

Multifaith forums as structures for community peace: cases of cohesion and peace in England?

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Abstract

Rooted in the assumptions of secularism, post-enlightenment Western social scientific scholarship has tended either to ignore or vilify religion. Kant, Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Weber, & Durkheim are key figures in a long evolution of the de-legitimization of religious modes and the celebration of scientific method as their rational alternative. The displacement of religion as an explanatory force has been reflected in its wider displacement as an organizational and moral mode, and public spaces have increasingly been seen as non-religious. What is left of public discourse on religion has tended towards a negative conception rooted in collective narratives of religious oppression, power, paternalism, both benign and aggressive, and very frequently violence and war. This paper proposes an alternative engagement with religion as a force for peace rather than violence. In doing so it uses primary data from interviews with directors of multi-faith fora in eight English regions to consider ways in which difference and diversity have been mediated as a grounds for enrichment rather than conflict.

Over the last decade, I have been struck by a growing interest in faiths as a public category once more. This has surprised me because, if there was one thing that seemed clear to me as an undergraduate in Theology and Religious Studies at Cambridge in the mid-1990's, it was that the public appetite for religion was minimal. I lost count in those days of the number of times people asked with incredulity what on earth I thought I was doing wasting my time with Theology at university. I mean, what was I going to *do* with that? On one noted occasion I was asked by a puzzled fellow undergraduate (in Veterinary Sciences, I think) whether Theology was 'a third year option' (a derogatory accusation in the UK system). On others, too frequent to recount, it was assumed that I would be a priest when I finished, and that was the end of that.

It has been fascinating, in turn, to experience the low level background hum of prejudice and stigma against 'faith' and nowhere more so than in the social science academy. For some, the ideas of Kant, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Weber and Durkheim have left a legacy of anxiety about the legitimacy of faith at all, let alone in public space, and particularly as a subject of social scientific enquiry. What axe do I have to grind? Which beliefs do I seek to promote? What methods will I use to sneak my dodgy dogmas in through the back door of a grown up, rational and intelligent academy? The assumptions of a secularised and neutral public realm are strong. And yet philosophy has been asserting the subjectivity – for that matter the constructivity – of 'rational' knowledge for decades.

Whether furiously against public faith, supportive of it or merely bemused, the contests reflected by these positions make the case of public faith an interesting one for throwing light on all sorts of significant questions. What is private and what public, who is a citizen, how are we represented, and what is legitimate in the public realm? Some of these are very 'now': about faith schools, interfaith relations, the prevention of extremism, and global relations. Others have been with us for longer: the persistence of spiritual hunger, the veracity of secularism and the legitimacy of faith as a public category at all. The reappearance of public

faith is often an unfamiliar experience for those who already see themselves as 'in the public realm'. Dialogue between different faiths is clearly important as the parties get to know one another; likewise that between believers and others. How can encounter with difference lead to peace, not conflict?

My work attempts to understand the relationships within, between and beyond faiths in a milieu which is increasingly interested in them and anxious about them. Mine is also an interest firmly located in the values of empowerment, participation and inclusion, as you might expect of a former social and community worker. I think faiths have a lot to offer to a public realm in which all sorts of interests are increasingly present and which seems to maintain a persistent spiritual appetite. But there are differences in power between faith traditions, their partners in the wider world and the groups within them, notably women and gay people. I recognise, too, that faiths can have a dark side; where dogma ends dialogue we have a problem.

In this paper I want to counter anxiety and ambivalence about faith and suggest that it can be a positive public category. I will explore how religion is a source of growing interest to governments who see them as repositories of resources for welfare services and a sense of community. I will explore how at the same time there is a context of anxiety about faith as a source of violent extremism. Alternative or additional to the view that faith is an incendiary public force, I will suggest a public engagement with faith as a source of peace.

The Return of Public Faith

It is to the surprise of many that faith is back in public space at all. In the UK, government has stated that it is "increasingly conscious of the importance of effective co-operation with faith communities" (Home Office 2004, foreword) and says that it sees them 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). Yet throughout much of the twentieth century, secularisation theorists were sure that faith was dead. Now, as Habermas has observed, there appears to be a “political revitalization of religion at the heart of Western society” (Habermas in Norris & Inglehart 2004); a positive ‘turn to faith’.

Nevertheless popular discourse and culture remain at best ambivalent about religious faith. There is considerable anxiety about the possibility that religious people harbour sinister ambitions to remoralise the public sphere and organize society around religious dogma and practices which would inhibit the freedoms we claimed during and since the enlightenment. Academics often see it as a matter of defending the superior paradigm of scientific method against the sheer silliness – nevertheless dangerous – of religion. In the UK, A.C. Grayling compares religious belief to belief in fairies, and religious scholars – at least those with anything positive to say about religion - as contributing nothing to the sum of human knowledge and quite probably as hoping to hold it back.

These are the assumptions of secularism. But ‘secularisation’ is a more complex notion than is often understood and a closer analysis suggests that faith never really went away. The term ‘secularisation’ initially referred to “the freeing of [certain] areas of life from their theological origins or basis” (Alexander 2002 p48), reflecting the idea from the Latin ‘saeculum’ (‘age’) of an essential distinction between the immanency and time-boundedness of the world with the atemporality and metaphysicality of the heavenly. This ‘freeing’ of ‘certain areas’ may describe the beginning of those processes “whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance” (Alexander 2002 p48). But it does not banish faith altogether from public space.

Secondly, it has been observed that the loss of faiths’ social significance is associated with their ceding to the state certain “specialised roles and institutions” (Alexander 2002 p49) such as the delivery of education, health and

social care. But these processes were driven by a vision of universal welfarism, not a dedication to the expulsion of faiths from the public table (see Prochaska 2006). What is more, it is clear that faith based social action has maintained a foothold in public space. Faith based community action initiatives often remain present even where all other agencies have withdrawn (Dinham 2007).

A third strand asserts that faiths lost their social significance as a result of the twin forces of urbanisation and technology. Thus, as populations centred in cities, communities fragmented, resulting in the loss of platforms for social control as exercised by religious leaders. At the same time, it is suggested that technology promised ways round 'God-given' constraints. These are particularly associated with medical interventions and with telecommunications. That we can resuscitate people, transplant organs, assist pregnancy, talk to each other remotely in 'real time' anywhere in the world, and fly through the skies are all seen by secularists as undermining of the claims that there are laws of God laid down in nature.

