**DRAFT – NOT FOR PUBLICATION**

**Building a society for the future: bridges and bonds in the East Midlands?**

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**Responders: Paul Weller, Derby University and**
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Thank you for the invitation to speak.

It is a great privilege to be helping to celebrate today the enormous contribution that faiths make to society in this first 'Interfaith Week'.

It is wonderful, too, that it has come about as a result of so much hard work over many years which is now being recognized at the highest levels in government.

It is recognised, too, in the academic world of social science which I inhabit, which has been so skeptical about religion in recent times. Journals, publishers and research councils have all been increasingly welcoming of faith and religion research in the social sciences. I think that is incredibly important – and a relief to those of us who have been working in this field for a good while - and well reflected in this setting of the UK's only university-based dedicated multi-faith centre.

The interest in faith as a public category remains a great surprise to many. The assumptions of some of my colleagues in the social sciences have been greatly challenged – when Peter Berger commented in 1968 that…

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"the world today, with some exceptions, is as furiously religious as it ever was" (Berger 1996, p3). SLIDE

Politicians, too, are no doubt surprised by the power of faith as a public issue. I have suggested elsewhere that this has been driven by at least three things and I will briefly say what they are, and see if they seem familiar to you:

First, a perception that faiths are repositories of resources which can be turned to the public good – buildings, staff, volunteers, networks and, yes, even money! And I guess there are those here today who have wondered about the extent to which it is wise or right to connect with a public policy which sees faith as 'useful' in these ways.

Second, the idea that faith communities are good at community – which is usually called 'cohesion' these days. And community and cohesion are usually seen as the same things, which of course they're not.

Another way of putting this is that faith groups are seen as containing and sustaining social capital. Hence the emphasis in Face to Face on 'bridging' and 'linking'. It is striking how important this idea of social capital has become in shaping approaches to working with faiths. I will say more about that later.

And third, faiths at the margins are understood at the same time as capable of dividing and damaging society through acts of dissent and even violence, driven

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And third, faiths at the margins are understood at the same time as capable of dividing and damaging society through acts of dissent and even violence, driven

by extremism. Certainly 9/11 and 7/7 helped focus the minds of many on the role and place of religion in society, locally, nationally and globally.

Each of these concerns is there in the background to Face to Face, Side by Side PICTURE SLIDE, which describes itself as a "framework for partnership in our multifaith society". It is, of course, part of the reason that we're here – it is in this document that government undertook to:

> "work in partnership with the InterFaith Network for the UK to support an Interfaith week." (CLG 2008, p10) SLIDE

And here we are! And it goes on to say that

> "This will encourage communities at national, regional and local levels to hold events to celebrate and raise awareness of the positive interfaith work that is being undertaken everywhere" (CLG 2008, p10) SLIDE

And celebration should certainly be a big part of today. There is much to celebrate. We know that there is a lot of interfaith activity in the UK. In 2007 the Interfaith Network recorded 25 IF organizations operating at national level. In England all the regions except the NE have a Faiths Forum. There are at least 207 local interfaith initiatives, including 10 in Scotland, 3 in Wales and 1 in Northern Ireland. 15 of those are in the East Midlands. [I need to update these figures using the 2009 directory]

We know too that much of this predates the current policy interest in faiths. Others have been 'called in to being' by it.

Some of this reflects the aim of 'creat[ing]new opportunities to build relationships' envisaged in Face to Face. Paul Weller has traced the evolution of these initiatives in three main phases: an early interfaith phase which began at

international rather than national or local levels, for example the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and the First International Assembly of the World Fellowship of Faiths, also in Chicago, in 1933. He sees this as a period of interfaith work on the periphery, suggesting this is:

> "one of the unintended by-products of colonial and imperial projects: they became catalysts for a growth in consciousness about religious diversity" (Weller in Dinham et al 2009, p66).

He sees a second phase as driven by immigration and pluralism so that:

> "As the population diversified…the challenge of living together…pressed 'mainstream' religious communities and groups to develop pragmatic ways of working and cooperating with one another" (Weller in Dinham et al 2009, p67).

This is the period in which bodies emerge such as Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, the Churches' Commission for Inter-Faith Relations, and of course in 1987 the InterFaith Network for the UK was founded.

