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What is a faith community?

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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

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

Faith in the Public Realm: after secularisation

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

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

Third, it is suggested that faiths lost much of their social significance under the dual pressures of urbanisation and technological innovation so that, as populations centred in cities, communities broke down and with them, the social control of religious leaders within them. At the same time, technology promised ways round 'God-given' constraints, particularly those associated 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

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

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

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

(Davie 1994 pp4-5)

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

Faith, Citizenship and the 'Faith Community'

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

"gateways to access the tremendous reserves of energy and commitment of their members, which can be of great importance to the development of civil society" (Home Office 2004 p7). People of faith are seen as already good at being citizens. It is an 'enactment citizenship' based in the formula, 'rights with responsibilities' - with the emphasis on the responsibilities. People of faith are regarded as strong volunteers, they associate, they vote, they campaign and participate in governance, they provide services, they network, they contribute through social capital to community cohesion. It is hoped in UK policy that this can be drawn upon and extended in to wider citizenships as a basis for strong community.

The 'dark side' of faiths – that they can be interior, evangelical, so tightly bonded that they cannot bridge or link, and whose loyalty to faith prevails over their loyalty as citizens - is elided in this view. This may be because there is also considerable interest in the other resources they are perceived to hold – buildings, staff, volunteers, networks, even money. Some have identified their 'commodification' (Bretherton 2006) and criticised policy for its instrumentalism of faiths in pursuit of their 'usefulness' in service delivery, community cohesion and governance. But 'faith' is a complicated notion – not only in the rarefied environment of academia but also in the practices of engaging with faiths. This takes place in the intersection between faith, citizenship and the public in the so-called 'faith community' – that space conceived of as mediating private faith to public space. This is where the UK government thinks resources lie and faith communities are regarded as the repositories of which they talk.

Therefore we see in the *Working Together* report (Home Office 2004) references to 'faith communities' five times in the foreword alone and "recommendations to faith communities" (Home Office 2004:5) and later to "faith bodies" (ibid:5), it talks about "faith experts" (ibid:22), encourages engagement in "faith awareness training" (ibid:5) and wants the active pursuit of "faith literacy" (ibid:7).

But what is a faith community? It is essential to probe what we mean if we are to use the notion in public policy. More importantly it is necessary to know what we are dealing with in order to respect the characteristics which make it 'valuable' in the first place. We must ask ourselves whether the idea of the 'faith community' really is more than an 'imagined community' (Mayo 2000); a construction of the wishful thinking of policy makers. And if so, how? I propose here to use four notions of community to explore this. They are each communitarian notions – useful because of the central role communitarianism plays in the policies which so emphatically envisage the 'faith community'.

I hope to do two things: first, to explore what kind of community a faith community might be; and second, to show that faiths as communities are highly situated and contingent. By looking at what those contingencies might be, I want to raise questions which need to be addressed if policy is to engage with faiths according to the values of community - which respect and empower them, inclusively. I will propose that an appropriate policy approach is one which embraces community development to engage with and understand the faith communities it envisages.

The notions around which I organise my exploration are community of location, community of shared history and values, community of common activities and community of solidarity.

Community as Location

Community of location is based on the idea that a common locale helps assure that the various shared aspects of community arise from that form of life in which "members find themselves to begin with" (Sandel 1982 p136). Here, affiliations are regarded as neither entirely voluntary nor broken at will. Community is understood as a rich texture of involuntary interconnections which precede social interaction and are unconscious to it. It is in this sense that people "find themselves to begin with" (Sandel 1982 p136) in a matrix which they have not chosen and which they cannot choose to reject. It is 'in the bones'. Though people may leave the geographical location, the

psychological and cultural resonances of membership continue to have efficacy. In this way, such interconnections are primarily local first. They find expression in everyday encounters within a fundamentally familiar set of terms of reference in the social environment around and between individuals.

For MacIntyre, communities of locality are well expressed in the idea of the 'city state' in which people know each other as community members, not necessarily individually and personally, but by association (see MacIntyre 1981). But MacIntyre argues that the territorial dimension of people's relationships is not sufficient to make 'community'. 'Relational' factors are also crucial and, though association with others is unlikely to be personal except with a small number of 'loved' individuals, alongside the territorial dimension relational factors are a crucial part of turning a population into a community. This is noted in reverse, as it were, in Cantle's observation of different ethnic groups living 'parallel lives' in the same locations (Cantle 2001). It is also proposed in the context of faith in Cheesman and Khanum's observation of a 'soft segregation' of Muslims and others arising out of religious and cultural modes, producing a tendency for Islamic communities to find their centre in the home rather than in the shared public spaces of their localities (in Dinham et al 2009).