Yet these ideas must be located within their Western-centricity, originating in the urban lives and technological trends of Europeans and North Americans. They do not translate easily or simply in to many other parts of the world outside of Europe and North America. Indeed, even within them there are important distinctions in types and levels of religiousness. It is in part for these reasons that Peter Berger has replaced his earlier assertion 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), with a more recent observation that "the world today, with some exceptions...is as furiously religious as it ever was..." (Berger 1999). Faith is persistent, he notes. For Berger it is also a 'furious' force rather than a benevolent one. And indeed, in the States, which has been most subject to these forces of technology and urbanization, religion has remained a strong force.

Secularisation, then, is not as clear cut as is often supposed. A limited or soft form of it is argued here, on the basis that the social significance of religion has been under pressure but, at the same time, at least some of that significance has *changed* rather than been *lost*. There is, it seems, a role for faith in public space, though debate about it often presumes the opposite, making sophisticated discussion more difficult to have.

In the UK, part of this is associated with the rather curious way in which faith is played out in public through what has been called “the dignified parts of the constitution” (Weller in Dinham et al 2008, pX). The head of state is also head of an established church, Bishops sit in the upper house of parliament and (Christian) houses of worship are the context for public events such as royal weddings and state services of thanksgiving and remembrance. Across and beyond all the faiths, the lifespan is frequently marked in religious buildings through rites such as baptisms, weddings and funerals. These public displays of faith may be ‘red herrings’ – confusing symbols with less currency than the assertion of them suggests.

Another dimension is the shift that has been noted from ‘believing to belonging’ (see Davie 1999). There is a remarkable persistence of religious affiliation in Europe (especially outside the UK) and North America, although there is an equally remarkable decline in the practice of organised religion.

So what are the driving forces behind the renaissance of public faith? For many, the most obvious lies in the widespread perception of a tension between Islamic religious fundamentalism, or ‘Islamism’, on the one hand and the Western values of democracy and freedom of speech on the other. This reflects in macrocosm the debate about whether religion is ‘furious’ or benign – peaceful or violent. For many, religion is encapsulated in shadowy collective memories of the Crusades and the Inquisition. For others it is held in the rumours and histories, for example, of abusive schools run by Monks and Nuns, the oppressive practices of feudal

Bishops and the aggression of British and European colonialism originating in missionary expeditions. Another backdrop which resonates for many is the conflicts in Northern Ireland, Kashmir and Israel-Palestine. Such examples are grist to the mill of those who see faith as a furious force. It is in these contexts that Islam, since 9/11 has come to be characterized in the rhetoric of the so-called 'war on terror', as a (wrongly) perceived clash of cultures (Huntington), identities and values which goes to the very roots of meaning.

This has found expression in the UK (as elsewhere) in a policy rhetoric of 'prevention of violent extremism' which starts with the premise that

“Addressing the problem of extremist activity within communities in the UK has never been more important. Whether it is people planning terrorist attacks or attempting to subvert British values of democracy, tolerance and free speech, the Government is committed to tackling extremism head on.”

(Home Office 2005 p1)

The language is strong and government claims that it has been asked “to deal firmly with those prepared to engage in... extremism; and most particularly those who incite or proselytize it.” (Home Office 2005 p1). There is reference to “the problems of radicalisation and extremism in their midst” (Home Office 2005 p1).

The overall aim is “to build resilient communities able to challenge robustly the ideas of those violent extremists who seek to undermine our way of life” (Home Office 2007). The stated goal is a situation

“whereby all communities, and particularly British Muslim communities identify themselves, and are accepted, as part of a wider British society reject and actively condemn violent extremism,

develop community capacity to deal with problems where they arise and support counter terrorism work by the police and security services”

(Home Office 2007)

The UK government has also extended legislative powers so as to be able to “prosecute those who foment extremism at or near places of worship with the current offences of incitement and the offences of encouragement to terrorism and dissemination of terrorist publications.” (Home Office 2005 p3).

But there are more subtle, and arguably more immediate, imperatives driving an interest in faith, certainly in the UK. These are in three key areas. The first starts with government’s understanding of the role of faiths as repositories of resources - buildings, staff, volunteers and relationships - which have the potential to be deployed in the direction of social and community services.

A second area is found in the extension of new forms of participative governance to include faiths. Neighbourhood boards, local strategic partnerships (LSPs) and regional assemblies are all examples of where faiths are increasingly present. This strategic level of engagement in policy and decision making at the local and regional levels is echoed in new forms of participation at the national, where, for example, the Faiths, Race and Cohesion Unit in Whitehall focuses on making policies affecting the role of faiths, and the ‘Faith Communities Consultative Council’ attempts to give voice to faiths at the heart of politics and the civil service. Faith groups are now involved at the very highest levels in decision making in the UK and this reflects a concern to bring them on board the ship of state as active citizens and participants.

A third dimension is the value governments attach to faiths as potential sources of social capital and therefore of community cohesion. This incorporates the idea of the ‘strengthened community’, lifted up by the participation of an ever-wider

cast of actors in civil society. Faith groups have been embraced in this rhetoric in documents such as 'Working Together' (Home Office 2004) and, like other parts of the social, such as residents' associations and community projects, recast as members of a newly rediscovered nation 'community'. This is expressed in the government policy 'Face to Face Side by Side: a framework for partnership in our multifaith society'.

This embodies the notion of 'resilient' communities, to describe the positive resistance in communities to extremist elements. Faiths are therefore regarded as important contributors to community cohesion at a time when growing diversity challenges the multicultural settlement and while international relations between Islamic and Western countries (if not cultures) are played out in local contexts such as the English cities of Bradford, Leicester, Luton and London. The question is being asked, how can faiths in Britain be encouraged to work in their communities to strengthen British civil society and not be agitators against it? How can they be agents of peace, not conflict? Are they to be understood as heroes or villains?

Religious Diversity in the UK

This all takes place in the context of enormous diversity and the potential for flashpoints along lines of difference is great. The religious make up of the UK is extremely complicated and very diverse. The political landscape which forms its context is one part of this complexity. The history and traditions of the four nations that make up Great Britain, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, are distinctive and the religious landscape reflects this. In their enormous undertaking, the *Religions in the UK Directory*, the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, UK, surveys this. It begins by acknowledging that "the United Kingdom has a Christian inheritance that remains the predominant religious tradition" (Weller 2007 p21). At the same time it emphasises that the UK has "...a greater degree of religious diversity than is found in any other country of the

European Union” (ibid p21). This reflects a history of empire and immigration stretching back, not just to the Victorian and colonial era of the nineteenth century but also way back into the ancestral histories of the Romans, (who first brought Christianity to Britain), the Normans whose invasion in 1066 led to the immigration (and later expulsion) of Jews from Spain and Portugal, then the Vikings and the Saxons (see Weller 2007 p23-26). In particular the events of the Tudor and Elizabethan era in England and the rise of Protestantism in Western Europe produced a uniquely English religious settlement wherein the Church of England was established as distinct from the then dominant Catholic church of Rome, with the Monarch at its head as well as at the head of state. At the same time, the English story is one of the acceptability of what was originally called ‘dissent’ (from Rome) and is now better described as ‘diversity’.