And then there is the current phase in which, as we've all been noticing, there has been an acceleration of interfaith and multifaith activity – which started, perhaps, with the founding of the Inner Cities Religious Council.

Alongside this there has been a shift away from the language of multiculturalism - which promoted tolerance between the 'many cultures' in British society. Ted Cantle has said that we are in a "moment of transition" (Cantle 2007) between models. He suggests the idea of 'community cohesion' instead, a now familiar policy theme and a model which goes beyond tolerance to something more together and common. Parekh and Modood talk as well, not of tolerance but of respect – informed by knowledge and relationships and understanding. So we

thought we were in a multicultural society. We then moved to 'cohesion'. We now find ourselves, in the words of the framework, in a multi-faith society. Many faiths. One society. How to work together?

The framework which has called us together today is the most comprehensive policy answer so far, but it poses some very interesting and difficult challenges.

One is the importance of knowing what exactly it is that we are celebrating so that we can make sure we keep doing it – and better – and more of it! This is difficult because we don't share a language for thinking about, measuring, or describing what we do. This became abundantly clear in a review of regional evidence bases we conducted in 2006. Taken altogether the categories used by all the regional research in the 5 years preceding our review numbered at least 48. And when you look at them carefully it is pretty well impossible to know exactly – or in some cases even vaguely – what they actually mean. SLIDE

What I want to do in the rest of my time is to try to draw out some of the other challenges which follow. I'll try to raise a number of questions. I offer no answers! But I hope it will get the ball rolling for what looks like a really interesting program for the day.

What Face to Face envisages is two kinds of partnership – face to face interfaith dialogue and side by side social action.

First some thoughts about these 'headlines' – Face to Face, Side by Side: a framework for our multifaith society.

The first thing to note is that *interfaith* social action is distinct from *faith based social* action, which may or may not be interfaith. These categories may seem arcane to policy makers but they carry a high degree of practical meaning in faith communities.

The framework is not always crystal clear whether it means one or the other or both. Research we conducted in 2008 with people of faith tells us that the idea of 'faith based social action' is preferred because it includes interfaith social action as well as social action initiated in single faith settings.

That is important because it is often assumed that single faith settings are shut off from bridging and linking for social capital – that they simply don't make such links outside of themselves. But we should note, too, that, even in such settings, there can be, and often is, significant bridging and linking activities with others in wider society. It has been observed therefore that

> "Members of single faith groups were often from different parts of the same town, of different ages, different genders, different sub-religious groups or different national or sub-national ethnic groups"
>
> (James 2007 p70).

And there is plenty of evidence that they bridge and link too. This is often overlooked because of suspicion that single faith groups are motivated by an unchecked desire to evangelise. Why would they want to work with others when what they really hope to do is convert them? Experience shows that this is rarely the case in relation to social action.

Indeed, beneficiaries of activities arising out of single faith settings frequently include people of other faiths and none. Therefore, as well as interfaith social action, it is important to recognize that activities arising out of single faith settings should also be regarded as an important and legitimate part of faith based social action.

So a framework for a multifaith society should recognize that a multifaith society is not achieved only through self-consciously multifaith work. Single faith activities are in the mix too.

A second key issue is that 'dialogue' is a distinct activity from 'social action' and the relationship between the two varies widely. In some cases the one is rooted in the other. Elsewhere dialogue and social action are completely unrelated. While the two may overlap, complement or coincide they can at the same time be quite distinct and happen independently.

Both social action and dialogue may be beneficial to relationships within, between and beyond faith traditions. For some, 'doing' together is enough. For others 'talking' together is enough. And for many, the space to engage in dialogue becomes a basis for their social action.

Baker and Skinner (2006:4-5) have something to say about this in their development of the idea of social capital in which they talk about spiritual and religious capital.

Religious capital "is the practical contribution to local and national life made by faith groups". SLIDE. This relates to the practical actions and resources FBOs contribute in the spaces of civil society.

Spiritual capital "energises religious capital by providing a theological identity and worshipping tradition, but also a value system, moral vision and a basis of faith." SLIDE. This relates to the motivation of FBOs to act in civil society.

