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Dinham, Adam

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What is a faith community?

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view

What is a 'Faith Community'?

Dr Adam Dinham, Goldsmiths, University of London

Abstract

This article asks 'what is a faith community?' This is important because of a re-emergence of faith and the 'faith community' as a public category in many Western countries. This is reflected in the UK in a public policy interest in faiths as repositories of resources for 'strengthened community'. Thus faiths are understood as 'containers' of staff, buildings, volunteers, networks, values and skills which can be 'harnessed' in key community domains, especially the provision of welfare and social services, extended forms of participative neighbourhood governance, and initiatives for community cohesion. Resources in each of these areas are understood to reside in 'faith communities' and faiths are frequently seen as 'good at community' in these terms. But do we know what a 'faith community' is? Using communitarian ideas of community this article explores the notion of the faith community and the implications of policies about them for faith-based practices in community settings. It argues for the application of community development values to understanding 'faith communities'.

Introduction

Modernisation theory had suggested that "Larger society has replaced the small community as the basis for most social life" (Fox 1994, p11). Concurrently, sociology of religion had come to assume that "Social norms that were once defined by religious precepts are now defined by technical, rational and empirical criteria" (ibid, p11). This implied that, "Accordingly religion, which helps to maintain order within community, is no longer needed to maintain social order in a society that is no longer communally based" (ibid, p11). Yet policy makers in the West have been reasserting 'community' as a site of crucial importance for society. Within that, there has been a notable

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3 turn to faiths as key 'repositories' of 'community'. This article will explore the
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5 turn to faith in public policy in the UK context and ask what is meant by 'faith
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7 community' and what do policy constructions imply for the everyday
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9 community practices of faiths in their local settings.

10 11 12 ***Faith in the Public Realm: after secularisation*** 13

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16 In the middle part of the twentieth century, the assumption that faith had
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18 ceased to be a legitimate public category appeared to have taken hold. Later,
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20 data gave rise to critiques of secularisation which are well rehearsed in the
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22 sociological literature. There it is noted that secularisation is an idea which
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24 has always been more complex than is credited. First, secularisation refers to
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26 "the freeing of [certain] areas of life from their theological origins or basis"
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28 (Alexander 2002) and, from the Latin 'saeculum' ('age'), contrasts the
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30 immanency of the world with the atemporality of the heavenly. Practically, it
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32 refers to that process "whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions
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34 lose social significance" (Wilson 1966) but it by no means expels faith
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36 altogether from the public realm.

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38 Second, its diminishing significance has been attributed to the handing over to
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40 the state of certain "specialised roles and institutions" (Alexander 2001 p49)
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42 such as the delivery of education, health and social care. Yet faith based
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44 social action has maintained a long tradition, despite the years of centralised
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46 state provision (see Prochaska 2006; Dinham 2007) motivated variously by
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48 philanthropy, theology and pastoral ministry.

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50 Third, it is suggested that faiths lost much of their social significance under the
51
52 dual pressures of urbanisation and technological innovation so that, as
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54 populations centred in cities, communities broke down and with them, the
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56 social control of religious leaders within them. At the same time, technology
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58 promised ways round 'God-given' constraints, particularly those associated
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60 with medical interventions and with telecommunications which give people
access to each other in immediate ways across enormous distances. Yet
these ideas also have been criticised for their Eurocentricity, being located in

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3 the urban lives and technological trends of Western Europeans. Berger's
4 assumption that by "the twenty first century, religious believers are likely to be
5 found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular
6 culture" (Berger 1968), has been modified by his view that "the world today,
7 with some exceptions...is as furiously religious as it ever was..." (Berger
8 1999).

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16 Yet the 'faiths' data is highly debated and it has been observed that
17 "sociologists are always suspicious of statistics...even more [so] of religious
18 statistics" (Davie 1994 p45). Variables such as 'membership', 'affiliation' and
19 'belief' are highly contested. Thus, while the census material in the UK
20 indicates a convincingly strong 'faith presence', it is "important to recognise
21 that the census questions were to do with religious affiliation...rather than
22 saying anything about either religious belief or religious practice" (Weller 2007
23 p27). It has been noted that

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31 "...on the one hand, variables concerned with feelings, experience and
32 the more numinous aspects of religious belief demonstrate
33 considerable persistence...; on the other, those which measure
34 religious orthodoxy, ritual participation and institutional attachment
35 display an undeniable degree of secularization..."

