who have become accustomed to living under authoritarian regimes may not be well versed in the art of organising within civil society. In some places even a basic right of association may have been absent. For those Muslims who had no chance of organising themselves outside the state in their inherited traditions, the state and all things related to it have always been a leviathan, to be obeyed or shunned, but never challenged.

These three factors militate against Islamic involvement in broad-based organising. They will have to be addressed if it is to reach its full potential. And the potential is significant: in a culture on the receiving end of a great deal of prejudice and economic disadvantage, and with considerable concerns about the character of consumerist capitalism, organising offers Muslims a way of being a “contrast society” that is at once peaceable, and in alliance with other faith groups in Britain, including Christianity.

As with Islam, Anglican involvement in organising is hampered by a reluctance to ‘rock the boat’ - but for very different reasons. Compared with Catholicism or Islam, Anglicanism has a place in public life out of proportion to its numerical strength. Its status as an established church encourages it to have a perception of public space as something to be managed and cared for ‘from above’, rather than adopting the grassroots perspective of organising. This means Anglicanism is particularly susceptible to the kinds of overture being made by politicians. Service provision is an attractive option if the provision of clergy and buildings - and the connections with the state - are stronger features of the Church of England than the (declining) size of congregations.

Ritchie has argued elsewhere that despite these pressures, organising provides Anglicanism with an important way to continue to be a church for the whole nation.²⁶ For one of the most attractive features of an organisation such as London Citizens is that it allows the Church to be a “contrast society” without turning into an inward-looking sect. The faith communities involved in organising are *both* distinct from the dominant culture *and* committed to working for the common good.

The end of Christendom has led many to question whether establishment is a viable long-term option for Anglicanism. Organising provides a way for Anglicans to retain their historic commitment to ministry for all - and not simply for the minority who attend church - while developing as a “contrast society” in a way it has found hard to do in the past.

5. Conclusion

This paper began by asking: How should faith communities respond to the renewed political interest in them? We have argued that there is for considerable scepticism - that the invitation to become a service provider on contract for the state is in real tension with the calling of the Church and Ummah. To be faithful to Islam and Christianity in the United Kingdom today

²⁶ Angus Ritchie. ‘Benedict, MacIntyre and the Future of Anglicanism’. *One in Christ*, Spring 2005).

requires communities of faith to be “contrast societies”, embodying radically different narratives from those of the prevailing capitalist and consumerist culture. Whilst different faith communities will articulate different narratives, broad-based community organising shows that the “social bodies” of Islam and Christianity can work together effectively. (We have explored these two faiths, as they are the strongest in Telco and South London Citizens, but Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Jewish communities are also involved in this work.)

Community organising provides a way for communities of faith to remain distinctive without becoming sects. Whilst supporting them in being different *from* the dominant culture, community organising enables congregations to turn outwards towards the world, in loving service and in bearing witness to God’s justice.