So where reflective dialogue does *not* happen this may not be because it is not seen as important.  It may be a result of a lack of resources and it is often felt that potential for social action is unfulfilled or limited as a result.

And vice versa, we should not assume that where faith groups *are* focused on dialogue, this is *instead* of action, or at least slows it down. If Baker and Skinner are right, the action (religious capital) is underpinned by the dialogue.

But to reverse the equation, this raises the question, is dialogue the only route to 'spiritual capital' and, in turn, do we need 'spiritual capital' in order to proceed to social action? We might argue that people of faith often resource themselves spiritually, alone, in acts of contemplation, meditation and solitary prayerfulness. This does not in itself contribute to social capital. Others might say that people of faith are wasting time in dialogue and the crucial thing is to get on with action.

Others still may be concerned about breaching the relationship between dialogue and social action, worried that it amounts to 'opening mouth before engaging brain'.

For that matter, some might say that religious people who do social action never act independently of some form of dialogue because they are constantly appealing to the deity, supreme principle or values of their belief systems. Dialogue can be within the self (with God) and still resource social action. But how would this contribute to strengthened social capital between faiths and others?

What does seem clear is that, of great importance to faiths is that government and other partners take seriously the relationship between their spiritual and their religious capital – their faith and their action.

One is often grounded in the other and there is very strong feeling amongst faiths about the importance of policy nurturing – or at least respecting - both rather than 'taking' the social or religious capital without acknowledging or understanding the spiritual capital that sometimes underpins it. They might argue that anything else is to kill the golden goose.

And that leads me to the substance of the framework itself. As I've been saying, absolutely central to the framework is the idea of social capital. Indeed, it says on p22 that:

> "We drew upon…research carried out by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation into social capital within faith communities to identify a number of building blocks…" (CLG 2008, p22).

Those building blocks are, of course, the organizing themes for today. And it's research I know very well because I was one of the researchers, so I feel quite well qualified to offer a critique of how it is used in the framework.

The first thing about 'social capital' generally is that it can be in a hurry to get 'spent'. There is a sense in which the multifaith framework expects faith groups to generate social capital and spend it on the things that society values, preferably to a timetable which allows policy makers to demonstrate clear and timely change for the better.

The second is that 'what society values' may not always be the same as the things that faith groups within society value. I have suggested in other settings that, far from being a source of tension, this has the potential to make faiths 'a positive disruptive presence' (Dinham & Lowndes 2009), bringing a broader or alternative canvas of concerns to the public table. It surely makes policy makers and public sector partners sit up that bit more when they are invited to consider ideas like 'neighbourhood' through, say, a theological notion like love, generosity or compassion, for example.

But on the other hand, we have found that faith groups are sometimes anxious about finding themselves rail-roaded into responding to public policy demands

and some are worried about how that could affect or change their faith community.

Third, the framework says that it hopes to "encourage inter faith dialogue which builds understanding and celebrates the values held in common…" (CLG 2008, p21).

But 'commonality' is open to challenge. The reality is that we have to recognize the sheer range and diversity of faiths – this requires a highly nuanced understanding and a recognition that different faiths – and traditions within them – and particular congregations and settings within *them* – are not the same and may have very little in common. They are highly situated, contingent and located in the differing realities of personalities, theologies, biographies, histories, poverties, needs, desires and hopes of people.

It is probably a controversial thing to say in interfaith week but the tendency of state to want to universalize and make things 'handleable' can, I think, be a source of harm, injustice and oppression where it seeks to smooth out difference rather than work with it. Partnerships based on respect for difference are much more likely to succeed than those which believe there are no differences – or which emphasise only commonalities.

Indeed there are those who reject the very idea that faiths share common values at all, saying that this romanticizes them and imposes upon them a particular reading which reflects Western ideals of liberalism and democracy.

In addition, while the aim to "create more opportunities for people to come together and understand what they hold in common" (CLG 2008, p21) may be a good one, I suspect that the people most in need of such opportunities may be least likely to take them up - by coming, for example, to an event like this one.

Indeed, we found in our Joseph Rowntree study that some faith communities can bond so tightly, within their buildings and more widely in their associational spaces, that they never move on to bridging and linking and in some cases may resist attempts to do so. This has sometimes been called the 'dark side' of social capital.