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41 (Davie 1994 pp4-5)

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44 This tends to suggest "high levels of belief and low levels of practice" (Davie
45 1994 p5), though there are exceptions to the trend, for example in Northern
46 Ireland and Scotland, where there are manifested "markedly higher levels of
47 religious practice than almost all other European countries" (Davie 1999 p14).
48 Nevertheless, it has been noted in the case of faith that "Statistically there can
49 be little doubt about the trends; they go downwards" (Davie 1999 p52).

50 51 52 53 54 55 56 **Faith, Citizenship and the 'Faith Community'**

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At the same time, the re-emergence of public faith is nevertheless asserted in
the UK in the government's 'repositories' discourse which sees faiths as

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4 “gateways to access the tremendous reserves of energy and commitment of
5 their members, which can be of great importance to the development of civil
6 society” (Home Office 2004 p7). People of faith are seen as already good at
7 being citizens. It is an ‘enactment citizenship’ based in the formula, ‘rights with
8 responsibilities’ - with the emphasis on the responsibilities. People of faith are
9 regarded as strong volunteers, they associate, they vote, they campaign and
10 participate in governance, they provide services, they network, they contribute
11 through social capital to community cohesion. It is hoped in UK policy that this
12 can be drawn upon and extended in to wider citizenships as a basis for strong
13 community.
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23 The ‘dark side’ of faiths – that they can be interior, evangelical, so tightly
24 bonded that they cannot bridge or link, and whose loyalty to faith prevails over
25 their loyalty as citizens - is elided in this view. This may be because there is
26 also considerable interest in the other resources they are perceived to hold –
27 buildings, staff, volunteers, networks, even money. Some have identified their
28 ‘commodification’ (Bretherton 2006) and criticised policy for its
29 instrumentalism of faiths in pursuit of their ‘usefulness’ in service delivery,
30 community cohesion and governance. But ‘faith’ is a complicated notion – not
31 only in the rarefied environment of academia but also in the practices of
32 engaging with faiths. This takes place in the intersection between faith,
33 citizenship and the public in the so-called ‘faith community’ – that space
34 conceived of as mediating private faith to public space. This is where the UK
35 government thinks resources lie and faith communities are regarded as the
36 repositories of which they talk.
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49 Therefore we see in the *Working Together* report (Home Office 2004)
50 references to ‘faith communities’ five times in the foreword alone and
51 “recommendations to faith communities” (Home Office 2004:5) and later to
52 “faith bodies” (ibid:5), it talks about “faith experts” (ibid:22), encourages
53 engagement in “faith awareness training” (ibid:5) and wants the active pursuit
54 of “faith literacy” (ibid:7).
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3 But what is a faith community? It is essential to probe what we mean if we are
4 to use the notion in public policy. More importantly it is necessary to know
5 what we are dealing with in order to respect the characteristics which make it
6 'valuable' in the first place. We must ask ourselves whether the idea of the
7 'faith community' really is more than an 'imagined community' (Mayo 2000); a
8 construction of the wishful thinking of policy makers. And if so, how? I propose
9 here to use four notions of community to explore this. They are each
10 communitarian notions – useful because of the central role communitarianism
11 plays in the policies which so emphatically envisage the 'faith community'.
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21 I hope to do two things: first, to explore what kind of community a faith
22 community might be; and second, to show that faiths as communities are
23 highly situated and contingent. By looking at what those contingencies might
24 be, I want to raise questions which need to be addressed if policy is to engage
25 with faiths according to the values of community - which respect and empower
26 them, inclusively. I will propose that an appropriate policy approach is one
27 which embraces community development to engage with and understand the
28 faith communities it envisages.
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37 The notions around which I organise my exploration are community of
38 location, community of shared history and values, community of common
39 activities and community of solidarity.
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43 44 **Community as Location** 45

