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**"Bringing heaven down to earth": The purpose and place of religion in UK food aid**

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“Bringing heaven down to earth”: The purpose and place of religion in UK food aid

Abstract

*Purpose*

This paper uses data from a city with a multi-ethnic, multi-faith population to better understand faith-based food aid. It aims to understand what constitutes faith-based responses to food insecurity; compare the prevalence and nature of faith-based food aid across different religions; and explore how community food aid meets the needs of a multi-ethnic, multi-faith population.

*Methodology*

The study involved two phases of primary research. In phase one, desk-based research and dialogue with stakeholders in local food security programmes was used to identify faith-based responses to food insecurity. Phase two consisted of 18 semi-structured interviews involving faith-based and secular charitable food aid organizations.

*Findings*

The paper illustrates the internal heterogeneity of faith-based food aid. Faith-based food aid is highly prevalent and the vast majority is Christian. Doctrine is a key motivation among Christian organizations for their provision of food. The fact that the clients at faith-based, particularly Christian, food aid did not reflect the local religious demographic is a cause for concern in light of the entry-barriers identified. This concern is heightened by the co-option of faith-based organizations by the state as part of the ‘Big Society’ agenda.

*Originality*

This is the first academic study in the UK to look at the faith-based arrangements of Christian and Muslim food aid providers, to set out what it means to provide faith-based food aid in the

UK and to explore how faith-based food aid interacts with people of other religions and no religion.

### Keywords

Big Society, ethnicity, faith, food banks, food insecurity

Introduction

Religious activity has been a conspicuous feature of recent developments in food aid (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014). This operates at an organizational level – the Trussell Trust, the principal coordinator of UK food banks, is a charity founded upon Christian principles (Trussell-Trust, 2016) – and at the level of individuals: 70 percent of evangelical Christians have donated to a food bank in the last year (Kandiah, 2015). While the involvement of other religions has been less visible than the high profile role of Christian organizations and churches, Muslim, Sikh and Jewish groups in the United Kingdom (UK) do appear to be increasingly targeting their activities towards food insecurity (Dugan, 2014, Forrest, 2014).

The high level of religious, most notably Christian, engagement in food provision may be associated with shifts in government policy and political rhetoric since 1997 (Cairns et al., 2007, Harris et al., 2003). As a component of civil society faith-based organizations (FBOs) have experienced public policy pressures to deliver services (Cairns et al., 2007, Harris et al., 2003), however, in comparison with Third Sector Organizations (TSOs), FBOs have been more reticent in formally engaging with the state in delivering services (Rochester and Torry, 2010). It would appear that the Coalition government’s ‘Big Society’ agenda, which placed a strong emphasis on localized, non-state solutions in public services, aimed to open up a space for faith-based organizations in non-formal approaches to public service delivery. Nevertheless, this objective was largely reflected in government rhetoric rather than policy change or the improved availability of financial resources for increasing religious involvement (Clifford, 2016), with former Prime Minister David Cameron claiming, ‘Jesus invented the Big Society 2,000 years ago ... I just want to see more of it’ (Walsh, 2014) and

arguing that religion has an important role in 'helping people to have a moral code' (Mason, 2014).

Despite the apparent zeal with which religious organizations and individuals have responded to food insecurity, religious leaders have been highly critical of government equivocations over the extent and causes of hunger, arguing for government to address the roots of food insecurity through policy change (Butler, 2014). While members of the Anglican Church have been most public in their criticism of government apathy, representatives of all the main Christian denominations and representatives of other religions, such as Judaism, have publically engaged with anti-hunger campaigns. Muslim leaders appear to have been absent from formal public criticism of government (Forrest, 2014).

This paper uses data from a city with a multi-ethnic, multi-faith population in the north of England (Bradford) to better understand faith-based food aid. There are four objectives. First, to understand what constitutes faith-based responses to food insecurity and to present a typology of faith-based food aid in the UK. Second, to compare the prevalence and nature of faith-based food aid across different religions in the context of recent social policy changes. Third, to compare the prevalence and viability of faith-based and secular food aid. Fourth, to explore how community food aid meets the needs of a multi-ethnic, multi-faith population. Without negating the generosity of many of those involved, the paper seeks to contribute to a developing academic debate which critiques UK food aid and questions the social, political and policy context in which it has come to prominence.

Background

Faith-based organizations (FBOs)

Exactly what it means to be a FBO providing social services is equivocal. Drawing on applied organizational theory, Jeavons and Cnaan (1997) propose seven dimensions for defining an organization as ‘religious’, ranging from organizational self-identity to sources of resources to the distribution of organizational power. For each dimension, an organization may be placed along a spectrum from least to most religious (Jeavons and Cnaan, 1997). Belcher and Deforge (2007) also emphasize a spectrum of faith-based organizations; their main criterion, however, is the extent to which an organization proselytizes (Belcher and Deforge, 2007). Sider and Unruh (2004) take an alternative approach, dividing their seminal typology of faith-based organizations into two sections (organizations and programmes), recognizing that the religious characteristics of an organization differ from the programmes it operates (Sider and Unruh, 2004). Despite such semantic and structural differences between typologies of FBOs, existing models share common themes. Notably, the premise that religion is not an independent attribute but a dynamic to be incorporated into the organization in a variety of ways and a recognition that the question of whether an organization is faith-based cannot be answered with a simple yes or no (Sider and Unruh 2004).