This gives England a unique relationship with the church – the Church of England. That organization tells its own very positive story about religious affiliation and practice.

“1.7 million people take part in a Church of England service each month, a level that has been maintained since 2000. Around one million participate each Sunday. More than 2.8 million participate in a Church of England service on Christmas Day or Christmas Eve. Forty three per cent of the population attends church at Christmas, rising to forty eight per cent in London and, nationally, twenty two per cent among those of non-Christian faiths. In 2005 forty seven per cent of adults attended a church or place of worship for a memorial service for someone who has died and twenty one per cent were seeking a quiet space. Both these proportions are increases on thirty seven per cent and nineteen per cent respectively in 2003 and twenty nine per cent and twelve per cent respectively in 2001. Eighty six per cent of the population visits a church or place of worship in the course of a year for reasons ranging from participating in worship to attending social events or simply wanting a quiet space. Every year,

around 12.5 million people visit Church of England cathedrals, including three hundred thousand pupils on school visits. Three of England's top five historic 'visitor attractions' are York Minster, Canterbury Cathedral and Westminster Abbey”.

(Source: Church Statistics 2003/4 & 2004/5, www.cofe.anglican.org)

This may be a rather coloured version of events and of course is presented in as positive a light as possible. Nevertheless the census data also indicate a degree of interest in religious faith which has surprised many. The 2001 census is the first in the UK to ask about religious affiliation and it reports as follows:

Figure 1: Religion Responses in the UK 2001 Census [* in Northern Ireland separate statistics for those of 'No religion' and 'not stated' are not available]

Religion	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	UK total	UK%
Buddhist	139,046	6,830	5,407	533	151,816	0.3
Christian	35,251,244	3,294,545	2,087,242	1,446,386	42,079,417	71.6
Hindu	546,982	5,564	5,439	825	558,810	1.0
Jewish	257,671	6,448	2,256	365	266,740	0.5
Muslim	1,524,887	42,557	21,739	1,943	1,591,126	2.7
Sikh	327,343	6,572	2,015	219	336,149	0.6
Other	142,811	26,974	6,909	1,143	178,837	0.3
Total	38,190,984	3,389,490	2,131,007	1,451,414	45,162,895	76.8
No Religion	7,171,332	1,394,460	537,935	*	9,103,727	15.5
Not stated	3,776,515	278,061	234,143	*	4,288,719	7.3
No religion/not stated	10,947,847	1,672,521	772,078	233,853	13,626,299	23.2

Table reproduced from InterFaith Update 21:3, the newsletter of the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom. Due to rounding percentages may not total 100%

UK census analysis also reveals an interesting story in relation to those professing faiths other than the nine 'major' traditions, or who state that they have no religion. There were 9,103,727 respondents claiming this position (15%) while a further 4,288,719 made no response at all (7.3%). At the same time, 39,127 respondents in England and Wales felt prompted (in response to an internet campaign) to indicate affiliation to the 'Jedi' or 'Jedi Knights'. A further 58 said they were 'free thinkers', 8296 were 'Humanists', 3 'internationalists', 37 'rationalists', 104 'realists', 11 'secularists' and 269 'Heathen'. This adds up to what has been described as "three dimensional [religion]: Christian, secular and religiously plural" (Beckford et al 2006 p7).

These levels of religious affiliation are similar in Canada where 24,738,945 people reported positively in their national census in the same year (see Figure 2). This represents the higher figure of 83.5% of the total population, of which, as in the UK, the majority is Christian. In Canada religious diversity goes further within the Christian tradition in particular and this makes for a significantly more differentiated Christian 'count'. The census includes sixty-three Christian denominations, of which four are Catholic (Roman, Ukrainian, Polish and 'other') and fifty-nine are Protestant¹. This reflects the fact that, unlike the UK, Canada has no established church and the Protestant and Non-conformist traditions are far more diverse within themselves. In general, though, Christians overall constitute the largest religious group in Canada by a large margin, as in the UK, followed numerically by Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, other Eastern religions (including Zoroastrianism, and Taoism and Confucianism from China and Japan) and 'other religions'. The 'mixes' are similar with Christians and Muslims forming the largest faith traditions in each country. The statistics for the other faiths also follow very comparable trajectories, though if anything Canada

¹ For a full list see *Religion (95) and Visible Minority Groups (15) for Population, for Canada, Provinces, Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas* at www.statcan.ca

demonstrates greater levels of affiliation (83.5% compared to 76.8% in the UK) and slightly broader diversity in terms of minority faiths (6.2% compared to 5.4% in the UK).

Whichever way we look at it “it is evident that between two thirds and three-quarters of British people indicate fairly consistently that they believe in some sort of God” (Davie 1999:75) and this is also true of Canada. At the same time, overall there are also significant reports of ‘no religious affiliation’ of which higher levels are reported in the UK (23.2%) than in Canada (16.5%).

Figure 2: Religion Responses in the Canadian 2001 Census

Religion/Tradition	All Canada	All Canada %
Catholic	12,936,905	43.6
Protestant	8,654,850	29.2
Christian Orthodox	479,620	1.6
Christian not included elsewhere	780,450	2.6
Muslim	579,640	1.9
Jewish	329,995	1.1
Buddhist	300,345	1.01
Hindu	297,200	1.0
Sikh	278,410	0.9
Eastern religions	37,550	0.1
Other religions	63,975	0.2
No religious affiliation	4,900,090	16.5

Source: Data derived from the table ‘Population by religion, province and territory’ (2001 Census) Ottawa: Statistics Canada, May 13, 2003. 2001 Census of Canada. Catalogue number 97F0022XCB2001005

A quick glance at the religious mix in the USA indicates high levels of religious

affiliation there, too – in fact the Christian churches are much stronger there than anywhere in Europe and there is a predominance of evangelical and Pentecostal churches.



