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# Where's the 'Faith' in 'Faith-Based' Organisations? The Evolution and Practice of Faith-Based Homelessness Services in the UK

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## **Abstract**

Drawing upon a qualitative exploration of the role of faith-based organisations (FBOs) in service provision for homeless people in the UK, this paper examines the ways in which the 'faith' in 'faith-based' services is articulated and experienced 'on the ground'. It demonstrates that the 'F' in FBO is expressed in a myriad of nuanced ways, and that the strength of 'coupling' between many welfare agencies and organised religion has diminished over time such that some projects' faith affiliation or heritage is now evident in palimpsest only. Homeless people do in fact often find it difficult to discern tangible differences between avowedly 'faith-based' and 'secular' projects, given a blurring of boundaries between the religious and the secular. These findings problematise FBO typologies, and highlight the complexity and fluidity of the very concept of 'FBO' itself. Certainly, they suggest that the differences between faith-based and secular provision should not be exaggerated, whilst recognising the importance of faith to the motivations of many service providers and the potential value of the (optional) 'spiritual' support offered by most FBOs.

## **Introduction**

Faith communities have played a key role in the provision of welfare services for vulnerable individuals historically (Jawad, 2012) and the majority of homelessness services in the UK have a faith affiliation or history thereof (Clope *et al.*, 2010). Faith-based organisations (FBOs) have been elevated on policy agendas in the past decade, most obviously, and controversially, in the United States under former President Bush's 'Faith-Based Initiative' which aimed to increase FBO involvement in the delivery of publicly funded services (Kramer, 2010). Underpinning that and subsequent initiatives in the US have been numerous assertions regarding the greater effectiveness of FBOs as compared with secular voluntary organisations (Grettenberger *et al.*, 2006), by virtue of their allegedly

being more holistic, personal, responsive and/or transformational (Ebaugh *et al.*, 2003; Smith *et al.*, 2004).

A number of scholars have however called into question such claims, arguing that debate about the comparative effectiveness of FBOs has been dominated by conjecture and anecdote rather than demonstrable evidence (Ferguson *et al.*, 2007b; Fischer and Stelter, 2006; Johnson *et al.*, 2002). A few have gone as far as to claim that assertions of FBO superiority are being made in the absence of compelling evidence that faith-based services are indeed substantively distinctive from, or provide a discernibly different service to, their secular equivalents at all (Jochum *et al.*, 2007; Kramer, 2010; Melville and McDonald, 2006).

Assertions regarding FBOs' distinctiveness or greater effectiveness have not featured to nearly the same extent within political discourses surrounding welfare provision in the UK. Faith has, however, made an increasing (re)appearance at the public table here and elsewhere in Europe (Beaumont and Cloke, 2012), with faith communities having been targeted as partners in the civil renewal and social inclusion agendas under Blair's Labour Government, for example (Dinham and Lowndes, 2008). Such a shift reflects, in part, increased recognition of the potential of faith communities as repositories of staff, buildings and resources for the promotion of social good (Dinham *et al.*, 2009; Harris *et al.*, 2003). It is thus widely presumed that FBOs will (or should) be key players in the delivery of the current UK Conservative–Liberal Democratic Coalition Government's vision of a 'Big Society'<sup>1</sup> (Stunnell, 2010), given faith communities' resources, local embeddedness and high level of volunteerism (Baker, 2012; Lukka *et al.*, 2003).

Perhaps surprisingly in light of such developments, there has as yet been little in the way of empirical examination of the difference that a religious affiliation or heritage makes to what is provided; even less regarding how faith-based programmes are experienced by beneficiaries (Biebricher, 2011; Kramer, 2010; Sager, 2011). A number of important questions thus remain unanswered. For example, are there identifiable differences in the structure, ethos and/or practices of faith-based and secular agencies? Do service users notice any difference between them? Moreover, do they *care*?; that is, do they feel better served by or prefer one over another?

This paper reflects on such questions by examining the (evolving) ways in which the 'F' in FBO is articulated in services for homeless people in the UK. It begins by reviewing typologies that have been used in attempts to identify distinguishing features of FBOs to date. The remainder of the paper focuses on the variable ways in which faith was expressed and experienced in the homelessness agencies studied. It concludes that any strict faith-based/secular differentiation is a false dichotomy which obscures the myriad ways in which faith infuses operation 'on the ground', for the boundaries between the 'religious' and 'secular' are highly blurred in practice.