FBOs providing social services are highly prevalent in North America (Kearns et al., 2005). FBOs in the United States (US), in particular, are comparable to their secular counterparts in many respects - size, funding, programme capacity and management sophistication – however they are also substantially different from secular agencies, with regard to their extensive use of volunteers, their relatively low reliance on government funding, and their

comparatively low engagement in policy advocacy (Kearns et al., 2005). The applicability of policy analysis about FBOs in the US to the UK social policy context is questionable, notably the scope for transferring welfare responsibilities to faith-based organizations is far greater in the US than in the UK (Harris et al., 2003). Nevertheless, FBOs are increasingly involved in service delivery in the UK (Jarvis et al., 2010, Cairns et al., 2007) and this calls for a fresh analysis of FBOs with particular reference to the UK policy context.

There are multiple, interrelated factors that contribute to religious involvement in public services and community engagement. As discussed above, political and policy pressures are increasingly influential on church contribution to service delivery, however, public service is also inextricably linked to theology (Cairns et al., 2007). For instance, service may be considered as an outward expression of personal faith, compassion and solidarity (Sager and Stephens, 2005, Clydesdale, 1990). However, the development of religious involvement in social problems can also be prosaic, such as the straightforward desire to make good use of church buildings (Cairns et al., 2007).

### *Faith-based food aid*

Despite the large and growing body of work on US and UK faith-based organisations and service delivery, there is limited evidence on faith-based organisations in relation to food aid specifically. A recent study of religion in the arena of food aid in Finland (Salonen, 2016), suggests that the shape and function of religion in food assistance is context-specific.

Religion is socially produced in 'the practices of the food banks, in the goals of the food providers, and in the lived experiences of the food recipients' (36). Salonen's analysis focused on Christian food banks only and, hence, cannot comment on religion in other food



aid contexts or food aid provided by religions other than Christianity. Despite the high level of religious involvement in UK food aid (Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014, Sosenko et al., 2013), there is an absence of in-depth studies on faith-based food aid in the UK.

**Methodology**

*Study site and population*

The study was undertaken in Bradford (a city in the north of England) with individuals who have experience with anti-hunger/food security programmes in faith-based and secular organizations. Bradford District is the sixth largest metropolitan area in the UK (in terms of population) (Gill, 2015) and has the largest proportion of people of Pakistani ethnic origin (20.3 percent) in England, which contributes to its large Muslim population (24.7 percent). 46 percent of the district’s population is Christian (45.9 percent) and just over one fifth (20.7 percent) describe themselves as having no religion.

The study involved two separate phases of primary research conducted between June and November 2015. In phase one, desk-based research using the Internet and local government resources and dialogue with key stakeholders in Bradford’s food security programmes was used to identify faith-based responses to food insecurity in the District. Phase two consisted of 18 semi-structured interviews in Bradford involving individuals from faith-based and secular organizations with experience of food security programmes at a community level. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of York, Department of Health Sciences Research Governance Committee (Ref HSRGC/2015/712). Sample organizations were chosen purposively from the 67 food aid organizations identified in the desk-based analysis

to form a representative sample, which included various types of organization and multiple religions. The faith-based organizations in the final sample were Christian and Muslim only. Interviewees within the sample organizations were also chosen purposefully to capture perspectives that would best represent the organizations' positions. Publically available information was used to draw up a contact list. Invitations to join the study were sent to the appropriate person within an organization. Organizations that failed to respond were removed from the sample. Others declined to be involved or suggested another organization in their place. If this occurred, the organization was contacted only if it was considered an appropriate replacement. Reasons given for declining to participate included a perception of no relevant experience and failure to see the study's value. The final sample was biased towards emergency food aid providers, however, this was not considered problematic given the current salience of the issue and the high prevalence of deprivation in Bradford. Table 1 provides details of the interview organizations/participants.

**Table 1. Sample Characteristics (table goes here)**

The topic guide was informed by a literature review (above) and discussion with the project team. The interviews were conducted by a White British female interviewer, recorded on a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim. A three-stage analysis approach (Dwyer, 2002) was used to analyze the transcripts. Each transcript was summarized to understand the narrative. A coding frame was devised based upon common themes/sub-themes and, using Nvivo 10, these codes were applied to each transcript. Relevant text was indexed whenever a theme appeared. The appropriately indexed material was transferred to a grid and catalogued with basic organizational and demographic details about the sample. To preserve anonymity of participants and, as required by the Ethics Committee approval, details about the organizations and individuals in the sample are kept to a minimum.