Source: Grammich C (2004) *Many Faiths of Many Regions: continuities and changes among religious adherents across US counties* WR-211 December 2004 Working Paper of the RAND Labor and Population working paper series

Blue = 0.1-34.9% reporting religious affiliation (LOW)

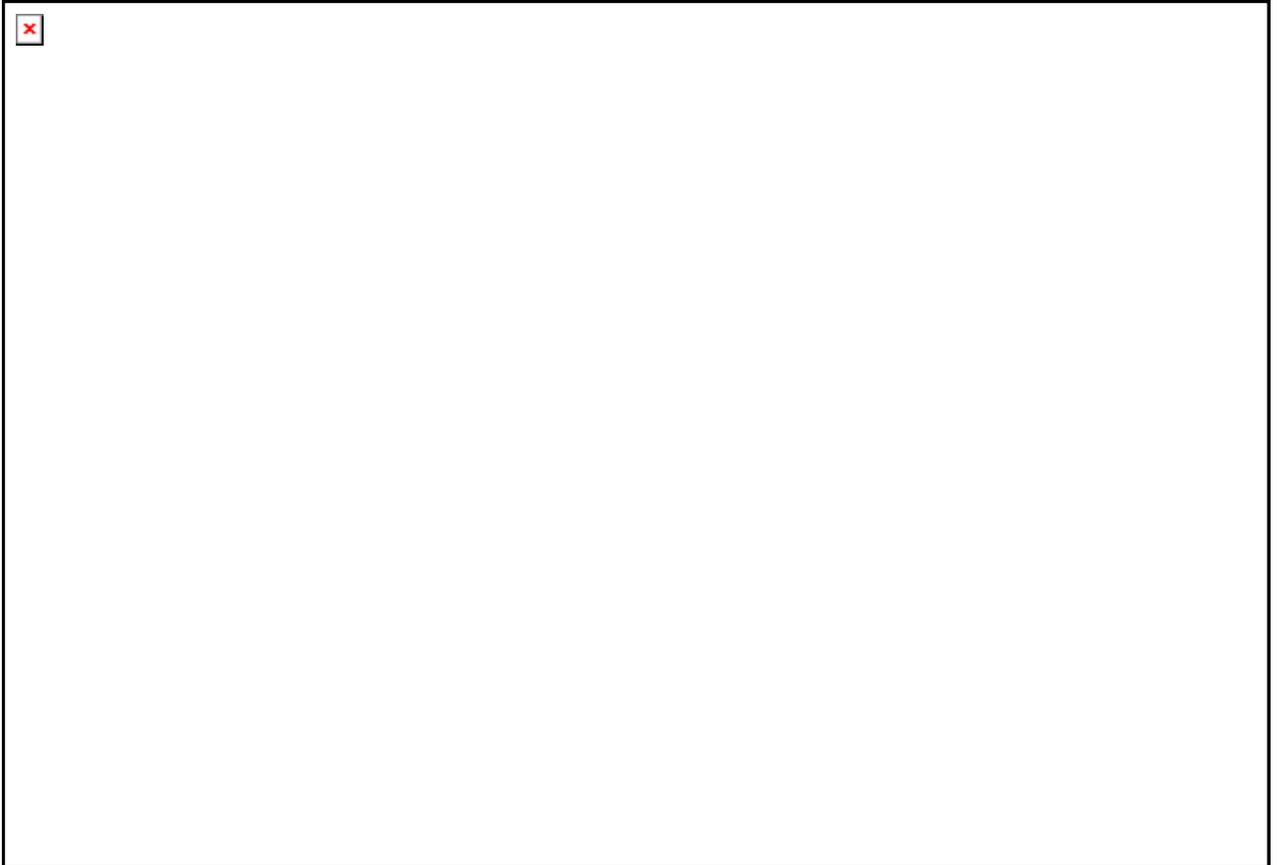
Yellow = 75%+ reporting religious affiliation (HIGH)

In the UK, figures on the faith mix in parishes are helpful in understanding the exposure of different faith traditions to each other in lived communities.

Figure 4: Distribution of population of Faiths other than Christian in England

% other Faiths	No of parishes	% all parishes
>0% to 1%	4371	35.6%
>1% to 5%	3624	29.5%
>5% to 10%	637	5.2%
>10% to 25%	554	4.5%
>25% to 50%	227	1.9%
>50%	61	0.5%
Total	9474	
Total	all	
parishes	12264	77.20%

Redistributed data from parish records mapped on to ward analyses demonstrate the mix in a number of UK cities, too. This one is in Bradford where there were street riots in 2001.



So we can see that reported levels of religious affiliation are high – around the two thirds mark in the UK (and Canada). Different faith traditions are encountering each other in their everyday communities. We should also note that there is a correlative trend between faith and ethnicity which means that exposure to different faith traditions often means exposure at the same time to different ethnicities. The challenges of multiculturalism maybe similar therefore to those of multi-faithism. Indeed in the UK, Ted Cantle has wondered whether faithism is the new racism and it has been noted how speedily the UK's 'race riots' of 2001 were recast as 'faith riots' after 9/11 in that same year.

But race and faith should not be elided or confused. They are not the same and do not necessarily correlate. The Canadian data are very helpful on this point.

Figure 8: Religion and Visible Minority Groups in Canada

Religion	Total in population overall	Chinese	South Asian	Black	Filipino	Latin American	South east Asian	Arab	West Asian	Korean	Japanese	Other visible minorities	Multiple visible minorities	Total visible minority population
Christian (Catholic)	12,936,910	120,420	75,095	176,510	252,995	148,190	41,455	33,800	3,020	24,720	4,895	23,825	24,275	930,215
Christian (Protestant)	8,654,850	92,220	30,450	274,210	33,050	30,975	7,520	3,555	1,370	32,120	17,425	16,250	10,380	549,540
Muslim	579,640	2,150	212,805	51,680	810	890	4,440	122,130	81,360	155	100	13,815	6,935	497,275
Jewish	329,990	755	660	1,455	145	540	65	730	360	105	110	240	115	5,275
Buddhist	300,345	144,555	8,630	525	275	180	93,330	40	120	3,860	12,955	1,200	10,615	276,275
Hindu	297,205	715	260,535	1,950	100	905	2,700	110	1,305	70	55	21,595	1,465	291,495
Sikh	278,415	300	272,220	170	65	25	1,870	45	315	20	30	60	595	275,715
Eastern Religions	37,545	3,230	6,500	685	80	70	1,200	305	7,425	135	745	170	800	21,170
Aboriginal Spirituality	29,820	20	585	75	0	10	20	0	0	15	10	0	0	740
Pagan	21,080	110	55	325	50	30	45	30	0	10	0	25	25	720
Unity-New Thought-Pantheist	4,000	40	0	125	0	10	10	0	0	0	15	0	0	215
New Age	1,530	10	10	20	0	25	0	0	0	0	20	0	0	60
Scientology	1,525	30	10	10	0	0	15	0	0	0	0	0	10	70
Gnostic	1,165	0	3	15	0	30	0	45	0	0	0	0	0	140
Rastafarian	1,135	10	25	585	20	10	0	10	0	0	0	60	10	710
Satanist	850	15	10	35	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	20	95
Other religions	2,870	10	65	420	0	35	10	10	0	0	10	0	15	585
No religious affiliation	4,900,095	603,15	30,610	80,430	6,990	20,775	39,915	5,435	9,940	20,040	34,660	9,320	13,875	875,095

Table derived from *Religion (95) and Visible Minority Groups (15) for Population, for Canada, Provinces, Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2001 Census – 20% Sample Data* Ottawa: Statistics Canada, May 13, 2003. 2001 Census of Canada. Catalogue number 97F0022XCB2001005.