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48 Community of location is based on the idea that a common locale helps
49 assure that the various shared aspects of community arise from that form of
50 life in which "members find themselves to begin with" (Sandel 1982 p136).
51 Here, affiliations are regarded as neither entirely voluntary nor broken at will.
52 Community is understood as a rich texture of involuntary interconnections
53 which precede social interaction and are unconscious to it. It is in this sense
54 that people "find themselves to begin with" (Sandel 1982 p136) in a matrix
55 which they have not chosen and which they cannot choose to reject. It is 'in
56 the bones'. Though people may leave the geographical location, the
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3 psychological and cultural resonances of membership continue to have
4 efficacy. In this way, such interconnections are primarily local first. They find
5 expression in everyday encounters within a fundamentally familiar set of
6 terms of reference in the social environment around and between individuals.
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12 For MacIntyre, communities of locality are well expressed in the idea of the
13 'city state' in which people know each other as community members, not
14 necessarily individually and personally, but by association (see MacIntyre
15 1981). But MacIntyre argues that the territorial dimension of people's
16 relationships is not sufficient to make 'community'. 'Relational' factors are also
17 crucial and, though association with others is unlikely to be personal except
18 with a small number of 'loved' individuals, alongside the territorial dimension
19 relational factors are a crucial part of turning a population into a community.
20 This is noted in reverse, as it were, in Cattle's observation of different ethnic
21 groups living 'parallel lives' in the same locations (Cattle 2001). It is also
22 proposed in the context of faith in Cheesman and Khanum's observation of a
23 'soft segregation' of Muslims and others arising out of religious and cultural
24 modes, producing a tendency for Islamic communities to find their centre in
25 the home rather than in the shared public spaces of their localities (in Dinham
26 et al 2009).
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41 In relation to faith communities, the idea of the unchosen matrix may apply
42 better to some traditions than to others. Congregations are frequently
43 gathered on the basis of proximity to the faith building – an otherwise random
44 coming together of people who do not 'choose' each other. There is also an
45 issue of identification with a much wider 'unchosen community'. We know that
46 more than 75% of people identify themselves as Christian while we know that
47 only one million attend churches regularly. This is not to assume that
48 'attendance' is the only indicator of 'having faith' but it does suggest that there
49 is a feeling of belonging to some 'community' (the 'community' of 'being
50 Christian') even without actively choosing it or translating that into what might
51 be called chosen or active participation.
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3 But MacIntyre insists upon a 'relationalism' within the unchosen community
4 and that it is in this relationalism that communities are 'located'. This may be
5 closer to the experience of other traditions, or traditions within traditions,
6 wherein people of faith do indeed start with where "they find themselves to
7 begin with" (Sandel 1982 p136) but move within that to make associations of
8 community. The faith community as 'territorial + relational location' may fit
9 some faiths better than others therefore.
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18 It also raises the question of how that territorialism expresses itself and what
19 form relationalism takes within it. In our study of faith as social capital, we
20 found that faith buildings can be highly effective foci of relationships which
21 underpin useful work and presence in the wider community (Furbey et al
22 2006). This relationship between the place of the faith community and the
23 space of the interactions within it may be one central dimension, therefore.
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30 But this, in turn, raises questions about who is in the place, who knows whom
31 within it and how these associations relate to wider civil society. It is not as
32 simple as assuming that people of faith go to locations of faith and associate
33 with others of faith in ways which produce goods for a wider community.
34 People will attend, interact and offer themselves in different ways and to
35 differing degrees. The equation cannot simply be 'place = people =
36 relationships = faith community', no matter how much that might be helpful
37 from a policy perspective.
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46 The idea of community of location is taken up by Toennies (in Loomis 2002) in
47 another way. He describes communities based on 'affection and kinship' in his
48 category of 'gemeinschaft' - communities based on similarity and resonant of
49 'relationalism', though that does not require the homogeneity implied by
50 'gemeinschaft'.
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56 Toennies is preoccupied with a fundamental shift away from this 'affection and
57 kinship' model which he associates with industrialisation, huge shifts in labour
58 markets and the rise of capitalism. This finds expression, he argues, in a new
59 kind of community of location based, not on affection and kinship, clustering
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around families and very small and local groupings of people, but on the division of labour and ‘contractual’ or ‘agreed’ relationships which occur after those which arise because of where people “find themselves to begin with” (ibid). This he calls ‘gesellschaft’ - community based on interdependence and exchange. In one respect this is associated with a shift in the spirit of community from mutual altruism based on familiarity and shared goals to one in which “individuals consult only their self-interest” arising out of the competition of capitalism (Toennies in Loomis 2002 p36). Could it be that Toennies’ ‘gesellschaft’ reflects the direction in which faith communities are being asked to go in terms of entering in to public sector agreements and contracts for service delivery - the ‘faith community’, not as place and relation but as service and contract? This may well be the emphasis certainly of the faith based initiative in the US. In the UK the service dimension is accompanied by a focus on the less tangible social goods of community cohesion which it is harder to ‘contract’ for.