Results

The nature of faith-based provision will first be set out, followed by a description of how religion is expressed in the context of food aid. The objectives and motivations of faith-based food aid and the perceived ‘client’<sup>i</sup> experience of receiving food from a faith-based organization will then be reported.

*Faith-based community food aid*

*Overview of faith-based food aid in Bradford.* Of the 67 community food aid providers identified in Bradford, 48 percent (n=32) described themselves as faith-based, 36 percent (n=24) identified as Christian and 12 percent were Muslim (n=8). This is unreflective of Bradford’s religious demographic: nearly one quarter of the population (24.7 percent) identify as Muslim and just over one fifth of the district’s population (20.7 percent) describe themselves as having no religion. The discrepancy between the proportion of community food provided by Muslims and the proportion of the population identifying as Muslim raises concerns about how well food aid in Bradford reflects the local demographic.

In Bradford, organizations providing emergency food - hot food providers (soup kitchens and soup runs) and food banks - were more likely to have their origins in faith-based charities than those providing non-emergency food - community cafes, community kitchens, community supermarkets and environmental organizations - which tended to be secular. Of the 19 hot food providers and soup runs, 11 were Christian (Catholic, Methodist, Anglican and Evangelical Covenant Church), five were Muslim and four were secular. Of the eight food banks, 6 were Christian, one was secular and one Muslim.

*Conceptualizing faith-based food aid.* Faith-based food aid can be defined in multiple ways. In the study sample, the extent to which a food aid provider was faith-based was principally decided by legal and organizational ties: the provision of food was legally a project of a registered faith-based charity, such as a church. Foundational financial and resource support from religious institutions and faith-based charities may also contribute to the extent to which a food aid project is 'faith-based'. Of the 15 faith-based food projects in this study, nine received financial resources that were integral to its operations from religious institutions or individuals. An explicit expression by staff of their religious identity and belief was also characteristic of faith-based food aid. In this study, faith-based food aid was predominantly staffed by people who were a member of a religious institution. This ranged from food projects with a combination of self-identified secular and religious staff members, to those with a dominance of religious staff members. An expression of religious principles and teachings in the interaction between staff and clients was a feature of the most overtly faith-based forms of food aid. A minority of study organizations promoted a message of faith in the provision of food (n=5) and those which did tended to be Christian hot food providers.

The data indicated that the degree to which a project was faith-based was consequent upon its number of faith-based characteristics and the predominance of these characteristics. This applied to both Christian and Muslim organizations. Figure 1 displays the hierarchical layers characterizing faith-based food aid.

**Figure 1.** Layered defining characteristics of faith-based food aid (authors’ own) (goes here)

Accordingly, there is a spectrum of types of food aid depending on the strength of an organization’s acceptance of religious doctrine and religious institutions (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Food aid faith-secular spectrum (authors’ own) (goes here)

The far left end of this spectrum is occupied by faith-based projects which aim to continue a religious tradition of charitable services for ‘the poor’ (‘a response to a spiritual call’). Organizations in this category are inspired by and aim to enact religious doctrine; they may also be a project of, or funded by, a religious institution. Second to this exist a hybrid-type of faith-based project which may enact their religion either with their clients or personally through the provision of food, but whose primary relationship with religion in the provision of food is functional. ‘Functional faith’ is the final category of faith-affiliated food aid organizations. This includes organizations legally describing themselves as faith-based but whose affiliation to a particular religion is purely functional, such as the use of a religious building.

A merging of religious and secular boundaries was apparent in some food aid organizations (‘the secular side of faith’). Secular projects may celebrate religious festivals with their clients, such as Eid and Christmas, or benefit from increased donations during religious festivals. Alternatively, faith-based projects may support secular social services using their venue as a site to meet clients.

The far end of the spectrum is occupied by secular projects that assertively reject the involvement of faith organizations or individuals ('positive atheism'). In the sample, this was expressed in the repudiation of religious volunteers or religiously motivated donations:

I don't allow politics and religion; you can leave that at the door. I weed out those volunteers who are motivated by religion. I don't want the people to be a witness.

Hot food provider (secular), Manager, P15

### *The expression of religion in food aid*

Within faith-based food aid, religion may be expressed implicitly or explicitly. An implicit expression of religion, one in which the expression of faith is not premeditated, may operate through the building. Among study organizations, food was commonly distributed from a church or mosque and, while clients were not required to engage with the building, the material space was a site of religious imagery. Religion may further be expressed implicitly through the religious identity of staff members, as displayed through what they wear. In a minority of study projects (n=2), staff members who interacted with clients wore religious dress, such as habits or clerical collars. Such clothing was an inescapable message of faith.

Religion was expressed explicitly through religious music and activities run during or immediately before or after the distribution of food, and in the interactions between staff and clients. An explicit expression of religion was most common in Christian hot food providers; Muslim providers made no reference to the religious aspects of the organization.