What is also clear is that different generations within the same faith traditions may experience their faith, and its relationship to their identity and practice, in highly differentiated ways. So in this, too, youth becomes a significant dimension of the diversity of faiths and a potential flashpoint. In our Faith and Social Capital study (Furbey et al 2006), we asked several second generation immigrant faith leaders to reflect on the attitudes of their parents' generation, informed by the experience of migration to the UK some fifty years ago. They saw their own children exhibiting rather different attitudes to their own, observing that

“Today in our community the younger generations will accept individuals for who they are, irrespective of colour, creed, religious belief or cultural understanding. That fear within our elder generations is almost gone’ (African Caribbean church leader)”

(Furbey et al 2007 p31).

At the same time, the study observes that

“On various occasions leaders of all the main religions in the UK have indicated their concern at the loss of Faith among young people or, perhaps more accurately, an unwillingness on the part of young people to follow in their parents' Faith tradition. In relation to Hinduism, one woman commented: ‘I think in the way that we were brought up, on a very practical level, going to the temple, doing the worship, we didn't have the understanding. We were told stories about Ram and so on. We weren't relating that to how that impacts on our lives. We know that we shouldn't be consuming alcohol and drugs, but we don't know why. We don't know whether the religion is telling us not to do it, or whether it's customary or tradition, or because that's how it was in India or wherever.’ “

(Furbey et al 2007 p31)

This indicates the potential for a certain confusion or dislocation of faith in terms of identity and certainly our study found that often the young people we spoke to did not distinguish between ethnicity, culture and religion and in fact use these terms relatively interchangeably. This appeared to be borne out in the experiences some of them had of other people's confusion about faith and ethnicity too. The study observes that

“One of the young people remarked upon the extent of suspicion between groups at college: ‘In some cultures, I think it's a bit beyond help in a way. The college that I'm at, I hate it there because there is so much racism to the Sikhs and the Muslims. If you walk into the room you have a corner of Sikhs and a corner of Muslims and if you speak to the Sikhs then you don't speak to the Muslims on that day. You can feel the tension.’
(Christian, male)”

(Furbey et al 2007 p32)

Faiths, Diversity and Gender

These differences of experience of faith apply as much to gender as to generation and ethnicity and this, too, is an important dimension of the diversity of faiths. In our Faith and Social Capital study, many of the interviewees observed that women do most of the work in community activity but “nevertheless become less visible the further one moves from grassroots activity, and the higher one goes up the ladder of decision making” (Furbey et al 2006 p30). The study also observed that

“Women are clearly engaged in generating bonding social capital in faith organisations and were present in every venue and project visited. However, when it comes to engaging in bridging and linking, it is mainly the men who are involved, or at least it is the men who speak about this on behalf of the organisation.”

(Furbey et al 2006 p30)

This clearly suggests that the role of women in faith settings is very different from that of men. Women tend to fulfil roles which engage with one to one and face to face relationships. The focus is associational and personal. Men, on the other hand, seem to focus on the strategic and formal.

Theological Diversity

As well as numerical diversities (as shown in the census and elsewhere) and diversity on the basis of ethnicity, age and gender, faiths are also diverse in terms of their theological outlooks and missions, many of which may be correlated with some of these other factors. For example, O'Neil's work in Canada demonstrates the relationship between faith, gender and voting practices (O'Neill in Dinham et al, 2009). It would not be an exaggeration to say that for every faith tradition there is, and in turn for each denomination or 'school' within them, there will be a distinctive theological and missiological perspective informing their position in relation to engagement in public space and civil society. Sometimes these differences will be radical. Mostly they are subtle and this makes them all the more difficult to apprehend.

A key theologically-based distinction between faiths seem to lie somewhere in whether they focus on beginnings (causes), middles (events; what *happens*) and ends - what could be called 'the three 'E's': etiology, ethics and eschatology. These are categories which at a very general level are likely fundamentally to affect the ways in which different faith traditions see themselves in relation to the social, the public and the civil.

Etiology is concerned with how things began and what caused them. In some senses this is about a source, being or principle which is the precondition for existence and being. It is an ontological category which seeks to ascribe

meaning to being and, depending upon which meaning is given, being is determined therein. For example, in the earliest major Eastern traditions (Hinduism and Buddhism) the universe is made meaningful in terms of its source being the sum of all there is and its parts being its matter, in which we share. The Western traditions, on the other hand, see it in terms of a state of perfection to which we can aspire, rendering the world an arena in which that state can be practiced.

Clearly such ontological contingencies are fundamental to how we see the world and our parts in it and therefore they affect utterly the decisions we take, the values we hold and the actions which result. This, in turn, underpins our ethical engagement with the world and informs our behaviours in moral terms. What motivates us to behave in one way and not in another is, at least in part, determined by what we believe about the ethical imperatives inherent in the world we see and make meaning of. In some cases, where being is understood as governed by an almighty creator, then the ethical might be determined in terms of laws issuing from such a being and a sense of our own ontological inferiority in relation to that being. In others, an understanding of our essential unity might lead us to a different ethical conclusion – that what we must do is to act altruistically, for example, or with concern for the environment as much as for one another.

And thirdly, eschatology is concerned with questions and meanings about our destination and how we end. Different emphases may be placed on ends according to what we make of causes and ethics before hand. If this world is seen as an important and relevant arena for love and unity, our interactions with it will be radically different from those who see it as a painful holding pen, a test of endurance and moral fibre, in which we store up rewards and riches in the hereafter. These dimensions of theological thinking are an important aspect of understanding the diversity of faiths, and policy makers should not be blind to

their relevance and significance in the framing of civil society. People are motivated and will act differently according to them.

Multi Faith Working as a Basis for Peace?