Nevertheless, the strategic and governance level engagements which faiths are increasingly making in these directions (see Dinham 2007; Lowndes and Chapman 2005) do seem to recast the ‘faith community’ towards this contractual relationship of interdependence and exchange, for example through publicly funded infrastructure bodies such as FaithNetEast and FaithNetSouthWest¹ in the UK. This presents its own challenges for the idea of the ‘faith community’, as our study of faiths and public sector tendering shows (Dinham 2006). There, a focus group identified a whole range of perspectives and anxieties, as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1: Faiths and the Public Sector study: Reported difficulties in engaging with public sector tenders, Dinham 2007

If one group predominates within a partnership this may lead to fracture
Faiths should get involved in procurement because they need to have their vision and mission there in public space – this is seen by many as an opportunity for faiths to bring specific values to the public arena, for example, tackling some of the values of corporations such as supermarkets by doing things differently through service delivery in the public arena

¹ Two regional faith based bodies providing support to local faith bodies to maximise their capacity for and engagement in community development

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4	There is an important question nevertheless about the relationship between the worshipping community
5	and that part of it which engages in public sector contracts. In particular the role of evangelism is a key
6	concern in relation to this – should faiths be providing services with values conditions, either explicitly or
7	implicitly?
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9	At the same time, it may be that openness about starting points, intent and purpose, may be sufficient,
10	just as ‘mission statements’ are for other non faith based organisations
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12	There may be opportunities for faith traditions to come together in consortia to deliver services, with
13	some potentially very interesting ramifications, including possible valuable synergies?
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15	Might some also want proudly to remain single faith?
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17	Policy makers and procurors may not see the relevance of issues of faith and belief in the first place and
18	such debates may be seen as wasteful and redundant
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20	There is a very important difference between ‘making money out of doing good’ and ‘making money
21	anywhere in order to do good’ – it matters what kind of service is contracted for
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23	Equalities legislation is likely to bite in new ways for faith groups wanting to engage in public sector
24	contracts as faith groups engage as employers and contracting authorities grapple with sometimes
25	cross-cutting values within faith groups
26	
27	Whatever happens, faith based public sector tendering is new territory and it is important to remember
28	that ‘too fast might be too frightening’ and that learning about financial and legal responsibilities in
29	particular, as well as about the functions and mechanisms of project managing contracts is key
30	
31	Faiths need to think carefully about the relationship they want with government – do they want to be its
32	agents, critical friends, or independent critics? Or something else? Or a combination?
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35 So in relation to the ‘faith community’, location may appear to play an

36 important part, especially given that worshipping communities are often very

37 identified with their buildings and places. But three factors mitigate this. First,

38 many worshipping communities only have their building or place in common

39 and in fact share very little else of the wider ‘community’ location. Theologians

40 talk about the ‘gathered church’ in this regard – where groups ‘congregate’

41 because of convenience or liturgical taste for example.

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49 Second, worshipping communities may form only one part of a faith

50 community and there are debates about who and what else is included.

51 Candidates include neighbourhood projects arising out of a worshipping

52 community but distinct from it, social enterprise ‘arms’, leaders and

53 representatives who sit on panels or boards for neighbourhood initiatives, and

54 those who use the building or place occasionally for specific purposes such as

55 rites of passage (for example weddings and funerals). Which ‘bits’ of this can

56 be said to constitute ‘community’?