Faith-based activities included Bible classes and prayer circles involving staff and clients (n=4). Engagement in prayer was in some organizations seen to be voluntary: it was considered an adjunct to the distribution of food and pursued only if resources allowed:

We are not hiding behind our faith at all but we are not ramming it down people's throats either. We offer to pray with them (the clients) but if they don't want it then fair enough, they are treated no differently.

Food bank (Christian), Manager, P5

However, there were examples where the provision of food could be conditional on engaging in prayer. This was applicable to two evangelical Christian hot food providers.

*Objectives and motivations*

The origins of faith-based food aid were functional and doctrinal.

*Doctrinal motivations and objectives.* Religious doctrine contributed at a macro-, meso- and micro-level to organizational objectives and staff motivations. In this study, the influence of religious doctrine on organizational objectives was only applicable to Christian emergency food aid. Neither the Muslim food bank nor the Muslim hot food providers interviewed discussed religious doctrine. Religious doctrine was also not perceived as a motivating factor among the faith-based non-emergency food providers in the sample.

At a macro-level, Christian teachings of salvation (of society and of the self) underpinned the provision of food aid in some organizations. Providing food assistance to clients within a

food bank or soup kitchen was a means through which to 'save' both the client and affirm the purpose of the site of food distribution:

In providing food, support and social services we are bringing heaven down to earth. Most people think that doing good work when alive means that they will go to heaven when they die but this is a misunderstanding of the Lord's Prayer. It is about helping people on earth, so that you bring heaven down to earth.

Food bank (Salvation Army), Manager, P12

A religiously founded concept of the human person, encompassing dignity and spirituality, also motivated staff to assist individuals in need:

You can't compartmentalize who we are as people; you can't separate the spiritual from the physical being. We try to help the person and in helping the person we are drawing upon spirituality and helping the spirituality in them.

Food bank (Salvation Army), Manager, P12

More directly, in line with Christian doctrine, food aid provided an 'opportunity' for the performance of 'good' behavior, through donating to charity, helping the poor and hungry, spreading the gospel and preventing surplus food going to waste.

At a meso-level, a specific conception of the ideal form and the responsibilities of the religious community - informed by Christian principles of solidarity and participation - motivated partnerships between churches, encouraged charity towards the destitute and supported the public expression of personal religion in the community via food aid:



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Interviewer: Do you think faith is a motivation for people to help?

Definitely. I think there is quite a strong influence in the church at the moment of living out your faith in your community.

Food bank (Christian), Manager, P18

At a micro-level, staff in some faith-based projects experienced a personal religion which motivated their involvement in food aid. The act of providing food was described by staff in three emergency food providers as a ‘response to a spiritual call’. In addition, solace found in religion enabled staff members to cope with the upsetting nature of the work:

It is religious for sure; it is based on our faith. We don’t see it so much as a social work, as much as like a response to a spiritual call and serving the Lord and the poor. We couldn’t do it without our spiritual base really.

Hot food provider (evangelical Christian), Manager, P17

*Pragmatic motivations and objectives.* Faith-based food aid exists where secular projects cannot, however, predominantly because existing organizational structures, networks, and resources facilitate the development of food aid and support its ongoing existence. Pre-existing organizational structures expedite the development of faith-based food aid. For instance, and as described above, faith-based food aid is commonly supported by faith-based charities which may sponsor the initial set up. Similarly, networks between faith-based institutions may facilitate collaboration which eases the development of food aid and supports its survival in the long-term:

We got loads of churches...and said, "We are thinking of looking at this, would any of you like to be involved?" And I think it was out of 24 churches in total we got 13 that were dead keen on doing it.

Food bank (Christian), Manager, P5

Christian and Muslim charities and religious institutions further contribute to the initial development and ongoing existence of faith-based food aid through the provision of sustained finance, buildings and volunteers. This was fundamental to the feasibility of food aid in a climate of limited, short-term third sector funding.

All faith-based and two secular projects in this study received in-kind (food) and financial donations from members of local religious congregations; often this was essential to the development of a project:

We get more donations here (in the mosque) as well. If I make an announcement to our congregation on Friday, I will be inundated by Monday.

Food bank (Muslim), Manager, P2

It was common for faith-based food aid to benefit from the use of a religious building rent free, often including free utilities and facilities. This applied to seven study projects and without it their existence would not have been possible. Religious institutions were also the primary source of full- and part-time staff and volunteers. Two projects were initiated on the insistence of a religious leader external to Bradford, while the development of four organizations was attributable to an individual from within the Bradford-based religious community:

We came to Bradford at the invitation of the Bishop. He invited us to come here, into X, because of our work with the poor.