These differences are often seen as flashpoints. There are a variety of intellectual and policy logics which attempt to address this: immigration, multiculturalism, integration versus assimilation, and now the multifaith society. It is easy to concentrate on the risks of difference leading to conflict and violence. But in all this, faiths themselves have been effective in celebrating their own diversity together in various and varying structures of multi and inter faith working.

The InterFaith Network for the UK 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-greifyddol Cymru and a Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum. In England, in addition all the English regions except the North-East have established regional faith fora which are engaged with structures of regional government through the Regional Assemblies (where they exist) and through the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). At local level, there are recorded details of two hundred and seven local inter-faith initiatives throughout the UK. These include three in Wales, ten in Scotland and one in Northern Ireland. In England, details of one hundred and ninety-three groups were recorded including fifteen in the East of England, fifteen in the East Midlands, thirty-eight in London, seven in the North-East, thirty in the North-West, thirty in the South-East, seventeen in the South-West, nineteen in the West Midlands and twenty-two in Yorkshire and the Humber. In itself the breadth of this activity is a clear indication of the diversity of faiths. In addition, the fact that so much interfaith activity is in existence also suggests that there are many opportunities for and examples of working together in peace.

But is working together *in* peace the same as working together *for* peace? Classic academic definitions of peace suggest that it is the absence of violence and that violence may be personal (immediate and individual) or structural (oppressions built in to the structures of community and society). It is not necessarily physical but can also apply to psychological and mental violence and to well-being, which includes spirituality. On all these counts, it is certainly possible to find examples of where faith has done violence. In the treatment of women, the role of gay people, the oppressions of hierarchy and wealth associated with the Catholic church, physical violence and so on, faith may be construed as violent. Those stories have been told many times.

But peace studies is interested in the 'nature of peace' (p ix), not just with the absence of war (Harle 1986) and it is about much more than international relations or the absence of violence. Indeed, Galtung argues that "an extended concept of violence leads to an extended concept of peace" (Galtung in Smoker 1990 p13). As Harle suggests, "We should not belittle the importance of present international issues and the dangers they present, but nor should we ignore the more general questions of human associations" (ibid p ix). The questions are how can people live together and what forms best support that? I argue here that multi-faith work has this as its central concern and can therefore be explored as a basis for structural non-violence – peace – in the communities in which it occurs.

I have explored this using primary data from nine semi-structured depth interviews with directors of each of the English regional faith fora plus one with the director of a national faith based agency, the Faith Based Regeneration Network. The interviews were in three phases: the most 'obvious' case of how multifaith fora have engaged with the government's agenda for 'prevention of violent extremism' (PVE) – what has been their experience and how do they view this agenda?; the interpersonal conciliation of difference and contests – how has this been managed and addressed in relation to PVE but also more widely in the

general impetus to work together?; and working together in communities – what is the experience of multifaith fora of how their participants use them as a platform or springboard for wider collaborative action and community building? Overall I hope to explore how working together generates and contributes to peace rather than conflict. I aim to set this within the wider context of drawing out lessons for good practice in multi-faith work as a platform for structural non-violence between people of faith and between them and others. I hope that this could stand as an English case study pointing towards good practice which could be taken up in other contexts internationally.

Recasting the language of ‘Prevention of Violent Extremism’

One of the most striking roles the faith forums see themselves as playing is in recasting the language of prevention of violent extremism and balancing it in the broader context of community cohesion.

Despite concern about the focus in policy on preventing extremist ideology rather than concentrating on the preventative nature of community work such as building leadership skills, building dialogue, multifaith forums emphasise working together in social and community action initiatives as a basis for good relations. There is also concern that more focus should be placed on capacity building for groups:

“in some ways the Prevent money would have done better to have actually worked on education of structures to have enabled people like perhaps the Imams or people from the mosques to be able to take more part in those committee structures”

There is recognition that there is work to be done to engage with those on the margins and perhaps most vulnerable to extremism or radicalisation and the

approach which is sought is one of shared community action with a strategic focus on involving the least participative or most marginalised. In practice, multi-faith forums see the 'prevent' agenda as alienating both sides,

"the Government from the way it's construed that prevent so far has potentially alienated as it were both sides, the Muslim community because they see themselves being equated with terrorism - the threat singular - and other communities thinking why just the Muslim community, we are all affected by terrorism" (SW)

Prevent is seen as exacerbated existing, cultural tensions, particularly those around issues of territory with newly arrived immigrant communities.

"it always seems that within different communities there is always a feeling that some of the others are getting things that we are not" (SW)

There is a reluctance among multi-faith forums to bid for or accept Prevent funding as a result. It is also resisted because of its focus on a single faith community (Islam) which undermines the 'Face to Face. Side by Side' principle embodied in the principle policy document. This leads to mistrust of the objectives underpinning Prevent and a deep suspicion of its surveillance dimensions

"which can be summarised around phrases like "you are selling out to the Government", "you joined Special Branch", "you are compromising what you were set up to do - you are set up as a community organisation why are you getting involved with this?" So there are those kind of tensions that I know specifically Muslim organisations particularly in this area and I'm sure elsewhere have had to face "
(SW)

There is a general view too that Prevent is creating competition between faith groups on the ground; projects that see themselves as waiting for funding see priority given to Muslim groups.

“And that has actually caused a lot of problems in communities because it’s...it introduces an element of jealousy... why should they get the funding when all they’re doing is planting a few bombs” (DF)

In this sense, Prevent is seen as working against cohesion and the work that the Fora are trying to do in bringing faith groups together. ‘Prevent’ is also seen as reinforcing the idea that terror and faith are related.

“I think it further perpetuates the image that conflict is the contribution of faith communities” (Y&H)

“it reinforces the idea that faith groups are just a whole load of trouble and much more trouble than they’re worth and that faith hasn’t got a legitimate place at the public table, it just creates division and strife.” (DF)

This plays into the hands of those who do not see faith as having a legitimate place at the public table. Some saw this as contributing to the overall negative perception of faith groups in that they are associated with many types of conflict;

“But they’re linked with other agendas which also perpetrate fear in society. So they’ll be linked with racism, they’ll be linked with immigration, they’ll be linked with fears of breakdowns in cohesion of all kinds of things.” (WM)

The involvement of faith fora has been key to influencing the Prevent agenda, both locally and nationally. In a local example, Derby Forum of faiths was able to influence how Prevent money was spent in the City,

“By saying, actually we don't want it because there's nothing there that we can do because we work across faiths, we don't just work with one faith, we work across faiths, so unless you do something with the way in which you're going to spend it, then we don't want it. And so that's what we've...that's what happened, basically.” (EM)

Another example of influence in Yorkshire * the Humber;

“We now focus much more on promoting good relations than on preventing violence, that's what we see as the agenda. And we've not up to date taken any preventing violent extremism money to do our work, although members of our board have been on the preventing violent extremism pathfinder fund board, so we have had representation on the kind of local group that distributes the money, decides strategically how it's going to be used. So we've advised on that and I think our main advice has been that the money should not be targeted on the Muslim community only, that we need to challenge all forms of extremism including political right wing extremism, and we, ourselves, are organising a conference which will take place some time later next year on challenging extremist theology, and that will focus on challenging extremist theology in all faiths.”