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5 Third, in direct contradiction of a place or location focus, theological and
6 particularly eschatological perspectives amongst some faith traditions may
7 emphasise the 'transcendent' and 'beyond' over the 'here and now'. How
8 might that be useful, or otherwise, to policy? And what happens in faith
9 communities when policy neglects one part while trying to make use of
10 another?
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17 **Community as 'History and Values'**

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21 A second exploratory tool is the idea of the community based on shared
22 history and values. This helps assure consensus about where people come
23 from and who they are. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre expresses this in
24 characteristically moral terms, suggesting that "community coheres by
25 envisaging its life as directed towards a shared good" (MacIntyre 1981 p46).
26 Sandel shares this view that community exists around "a common vocabulary
27 of discourse and a background of implicit practices and understandings"
28 (Sandel 1982 p39). It includes traditions, practices, common understandings
29 and "conceptions of the common good" (MacIntyre 1981 p46).
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39 As with territorial and relational aspects of community of location, these
40 'shared values' are understood in part in psychological terms and members
41 accept and internalise the community's shared values and standards
42 (Toennies in Loomis 2002). They are an aspect of the narrative of the
43 community which people believe and perpetuate. This 'history and values'
44 understanding of community is an apt model for faith communities because it
45 resonates with notions of morality, social good, practices, traditions and
46 'wisdom'. The aim of a life as directed towards a 'shared good' surely reflects
47 the experiences of all sorts of communities of faith (though not, of course,
48 all)?
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58 Faith communities might also coalesce around common vocabularies,
59 practices and understandings. But while a 'history and values' understanding
60 sees faith communities as "...a social framework for individuals to understand

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3 and relate to each other” (Sandel 1982 p39), theologians and people of faith
4 themselves might just as strongly emphasise the distinctiveness of their
5 liturgical and community beliefs. This could result in the assertion, not of what
6 is shared, but what is different. From an historical perspective the same
7 events, for example the Christian reformation, nineteenth century European
8 colonialism, or the ‘troubles’ in Northern Ireland, might constitute the basis,
9 not of sharing, but of profound and fundamental disagreement.

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18 Another angle is that people of faith themselves might want to add to a
19 ‘shared history and values’ account that they are also about understanding
20 and relating to God or the ‘other’ as both source and member of the
21 community to which they belong. Indeed, it is the very fact of ‘faith’ itself which
22 may differentiate and ultimately define what makes a community a ‘faith
23 community’ – an aspect often overlooked by policy makers. What happens
24 when the ‘faith’ in ‘faith communities’ is effectively sheared off by policy? How
25 does action appeal to motivation and how is it sustained when they are
26 separated? Just as in wider community development praxis depends upon
27 reflection, might similar processes apply to the relationship between theology
28 and practice in the faith community?
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39 It is also the case that faiths are highly differentiated in terms of the practices
40 and traditions upon which they each draw. In some cases this has resulted in
41 forms of liturgy and other formal practices which are unrecognisable to
42 members of different traditions within the same faith. At times it has led to
43 violence and dissent. This is clearly uncomfortable for the notion of
44 community based on shared history and values.
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51 At the same time there are interesting attempts to consciously acknowledge
52 differences and to identify such histories and values, and/or to bridge between
53 them, in the many multi-faith and inter-faith initiatives which proliferate. In the
54 UK, the InterFaith Network records twenty-five inter-faith organisations
55 operating at national level within the UK (Inter Faith Network for the UK, 2007
56 p14-38). These include a Scottish Inter Faith Council, an Inter Faith Council
57 for Wales/Cyngor Rhyng-greifyddol Cymru and a Northern Ireland Inter-Faith
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3 Forum. In addition all the English regions except the North-East have
4 established regional faith fora which are engaged with structures of regional
5 government through Regional Assemblies (where they exist) and through
6 Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). At local level, there are recorded
7 details of two hundred and seven local inter-faith initiatives throughout the UK.
8 But to what extent might such groupings be understood in the language of
9 'faith community'?

17 **Community and Common Activities**

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21 The third strand in communitarian understandings of community is that it
22 resides in common activities and political participation. This rests on the
23 assumption that communities consist of members' participation in common
24 activities, for example residents' associations, community education and
25 community action. Faiths have a long tradition of such activities. This draws
26 people into a greater community by means of a "collective participatory
27 dialectic" (Barber 1984 p36). Here, "community grows out of participation and
28 at the same time makes participation possible" (Barber 1984 p13).

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31 Community thus requires "that people be actively involved in common talk,
32 common decision making and common action" (Phillips 1993 p31). The
33 practice of 'common activities' involves an intimacy of sorts, not based on
34 close caring relationships but on shared participation in consensually agreed
35 action.