Hot food provider (Catholic), Manager, P17

*The client experience*

*Overview of clients, as presented by staff members.* As discussed above, the religious affiliation of food aid in Bradford was unreflective of the District’s religious demographic. While not necessarily a problem in itself, the very low use of faith-based food aid by the local Pakistani community - the majority of which is Muslim - raises doubts about how well faith-based food aid is able to serve those of other religions. Among all food aid providers, clients were reported by staff to be predominately White British, with a large minority of recent migrants from the European Economic Area (EEA). Although, overall, a small minority of clients were of Pakistani ethnic origin, secular food aid and the food aid provided by members of the Pakistani community or directly affiliated to mosques reported serving more Pakistani clients than Christian-affiliated food aid. It was surprising, therefore, that interviewees did not appear to consider this lack of diversity to be an issue or expressed the belief that there was less need among the Pakistani community.

There was also a common perception, particularly among food aid organizations in majority White British areas, that the client demographic reflected the local demographic, which in itself was seen to abdicate an organization from questions of accessibility:

This is a very white area...the BNP (British National Party) their main office is in X and the local secondary school has got you know a handful of ethnic non-British

people. Simply because it is not in an area where those people are, not because there is any restriction on them.

Food bank (Christian), Manager, P5

*Perceived client experience of faith in food aid.* Without interviews with people using faith-based food aid, client experience could only be inferred from the perceptions of the interviewees (a staff member or manager of food aid). There was a common perception among interviewees in Christian providers that faith-based food aid was more welcoming, caring, personal and respectful towards clients than secular food aid, particularly secular food aid funded the state. This was not discussed by staff in Muslim food aid and it may be related to the relative inconspicuousness of religion among the Muslim organizations interviewed.

The welcome and care received by clients was directly attributed to the influence of religion, for instance staff behavior was inclusive *because* of Christian teachings of respect and dignity. Requests for prayer from some clients and regular attendance at some long-standing faith-based food providers suggested that client' may benefit from the possibilities - solace, friendship, the possibility of change - offered by religion in the provision of food aid:

They have tried sex, drugs and alcohol. But they haven't tried God and that way of life, because that way of life can change your life. They step into this world. The more they hear, the more they think, "I can change".

Hot food provider (evangelical Christian), Manager, P16

However, the extent of client engagement with and respect for, as opposed to indifference to, religion in the context of food aid was questionable. Faith-based food aid was considered an

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3 opportunity for preaching to or praying with clients, at times with the objective of religious  
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5 conversion:  
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10 Then the other thing which some people find difficult but which we do offer, we make  
11 it clear that we are a group of churches running it and we are a Christian organisation.  
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13 We believe in the power of prayer and we offer to pray with people.  
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16 Food bank (Christian), Manager, P10  
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20 Client respect of religion and ‘good’ behavior was maintained through the possibility that  
21 food and welcome could be withdrawn. In some cases the receipt of food was conditional on  
22 praying or listening to a sermon, while the long-term trajectory of the client could be  
23 influenced via providing professional support from faith-based social services and charities.  
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25 More subtle but equally forceful power dynamics were at play in projects where prayer was  
26 voluntary. While prayer was considered voluntary by the staff, the limited autonomy of the  
27 client rendered this questionable:  
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38 Now most people take it up and say things like, “my mum goes to church” or “I used  
39 to go to Sunday school” you know, “I will try anything basically, I am in such a hole”.  
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43 Food bank (Christian), Manager, P18  
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## Discussion

### *Main findings*

The high prevalence of faith-based food aid in the case-study area (48 percent) is in keeping with previous literature (Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014, Sosenko et al., 2013). The majority of faith-based food aid was Christian, which is in line with the high involvement of Christian organizations in faith-based public services and community engagement in the UK, as previously identified (Jarvis et al., 2010). Food banks were more likely to be faith-based than any other model, although soup kitchens were also predominantly faith-based. Muslim food aid was in the relative minority, despite the local context and non-emergency food aid was largely secular.

*Defining faith-based food aid.* Faith-based food aid could be defined by multiple characteristics. The degree to which a project was faith-based was consequent upon its number of religious characteristics and the strength of these characteristics. Accordingly, there was a spectrum of types of food aid - faith-based and secular - depending on the strength of an organization's acceptance or rejection of both religious doctrine and religious institutions. This is consistent with the work of Jeavons (1997), Belcher and Deforge (2007) and Sider and Unruh (2004), all of whom identify a spectrum of FBOs according to the number and intensity of their religious characteristics. Sider and Unruh's (2004) distinction between the religious characteristics of an organization and the programmes it operates was not found in this study. This may be partly attributable to the small size and informal organizational arrangements of many of the organizations in the sample, which precluded formal distinction between organization and programmes.