“Well the faith forum can do very, some very simplistic but actually getting everybody around a table at the same time that helps, because it doesn't happen very often and for instance some of the faith forum that we have formed different communities wouldn't come together any other way. So for instance it enables a discussion that's not likely to happen anywhere else, certainly not specific to faith communities anyway.” (SW)

Such work has an important role in reducing some of the tensions around Prevent. It is also seen as key to establishing a foundation which engenders good relations between faiths and thus prevents conflict.

“So I think we have a part to play in actually facilitating dialogue and building understanding and relationships of trust. I mean, the reality is that not all violence and terrorism can be laid at the door of fundamentalist Islam, in whatever shape or guise, however one wants to label it. And I think different faith communities each have issues around young people, for example, and also around theology, and we are beginning to explore both those agendas together, but you can’t start discussing difficult issues without establishing some basis for understanding and trust between groups first. So that’s what we’ve been doing” (WM)

Multi-faith Partnership as Cohesion?

Multifaith forums also see themselves as sites for negotiation. One leader observed that:

“consultation was an important principle, involvement was an important principle, taking on board what we’re being told and then taking on board what we’re telling them, and through the notes that we’ve produced after each and every meeting and so on, and the respect that we show each other, they’ve been a fantastic success. So I think the principles upon which we work have enabled conflict not to rear its ugly head” (NE)

The work of the forums is focused on conflict prevention through the building of cohesion rather than the prevention of violent extremism. In a sense this is behind the scenes work, which reduces the risk of conflict in communities, but which is not as obvious as is constructed in some ‘Prevent’ projects.

“I think all the things people do each day and however they do it to just promote good relationships, the simple gestures of welcome and hospitality and courtesy and sharing a meal with somebody and having a deep conversation about who they are and what matters to them, all those things are important and mustn't be underestimated, the value of them mustn't be underestimated” . (Y&H)

“ getting people to work together and about promoting good relations, that's how you achieve peace, that's how you prevent violent extremism. We haven't said our work is about preventing violent extremism, we've always said our work is about promoting good relationships of mutual respect and trust, if you do that then you will help to achieve peaceful communities.” (Y&H)

A key part of such conflict prevention is dialogue and multi-faith fora play an important role in getting people of different faiths together to talk. Such dialogue provides a space for airing tensions, but also paves the way for increased understanding and thus confidence to engage with other faiths.

“ So for example at our national conference in March we had about a hundred and forty participants from across all the difference faiths and we had a very interactive marketplace area and people were just talking, talking, talking and I walked through and I could hear people say things, “I never knew there were so many people from all these different faiths doing all this, sort of, stuff. We thought it was just us”. And that realisation that there are other people from your own faith that are doing things in the community, all these projects and programmes is one thing and then the realisation that people from a whole range of faiths have similar concerns about the way society is ordered about the way their communities...what's happening about what's happening in their communities and are active in similar ways to you. That's a tremendous realization” (DF)

“different communities wouldn’t come together any other way.... it enables a discussion that’s not likely to happen anywhere else”(SW)

“space for people to be able to [talk] in the hope that then when they go home they will still do” (EM)

“ because a lot of the thing is ignorance and myths, and if you can bust some of the myths and get rid of some of the ignorance, then people will sit together and talk” (EM) This educational role is very important and is extended to religious literacy training (in North East) for local authorities and work in schools.

“So just bringing people together and putting some of this out into the air, open as it were rather than being an underlying tension” (SW)

Part of this facilitation role is about helping faith groups address issues of conflict or difference before they reach crisis point. For example, the Multifaith Centre in Derby’s religious diversity training has this aim in mind;

“But what we're trying to do with some of the religious diversity stuff that we do is give people the tools to ask those difficult questions without offending the person that you're talking to, and to try and keep the emotional bit of what it is, if you like, a bit suppressed, because that's what it is, people get passionate and emotional about it and then if you're not careful they then get rude so it's giving people some of the tools, if you like, or the ideas in how they might tackle those difficult questions” (EM)

Often the faith fora are well placed to act as a neutral friend to chair discussions, both between faith groups and between them and government officials. The research shows that, although the faith fora rarely get involved in local conflicts,

faith groups value the support of the forum as a structure, knowing it was there. Where there has been more direct involvement, the informed, yet neutral stance of the faith forum was valued.

Sometimes such activity can prepare faith groups to play an important role when crises do arise. For example:

“I think whenever tensions have arisen, because of what we’ve been able to do and making links and helping establishment of good local databases, we are able to help the calling together of faith leaders whenever there is a threat in such local form. And sometimes it might be a religiously motivated crime, or it might be the actions of far right political parties, or it might simply be one particular group is in conflict with another group and some mediation’s needed” (WM)

Another example is the coming together of people of all faiths in the North East for a worldwide Hindu conference, held in Durham. Acting on the steering committee for the conference, the faiths forum helped to promote the involvement of all faiths and in this event. Such events bring faiths groups together around shared values, developing an openness to difference, to the fact that there are different cultures in the world that don’t always think the same way but do share a lot of values together,

“I think this kind of builds up a level of trust really in the region, a level of involvement between the faiths”.

