Local Connections in an Increasingly Polarised Nation? Examining the British Context for Multifaith Social Action and Interfaith Dialogue from 1997 to the Present

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Abstract

In this chapter we discuss the impact of policy initiatives and local activism since the early 2000s on interfaith activity, and specifically multifaith social action, in the UK. We will look backwards to understand how interfaith activity and policy were bound up with broader discussions of faith in the public realm under the New Labour government of 1997-2010. Reflecting on the current policy context for local interfaith activism, we will trace the impact of this period of activity on more recent policy developments concerning austerity, Brexit, social cohesion and integration. Two case studies of local multifaith social action, some of which emerged in the early 2000s, will be the basis for exploring the practical and theoretical issues related to faith-based and multifaith social action and interfaith dialogue in local communities and the impact of policy agendas over time. The implications of this history for understanding the evolution and development of the interfaith agenda and related policies on religion in public life are significant for the UK context and beyond.

Introduction

The imperative to serve others, which is shared by virtually all religions, motivates the practice of social action in neighbourhoods and cities across the UK. The scale of action ranges from the multi-million pound international work of major charities such as Christian Aid and Islamic Relief to tiny coffee mornings for the elderly held in places of worship and run on donations of refreshments provided by individuals. In this chapter, examples of multifaith social action will be discussed in order to explore some of the practical and theoretical issues related to the practices of multifaith social action and interfaith dialogue. Within the context of this collection, we work with multifaith social action and interfaith dialogue as practices – situated, embedded and often contested – which provide the means and scope for actors to engage with one another and the state. The two case studies reveal theoretical issues pertaining to the nature and articulation of interfaith dialogue and multifaith social action, as well as practical issues

concerning the engagement of faith-based organizations with the state and the local impact of multifaith social action. Reflections from the two case studies provide a basis for interrogating the social, policy and funding developments that shape, challenge and motivate different forms of multifaith social action and interfaith dialogue. The two case studies come from England and, although there are some commonalities with other parts of the UK, it should be noted that there are differences between the regions. Therefore it cannot be assumed that patterns are common across the nation.

To describe the UK as an increasingly polarized nation is a bold claim, but one which sets the scene for understanding the factors that are shaping, and have shaped, the practice of multifaith social action and interfaith dialogue in local communities – the 'local connections' which our case studies help to illustrate. In the period we are looking at, from the late 1990s to the present day, there has been ongoing political and social concern about the nature of 'cohesion' in the UK. A series of events have provided a focus for policy interventions and for shifting articulations of this challenge. In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, urban disturbances ('riots' or 'uprisings') led to a policy focus on the integration of ethnically and racially diverse communities (Rhodes 2009). Following the London bombings of 2005, there was a renewed focus on countering violent extremism and a more focussed attention on Muslim communities as 'the problem' (O'Toole 2016). The 2014 Scottish Referendum signalled that the union was under pressure (Keating 2017), and the 2016 Brexit vote underlined the polarization of the nation. An incredibly finely balanced vote, often depicted as between outward-facing Europeans (Remainers) and inward-facing Brits (Brexiteers), the Brexit vote gave rise to strong reactions that have seen massive upheavals in party politics, both locally and nationally (Wincott 2018), and a rise in racially and religiously motivated hate crime (Carr et al. 2020). Although the Brexit vote did not concern religion, it did concern British identity. For some communities more than others, religion is a fundamental aspect of their British identity. Our narrative throughout this chapter will note the polarizing events that shape policy but also shape the context for multifaith social action and interfaith dialogue.

The argument of this chapter is that multifaith social action projects are an opportunity for, and often rooted in, interfaith dialogue and can have profound impacts on communities and 'local connectivity' that extend beyond the reach of the services which the projects provide. It will also be argued that the existence and development of multifaith social action projects in the UK is revealing of broader issues related to the place and nature of religion in a religiously diverse and arguably 'secular' state (Davie 2015). Practices of interfaith dialogue and

multifaith social action in the UK have arisen out of a very particular history that continues to impact on the nature, form and success of initiatives to the present day. Following a brief contextualization of this inter-relationship between multifaith social action and interfaith dialogue, a more specific discussion of the policy agendas since 1997 will help to explain the environment in which our case studies have emerged. The concept of the 'religion policy window' – developed from the work of Kingdon (2003) in Prideaux and Dawson (2018) – will be used to frame the way in which policy opportunities have shaped the evolution of multifaith social action. A discussion and analysis of our two case studies will then be used to illustrate some of the factors that shape multifaith social action, and more specifically the impact of government policy locally.

The relationship between interfaith dialogue and multifaith social action

There are many ways to define interfaith dialogue and multifaith social action. Broadly speaking, we understand interfaith dialogue as a theologically driven practice, often but not necessarily formally organized, where people of faith seek to understand, discuss and develop their religious positions together. Historically, much of this activity has been conducted by leaders and academics rather than people living in religiously diverse communities, although many cities in the UK have had interfaith fellowships for many decades which have wide, but in many cases now aging, memberships. Multifaith social action is a practice within communities, involving people of different faiths, who aim to provide a service to others based on shared, religiously inspired values. These activities occur in religiously diverse neighbourhoods where individual religions often have a relatively well-developed infrastructure to support the development of managerial and operational practices.

Ramadan (2006) maintains that it is those who are already open-minded who become involved in interfaith dialogue. The full range of schools of thought within a religious tradition are not represented, and those with closed opinions do not become involved. Multifaith social action, on the other hand, can include a much broader range of individuals, as there is a shared, positive focus on a social need that does not necessitate any discussion of religious difference. Interfaith dialogue can act as the basis for multifaith social action, and multifaith social action can lead to interfaith dialogue: indeed, the two activities are mutually implicated and difficult to disentangle. Although we will endeavour to disentangle and critique the relationship between dialogue and social action as both individual and communal practices, it is by no means a

straightforward process to do this in relation to the two case studies, and there is an inevitable degree of 'messiness' in describing the field.