In relation to faith communities, the idea of the unchosen matrix may apply better to some traditions than to others. Congregations are frequently gathered on the basis of proximity to the faith building – an otherwise random coming together of people who do not 'choose' each other. There is also an issue of identification with a much wider 'unchosen community'. We know that more than 75% of people identify themselves as Christian while we know that only one million attend churches regularly. This is not to assume that 'attendance' is the only indicator of 'having faith' but it does suggest that there is a feeling of belonging to some 'community' (the 'community' of 'being Christian') even without actively choosing it or translating that into what might be called chosen or active participation.

But MacIntyre insists upon a 'relationalism' within the unchosen community and that it is in this relationalism that communities are 'located'. This may be closer to the experience of other traditions, or traditions within traditions, wherein people of faith do indeed start with where "they find themselves to begin with" (Sandel 1982 p136) but move within that to make associations of community. The faith community as 'territorial + relational location' may fit some faiths better than others therefore.

It also raises the question of how that territorialism expresses itself and what form relationalism takes within it. In our study of faith as social capital, we found that faith buildings can be highly effective foci of relationships which underpin useful work and presence in the wider community (Furbey et al 2006). This relationship between the place of the faith community and the space of the interactions within it may be one central dimension, therefore.

But this, in turn, raises questions about who is in the place, who knows whom within it and how these associations relate to wider civil society. It is not as simple as assuming that people of faith go to locations of faith and associate with others of faith in ways which produce goods for a wider community. People will attend, interact and offer themselves in different ways and to differing degrees. The equation cannot simply be 'place = people = relationships = faith community', no matter how much that might be helpful from a policy perspective.

The idea of community of location is taken up by Toennies (in Loomis 2002) in another way. He describes communities based on 'affection and kinship' in his category of 'gemeinschaft' - communities based on similarity and resonant of 'relationalism', though that does not require the homogeneity implied by 'gemeinschaft'.

Toennies is preoccupied with a fundamental shift away from this 'affection and kinship' model which he associates with industrialisation, huge shifts in labour markets and the rise of capitalism. This finds expression, he argues, in a new kind of community of location based, not on affection and kinship, clustering

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 FaithNetSouthWest[1] 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

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

So in relation to the 'faith community', location may appear to play an important part, especially given that worshipping communities are often very identified with their buildings and places. But three factors mitigate this. First, many worshipping communities only have their building or place in common and in fact share very little else of the wider 'community' location. Theologians talk about the 'gathered church' in this regard – where groups 'congregate' because of convenience or liturgical taste for example.

Second, worshipping communities may form only one part of a faith community and there are debates about who and what else is included. Candidates include neighbourhood projects arising out of a worshipping community but distinct from it, social enterprise 'arms', leaders and representatives who sit on panels or boards for neighbourhood initiatives, and those who use the building or place occasionally for specific purposes such as rites of passage (for example weddings and funerals). Which 'bits' of this can be said to constitute 'community'?

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

Community as 'History and Values'

A second exploratory tool is the idea of the community based on shared history and values. This helps assure consensus about where people come from and who they are. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre expresses this in characteristically moral terms, suggesting that "community coheres by envisaging its life as directed towards a shared good" (MacIntyre 1981 p46). Sandel shares this view that community exists around "a common vocabulary of discourse and a background of implicit practices and understandings" (Sandel 1982 p39). It includes traditions, practices, common understandings and "conceptions of the common good" (MacIntyre 1981 p46).

As with territorial and relational aspects of community of location, these 'shared values' are understood in part in psychological terms and members accept and internalise the community's shared values and standards (Toennies in Loomis 2002). They are an aspect of the narrative of the community which people believe and perpetuate. This 'history and values' understanding of community is an apt model for faith communities because it resonates with notions of morality, social good, practices, traditions and 'wisdom'. The aim of a life as directed towards a 'shared good' surely reflects the experiences of all sorts of communities of faith (though not, of course, all)?

Faith communities might also coalesce around common vocabularies, practices and understandings. But while a 'history and values' understanding sees faith communities as "…a social framework for individuals to understand

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

Another angle is that people of faith themselves might want to add to a 'shared history and values' account that they are also about understanding and relating to God or the 'other' as both source and member of the community to which they belong. Indeed, it is the very fact of 'faith' itself which may differentiate and ultimately define what makes a community a 'faith community' – an aspect often overlooked by policy makers. What happens when the 'faith' in 'faith communities' is effectively sheared off by policy? How does action appeal to motivation and how is it sustained when they are separated? Just as in wider community development praxis depends upon reflection, might similar processes apply to the relationship between theology and practice in the faith community?