### **FBO definitions, typologies and experiences**

The term ‘faith-based organisation’ (FBO) began to feature in policy rhetoric within the US in the 1990s (Kramer, 2010) and is now common parlance in political discourse across the globe (Jochum *et al.*, 2007; Melville and McDonald, 2006). This expansion in use has however occurred in the absence of any agreed definition as to what an FBO actually is or does (Jeavons, 2004; Sider and Unruh, 2004). As Grettenberger *et al.* (2006) note when talking about FBOs, policy-makers tend to not only homogenise the breadth of faith traditions but also blithely refer to faith-based and secular programmes as if they are separate and somehow easily distinguishable entities.

Clarke and Jennings (2008: 6) arguably go the furthest in defining the term, describing an FBO as ‘any organisation that derives inspiration and guidance for its activities from the teachings and principles of the faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within the faith’. It thus incorporates organisations that are shaped by faith or grounded in a faith tradition but do not involve activities that are explicitly religious (Harris *et al.*, 2003). One should be careful to avoid conflating religious congregations and FBOs, however, as the former are communities of practicing believers who gather for worship; the latter institutions whose inspiration and origins may be religious but whose activities are focused on the provision of services, information or advocacy (Howarth, 2007). FBOs vary substantially in scale and geographical remit, ranging from, for example, international bodies such as the Salvation Army to small groups of believers associated with a single place of worship (James, 2003). FBOs are not only major providers of welfare services but are also frequently involved in political action, mobilisation and/or contestation (Beaumont and Cloke, 2012).

A number of academics have reflected on the ways in which an organisation’s administrative, environmental, funding and/or programmatic elements might be influenced by faith or religion (see for example Adkins *et al.*, 2010; Sider and Unruh, 2004; Smith and Sosin, 2001). Specifically, aspects reflected upon include: mission (the place of faith in an organisation’s identity and purpose); founding (whether it has a faith heritage and the continuing relevance of this); affiliation (whether affiliated with a faith entity); governance (role of faith identity in board selection); staff (role of faith identity in staff selection); support (financial and non-financial support from faith sources); target group (whether aimed at people of a particular faith); practices (integration of faith practices such as prayer or scriptural study); environment (whether premises are mainly used for religious purpose or contain religious objects/symbols); programme content (whether explicitly religious); and expected connection between religious content and outcomes (that is, whether spiritual experience is considered significant in promoting desired outcomes).

Importantly, Smith and Sosin (2001) note that FBOs vary substantially with regard to the strength of their ties or ‘coupling’ to faith, and that there is no

clearly defined relationship between an organisation's 'religiosity' and its size, type or other structural attributes. Building upon this, the Working Group on Human Needs and Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (2002) developed a typology comprising six organisational categories – faith-saturated, faith-centred, faith-related, faith-background, faith-secular partnership and secular – each differentiated by the degree and manner of influence faith has on mission and operation. According to this framework, by way of example, in faith-saturated organisations all staff share a faith commitment and programmes involve explicit mandatory religious content. In contrast, faith-related programmes may display religious symbols but do not require staff (with the possible exception of leaders) to affirm religious belief, and programmes do not include religious messages or activities, albeit that dialogue about faith may be available to participants who seek it out. Faith-background organisations, on the other hand, do not include any religious material in programmes and tend to 'look and act secular' despite having a religious heritage.

In a similar vein, Clarke (2008) classifies the extent to which faith is operationalised by FBOs as either: passive, active, persuasive or exclusive. In his typology, faith is subsidiary to broader humanitarian principles as a motivator for action and mobiliser of support in the former categories, but is the overriding motivation for action and/or sole consideration shaping operation in the latter ones. Further, he notes that whilst passive and active agencies do not expect a faith-based dividend (e.g., converts or greater credibility for the faith among people of other faiths), persuasive and exclusive organisations contain, to varying degrees, a commitment to winning new adherents, providing support to adherents to the exclusion of others, or advancing the cause of that faith at the expense of others.