This contextualization of the relationship between interfaith dialogue and multifaith social action has made it clear that this terrain is by no means straightforward. Our focus here is on multifaith social action, though we will repeatedly be identifying overlaps with interfaith dialogue. Our key concern is how this range of activity relates to government policy – and especially how the transience of policy can render some projects fragile. We turn now to a discussion of how government policy in relation to communities and religion has developed over thirty years in order to contextualize the historical and contemporary dimensions of our case studies.

Interfaith, Multifaith and Government Policy

In our discussion of policy, we are broadly working with the concept of a 'religion policy window' (Prideaux and Dawson 2018, drawing on Kingdon 2003) as a way to think about moments of policy opportunity that are 'opened' based on factors which often include political or social 'problems' but can also be a response to political ideology or identity. These policy windows are a moment where funding and other governmental interventions become available, and can be strategically engaged with. Much like the 'policy paradigm shift' described by Griera (2012), this is a way of understanding the flows and changes in policy as responsive and shaped by multiple factors.

Within the UK context of an arguably 'secular' state with an established church (Prideaux 2020), the New Labour government of 1997-2010 generated a very specific sense of what religion is and what its role should be that has had an ongoing impact on multifaith social action. In response to the eventual failure of the New Right and the failure of the Labour Party to respond adequately to the Thatcher years during the 1970s and 1980s, the New Labour political movement gathered momentum. The New Labour 'Third Way' won power through consensus building and carefully balancing the individual and the state (Levitas 1998, 2). Religion, whether through the personal conviction of New Labour politicians[1] or because of its resources and location, became part of this consensus-building. For the state, religious and other faith-based organizations became key partners because of their ability to access communities the state has often struggled to reach, the social capital they could call on and

[1] Both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, key architects of the New Labour project, are Christians.

contribute to (Furbey et al. 2006) and their resources, such as buildings (Farnell et al. 2003) and volunteers (Lukka et al. 2003). For individual faith communities and multifaith social action projects, they were able to access financial and other support from government to pursue their activities. This 'enhanced role for faiths in public life' has been criticized on a variety of levels. Dinham and Lowndes point out that:

> 'Many challenge the instrumentalism of policy and its focus on the 'usefulness' of faith, or on faiths as a means of 'classification'. Respect for the values and traditions of faiths themselves may be absent. Indeed, it is paradoxical that, while it is suggested that religion is practised in private, if at all, in Britain, this new instrumentalism brings religion out of the private realm and into the public.' (2009, 6)

Beckford (2010) specifically uses the New Labour period to argue that the visibility of religion was as much the result of the government's 'interpellation' of religion, and particularly 'faith', as of any resurgence in belief. The visibility of religion in policy was not therefore about religion moving from the private to the public sphere, but about the government engaging religion for specific purposes which are not necessarily related to the goals and aspirations of the religions or multifaith groups themselves.

For a multitude of reasons, there was an increasing political awareness of the saliency of religion in local communities under New Labour. However, multifaith activity expanded rapidly around the globe during the 1990s (Halafoff 2013; Fahy and Bock 2019), and there was activity in this realm prior to the New Labour years. Indeed, the founding of the Inter Faith Network for the UK (IFNUK) in 1987 is evidence of the extent of existing activity. As an independent body, the IFNUK worked with the public sector relatively soon after being founded. It is important because of its role in promoting and supporting interfaith dialogue, and increasingly in instigating a variety of activities, including reflection upon and networking regarding multifaith social action. The Inner Cities Religious Council (ICRC), created as part of the then Department of Environment in 1992, was another significant early organization with a national remit and governmental relationships. Representatives of the Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh religions met to work with the Government on issues including regeneration, neighbourhood renewal and social inclusion. Although not above criticism, the strategic role of the ICRC formed one of many routes in government through which religious voices began to be heard as faith-community representatives rather than as people who happened to be of a particular religion. Although engagement with faith communities was more pronounced under New Labour, the Conservative government made this first important step in

inviting religion into government beyond working with the Church of England as England's civic religion.

Under New Labour, it was initially the two policy streams of urban regeneration and then latterly community cohesion where religion was most evident. In response to the regeneration agenda a variety of organizations and networks developed, many of them looking to a single faith community, while others, such as the Faith Based Regeneration Network (FbRN), sought to work at a multifaith level. The community cohesion agenda was also particularly significant for the development of state support for multifaith social action. The Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund was launched in January 2005 to support 'Faith-based groups whose work promotes understanding and dialogue' (Home Office 2006), and in its first round it provided £7.5 million for community work. This fund is especially relevant to the present study because one of the major issues for faith-based organizations in seeking state funding for their work was, and still is, the perceived difficulty of convincing funding bodies that faith-based organizations are valid groups to fund either because of their internal organizational capacity or because of the perceived risk that the funding would be used for proselytization (Bickley 2015). The Capacity Building Fund actively attempted to address this drawback.

The 'Face to Face and Side by Side' report (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008) provided important insights into how religion, and specifically dialogue, was construed as significant in UK public life by the New Labour government, which was reaching the end of its term of office. The report acknowledges (2008, 17) that the distinction between face to face and side by side was drawn from the work of the Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks. The 'face to face' dialogue element more clearly addresses the concerns of community cohesion following the 2001 northern 'riots' and the 2005 London bombings. The 'side by side collaborative action' element more clearly relates to local regeneration projects led by multifaith groups. The report describes face to face dialogue as leading to 'people developing a better understanding of one another, including celebrating the values held in common as well as acknowledging distinctiveness'. This is contrasted with 'side by side' collaborative action, which 'involves people working together to achieve real and positive change within their local community' (2008, 17). However, the report does not suggest a strategy for engaging those who might feel that working with people of other faiths is counter to their religious teachings. Nor does it deal with issues which Humanists, Atheists and Secularists might raise about the privileging of faith communities. Although the 'Face to Face and Side by Side' provides evidence of how New Labour engaged with interfaith activity, it almost immediately became

a historical document. The election of the 2010 Coalition and 2015 Conservative governments saw a marked shift away from the New Labour policy focus on faith-based social action. Austerity, public spending cuts and a narrowing of state provision meant that faith groups were increasingly encouraged to run initiatives previously led by the state, and to do so with less funding. While some multifaith social action folded or struggled under the pressure of new agendas, local multifaith activism continued in new and adapted ways. The 'religion policy window' of opportunity that opened during the New Labour administration was altered, but not closed.