It is also the case that faiths are highly differentiated in terms of the practices and traditions upon which they each draw. In some cases this has resulted in forms of liturgy and other formal practices which are unrecognisable to members of different traditions within the same faith. At times it has led to violence and dissent. This is clearly uncomfortable for the notion of community based on shared history and values.

At the same time there are interesting attempts to consciously acknowledge differences and to identify such histories and values, and/or to bridge between them, in the many multi-faith and inter-faith initiatives which proliferate. In the UK, the InterFaith Network records twenty-five inter-faith organisations operating at national level within the UK (Inter Faith Network for the UK, 2007 p14-38). These include a Scottish Inter Faith Council, an Inter Faith Council for Wales/Cyngor Rhyng-greyfyddol Cymru and a Northern Ireland Inter-Faith

Forum. In addition all the English regions except the North-East have established regional faith fora which are engaged with structures of regional government through Regional Assemblies (where they exist) and through Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). At local level, there are recorded details of two hundred and seven local inter-faith initiatives throughout the UK. But to what extent might such groupings be understood in the language of 'faith community'?

Community and Common Activities

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

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

Certainly all of the major faiths in Britain have a long tradition of engaging in the sorts of 'common activities' envisaged. In turn, the 'collective participatory dialectic' in this model of community may find expression in a variety of forms in faith traditions. On the one hand, it might be located in democratic forms of faith group governance, for example in elections to certain posts or offices. It could also be found in informal systems of relationships and networks from which action arises. There might be shared decision-making about finances, community activities or acts of worship.

On the other hand, some faith traditions tend more towards hierarchy, and 'participatory dialectic' might be strong in itself but not be aligned with power. In other words there might be lots of *talk* but little opportunity to *decide*. In other cases it may not take place at all. Not all faiths are amenable, or in the same ways, to dialectic and deliberation. The extent to which participation is inclusive – or happens at all - may vary dramatically. Where this affects the role of women and young people, for example, claims to 'community' may be seriously problematic.

'Common activities' understandings of community also raise the question of whether faiths are always good at 'collective participatory dialectic' in the first place. Certainly doctrinal and literalist approaches to faith may require a signing up to an established catechism of belief rather than an exploration or deliberation of faithfulness which finds its way towards something meaningful. This may produce a community of 'members' but how far does that result in a deeply relational community of brothers and sisters in faith? And how, in turn, might such a fraternity express itself as contributing to a wider citizenship in a public realm of many 'communities'?

Community and Solidarity

A fourth characteristic of community is a high degree of solidarity. This draws together the idea of 'interdependence' found in each of the other strands but suggests that this is insufficient in itself to constitute 'community'. This arises out of two problems: first, that not all 'other' people have the same significance to the 'self'. Rather, this changes and intensifies according to proximity in time, space and biological relationality. Put more simply, we love some people more than others. Differing degrees of interdependence cannot be sufficient of themselves as foundations for 'community' therefore.

Second, that psychosocial understandings of interdependence suggest that social interdependence is a feature of every individual existence regardless of the idea of community. For example, the idea of transaction in child development provides that human growth depends on the transaction of

messages about needs and the meeting of those needs (Winnicott 1971), usually between mother and child but later burgeoning outwards to a lifelong interdependence in the family, the neighbourhood, the workplace and beyond.

Phillips suggests that it is thus "a sociological truism that we cannot even conceive of a person separate and absolutely alone in the world, independent of other people" (Phillips 1993 p72). Therefore this interdependence cannot of itself be sufficient to constitute 'community'. The idea of solidarity is introduced, therefore, to describe a general and diffuse sense of community with everyone else in it. It depends upon shared locality, common history and shared activities but recognises that they are not enough on their own to constitute 'community'.

Solidarity adds "fraternal sentiments and fellow feeling" (Sandel 1982 p18) and a "we-sense" (Bellah et al 1991 p16) characterised by special concerns and moral obligations which exist 'from the beginning' and which do not exist in relationships with people outside the community. This communitarian conception of community is thus highly moral and focused on the idea of 'the social good'. This seems like a resonant description for a putative 'faith community'. Everybody is interdependent already – but faith communities choose a further fraternity which constitutes this 'we-sense'.