As might be expected, the nature of programme content, particularly the inclusion of faith practices, is a key factor determining where FBOs are placed in such typologies. Unruh (2004) notes that these may take a number of forms such as: prayer (for, alongside, or by service users); worship (singing, liturgy and religious ritual); or the sharing of personal testimony (highlighting the role that faith has played in an individual's life). Some include religious teachings and/or invitations to a personal commitment to faith. Notably, the latter moves beyond presenting truth claims to asking beneficiaries to respond to these claims and thus corresponds most closely to what many mean by 'proselytism', but the line between that and the presentation of truth claims is a fine, and contested, one (Unruh, 2004). Such categories, Unruh (2004) notes, can be further distinguished by the 'how' of programme content delivery, particularly the issue of whether they are mandatory or optional, corporate or individual, and whether they convey beliefs rooted in a particular religious tradition or affirm 'faith' in a more general sense.

Several commentators note that attempts to classify FBOs, and/or identify any 'unique' influence of faith, are complicated by the non-uniformity of

definitions in existing literature, a lack of robust data, and the influence of variable structural characteristics (Boddie and Cnaan, 2006; Grettenberger *et al.*, 2006; Kramer, 2010). That said, there is a degree of consensus that FBOs strongly coupled to faith are qualitatively different in that they tend to view the personal 'transformation' of clients, informed by religious teachings, as crucial to attainment of programme objectives, whereas secular agencies are more likely to view the change process as dependent on clients' achievement of appropriate skills (Adkins *et al.*, 2010). Smith *et al.* (2004: 24, 26) do however caution that such differences are rarely obvious, and conclude that:

faith matters in important ways, especially in terms of resources and the approach to programs and clients. But contrary to at least some of the recent discourses on FBOs, we find that faith is not a good predictor of how an agency operates and its interactions with clients . . . Only a relatively small percentage of all FBOs are distinctively different from secular agencies or other types of FBOs.

Given the varying extents to which and ways that faith shapes service delivery, it is perhaps unsurprising that the findings of the few studies that have explored service user experiences and perspectives are mixed. For example, Goggin and Orth (2002) found that clients perceived workers at most, but not all, FBOs providing intermediate-term housing to homeless households in Michigan to be 'more caring' than those in government agencies. When evaluating faith-based projects for homeless young people in Los Angeles, Ferguson *et al.* (2007a) concluded that an emphasis on religion and spirituality had apparently promoted positive outcomes for users, such as an increase in self-respect and levels of personal responsibility. In contrast, when evaluating parenting programmes, drug/alcohol treatment and transitional housing projects in the US, Smith *et al.* (2004) found that there were few obvious differences in client satisfaction between FBO and secular services, or FBOs with greater and lesser degrees of faith integration. More negatively, Sager and Stephens (2005) report that compulsory religious elements such as attendance at sermons or prayers in some congregation-run feeding establishments for homeless people in a US city were perceived by the majority of service users to be coercive, hypocritical and/or condescending.

The insights from literature reviewed above are drawn upon later, where expressions of faith in UK homelessness services, and users' experiences of these, are discussed. Before doing so, however, the following section outlines the methods employed in the study of UK homelessness provision.

### **The evolving expression of faith in UK homelessness services**

The study aimed to identify what, if any, difference a faith affiliation or heritage makes to the type and nature of homelessness services 'on the ground'.<sup>2</sup> A review of literature and service databases was initially conducted to explore the scale

and structure of FBO homelessness provision in the UK. This informed the selection of two case study cities, London and Manchester, within which services provided by 'faith-based' and 'secular' organisations were compared. These cities were selected in part because of their extensive network of services, but also their larger than average ethnic minority populations, so as to maximise the likelihood of encountering services operated by minority faith groups. Across the two cities, a total of twenty-five organisations were recruited. Agencies were purposively selected to ensure adequate representation of a wide range of service types (including hostels, night shelters, day centres, soup kitchens and soup runs) and sizes, organisational structures and affiliations and extent (or lack) of coupling to formalised religion.<sup>3</sup> Approximately two-thirds ( $n = 17$ ) were described as faith-based by the project manager;<sup>4</sup> these comprised a range of religious orientations, including Christian (of various denominations), Hare Krishna, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh.

Across the twenty-five agencies, semi-structured in-depth face-to-face interviews and focus groups were conducted with a total of: thirty project managers or co-managers, thirty-three paid and volunteer frontline staff, seventy-three service users<sup>5</sup> and seven key informants such as representatives of local authorities and places of worship. A further ten interviews with national stakeholders, including representatives of central government, umbrella bodies and faith-based welfare providers, were also conducted to set the case study findings within their broader policy context.