The major policy shift directly related to locally rooted multifaith social action and interfaith dialogue following the appointment of the 2010 Coalition government was the introduction of the notion of the Big Society and the related devolution of powers from central to local government. Considered to be Prime Minister David Cameron's 'core intellectual idea', the aim of this agenda was 'to devolve powers to communities and establish a greater role in public services for voluntary and community organisations' (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012, 30). Although this much criticized policy direction (cf. Harrison and Sanders 2014) is still visible in Conservative policy, the term 'Big Society' largely disappeared after the Conservative party achieved an outright electoral majority in 2015. Alongside, and clearly related to the Big Society agenda, the 'austerity' economic policies introduced by the Coalition government also had a marked impact on local multifaith social action simply because of the reduced access to funding that was available to local statutory organizations, and therefore to locally rooted voluntary and community groups which might rely on this local funding. Austerity was an economic policy in response to the debt crisis that followed the 2008 financial crash (Baker 2020; Clarke and Newman 2012). Baker notes that:

> 'The policy featured an average reduction of nearly 50% to the overall budgets of local authorities that substantially reduced statutory funding for local voluntary sector organisations during this period.' (2020, 7)

A major development in the Big Society approach to religion was the formation of the Near Neighbours initiative in 2011, which encourages and funds multifaith social action across the UK. Near Neighbours describes itself as bringing:

> 'people together in communities that are religiously and ethnically diverse, so that they can get to know each other better, build relationships of trust, and collaborate together on initiatives that improve the local community they live in.' (Near Neighbours 2021)

Although it does not explicitly describe its work as interfaith dialogue or multifaith social action, the Near Neighbours website distinguishes between social interaction and social action, and its descriptions of activities clearly relate to the categories of interfaith dialogue and multifaith social action that we are using. However, it is useful to note that the descriptions of these themes, such as 'Help people from different faiths get to know and understand each other better' (2021), do have a slight difference from the normal expectation of interfaith dialogue, where the content of the dialogue would be expected to be about religion – that is not stated as an explicit objective here.

While Near Neighbours essentially replaced the Faith Community Capacity Building Fund (FCCBF), several key differences marked a shift in the government's approach to religion. Firstly, the funding for Near Neighbours was significantly less that the FCCBF. While the scheme has ensured funding for local multifaith social action has continued for the last ten years, it also represents a narrowing of state provision, exemplifying the impact of austerity. Another key difference from the FCCBF is that Near Neighbours provides government money for interfaith activity administered by the Church of England through the Church Urban Fund. It is also Near Neighbours national policy that a local vicar must sign off each funded project. O'Toole et al. (2013, 49) assessed Muslim participation in and attitudes towards the Christian administration of Near Neighbours and found a mixture of 'critical', 'accepting' and 'positive' attitudes. They found that the more critical voices suggested that the administration of Near Neighbours creates a problematic power dynamic across the faith sector, and that members of other faith communities might feel more comfortable approaching a non-religious funding source than a Christian organization (2013, 49). Although, as identified in other contexts (e.g. Körs and Nagel 2018), the established churches may benefit from historically privileged access to resources, this Near Neighbours arrangement introduces a new dynamic whereby the established church becomes the route through which other religious groups are able to access the resources to increase their local capacity for activity. The role of the established church in the practices of multifaith social action and interfaith dialogue is a significant but unsurprising shift (Prideaux 2020). Lastly, the funding opportunities offered by Near Neighbours are only available in England and are not geographically spread but instead targeted in specific areas. They offer funding for local multifaith social action on the condition that organizations are based around one of their local hubs, for example the Black Country, West Yorkshire or Peterborough (as discussed below). The Near Neighbours funding, as will be seen in the case studies, has been significant in maintaining and shaping local practices of multifaith social

action and interfaith dialogue, but other policies and strategies create competing policy windows that have created or diminished the opportunities for this work.

More recently the government's approach to faith has broadened to 'faith and integration'. The Integrated Communities Strategy Paper (MHCLG 2018) is a response to the Casey Review, a 2016 investigation charged with reviewing 'integration and opportunity in isolated and deprived communities' (Casey 2016, 5), and it raised concerns around segregation caused by migration in particular areas of the UK. In the Integrated Communities Strategy, faith becomes part of a wider agenda which is focussed on improving integration. The paper devotes a small section specifically to faith, highlighting the work of Near Neighbours and stating, 'we support interfaith work as a means of breaking down barriers between communities, building greater trust and understanding and removing the conditions which allow intolerance and unequal treatment to flourish' (2018, 60). However, the paper has a more central focus on 'meaningful social mixing' (2018, 12) as an antidote to community segregation. This focus on addressing segregation is indicative of wider and more multifaceted community tensions in recent UK history. The 2016 Brexit vote and the 2014 Scottish independence referendum brought new social fault lines to the fore, and new categories of difference such as 'Remainers' and 'Brexiteers' emerged. The aftermath of such a close vote in the EU Referendum led to 'increasing divisions along the lines of class, education, age and regional identity' (Pennington 2020, 29). Policy around cohesion therefore went beyond responding to concerns about Muslim communities (heightened following the 2005 bombings) to address a broader sense of unease in British society about British identity. In this new context, dialogue was not seen as an approach limited to faith communities, but was employed more widely across local communities.