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5 Within faith-based food aid, religion could be expressed implicitly or explicitly. An implicit  
6 expression of religion, in which the expression of faith was not premeditated, operated  
7 through the building or through the religious identity of staff members. Religion was  
8 expressed explicitly through religious music and activities, including prayer, and in the  
9 interactions between staff and clients. An explicit expression of religion was most common in  
10 hot food providers, as opposed to food banks or providers of non-emergency food aid.  
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21 *The origins of faith-based food aid.* The origins of faith-based food aid were functional and  
22 doctrinal. Religious doctrine contributed to organizational objectives and staff motivations at  
23 the level of religious teachings (macro), at a community-orientated level (meso) and on a  
24 personal level (micro). As reported elsewhere, religion was inextricably linked with a  
25 project’s community-based charitable engagement (Cairns et al. 2007). The act of providing  
26 food was not only an integral part of living a Christian life (Salonen, 2016, Cairns et al.,  
27 2007) but itself a form of prayer. Nevertheless, despite the importance of religious doctrine to  
28 staff and organizational objectives, as has been suggested by previous literature (Cairns,  
29 2007), a key motivation for faith-based food aid in this study – Christian and Muslim – was  
30 pragmatism. Faith-based food aid existed where secular projects could not predominantly  
31 because established organizational structures, networks, and resources facilitated the  
32 development of food aid and supported its ongoing existence.  
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49 *Christian and Muslim provision compared*  
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54 In this study, organizations affiliated to Christianity through legal ties, funding arrangements,  
55 and/or the identity and motivations of staff members were far more likely to provide food aid  
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than organizations affiliated to Islam. Existing analyses of religious involvement in community and voluntary activities at a local level similarly show high representation of Christian, particularly Church of England, communities and low representation of other religions (Jarvis et al., 2010, Bekkers et al., 2008). The Muslim food aid providers in the sample were faith-affiliated in a functional capacity only: providers were (legally) nested within Islamic organizations and received financial and in-kind support from the latter and/or from members of congregations in local mosques. Christian food aid, on the other hand, was not only more numerous but more explicitly faith-based. In contrast with North American research indicating that few faith-based organizations and services engage in proselytizing (Cnaan, 2001, Smith and Sosin, 2001, Wineburg, 2001), in this study, a large minority of faith-based food aid preached to or prayed with clients. Christian doctrine was discussed by many Christian study participants as a key motivation for their provision of food aid. Asked directly (by the interviewer) about their motivations for providing food aid, representatives of Muslim food aid did not mention Islamic doctrine, instead staff spoke of motivation stemming primarily from unmet need and secular principles of charity. Given the importance of compulsory (Zakat) and voluntary charity (Sadahaq) in Islam (Khan et al., 2010), the absence of any reference to Islam and Islamic philanthropy by Muslim interviewees was unexpected and requires further investigation.

### *Faith-based versus secular provision, in the context of the 'Big Society'*

In comparison with their secular counter-parts, faith-based food aid providers were, in general, better financed, staffed and resourced and, as a movement, more internally coherent and viable. In a climate of limited, short-term third sector funding, the contributions of Christian and Muslim charities were fundamental to the initial development and ongoing



existence of faith-based food aid. Additionally, staff in faith-based food aid, motivated by religious doctrine and united by a shared faith appeared to be more consistent and committed than secular staff in secular food aid. The viability of faith-based, as opposed to secular, organizations has been identified elsewhere (Farnell, 2001). Farnell (2001) suggests that the resources and religious connections contributed by members of religious communities are good, in themselves, contributing to the performance of social service. Also, financial viability and coherence as a movement generate confidence that they are independent of the state and market (Harris et al., 2003, Farnell, 2001).

Yet, ironically, it is in their widespread and consistent delivery of food services that religious, especially Christian, groups have evolved to fit a policy agenda developed by New Labour (1997-2010) and continued by the Coalition Government (2010-2015) and the 2015 Conservative Government. Religious food aid occupies a space for faith-based involvement in non-formal approaches to public service delivery. Christian food aid, in particular, embodies the Coalition’s ‘Big Society’ agenda in a) its localized, non-state solution to issues - poverty and hunger - that were, according to the 1945 welfare model, the prerogative of the state and b) the moralized character of service delivery, inculcating a ‘moral code’ in those assisted. Nevertheless, and in line with the work of Harris (2003), faith-based food aid organizations, again most notably those of Christian denominations, do not provide assistance because it is demanded or encouraged by government, rather it is theologically and pragmatically motivated. The act of providing food is above all a personal experience of expressing faith and performing acts of compassion and solidarity. The concept of charity within the Islamic framework, specifically, adds a further dimension to the place of faith-based food aid within a wider political/policy agenda. Charity, within the Islamic framework, acts as a social security mechanism imposed on the faithful (Gambling and Karim, 1986), in a

sense transferring the burden of social security from the state to the individual (Khan and Murdock). Yet, in this study Christian, not Muslim organizations, acted as a proxy welfare state.

### *The client experience and the exclusionary implications of faith-based food aid*

Perhaps surprisingly given Bradford's ethnic diversity (Bryant et al., 2013), clients of food aid providers were predominantly 'White' (Slocum, 2007). In particular, Christian food banks and soup kitchens reported serving very few Pakistani and/or Muslim clients. Although the reasons for this were not stated, the data intimated possible forms of inadvertent exclusion, also found in analyses of food aid in North America (Slocum, 2011, Slocum, 2006).