The vast majority of the agencies studied (faith-based and secular alike) grew out of faith-based initiatives, which is unsurprising given that most contemporary UK voluntary organisations have historical roots in faith-based, particularly Christian, philanthropy (Harris, 1995). In their earliest iterations, these typically took the form of soup runs or night shelters, run by volunteers and resourced exclusively by charitable donations. Since then, these organisations have evolved along a number of different trajectories, differentiated by the extent to which they have 'professionalised' (Cloke *et al.*, 2010), by for example employing paid staff, expanding the range of services to include specialist facilities and/or seeking statutory funding.

The case study agencies thus reflected the diversity of the UK's contemporary homelessness service landscape (see Cloke *et al.*, 2010), including a range of services which lie on a spectrum between what might (crudely) be classified as 'basic' provision such as winter shelters, soup runs and soup kitchens, to more 'specialist' provision such as high support hostels or resettlement programmes. The former provide meals and basic (often dormitory-style) emergency accommodation and are typically run by volunteers; the latter provide tailored support to assist service users to access settled accommodation and address vulnerabilities such as mental health or addiction problems, and tend to be staffed by professional workers (see Johnsen *et al.*, 2005). Notably, the



vast majority of 'basic' services are provided by FBOs, representing a range of religious affiliations including minority (i.e., non-Christian) faiths. 'Specialist' services are provided by a greater mix of faith-based and secular agencies, with the former almost exclusively having Christian affiliations, representing many different denominations.

As organisational structures and project types have evolved, so too has the role and expression of faith. The following subsections outline how the strength of coupling to religion, or at least the outward expression of faith, has apparently diminished in many. Informed by the typologies described above, the influence of faith in a number of domains is explored, including: faith heritage, affiliation and public identity; ethos and aims; governance and staffing; resourcing and environment; and programme content and religious practice.

### **Faith heritage, affiliation and public identity**

The review of service databases and case study fieldwork highlighted a great deal of fluidity, and ambiguity, in organisations' public expression of faith identities. In some cases, religious names reflected strong links with religious bodies and/or the ongoing influence of faith on programme delivery. In others, religious titles were described by project managers as little more than 'historical artefacts' harking back to a faith heritage that has little, if any, influence on contemporary ethos or operation. Conversely, a non-religious title could not be assumed to represent a secular identity, especially given that a number of FBOs had removed religious referents from their titles and other publicity purely to avoid 'putting off' people of other or no faith.

Furthermore, many FBOs, together with some secular projects with a faith heritage, regularly emphasise or de-emphasise their project's faith affiliation or history: 'playing it up' when seeking support from faith communities, and 'playing it down' when applying for public funding. It is therefore very difficult to determine whether many projects are faith-based purely on the basis of information associated with their 'public face'.<sup>6</sup> The following service providers' comments are illustrative:

There are times when I read the bump about trusts and if they specifically are saying 'We support Christian organisations', I would emphasise it [faith affiliation] more. I would [normally] say that we are a charity working with homeless people, whereas if I found a trust who fund Christian priorities, I'd say we're an ecumenical Christian organisation. (Manager, faith-based day centre)

Sometimes I will say founded by [name of religious order], if I'm talking to a religious publication or doing an ad[vertisement] in a religious magazine or newspaper ... But we don't highlight our religious history to regular funders. (Paid staff, secular day centre with faith history)

### **Ethos and aims**

When comparing the ethos and aims of faith-based and secular organisations, it is clear that the similarities between them far outweigh any differences. Crucially, both emphasise the importance of respecting service users' dignity and non-discrimination on grounds of metaphysical stance, religious identity, sexuality or any other such classification. When discussing ethos, it was clear that religious belief was key to the motivations underpinning FBO provision, which providers viewed as a response to religious imperatives to combat social injustice and care for vulnerable members of society (see also Cloke *et al.*, 2005). Yet, as Conradson (2008) notes, providers can come to similar ethical positions from resolutely secular starting points. The language used is often very different – and this can sometimes be a source of misunderstanding regarding FBO motives – but the primary ethos and aims of faith-based and secular providers regarding the care for and/or 'empowerment' of service users are, for the most part, shared. As the manager of a day centre with a faith heritage explained:

I would call ourselves a non-religious organisation now ... Of course the principles of caring for each other do have that religious connotation, but I maintain that it's not only religious people who feel the need to care for their fellow man, and are generous and kind and loving ... And so we still try and pursue that same ethos.