The Integrated Communities Strategy Paper looked at particular local areas, noting that 'integration challenges are not uniform throughout the country' (2018, 13). All in England, the five proposed 'integration areas' (Blackburn and Darwen, Bradford, Walsall, Peterborough and Waltham Forest) would receive significant funding for cohesion work over a two-year period from 2019 to 2021. The exact process for deciding on these areas is not made clear by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government[2] (MHCLG), but the policy focus on 'problem' localities is clear. Analysis from the research body The Campaign Company maps the rate of change in terms of black and minority ethnic and migrant populations in British

[2] This government department was renamed the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in 2021.

local authorities, and concludes that each of the five integration areas has a 'comparatively extreme' rate of change compared to the rest of the UK, with particularly notable recent changes (Clarke 2018). This analysis is supported by the fact that funding for the Integration Area programme comes from the wider government Controlling Migration fund, which provides finance to 'help local authorities respond to the impact of recent migration on their communities' (MHCLG 2019). Politically, this is an overt link to migration and associated concerns about diversity and extremism. It is worth noting, for instance, that three of the five areas were also listed as priority areas in the government's Prevent Strategy (2011, 98). The Integrated Communities agenda presents new opportunities for multifaith social action in certain locations, but also risks signalling that certain local communities or faith groups are seen to pose a threat to cohesion. Indeed, the government consultation around this policy raised grassroots concerns about this approach 'targeting specific groups or communities' (MHCLG 2019, 8). Kingdon's observation that a policy window can open because 'a new problem captures the attention of government officials and those close to them' (2003, 68) is evident here, as is the impact on engagement with religion and support for multifaith social action. The fact that both Near Neighbours and the Integration Area scheme, the two primary government sources of funding for multifaith social action, have this kind of regional focus shows how the policy window of opportunity is changing, and arguably narrowing.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a renewed focus on faith-based social action. While it is too early to draw full conclusions, preliminary evidence shows that faith groups have made up a significant part of community-based COVID-19 responses. Baker's recent research for the APPG on Faith and Society (2020) used information from 194 local authorities across the UK to show how much statutory bodies have relied on faith-based social action in their responses to the pandemic. Baker particularly notes that faith groups are well placed to access many of the more vulnerable and isolated people within local communities, a uniquely important need during the pandemic that extends previous understandings of the kind of social capital that faith groups can provide. It is noticeable that Baker's research, along with other early evidence (e.g. Agace and Macfarland 2021), almost exclusively focuses on single-faith responses, tracking church-based food banks, mosque-based efforts and Sikh langar provision separately. This could point towards a trend of increased social action rooted in single-faith communities, rather than increased multifaith social action. However, what our case studies will suggest is that, in this context of single-faith social action, and particularly during COVID-19, networks that draw together single-faith social action and foster multifaith collaboration are emerging. More

research is needed to explore the extent of multi-faith social action during the pandemic, as well as the impact and prevalence of multifaith networks that draw together single faith-based social actors.

The two local case studies we now describe to explore further the policy themes identified here illustrate different features of the policy environment, as well as some of the ways in which multifaith social action projects and leaders can challenge and make strategic use of the funding and policy environment. In so doing, these case studies draw out theoretical and practical issues in how local connectivity is developed or challenged as a result of the policy interventions that do or do not support the development of multifaith social action and interfaith dialogue.

Evidence from the case studies

Faith Together in Leeds 11

Our first case study is one where the impact of government policy, and the interrelationships between multifaith social action and interfaith dialogue, have been relatively well documented, but the changes over time less well (Prideaux 2009a, 2009b). In contrast to our second case study, which looks across the local connections and practices of an entire city, this first case study is of a hyper-local neighbourhood project. Although many themes are evident across both of our examples, this first case study particularly provides a historical view of change and development in a multifaith social action project over a period of over twenty years.

Leeds is a city in the north of England with a long-established Jewish community, which also saw a significant growth in religious diversity from the 1960s, with workers arriving from the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent to work in the textile and other industries of the region. The city has one of the oldest interfaith fellowships in the country, Concord Interfaith Fellowship, founded in the 1980s (Bates 2016). There are several small interfaith dialogue groups meeting in local areas, as well as a Faiths Forum for representing religion to the local council and a 'Religion and Belief Hub' as part of the Leeds City Council Equalities Assembly. As well as these fellowship and representational groups, there are also a significant number of faith-based organizations in Leeds working on a variety of issues, from supporting the homeless and refugees to supporting religious education in schools. Among these there are a number of multifaith social action projects, some of which are multifaith by design, others are multifaith as a result of the people who are involved. This multifaith social action takes place within a context in which there are a significant number of non-religious social action

organizations, with the Leeds Citizens group latterly playing an important role in bringing together the range of activities that exist across the city.

Faith Together in Leeds 11 (hereafter 'Faith Together') was founded in 1997 in the Beeston Hill neighbourhood. When it was established it was openly described as a Muslim-Christian-secular partnership. The project resulted in the building of two separately owned community centres, which initially shared joint strategic management. This case study draws on extensive research in the early 2000s alongside some more recent interviews with local activists in order to provide an example of how projects are initiated, grow and change in response to policy and funding opportunities, as well as to the changing personnel and needs of the local community.