Representations of 'White' food predominated, with few non-Muslim organizations catering for cultural diets, and a large minority of Christian food aid required clients to engage with Christian doctrine or symbols.

However, the extent to which the presence of religion may affect clients at faith-based food aid is disputable. The apparent absence of ethnic and religious diversity at faith-based food aid might reflect perceived exclusivity, however religious beliefs and traditions may have a positive as well as a malign impact on the actions of individual service users and practitioners (Furness and Gilligan, 2012). An interesting dimension is evident in research from Finland. Despite the efforts of some food banks to emphasize the religious elements of their work, food recipients often consider religion unremarkable and inessential, viewing the food bank as predominantly secular (Salonen, 2016).

The centrality of religious conversion to the provision of food in a significant minority of study projects conflicts with the findings of Cairns, Harris and Hutchinson (2007) who found that overt evangelizing in faith-based public services and community programs was considered controversial and, as such, avoided (Cairns et al., 2007). It also contrasts with the work of Belcher and Deforge (2007) who concluded that, while volunteers of faith-based social services in the US believed their volunteerism to be both representative and an extension of their Christian service, they also felt strongly about not proselytizing clients (Belcher and Deforge, 2007). In contrast with this study, Cairns (2007) found that church volunteers and project users commented on the fact that attending a church-organized activity gave them an opportunity that they would have otherwise lacked to get to know people from a different ethnic or religious background, indeed churches in multi-ethnic and multi-religious areas were often considered to have developed good links with the local Muslim population through the community services they developed.

The apparent absence of Pakistani and Muslim clients at Christian food banks and soup kitchens may be explained not by the exclusivity of faith-based food aid itself but by lower levels of food insecurity among Pakistani-Muslims in Bradford. Evidence suggests that Pakistani people living in the UK do not necessarily experience the poor health outcomes that their relatively high levels of deprivation, in comparison with the white ethnic majority (Nazroo, 1997), may lead one to expect (Uphoff et al., 2016). It is theorized that support within social networks among ethnic minority communities may mitigate the effects of poverty on health (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2008). Lower levels of food insecurity among Pakistani-Muslims living in Bradford would be in keeping with this. However, as discussed in Power et al. (2016), although the prevalence of food insecurity is lower among Pakistani

than White British women, food insecurity does exist among the former group with 1 in 10 Pakistani women in Bradford reporting food insecurity (Power et al., 2016).

The low use of food aid by Pakistani-Muslims in Bradford may, therefore, be attributable to the existence of alternative, hidden forms of food assistance among the Pakistani-Muslim community surrounding mosques. Borell and Gerdner (2011) found that in Sweden, Muslim congregations are both religious and social meeting places and centers for the organization of a range of social welfare services (Borell and Gerdner, 2011). There are also non-Mosque based arrangements in Pakistani-Muslim communities for sharing savings in mutual aid groupings and distributing according to need. While the particular forms of Islamic finance in terms of banking and associated 'loans' have been examined in the literature (Warde, 2000) the more informal, albeit widespread, expression of mutuality are relatively hidden (Alam, 2011).

### *Study strengths and limitations*

This study provides an insight into the different types of faith-based organizations responding to food insecurity at a time of high political and media interest but limited academic analysis. It is the first academic study in the UK to look in detail at the faith-based arrangements of Christian and Muslim food aid providers, to set out what it means to provide faith-based food aid in the UK and to explore how faith-based food aid organizations interact with people of other religions and no religion. As such, it raises concerns about the accessibility of faith-based food aid.

However, the sample of community food aid providers is biased towards emergency provision and includes Muslim, Christian and secular organizations only. In addition, it was not possible to access informal expression of mutuality such as unofficial, ad hoc distribution of food in mosques. The study also did not interview users of food aid and, therefore, findings about project inclusivity and the experience of clients are reported via the perceptions of staff. As a result of these limitations, it is not possible to comment with certainty on whether the relatively low provision of Muslim food aid is a fair reflection of responses to food insecurity by Bradford’s Muslim community or, in fact, only a partial reflection of Muslim food aid in Bradford. Further research looking at the prevalence and management of poverty and hunger among low income Pakistani households and exploring informal networks of food aid among the Pakistani Muslim community in Bradford is required to understand the extent to which current food aid excludes people in need.

**Conclusions and implications for research and practice**

This study’s findings illustrate the internal heterogeneity of faith-based food aid and the importance of sensitivity to the exclusive implications of religion in the context of food aid. The fact that the clients at faith-based, particularly Christian, food aid in Bradford did not reflect the local religious demographic is a cause for concern in light of the barriers to entry shown up by the qualitative data, notably the imposition of religion on some clients. This concern is heightened by the cooption of faith-based organizations by the state as part of the ‘Big Society’ agenda. There exists a real danger that faith-based food aid will be used as an inadequate safety net for those in food insecurity, while the fact that they are providing such a safety net will be used to rationalize further cuts in services for vulnerable people. The theological underpinnings of some faith-based food aid and the political apathy of some staff

within FBOs, in contrast to the public political engagement of religious leaders, may paradoxically ease the institutionalization of such organizations within the (welfare) state apparatus. Policy responses should focus, therefore, not on furthering food aid (secular and faith-based) but on tackling the roots of food insecurity.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> 'Clients' is used to describe the people accessing food aid. The term was chosen because it was considered preferable to 'recipients', which may connote passivity, and to 'users'; and it was used by interviewees to describe people using their services. The term has many flaws - not least its association with systems of market-based production - however there was, unfortunately, no scope for critique here.