Where differences of ethos do exist, they generally revolve around FBO stances on evangelism, and these vary significantly. Some charitably funded FBOs will actively seek opportunities to share their faith with service users; others, however, prohibit staff from any activities which could be construed as proselytism. Compare, for example, the following stances:

We would encourage them [volunteers] to talk about their faith, and as members of [name of church] they'll understand that evangelism is a very fundamental part of following Jesus, we believe. (Manager, faith-based soup kitchen)

We're definitely not an overtly Christian organisation ... I think it's more the Catholic in Catholicism is lived, that if you believe in it let's do something about it, rather than talk about it ... So definitely in no way are we nor have we ever been evangelical. (Manager, faith-based day centre)

Notably, almost all FBOs actively encouraged service users to practice their own faith where this differed from that they were affiliated with:

We have a number of Muslim women living here and ... we're very careful because we don't want the girls that need to be praying ... to think 'I can't go into the chapel, it's a Christian thing', so we do our best to make it just a place of praying. (Manager, faith-based hostel)

### **Governance and staffing**

In the vast majority of cases, FBOs' governing boards consisted entirely, or predominantly, of adherents of 'their' faith. There was however evidence of a

growing trend toward including representatives of other faiths on the boards of both faith-based and secular agencies, often prompted by a desire to ensure that services were sufficiently sensitive to the cultural and/or religious needs of ethnic minorities.

FBO staff recruitment policies varied widely. A number required senior staff to be adherents of the faith to which the project was affiliated, on grounds that failure to do so risked ‘diluting’ project ethos. This practice generated a controversial ‘glass ceiling’ for staff without faith. Only one of the FBOs involved in the study specifically required frontline staff (e.g., hostel support workers or soup run volunteers) to practice faith; the others simply that they be ‘in sympathy with’ the organisation’s values. For example:

Our basic philosophy is one of accepting people, and providing that people live that out in their working lives, treat everyone who comes through the door with respect, to my mind you don’t need to be a Christian in order to do that. You don’t have to be of any particular faith, as long as you share our values. (Manager, faith-based day centre)

Notably, many of the secular agency staff interviewed described themselves as people of faith, motivated by a desire to ‘serve’ through their work with homeless people, with no wish to share their faith ‘in words’ (see also Cloke *et al.*, 2007; Lukka *et al.*, 2003). As a consequence, and reflecting the religious pluralism of the UK (Dinham, 2009), almost all projects, faith-based and secular alike, were staffed by a mix of individuals with and without faith and/or from a range of religious affiliations.

This finding highlights the challenges involved in attempts to disentangle the influence of faith on project operation, as some staff members of both faith-based and secular projects bring religious convictions to their work. Furthermore, someone’s metaphysical orientation may not be known to other staff or service users, given that faith is for many a highly private matter. Accordingly, project managers and frontline staff – many of whom had experience of working for both faith-based and secular organisations – consistently emphasised that it was not possible to discern any systematic differences in the ‘commitment’ of staff (howsoever defined), or manner in which they related to service users.

### **Resourcing and environment**

Almost all the services, faith-based and secular alike, derived financial and/or in-kind material support from faith communities. The proportion of resources derived from statutory sources varied according to a number of factors, most notably the type of services provided and/or views on the value of ‘independence’ from government agendas and outcome targets:

The day centre doesn’t receive any money from government, so, we’re funded through trusts and foundations and through the church. It’s given us a lot of independence . . . if we were

funded differently we would not be able to do the work that we feel called to do. (Manager, faith-based day centre)

Accordingly, a few senior staff emphasised the necessity of remaining independent so that they are free to exercise organisational ethos in the way they deemed most appropriate; others, however, were willing to sacrifice independence on grounds that greater (statutory) resourcing would better equip them to serve their target group. Several FBO managers noted that they rejected some potential sources, most commonly lottery funding, on moral grounds:

We don't take money from the National Lottery . . . We don't actually go looking for money that we know has come from sources that we don't think are socially acceptable. Gambling isn't socially acceptable. We know that from the Gamblers Anonymous groups that come to try and sort out lives here. (Manager, faith-based soup kitchen)

The FBOs delivered services to homeless people in a wide range of settings: church halls, temple kitchens, purpose-built hostels and on the street to name but a few examples. Some of the buildings 'look' religious by virtue of their architecture and/or the imagery inside (e.g., displays of icons or scripture). In others, there was nothing at all in the physical environment suggestive of a faith affiliation. Moreover, some secular projects used buildings that were formerly used for religious purposes (e.g., churches) which retained a religious architectural 'flavour'.