The impetus for reconsidering the availability of community space in Beeston Hill came when a local Methodist minister and a Muslim community worker attended the same meeting about funding opportunities for economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The vision of the two was to find a way to free up the large amount of 'Christian' space in the neighbourhood for the use of the whole community, and in so doing to contribute to regeneration and cohesion and thereby improve the standard of living of the local population. This was a practical imperative driven by the spatial needs of the local Muslim community and the desire for relevance on the part of the Christian community. It was also a religious imperative, in that it sought to express hospitality and co-operation from both sides. The project was initially concerned with asserting that local people have faith in the area, as well as asserting the role of organized religion in the area and the ability of different faith groups to work together. The title ('faith', not 'faiths') made it possible for non-religious individuals or groups to take part in the project. However, when the project first began, the leaders were very willing to talk about religion as one of its key aspects, with one stating that:

> 'I believe people of faith have to stand together if we are going to see the kind of world we believe in materialise, a world controlled by God and not by people. We have said from the beginning that if God wants our scheme to succeed it will succeed.' (Leeds Faith Communities Liaison Forum 2000, 9)

This level of religious discourse points to the original articulation of the project, which was religiously motivated and focused on multifaith social action. However, this dimension of the project rapidly diminished during the initial years of operation.

By drawing in partners from a variety of local non-religious organizations as well as the Anglican and Methodist churches, Faith Together developed over a period of several years into

a broad-based regeneration project. The Muslim community was involved via two organizations that mainly serve the local Muslim population. The primary partner in this regard was the South Leeds Elderly and Community Group (SLECG), and the second was the Asha centre, which is a support and activity base for local South Asian women. Secular partners included Vera Media, a community arts project. Initial funding came from a variety of bodies, including the National Lottery, the European Union, the Single Regeneration Budget, Yorkshire Forward (the Regional Development Agency) and a range of smaller grant-issuing organizations and trusts, including church trusts. The range of funding opportunities here is revealing of the policy window on which Faith Together was able to capitalize. Some of these funding streams (Single Regeneration, Regional Development Agency) were related to specific New Labour policies. A contemporary project of this nature would be relatively unlikely to access such a range of state funding sources, and of course European funding is no longer an option.

The most visible outcome of the Faith Together vision are the two community centres, Building Blocks and Hamara. Building Blocks, opened in 2003 and built around the Anglican parish hall, was owned and run by the local Methodist and Anglican churches, though ownership is currently being transferred to the nursery that occupies the space. Hamara, opened in 2004 and built around the former Methodist church hall, was initially owned and run by the Muslim community via SLECG rather than the local mosques, which had no official role in the project, although there was overlap of personnel between management committees. Initially, the buildings were owned separately, giving both communities a sense of ownership and anchorage through them, but at a strategic level they were run jointly.

Initially designated a Healthy Living Centre,[3] Hamara describes itself as 'the largest ethnic minority organisation in the voluntary and community sector in Leeds', with work extending across the themes of 'Health Promotion, Youth Activities, Older People's Services, Saturday Supplementary School, Learning Disabilities, Education and Employment & Training Programmes' (Hamara 2021). Building Blocks is a parents' centre offering a private nursery and other children's groups. Initially Building Blocks was also, between the hours of 6pm and 8am and at weekends, the Methodist church building and the Anglican church hall. It is now, however, the home of the nursery. As Lindsey Pearson, a local vicar noted: 'When it started

[3] Healthy Living Centres are a particular type of community centre found around the country that are charged with improving the health of neighbourhoods and work closely with local Primary Care Trusts. They are centrally funded through the National Health Service for much of their work.

there was a bigger vision, and that hasn't happened; but we have a thriving, functioning, good nursery'. Located across a side street from one another, the buildings were visually significant, providing at the time when they were developed one of the few examples of new building in the area. As one woman commented upon the opening of the Hamara Centre, 'The buildings make it look like someone cares about us'.

Activists and leaders in Faith Together were particularly adept at the strategic use of religion for accessing funds. One activist, who was herself an atheist, felt that religion 'is certainly not a disadvantage' to the Faith Together project, as it 'lends respectability sometimes'. A religious dimension to the project 'gives you more choice really because you can apply to faith funds … as well as to community and voluntary sector funds'. In contrast, for one of the key Christian leaders of the project in particular, the need to express a religious identity in what he considered to be an overwhelmingly secular society was paramount in his community work, and he commented that: 'as people of faith we wanted to make an assertion that faith matters … when you're up against a secular culture, it's more important to stand together for faith'. Despite this clear religious basis, he was prepared to make strategic decisions about the way the project was represented to funding bodies, including strategically choosing to emphasize the individual roles of the buildings, rather than the shared basis in Faith Together: 'You could always present them as a coherent whole, but the trouble is [that] there are times when it is easier to get funding by not doing that'. Clearly, different activists within the same project might choose different ways at different times to describe and emphasize the multifaith dimension of their work.

There was also a difference in how the project was understood and described between those who had leadership roles and those who used the buildings as clients. Those in leadership roles demonstrated the extent to which they had become socialized into the dominant discourse around community cohesion. The leaders were actively involved in interfaith dialogue and facilitated local interfaith dialogue events in the buildings. One that was especially memorable involved a group of mainly older female Christians meeting for discussion with a group made up mainly of young Muslim men who had just come from football training. The motivations and interests of the two groups were quite different, but the strength of vision of the Faith Together leaders facilitated such unusual gatherings. However, the impact of these activities, or even awareness of them, was somewhat limited. This was most clearly observed around the issue of how well known 'Faith Together in Leeds 11' was as the overarching project. Whereas for one Muslim project leader 'Faith Together in Leeds 11 is very well known in the locality',

a Muslim community worker pointed out that this really only extended to local officials, rather than local residents:

> 'I think some people are aware but not as aware as we would like them to be… people are aware that we work together, we are partners, but I'm not so sure whether they're aware that faith plays an important part in this.'