In relation to faiths, this 'solidarity' understanding of community may well be conceived of positively as the distinctive feature of the faith dimension – that elusive 'thing' which 'bonds'[2] a faith community together. But what then of the 'bridging and linking' that governments hope will follow? Could faith communities be so tightly bonded within themselves that they forget to engage outside themselves as actors in wider communities? Might they sometimes become actively 'uncivil' or 'anti-social' in defence of their solidarity as a group? In a context anxious about the public role of faiths in

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[2] For a discussion of bonding, bridging and linking see Putnam's study of social capital in Putnam R (2000) *Bowling Alone:the collapse and revival of American community* NY: Simon & Schuster. For its 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

international relations, the playing out of 'glocalised' tensions in communities (see Gale & O'Toole in Dinham et al 2009), and in terms of what former President G W Bush liked to call 'the war on terror', we might ask whose solidarity is useful, and when does solidarity within one faith community become a threat to another?

So what *is* a 'Faith Community'?

The idea of the 'faith community' magnifies and consolidates the complexities of both 'faith' and 'community' and yet in the UK, government talks about them extensively and largely without commentary. Yet not knowing what a faith community really is could be perilous to the coherence of the 'community' in question or, at least, result in the distortion of their engagements with community and society.

Is a faith community defined by its geographical location? If so, is this based on a building, a neighbourhood, a city, or some other boundary of place? How does this relate to national and trans-national locations, for example through international movements and traditions such as the Catholic church or the National and International Spiritual Assemblies of the Baha'is? Which identity prevails where a person of faith feels located both locally and trans-nationally?

Alternatively, is a faith community constituted by shared history and values? Then what do we make of differing theological emphases within traditions and even within congregations, for example on questions of mission and evangelism and in theologies and ontology? And how do we mediate between different but equally convicted histories and values in such a way as to ensure dialogue rather than dissent?

Could a faith community really be about its common activities? What, then, is the difference between, say, a Jewish day care service and a Muslim one?

And does motivation for action affect its public tone when enacted by people of different traditions and motivations?

Or is it more generally defined by its sense of solidarity? How far does an arena of solidarity extend? And how does solidarity affect relationships outside the solidarity group? Solidarity to the outsider can very quickly look like defence.

The attempt to pin down the idea of the faith community, and its relationship to the public realm also leads to the question, who is in a faith community? Who is not? On what basis? How are members bought in and, for that matter, sent out? Where does the faith community begin and end? Are its boundaries permeable or closed? Is the worshipping community a source of wider social activities or separate from it? In turn, who speaks for the faith community? With what authority? How are its members represented? In what places? How does the community manage dissent and disagreement?

These questions are provocative, but experience shows that they should be. A blithe assumption that we know what faith communities are frankly annoys people of faith and inhibits their effective engagement. It can also compound disadvantage since there are important differences in the capacity of faiths to articulate themselves as 'communities'. The Church of England, for example, is highly organised and extremely well resourced at international, national, regional and local levels, while the Zoroastrians rely upon much flatter structures to communicate strategically across large geographical spaces. While inclusiveness and social justice require the participation of all the faiths, their involvement can be inhibited and disadvantaged because the 'faith community' is often undeliverable in practice for the purposes of public policy.

How, then, to maximise the likelihood that faith communities *will* be 'deliverable' in practice? I propose that the answer lies in community development, which starts from where people are, and supports ways of articulating that which respect difference, empower people and seek social justice. From this perspective, what makes 'faith communities' valuable to

public policy and civil society is not the monolith of their public tradition (for example 'the church' or 'Islam') but the fact of their community-hood – the realities of everyday lived experience mediated between and across differences and dilemmas. The 'faith communities' which public policy needs to have in mind are real, situated and contingent, located in spaces as well as relational across them, and often through long periods of time, in some cases centuries and millenia. They may share history and values deriving from theology and scholarship, or they may differ radically or fundamentally in their views and understandings. Either way, they find expression in the everyday 'ordinary' in which they engage, undertaking common activities in projects and initiatives in a tradition of localism and self-help which in many cases celebrates neighbourhood and neighbourliness, even (especially?) where other agents have withdrawn. From these perspectives, theirs is a solidarity arising from being 'in' communities, not just from being 'a' community. They come from the 'bottom-up' and in this sense meet public policy on its way 'down' to them. Understanding this in both directions is key to the engagement of faith communities as citizens and civil society makers in an extended public realm.

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