### **Programme content and religious practice**

The visibility of faith in case study agencies' programmes had undergone profound change in recent decades. A minority had in the past required homeless people to engage in religious practices by attending worship services or bible study, for example. Such demands had discontinued in all. Today, pastoral care, counselling and/or scriptural study are provided by most of the FBOs, but participation in these activities is in all cases optional. This change has come about primarily in response to pressure from commissioning bodies regarding the removal of religious referents or practices from programmes, but also because of a wish on the part of FBOs to avoid appearing unwelcoming to people of other or no faith. As a support worker in a faith-based hostel recounted:

We used to have a bible study once a week . . . What started to happen was we had to change from that to no bible study, no [religious] posters on the wall, no prayer meetings . . . to fit in more with Supporting People [statutory funding]. And to be more welcoming of all faiths, so that we weren't seen as promoting a Christian faith.

That said, the influence of faith was more apparent in the minority of charitably funded services – most notably soup runs, night shelters and some day centres – where evangelism was more prominent in project ethos (see above). In some (but not all) of these, paid staff and volunteers shared personal testimonies (that is, described the significance of faith to their own lives) and/or offered to

pray for or with service users with their consent. Such interactions almost always stopped short of invitations to faith, unless conversations about faith had been initiated by the service users themselves.

None of the agencies studied regarded faith as essential for service users to overcome homelessness or associated problems such as addiction, as would be the case in the 'faith-permeated' or 'exclusive' FBOs described by Clarke (2008) (see above). Some managers and/or staff did however express a view that faith could be a valuable aid to service users' recovery and reintegration into mainstream society, and/or hoped that the compassion and non-judgementalism of staff would enhance their receptivity to discussions about faith. For many, faith was regarded as a key ingredient in recovery from traumatic backgrounds:

If you're not a Christian or you've not got a faith, what's the answer to all these problems? ... How are they gonna find peace? I mean, they have counsellors and psychologists and psychiatrists, but the only ones I know that really get any help have found the faith, been able to *forgive*. (Paid staff, faith-based hostel, emphasis in original)

Secular agencies also recognised the potential value of assessing and addressing service users' needs in relation to senses of faith, identity and purpose – which some providers described in terms of 'spirituality' – when developing holistic person-centred support plans. Most did, however, feel ill-equipped to support service users in this area if they expressed a desire to pursue questions of faith or religion, beyond signposting them to local places of worship (see also Garvell, 2013).

### **Identifying the 'F' in FBO from 'the inside' ... not an easy task?**

Discussions with homeless service users confirmed that the influence of the 'F' in FBO is not necessarily obvious. In fact, given the declining visibility of faith described above, many homeless people find it difficult to discern any tangible difference between avowedly faith-based and secular projects. Service users frequently assumed that if they were not compelled to participate in religious practices, and/or if staff never proactively promoted faith in conversations, a project 'could not be' faith-based, when in fact that same service may be described as such by its manager. Conversely, service users often presumed that inclusion of 'people of the cloth' (e.g., nuns) in the staff team 'must be' indicative of a faith basis; when their presence can be an 'historical artefact' which reflects ongoing links with a founding religious body but has little if any bearing on its current (secular) ethos and practice. Disagreements about whether or not the projects they used regularly had a faith affiliation were thus commonplace in service user focus groups, as illustrated by the following conversational excerpt:

Service user A: It's got a religious name, ain't it?

Service user B: Yeah, but they don't say grace or preach or anything ...

Service user C: Isn't there a painting with Jesus on it on the wall in the dining room though? You wouldn't know it were anything to do with the church otherwise.

Service user B: Like I said, you don't get bible-bashed or nothing.

Service user D: . . . and some of the volunteers are Christians.

Service user B: Is it linked to a church then?