In some senses this is unsurprising. Local residents use the buildings on the basis of need or interest, whereas those who manage the buildings are involved at a more strategic level with the nature and identity of the buildings. However, the importance here of the vision of the leaders in the development of the project and the gap in awareness of the founding objectives among the local community may well be central to how the project evolved. None of the three early key leaders of the project, who all shared the strong religious dimension to the vision for Faith Together, are any longer in the role. From 2008, and the ending of the regeneration funding which was the springboard for the project, the community activity and shared working rapidly declined. Joint events and activities stopped being a key focus for Faith Together, and Hamara stopped having a seat on the Faith Together Board, while independently it became more successful. Asha and Vera Media are still key organizations in Faith Together, and this supports both community awareness and liaison work. Although Hamara and Building Blocks are now entirely separate at the Board level, the current Chair of Faith Together was on the Hamara board from 2012-2015 and was able to instigate some shared working and events. The fragility of such enterprises is underlined by the extent to which individuals committed to co-working are pivotal to the continued success of the initial vision for the project. In terms of the theoretical framing of and practical implications for multifaith social action, especially in the context of identifying the religion policy window that provided the conditions for the project's plausibility, it is important to note here the significance of local leaders. While funding linked to specific policy objectives provided the opportunity for the project, local practices around leadership and engagement have proved essential to maintaining the focus on wider objectives that might relate to interfaith dialogue, for instance, rather than the immediate tangible services required by the local community.

The closure of both the Anglican and Methodist congregations that were linked to the Building Blocks centre also underlines how religion is of decreasing significance to the project. As the visible practice of religion has declined in the locality, the practice related to community social needs has become more significant. The Faith Together Board is now primarily concerned with the running of the nursery that meets at Building Blocks, and the nursery is in the process of

purchasing the building, meaning that the building will no longer have any religious meetings or identity associated with its space. However, the informal space of religion continues to be important and is visible in the makeup of the current Board on which several members have a (Christian) religious identity that adds value in terms of networking. As the Revd Lindsey Pearson noted: 'there is a recognition of faith and religion being part of life which you might not find in some organizations'. In this sense, the personal practice of religion continues to impact on the project, even when the communal practice is less visible.

The current chair of Faith Together in Leeds 11, Al Garthwaite, is very clear that, despite being different from the original project and vision, the activity is nonetheless significant and has potential to be more so. The nursery itself is a hugely important community asset, whatever its origins. For Garthwaite, Faith Together continues to seek to be 'of service to the community, and a local organization' and it 'exists as part of a quite well defined and strong community in the area'. She notes that a strong sense of locality permeates the practice of the Board and that there is a desire to be of value and to signify ownership of key spaces for the community. Policy may shape, create and direct local multifaith social action, but it does not necessarily create the conditions for ongoing work. Instead, the needs of the community and the motivations of individuals who take on leadership roles are key to shaping and continuing the legacy of multifaith social action projects and their relationship with interfaith dialogue activity.

Faith Together demonstrates several of the key theoretical and practical themes that are emerging in this discussion. Firstly, the example demonstrates how important the religion policy window of the New Labour years was to the development of multifaith social action projects. There is a balance in the case study between the principled approach to the project of the initial instigators, the strategic use of religion to access funding, and the decline in the significance of religion to the project as the funding opportunities and the personnel changed. The situated practices related to the development of local connections involves a continued ethical practice of negotiation of the policy windows, religious or otherwise, which shape the funding and social environment for multifaith social action. Importantly, the case study demonstrates that, although multifaith social action projects can be shaped to a significant extent by the funding available, the project leaders are not passive receivers of this funding but are instead actively engaged with a practice of making strategic use of the opportunities that funding presents. Secondly, the example illustrates how, despite a firm rooting in interfaith dialogue and a leadership aspiration to enable local interfaith dialogue, this is not a necessary outcome of such projects. The 'demotic' (Prideaux 2009b) practice of local informal interfaith

dialogue, based on the spaces and contexts for contact between people of different faiths, has declined as the social action practice of the project has become primary and the local Christian community has stopped meeting for worship in the neighbourhood.

The site for dialogue is significant here. Anywhere can be a site for interfaith dialogue – the school gates, the queue at the bank, or the doctor's waiting room can be spaces where people of different faiths engage in dialogue of an informal nature about religion. When projects such as Faith Together in Leeds 11 create spaces which actively facilitate such practice, there is an opportunity to develop more formal and wide-ranging opportunities for dialogue. However, this opportunity is contingent on ongoing practices which support the vision and capacity to facilitate such dialogue. As Faith Together in Leeds 11 demonstrates, a project rooted in the practice of interfaith dialogue, making strategic use of policy windows to access funding, can create valuable opportunities for the practice of multifaith social action and demotic interfaith dialogue. However, this is fragile. When funding and personnel changes, what remains is the immediate need of the local community. Faith Together in Leeds 11, as a project which now supports the running of a valuable community asset, is still an important and valuable part of the civic landscape of Beeston Hill. 'Faith', however, is no longer about religion but about faith in the community and the people. Religion has left, but faith remains.

This review of Faith Together in Leeds 11 has provided a more historical look at the changing space for multifaith social action. Our next case study provides a more contemporary example that illustrates the continuing fragility and contestation regarding multifaith social action.

Peterborough

Our case study of Peterborough looks at work across a city to demonstrate the range and challenges of multifaith social action across a single location which significantly since 2018 has been a government Integration Area. Peterborough demonstrates the range of local activity that has been possible and the way in which strategic use can be made of changing policies and funding opportunities to further the objectives of local groups and projects.