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48 Certainly all of the major faiths in Britain have a long tradition of engaging in
49 the sorts of 'common activities' envisaged. In turn, the 'collective participatory
50 dialectic' in this model of community may find expression in a variety of forms
51 in faith traditions. On the one hand, it might be located in democratic forms of
52 faith group governance, for example in elections to certain posts or offices. It
53 could also be found in informal systems of relationships and networks from
54 which action arises. There might be shared decision-making about finances,
55 community activities or acts of worship.
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3 On the other hand, some faith traditions tend more towards hierarchy, and
4 'participatory dialectic' might be strong in itself but not be aligned with power.
5 In other words there might be lots of *talk* but little opportunity to *decide*. In
6 other cases it may not take place at all. Not all faiths are amenable, or in the
7 same ways, to dialectic and deliberation. The extent to which participation is
8 inclusive – or happens at all - may vary dramatically. Where this affects the
9 role of women and young people, for example, claims to 'community' may be
10 seriously problematic.
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19 'Common activities' understandings of community also raise the question of
20 whether faiths are always good at 'collective participatory dialectic' in the first
21 place. Certainly doctrinal and literalist approaches to faith may require a
22 signing up to an established catechism of belief rather than an exploration or
23 deliberation of faithfulness which finds its way towards something meaningful.
24 This may produce a community of 'members' but how far does that result in a
25 deeply relational community of brothers and sisters in faith? And how, in turn,
26 might such a fraternity express itself as contributing to a wider citizenship in a
27 public realm of many 'communities'?

36 37 **Community and Solidarity**

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40 A fourth characteristic of community is a high degree of solidarity. This draws
41 together the idea of 'interdependence' found in each of the other strands but
42 suggests that this is insufficient in itself to constitute 'community'. This arises
43 out of two problems: first, that not all 'other' people have the same
44 significance to the 'self'. Rather, this changes and intensifies according to
45 proximity in time, space and biological relationality. Put more simply, we love
46 some people more than others. Differing degrees of interdependence cannot
47 be sufficient of themselves as foundations for 'community' therefore.
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56 Second, that psychosocial understandings of interdependence suggest that
57 social interdependence is a feature of every individual existence regardless of
58 the idea of community. For example, the idea of transaction in child
59 development provides that human growth depends on the transaction of
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3 messages about needs and the meeting of those needs (Winnicott 1971),
4 usually between mother and child but later burgeoning outwards to a lifelong
5 interdependence in the family, the neighbourhood, the workplace and beyond.
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10 Phillips suggests that it is thus “a sociological truism that we cannot even
11 conceive of a person separate and absolutely alone in the world, independent
12 of other people” (Phillips 1993 p72). Therefore this interdependence cannot of
13 itself be sufficient to constitute ‘community’. The idea of solidarity is
14 introduced, therefore, to describe a general and diffuse sense of community
15 with everyone else in it. It depends upon shared locality, common history and
16 shared activities but recognises that they are not enough on their own to
17 constitute ‘community’.
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26 Solidarity adds “fraternal sentiments and fellow feeling” (Sandel 1982 p18)
27 and a “we-sense” (Bellah et al 1991 p16) characterised by special concerns
28 and moral obligations which exist ‘from the beginning’ and which do not exist
29 in relationships with people outside the community. This communitarian
30 conception of community is thus highly moral and focused on the idea of ‘the
31 social good’. This seems like a resonant description for a putative ‘faith
32 community’. Everybody is interdependent already – but faith communities
33 choose a further fraternity which constitutes this ‘we-sense’.
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42 In relation to faiths, this ‘solidarity’ understanding of community may well be
43 conceived of positively as the distinctive feature of the faith dimension – that
44 elusive ‘thing’ which ‘bonds’² a faith community together. But what then of the
45 ‘bridging and linking’ that governments hope will follow? Could faith
46 communities be so tightly bonded within themselves that they forget to
47 engage outside themselves as actors in wider communities? Might they
48 sometimes become actively ‘uncivil’ or ‘anti-social’ in defence of their
49 solidarity as a group? In a context anxious about the public role of faiths in
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57 ² For a discussion of bonding, bridging and linking see Putnam’s
58 study of social capital in Putnam R (2000) *Bowling Alone: the collapse*
59 *and revival of American community* NY: Simon & Schuster. For its
60 application to faith communities see Furbey R, Dinham A, Farnell R
and Finneron D (2006) *Faith as Social Capital: connecting or*
dividing? Bristol: Policy Press