Bringing people together to act

Although a large part of faith fora’s contribution to peace is through the facilitation of dialogue between and beyond faith groups, many see their focus as much more action based. Fora are key to getting people from different faiths working

together, not necessarily for interfaith work but on multifaith projects around an issue of shared interest. So in the North East, the focus has been on,

“side by side rather than face by face, if you like – we actually did things together, we engaged in projects together, and then different members within the network carried out projects on behalf of the network. And so that’s been our kind of glue, if you like, we don’t come together so much for dialogue or to talk to each other about our faiths, we come together to do things together. So it has a social action stamp really”

“And also the kind of commonality as well that there is far more that faith groups have in common ...than they have which divides them. So if you look at text for instance they all speak about the value of the earth and maintaining the planet, maybe they wouldn’t use the word sustainable but that’s what it means and so that, people come together on that..” (SW)

“when groups work together at a local level on say play provision for children or something for the elderly or because of concern about what young people are doing that...being on the streets or something like that, then when they’re working together on that, the differences that they have between different faiths and between faiths and wider society community groups, those barriers break down because they’re working on a common...for a common aim and although the differences are still there, people are able to work across those differences and I think that strengthens cohesion. It doesn’t break down the differences between people; people are still different, you’ve still got the diversity there but they’re able to work together.” (DF)

Wider structures

Advocacy role

Faith fora play an important advocacy role which operates in a number of ways. They are a conduit between faith groups and government, providing a route for faith groups engagement at strategic levels. Although the fora do not claim to represent all faiths or any in their entirety, they do represent faith at regional level. They are the first port of call when government want to engage with faith communities. ,

“Here we are, if you want to do business with faith communities, this is where you start”. (NW)

They often act as a conduit between faith groups and policy levels, as a channel of communication and representation and in influencing policy. The way that the West Midlands has been involved with the Prevent agenda provides an example of the way the forum works in strategic partnerships,

“ as a regional faiths forum we’ve engaged with the Government office. We’ve also engaged with a whole range of different partners including the police and the local authorities. So it’s been inevitable that we’ve been drawn into the Prevent agenda, and working with the people who have been delivering Prevent. We’re also well aware of groups within the compass of the faiths, who are raising grant money, and we’ve also worked with them, and we wouldn’t stop working with them. So at that level we’ve been very involved. And at each, the different consultations from Government, for example, around the face-to-face, side-by-side framework that was issued to us in consultation before that, and we’ve made our views around Prevent known in that process as well”. (WM)

Here the forum’s advocacy role answers a need expressed by faith communities;

“that piece of research [Ben Cairns for Centre For Voluntary Action And Research at Aston University, into feasibility of faiths forum] showed, following a lot of consultation across the region with faiths, was that faiths primarily wanted the Faiths Forum to occupy an advocacy role. It didn’t want us to be running projects for Government, or to be the mouthpiece of Government, but actually wanted to be articulating the position of faiths in the civil space, if you like, and to engage with regional policies, that kind of thing. And that was our main mandate, and that was a strong message.” (WM)

Influencing strategic policy levels/structures – helping to ensure that the policy environment supports what’s happening at the local level. For example, engagement with regional economic strategies, enables Fora to represent the concerns of faith communities in the region. An example of this in practice is the West Midlands faiths forum’s opposition to super casinos in the region.

“We expose our members, and through them their memberships, to hearing about political policy. So, you know, we’ve had Steven Timms speak to us recently. We’ve had a Conservative candidate come and speak to us. We’ll have a Liberal Democrat candidate in a month or so.” (EE)

This role is perhaps particularly important given that faiths are not structured at the regional level;

“So we’re using our regional presence to try and be a channel between national and local”. (EE)

They are a path of communication between and beyond faith groups

Brokering partnerships

Fora are well placed to support new partnerships between faith groups and other bodies in the region, feeding people into existing structures and facilitating the development of new partnerships. For example in the NW,

“[Faith] buildings are often heritage buildings and historic and...they can make a contribution to tourism strategies and the whole heritage industry and it's helping faith communities to get wise on seeing the visitor potential and their contribution to the visitor economy, but also to get the tourist people to work in partnership with faith communities as a potential, you know, as serious partners.

Fora themselves are increasingly working in partnerships across the regions as they become more established. For example in Yorkshire & the Humber;

“I think people do want to make use of the regional faith forum and feel that we have got a little bit of authority in the region, and so a number of organisations want to link up with us and to use us as potential partners in their work. So most of our work next year is going to be in partnership with other organisations because they feel that linking up with us gives them a bit of a kudos and credibility and they can have a wider reach. So we're working, for example, with Yorkshire and Humber Improvement Partnership and they are the group who promote dignity champions amongst older people and also work closely with Age Concern”

Promoting the role of faith in public life

Another dimension to this advocacy role is the promotion of faith in the public realm, of its legitimate place at the table. Part of this is ensuring that faith groups hold a place in local and regional partnerships where competition may threaten

this place. There was a feeling that faith is often sidelined and viewed with suspicion, even among those who would consider themselves promoters of the equalities agenda. The forums demonstrate the positive contribution of faith communities and they have done so with the publication of several reports . Such research not only demonstrates the economic impact to society (such as in NW) but also demonstrates good practice, providing evidence for faith's contribution to the region.

“ It's about promoting positive things about faith communities and with relationships.... And because the mantra is economic improvement we decided to do some research on the economic contribution of faith communities, and our research has revealed that somewhere around three hundred million pounds a year is contributed to the region, the economy, by faith communities. So our contribution has been consistently to talk about the positive contribution of faith communities”
(Y&H)

The outcomes of faith based action can be translated into the language of statutory bodies to demonstrate that contribution and, in the case of research in the North West, measuring the 'added value' provided by faiths. Forums can provide a platform for rolling out the faith agenda.

“it's not as if we're trying to say, “hey faith communities, get your finger out and get working in the community, you can help us”., which can be the tendency of Statutory Bodies. We're saying, “we're doing what we've always done”.

An important part of this in terms of a contribution to nonviolence is the showcasing of solidarity and the demonstration of cohesion between faiths.

“I think the kind of messages that we get across to people, through the kind of Hindu event ... that kind of event does make a difference, in these days of extremism and fundamentalism it’s important for somebody out there to say, you know, being a football supporter – a Middlesbrough supporter in my case – doesn’t make me a football hooligan. So being a person of faith doesn’t make me a fanatic or a fundamentalist. And for people to hear that message again and again is important. And the various platforms that we get to say that, in different forms – A, by coming together; secondly by speaking the message – that’s effective, I think.”
(NE)

Fora can also play an educative role in terms of engaging with faith communities and are often involved in providing training for local authorities, through faith literacy programs. The North East’s Engaging with Faiths Training Programme is such an example, working with all local authorities in the region;

“we met ... a dozen times altogether, with local authorities to explore the face-to-face and side-by-side framework with them, to explore how they actually do engage with faith communities and just to share with each other and discuss with each other how they can make each other better, how they can improve what they’re doing in terms of their council strategies and so on, and practices.” (NE)

Challenges to role

Problems of representation – cannot represent all faiths. Imbalance of different faiths capacity to engage with structures.

Independence of forum

Limits to influence -

The construction and make-up of forum

Differing origins of faith fora and differences in their constitution may have effect on approach to this.

Some are more focused on action than others, which see their role as more strategic. However, all do facilitate social action, some more directly than others.

Different approaches to interfaith

Differences between cities/Regions

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