(Service users, faith-based day centre)

Importantly, with few exceptions, homeless interviewees reported that there were no obvious differences in the quality, or integrity, of 'care' provided by staff in projects that were (known to be) faith-based or secular. Such views were widely echoed by frontline staff (both with and without faith themselves), including those who had worked for both faith-based and secular agencies. There was a strong consensus that the project dynamics were defined much more by the quality of staff and infrastructure, than any formal affiliation to faith *per se*.

It's hard to say whether or not there was a difference because you've got a mix of good and bad [staff] in both . . . Some of the staff in the faith-based ones really really genuinely are caring people . . . Whereas some of the non-faith-based ones had trained full-time workers, some of them workers were absolutely crap . . . but on the other hand some of them were really good workers. (Service user, secular hostel)

When asked whether they preferred either faith-based or secular projects, a few service users reported that they sought out FBOs because they wanted to explore questions of faith or spirituality and/or the support of fellow believers. Others reported actively avoiding faith-based services due to prior negative experiences with faith groups in the past, particularly religious schools. The majority, however, were relatively indifferent as to whether or not the services they used were faith-based, as long as they could choose whether or not to participate in or talk about anything 'religious'. For example:

When you're homeless and you're offered help you just take the first thing that comes along. So, no, I didn't care whether it was religious or not. (Service user, secular hostel)

I didn't know it was a Christian hostel, nobody told me that. But I ain't really bothered . . . as long as they don't try pushing it on to me. (Service user, faith-based hostel)

On this issue, and significantly given the central government's acknowledgement that many commissioning bodies have been 'squeamish' about funding FBOs given fears that they may use public money to propagate religion (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007), experiences of unwelcome promotion of faith were very rare. Virtually all service user interviewees felt that any expressed wish to desist from conversation about religion or faith had been respected by FBO staff.

Service user A: I never even knew the [name of church] soup run were a religious organisation for about a year.

Service user B: That's like the [name of project] on a Thursday morning, isn't it? ... They don't even go preaching anything.

Service user C: The same with the Hare Krishna, it doesn't matter if you're a Muslim, a Jew or whatever ... If you want to join, yeh, 'You know where you can find us', and that's it.

(Service users, secular day centre)

Many service users and staff nevertheless highlighted the role that faith, and the provision of support in this domain, had played in boosting some homeless persons' morale and senses of 'hope', and/or promoting positive behavioural changes such as overcoming substance misuse problems:

When I came to faith I went from here [gesticulating low] to here [gesticulating high]. It's not been easy, but my faith in God helped me. I could not have done it without it ... To know that someone believes in you, cares for you, at such a time ... It is so important. (Service user, faith-based day centre)

I had a client who ... was a drug addict, a cocaine dealer ... He ended up in the [name of faith-based hostel]. And the transformation that he's made in his life is unbelievable. He's taken up the faith and he's changed, everything has changed around him. (Paid staff, secular hostel)

The issue that 'mattered' most in defining service user preferences, however, was not whether they were faith-based or secular, but rather providers' expectations regarding behaviour change. There is at present a heated debate within the UK's homelessness sector regarding how 'interventionist' services should be. Stances on this issue fall along a spectrum: at one pole are 'non-interventionist' agencies which have an open door policy and hold no expectation that service users commit to change. Some homeless people, particularly those experiencing severe and multiple disadvantage (MEAM and Revolving Doors, 2011), will only use these services. The approach has however been deemed irresponsible by some commentators for allowing vulnerable people to continue behaviours such as drug misuse which are profoundly detrimental to their wellbeing (Lane and Power, 2009). At the other end of the spectrum are highly 'interventionist' organisations that insist homeless people 'engage' with support to address problems such as addiction. Interventionist approaches can be very effective with some individuals and are being endorsed by government (CLG, 2006, 2012), but have been severely criticised by campaigning groups for excluding the 'hardest to reach' and exacerbating their already difficult circumstances (Housing Justice, 2009).

Contrary to what is often presumed, it is the secular agencies that are most sympathetic toward the interventionist rehabilitative approaches. Whilst FBOs can be found along much of the spectrum, they *tend* to favour non-interventionist 'unconditional' approaches.<sup>7</sup> This puts many at odds with the direction of UK homelessness policy, which has become increasingly interventionist in tone in

recent years (Fitzpatrick and Johnsen, 2009). It also presents a challenge to what Cloke (2011) refers to as the postsecular ‘rapprochement’ of ethical praxis underpinning many contemporary partnerships between faith-based and secular bodies. These, he explains, were generally forged via a setting aside of moral differences in order to respond to the needs of homeless people from compatible ethical bases. Divergent stances on interventionism cannot be suspended easily, however, given the depth of feelings associated and the different weighting accorded to aspects of welfare and individual liberty. For many individuals and organisations, the adoption of more interventionist approaches represents a compromise ‘too far’ given conflicts with religious ideals of unconditional hospitality and care.