Peterborough is a city in Cambridgeshire, in the east of England. With historical roots as a cathedral city, more recently Peterborough has been characterized by its rapid growth. The Council's Belonging Together Strategy notes:

> 'In recent years Peterborough has seen rapid growth in migration. Between the 2001 and 2011 census, Peterborough's population overall grew by 17%. We live in one of

> the fastest growing cities in the country. Having a rapidly increasing and changing population creates great opportunities but also brings challenges.' (Peterborough City Council 2019, 6)

The report variously lists some of these 'challenges' as poverty, English-language proficiency, social exclusion and BAME (still the term in use at the time of the report) attainment in both education and employment. Peterborough has a longstanding Interfaith Council which dates back more than 35 years and runs several local annual events, such as a food festival at the Town Hall (Kartupelis 2015, 28). The Council has been led by the same individual, Dr Jaspal Singh DL, for over twenty years (Cambridgeshire Lieutenancy 2021), who has consistently spoken out about the important role of interfaith dialogue in the city.

In 2015 the Local Authority commissioned an Audit of the presence of faith in Peterborough in collaboration with the Peterborough Council of Churches and the Peterborough Council of Voluntary Services, for which the stated aim was 'to underline the benefit of the presence and activity of its faith groups to the community as a whole' (Kartupelis 2015, 4). The report shows the impact of austerity, noting the 2013 closure of the East of England Faith Forum, which formerly provided support and resources to Peterborough's faith communities and Interfaith Council. It cites many examples of local social action rooted in single-faith communities, arguing that the decreased availability of government funding post-2010 was having a direct impact on the practice of multifaith social action:

> '… there was very little 'multifaith' working, that is, different faith groups coming together to provide for the common good. Two projects in Peterborough are distinctive in drawing in a number of worshipping communities; one is Hope into Action, which does not currently envisage any links with non-Christian groups and the other is the Foodbank, which has one Muslim distribution centre and has volunteers from a variety of faiths.' (Kartupelis 2015, 26)

The report argues that this finding is indicative of a national picture, claiming exceptions are only found where 'a scheme such as Near Neighbours, Faith in Action or the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund intervenes to support and stimulate the concept' (2015, 26). No such schemes were available in Peterborough in 2015. What is significant here is that, six years after this Audit was written, Peterborough is again in receipt of substantial government funds, providing an opportunity to explore whether a new policy context creates renewed opportunities for multifaith social action.

In 2018 it was announced that Peterborough would be added to the regions where Near Neighbours works and would also be one of the five new Integration Areas as part of the national Integrated Communities agenda. These two funds are separate, with Near Neighbours being more overtly faith-focussed and the Integrated Communities funding having a broader agenda, of which faith is a part. Together, the availability of these two funds represented a huge increase in resources available to faith groups in Peterborough and a clear policy shift to focus integration efforts in local areas like Peterborough with a perceived need to support cohesion. Our research found that the funds had different impacts.

A Near Neighbours 'hub' was established in Peterborough, and a local staff member, Femi Olasako, was employed to work out of Peterborough Cathedral. Femi makes it clear that the decision to go to Peterborough came from central government ,stating:

> 'the government highlights a particular city as an integration area and asks if Near Neighbours can move into that city … MHCLG would indicate where they want Near Neighbours to expand to.'

As a result, 25 local interfaith events and initiatives have been funded by Near Neighbours since 2018. For example, the Peterborough Liberal Jewish Community and All Souls Catholic Church jointly ran a Holocaust Commemoration Concert that attracted 400 people (*Diocese of East Anglia*, February 11, 2020). A hundred people also joined the 'The Sultan and The Saint' Christian Muslim dialogue event, jointly run by the Peterborough Interfaith Council, Churches Together in Central Peterborough and the Medina Mosque (*Baptist Times*, July 30, 2019). These relatively large, but nonetheless local events run by a range of groups show that the presence of Near Neighbours in Peterborough has resulted in an increased practice of interfaith activity. However, the funded initiatives have largely been one-off events focused on interfaith dialogue, rather than sustained multifaith social action.

Another consequence of the policy decision to bring Near Neighbours to Peterborough is that Peterborough Cathedral has become a central point of local interfaith activity. In some ways, the criticism of Christian dominance highlighted in O'Toole et al.'s research (2013) is played out locally here. The Near Neighbours hub is based in a Christian venue and led by a Christian member of staff 'under the guidance' of the Cathedral's Canon (Peterborough Cathedral 2018). However, Femi is very clear to describe her role as a 'point of contact' and a 'conduit' to link groups and open up access, explaining how through her practice she has been able to support groups from different faith backgrounds to access other funding opportunities and encouraged

‘smaller ethnic minority groups who would not have thought they had the right to approach the Cathedral’ to access its space.

While Near Neighbours’ funding led to an increase in local interfaith dialogue activity, the Integrated Communities Strategy led to an increase in local multifaith social action. Peterborough’s identity as an Integration Area resulted in a £300,000 Communities Fund being made available to local Peterborough groups, disbursed in three tranches, with decisions made by the Peterborough Together Partnership Board (*Peterborough Today* October 29, 2019). None of the funded projects openly describe themselves as multifaith social action projects in the way Faith Together did in the early stages of the Leeds case study. However, one project, ‘Community First’, is chaired by a local vicar and has a prominent Muslim community leader as the Vice Chair. The name ‘Community First’ is interesting here, perhaps signalling the strategic importance of multifaith work being able to position itself within a wider community context under a broader integration funding agenda. Other funded projects were led by one faith community, but informally multifaith social action was occurring through grassroots collaboration. It is clear here that one of the key practices identified throughout the two case studies – the strategic use or not of religion – continues to be significant in how religious individuals and groups approach funding opportunities.

One large scale, non-denominational Church in receipt of this funding was running a multitude of local social action projects. They had worked significantly with a local Muslim charity on a resettlement project for Syrian refugees. More broadly, their focus was Christian-led social action, but a staff member described their practice as ‘very, very outward focused’ explaining that connecting beyond their Christian community was essential to achieve social impact in a diverse community:

> ‘Peterborough is not an affluent community, there’s a lot of poverty here, a lot of challenges…. And I think there’s also a recognition that in terms of some of the challenges people are facing, we can’t do it on our own… that actually as a Church, we can’t go in and solve, y’know, turn [the community] around on its own, we actually need to work…, we’re much stronger and we’re much better if we work with other people and other organizations.’