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3 international relations, the playing out of 'glocalised' tensions in communities
4 (see Gale & O'Toole in Dinham et al 2009), and in terms of what former
5 President G W Bush liked to call 'the war on terror', we might ask whose
6 solidarity is useful, and when does solidarity within one faith community
7 become a threat to another?
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10 11 12 13 14 **So what *is* a 'Faith Community'?** 15 16

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18 The idea of the 'faith community' magnifies and consolidates the complexities
19 of both 'faith' and 'community' and yet in the UK, government talks about them
20 extensively and largely without commentary. Yet not knowing what a faith
21 community really is could be perilous to the coherence of the 'community' in
22 question or, at least, result in the distortion of their engagements with
23 community and society.
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30 Is a faith community defined by its geographical location? If so, is this based
31 on a building, a neighbourhood, a city, or some other boundary of place? How
32 does this relate to national and trans-national locations, for example through
33 international movements and traditions such as the Catholic church or the
34 National and International Spiritual Assemblies of the Baha'is? Which identity
35 prevails where a person of faith feels located both locally and trans-
36 nationally?
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45 Alternatively, is a faith community constituted by shared history and values?
46 Then what do we make of differing theological emphases within traditions and
47 even within congregations, for example on questions of mission and
48 evangelism and in theologies and ontology? And how do we mediate between
49 different but equally convicted histories and values in such a way as to ensure
50 dialogue rather than dissent?
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57 Could a faith community really be about its common activities? What, then, is
58 the difference between, say, a Jewish day care service and a Muslim one?
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3 And does motivation for action affect its public tone when enacted by people
4 of different traditions and motivations?
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9 Or is it more generally defined by its sense of solidarity? How far does an
10 arena of solidarity extend? And how does solidarity affect relationships
11 outside the solidarity group? Solidarity to the outsider can very quickly look
12 like defence.
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17 The attempt to pin down the idea of the faith community, and its relationship
18 to the public realm also leads to the question, who is in a faith community?
19 Who is not? On what basis? How are members bought in and, for that matter,
20 sent out? Where does the faith community begin and end? Are its boundaries
21 permeable or closed? Is the worshipping community a source of wider social
22 activities or separate from it? In turn, who speaks for the faith community?
23 With what authority? How are its members represented? In what places? How
24 does the community manage dissent and disagreement?
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33 These questions are provocative, but experience shows that they should be.
34 A blithe assumption that we know what faith communities are frankly annoys
35 people of faith and inhibits their effective engagement. It can also compound
36 disadvantage since there are important differences in the capacity of faiths to
37 articulate themselves as 'communities'. The Church of England, for example,
38 is highly organised and extremely well resourced at international, national,
39 regional and local levels, while the Zoroastrians rely upon much flatter
40 structures to communicate strategically across large geographical spaces.
41 While inclusiveness and social justice require the participation of all the faiths,
42 their involvement can be inhibited and disadvantaged because the 'faith
43 community' is often undeliverable in practice for the purposes of public policy.
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54 How, then, to maximise the likelihood that faith communities *will* be
55 'deliverable' in practice? I propose that the answer lies in community
56 development, which starts from where people are, and supports ways of
57 articulating that which respect difference, empower people and seek social
58 justice. From this perspective, what makes 'faith communities' valuable to
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3 public policy and civil society is not the monolith of their public tradition (for
4 example 'the church' or 'Islam') but the fact of their community-hood – the
5 realities of everyday lived experience mediated between and across
6 differences and dilemmas. The 'faith communities' which public policy needs
7 to have in mind are real, situated and contingent, located in spaces as well as
8 relational across them, and often through long periods of time, in some cases
9 centuries and millenia. They may share history and values deriving from
10 theology and scholarship, or they may differ radically or fundamentally in their
11 views and understandings. Either way, they find expression in the everyday
12 'ordinary' in which they engage, undertaking common activities in projects and
13 initiatives in a tradition of localism and self-help which in many cases
14 celebrates neighbourhood and neighbourliness, even (especially?) where
15 other agents have withdrawn. From these perspectives, theirs is a solidarity
16 arising from being 'in' communities, not just from being 'a' community. They
17 come from the 'bottom-up' and in this sense meet public policy on its way
18 'down' to them. Understanding this in both directions is key to the
19 engagement of faith communities as citizens and civil society makers in an
20 extended public realm.
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38 **Word count 5308**
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For Peer Review