### Conclusion

A detailed examination of UK homelessness services reveals that the ‘F’ in FBO may be articulated and/or suppressed in a myriad of nuanced ways. Its influence may be evident (or not) across a range of dimensions, including: faith heritage, affiliation and public identity; ethos and aims; governance and staffing; resourcing and environment; and programme content and religious practice. Furthermore, agencies’ expression of and/or degrees of coupling to faith or religion are rarely static. Rather, they are continually evolving in response to a range of processes, including those that are coercive (e.g., pressure from commissioners in a competitive contract environment), mimetic (e.g., emulation of other successful providers) and normative (e.g., evolution of professional ideals regarding social inclusivity). The consequence has been a blurring of the boundaries between the religious and secular such that a project’s faith affiliation (or lack thereof) is not always obvious.

On many accounts, faith-based and secular service providers share more similarities than they hold differences, and differences amongst FBOs can be extreme. Moreover, any observable distinctions between faith-based and secular providers are cross-cut by agencies’ positions with regard to other dualisms, notably where they fall on continuums between ‘basic and specialist’ service type and/or ‘interventionist and non-interventionist’ approaches to service delivery. These positionalities arguably have an equal or greater bearing on the dynamics of, and by extension homeless peoples’ experiences within, a service setting. Taken together, these findings problematise FBO typologies, and highlight the complexity and fluidity of the concept of ‘FBO’ itself.

Some commentators may argue that the decreasing visibility of faith in homelessness services is symptomatic of ‘mission drift’ (Charity Commission, 2007; Jochum *et al.*, 2007). But in fact the primary aim of most FBOs is to serve God(s) and humanity by responding to the physical and other needs of the most vulnerable members of society, and this has not changed. For many FBOs, their



activities are viewed as an expression of faith, even if they do not include the proclamation of faith in any overt sense. In most, support in the realms of faith and spirituality are available, and indeed for some FBOs and staff within them a subsidiary aim (or hope) is to offer opportunities for service users to find faith and experience personal transformation. Yet, homeless people have much greater say in whether they engage with this – and, if so, to what extent – than was the case in the relatively recent past. Moreover, where support regarding spirituality is provided, it is just as likely to promote ‘faith’ in a general sense as it is ‘the faith’ to which that specific FBO is affiliated.

It is clear that faith has played a key role in inspiring the inception of the majority of contemporary services for homeless people in the UK, even if that heritage is barely evident in some today. Furthermore, faith continues to underpin the motivations of many people working within both faith-based and secular homelessness services. This study confirms that faith ‘matters’ in FBO operation in many respects, as has been argued by Smith *et al.* (2004), but it cautions that any differences between faith-based and secular homelessness services should not be exaggerated by, for example, individuals or groups who seek to either promote or oppose FBO involvement in welfare provision. For, homelessness services and other welfare settings reflect the broader society in which they operate, which in the UK is neither totally secular nor totally religious, but, complexly, both (Woodhead and Catto, 2012).

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### Notes

- 1 Big Society is a core element of the Coalition Government’s legislative programme. It aims to empower citizens and communities to play a greater role in service delivery. Central tenets include localism, volunteerism and social entrepreneurship (HM Government, 2011).
- 2 See Johnsen with Fitzpatrick (2009) for a summary of key findings and policy implications.
- 3 Additional details regarding the characteristics of case study agencies are not provided so as to preserve their anonymity.
- 4 I here follow other scholars (e.g., Reingold *et al.*, 2007) in asking project managers to (self-)classify their service as faith-based or secular.
- 5 The vast majority of service users had utilised both faith-based and secular projects.
- 6 An attempt to calculate the proportion of UK homelessness services run by FBOs was abandoned for this reason, given the very real possibility that it might present a highly inaccurate picture of FBO involvement.
- 7 Non-interventionist FBOs are however joined by a number of secular campaigning organisations in their opposition to the increased interventionism within the sector.

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