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**Table 1.** Sample Characteristics

Interview participant	Emergency or non-emergency	Organization	Model	Religion
P1	Emergency	Service organization for low-income, high needs clients	Food bank	Methodist
P2	Emergency	Service organization for low-income, high needs clients	Food bank	Muslim
P3	Emergency	Service organization for low-income, high needs clients	Hot food provider	Muslim
P4	Emergency	Service organization for low-income, high needs clients	Food bank	Secular
P5	Emergency	Service organization for low-income, high needs clients	Food bank	Anglican
P6	Emergency	Service organization for low-income, high needs clients	Hot food provider	Secular
P7	Non-emergency	Community Centre	Pay as you feel café; and community kitchen	Secular
P8	Non-emergency	Community Centre	Community café	Secular
P9	Non-emergency	Service organization for low-income, high needs clients	Pay as you feel café; mobile food bus; and distributor of food and clothing parcels	Anglican
P10	Emergency	Service organization for low-income, high needs clients	Hot food provider	Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC)
P11	Non-emergency	Social food charity	Pay as you feel café	Anglican
P12	Emergency	Service organization for low-income, high	Food bank	Salvation Army

		needs clients		
P13	Emergency	Service organization for low-income, high needs clients	Hot food provider	Muslim
P14	Emergency	Service organization for low-income, high needs clients	Hot food provider	Catholic
P15	Emergency	Service organization for low-income, high needs clients	Hot food provider	Secular
P16	Emergency	Service organization for low-income, high needs clients	Hot food provider	Anglican
P17	Emergency	Service organization for low-income, high needs clients	Hot food provider	Catholic
P 18	Emergency	Service organization for low-income, high needs clients	Food bank	Anglican

**Figure 1.** Layered defining characteristics of faith-based food aid (authors' own)

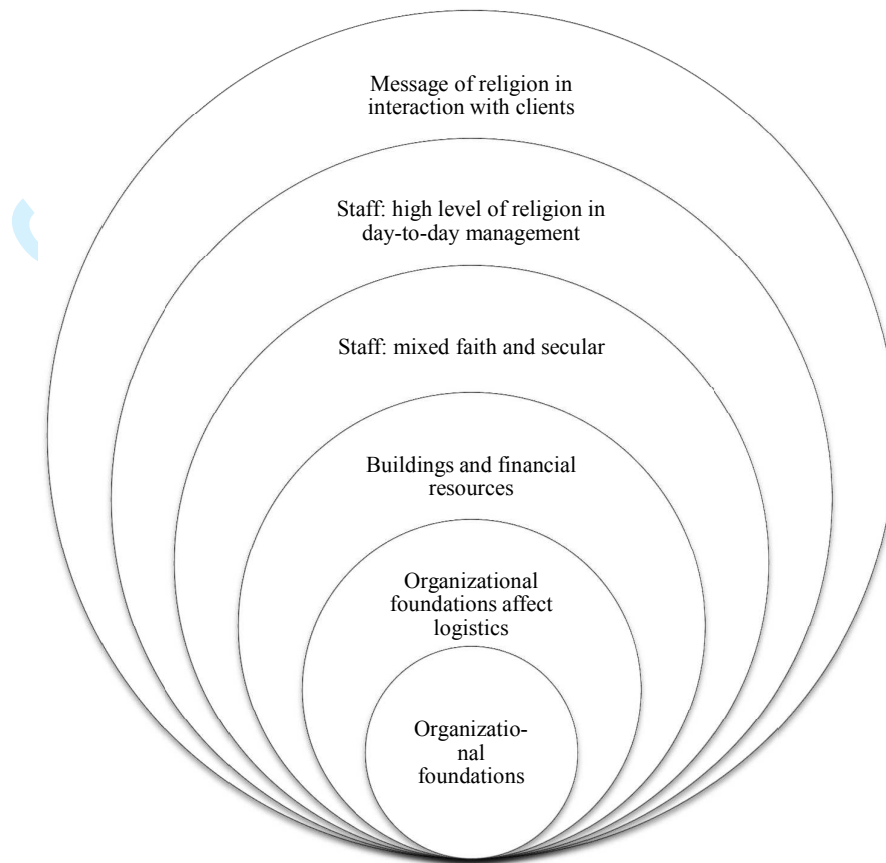


Figure 2. Food aid faith-secular spectrum (authors’ own)