The same staff member went on to explain that they recognized that their Church was well placed to access funds, and would sometimes lead a funding bid on behalf of a range of organizations from different backgrounds, further evidence of the strategic use of religion. The

identity of this church as non-denominational is also significant. Where evangelically aligned churches tend to engage less in formal interfaith dialogue (e.g. Azumah 2012), here multifaith social action, framed as part of a broader integration agenda, is providing an opportunity for this Church to work alongside other faith communities, with informal dialogue occurring through their coalescing around shared action.

More recently still, the COVID response had led to the emergence of new multifaith partnerships and social action in Peterborough. Peterborough Council for Voluntary Services or CVS (secular organizations existing across the UK connecting and providing support for community and voluntary groups) had convened several community response networks under different themes, including food insecurity. Although this network was not overtly faith-based, one Christian participant noted how many of the groups involved were faith-based, and how the network had led to the Sikh community collaborating with Christian and secular foodbanks 'for the first time ever'. This network resulted in the practice of multifaith cooperation to share food surpluses across initiatives from different backgrounds and ensure that these surpluses got out to those most in need.

Further to the CVS example, a new locally led Interfaith Support Group was also created. In the context of online working, the longstanding Peterborough Interfaith Council, which focuses on interfaith dialogue, was less active. The new Interfaith Support Group, while having many of the same members, had more of a focus on social action and crisis response. It was initiated by a staff member in the Cathedral, meeting every two weeks to respond to COVID needs and coordinate action. The group was closely linked to different statutory bodies and helped local faith groups disseminate public health messages and interpret government guidelines. Notably, one interviewee stated how this more action-focused group had a particularly representative range of 'all the faith groups in Peterborough', and also included community leaders such as the local Black Lives Matter lead and the Racial Equality Council. This example points to the capacity of an action-based group to draw in a wider range of faith groups than some of the more traditional dialogue groups. Both the Interfaith Support Group in Peterborough and the CVS example support Baker's finding (2020) that new partnerships across faith-based and secular bodies have emerged from the pandemic.

This study of Peterborough shows how the practice of multifaith social action continues in new ways in the UK. Compared to Kartupelis' assertion in 2015 that 'very little' multifaith social action was taking place in Peterborough, the strategic use of more recent policy and funding opportunities, coupled with a context of crisis, has changed the picture once again. However,

the multifaith social action that is occurring in contemporary Peterborough is not the overt practice that was demonstrated by the early model of Faith Together in Leeds 11, whereby two different faith groups collaborate and lead a project from its inception. Rather, social action that begins in the practices of single faith communities is subsequently reaching out beyond that community through new multifaith action networks that foster collaborative practice. This less overt form of multifaith social action can perhaps be seen as the result of a different policy context in which faith is part of a broader agenda around community cohesion, rather than being the specific focus of concern or opportunity. Interestingly, these kinds of networks are also appearing elsewhere in the UK, in areas without priority government funding. In northern England, the interfaith organization Building Bridges Pendle runs the Pendle Food Alliance, which brings together Christian, Muslim and secular initiatives working on food poverty (Building Bridges Pendle 2021), while in Scotland, the Glasgow Interfaith Food Justice Network fulfils a similar function (Interfaith Glasgow 2021).

The Peterborough example demonstrates how more recent funding streams have had a local impact on multifaith social action. The Leeds case study shows evidence of a strategic use of funding opportunities in order to pursue a multifaith social project with an interfaith ideology at its heart. In the Peterborough example, we see some activity which had a theological underpinning being pursued through Near Neighbours funding, while multifaith social action is being funded and pursued through Integration Area funding, which does not have a policy priority for religion. As with the Leeds example, strategic use is made of funding opportunities to pursue activities that the faith groups can see is needed by local communities and that they are particularly well placed to deliver.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to unpack some of the implications and complexities in the relationships between government policy and the practices of multifaith social action and interfaith dialogue in local communities. Through our two case studies, it has been possible to trace how local connections are being forged through multifaith social action and interfaith dialogue that has developed in response to policy and funding initiatives which try to tackle the experience of polarization in society. It has been clear throughout that there is a tension and intersection between the practices of interfaith dialogue and multifaith social action, and that the tensions can often be creative as well as sometimes being complicated considerably by location, leadership and the broader ‘religion policy window’ in action. Multifaith social action

and interfaith dialogue are implicated, shaped and sometimes generated by policy and funding, while also being influenced by the local specificities and local leadership that engages strategically with this policy and funding landscape. They also mutually implicate, shape and generate one another.

The implications of this are of practical significance for faith communities and policy, as well as for theory. The growth in multifaith social action during the New Labour period, though locally significant in term of the opportunities and impacts for action in communities, can also be shown to be as much a strategic response to funding streams as a growth in religiously motivated activity. As the religion policy window of the New Labour period became available, practice arguably shifted towards how to make strategic use of funding in order to pursue the underpinning religious practices (of charity and community), rather than the practice starting from the underpinning religious practices. The later decline of some of this multifaith social action, with a more significant presence of social action rooted in single faith communities, has often been the result of changing funding opportunities. While opportunities are now more limited, recent policy contexts situate religion as part of a broader context of integration, resulting in new and interesting forms of multifaith social action in particular locations. As Beckford has argued (2010), when surveying the engagement between policy and religion, social action may plausibly tell us more about the state than it tells us about religion. It nevertheless remains the case that the type of work happening in Faith Together in Leeds 11 and Peterborough has significant impacts in local communities, not just in the services they provide, but also in the opportunities they create for engagement between people of different faiths, both as project leaders and service users. The impact of multifaith social action is felt not just in the services it provides but in the lives of those who develop new and lasting friendships with people of other faiths.

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