And of course, there has been much talk of 'religious literacy' as a tool for bridging between differences. To be religiously fluent across the whole range of possibilities is almost certainly impossible, at least for most of us. Maybe we can find a language for finding out about each other sensitively and with care and perhaps that is the best we can hope for as a basis for respect. At the same time, assuming that faiths can always find common ground if they look hard enough or in the right places, is a risky business. When we use the framework we need to be careful about this.

A multi-faith framework must recognize that some of the 'multi' or 'many' will have very different ideas to those sought in the language of social capital, bonding, bridging, and cohesion.

There are also all sorts of degrees and types of belief. We know that the growing trend in Europe and Canada is towards 'believing without belonging' (Davie 1993). And there is a concurrent growth in spiritualistic faiths. OTOH, in the US there is a growth in 'belonging' which Pippa Norris has linked to existential anxiety and psychological insecurity based in wealth gaps, the nuclear threat and environmental fragility!

At the same time, the status of religion and belief is contested – so that there are debates, as we know, about the relative status of traditions, and beliefs such as humanism, and the privileging of some religious beliefs over others in public policy.

Debates about the use of these terms and the contexts in which they are deployed range around a number of key issues and I want to pose these as challenges or questions to be asked when engaging in interfaith or multifaith work partnership: SLIDE

- The 'usefulness' of faiths is a key starting point of the public policy view. To what extent do faith groups accept this view of themselves as 'repositories or resources' for wider social good? And what impact might this have upon the life of their community?

- Faiths have a long tradition of being 'useful' but they also see themselves in terms of the experiences lived by individuals and groups standing in a tradition of their own. Surely they feel strongly that this should be understood and respected. How should groups preserve the community spirit which defines them whilst also turning their attention to policy demands and imperatives?

- A defining characteristic of faith is belief, an obvious factor but one which is often overlooked – the starting points and values of belief must be respected as well as what faiths can 'offer'. Is THIS the role of 'interfaith dialogue' and must it precede 'social action'?

- Partnership is not only between different faith traditions but between faith traditions and others in the public realm. Do we need to move beyond interfaith dialogue and social action to a more general approach to getting everybody more 'religiously literate'?

- The idea of 'faith' takes some starting points which may be unfamiliar to a public or policy partner:
  - 'faith' is often expressed in terms of stories, experiences and values and these may be articulated in their own distinctive 'languages'
  - fellowship and worship within traditions are important aspects of faith as well as the practice of social action and engagement in interfaith dialogue.

  How can we sustain the links between worship, congregational

community, and interfaith dialogue as a basis for our action? And how do we communicate the importance of these things to partners outside of faiths in a way which they can value?

- There can be discontinuity as well as continuity between the various 'parts' of faith communities – leaders, representatives, projects, volunteers and worshippers may or may not have very much to do with one another even though they are all based within the same church, mosque or other religious centre. We may think we're building inclusive relationshipswhen whole strands or constituencies are in fact 'missing'.

- There are many very good examples of faith based social action which is NOT interfaith or multi-faith, even though it may benefit or work with people of other faiths or none. What part should single faith activities play in a framework for partnership which is explicitly about a 'multifaith' society?

But to return to celebrations – it may be of great importance to society that people of faith enter in to dialogue, face to face. In best-case scenarios, they may learn about each other's commonalities and demystify the differences, even if disagreements and dissent persist. As a researcher it is something I would like to see much more evidence and exploration about, especially in terms of whether such encounter really leads to the tolerance and respect envisaged in a 'multifaith society'.

Such research and evidence is already clear that people of faith work together in social action across differences, 'side by side', in a great many settings. It would be helpful to explore what happens in these encounters too.

What remains is an important question about the relationship *between* interfaith dialogue and social action. Does one necessarily precede the other? Is social action that *isn't* rooted in dialogue somehow worse, or less effective?  If it's better when it is  'rooted' like this, why should this be so? What are the things that we

should talk about in our interfaith encounters that would maximize the strengths of partnership in the 'multifaith society'?  Or maybe it's a simple case of 'and/or' – whether through dialogue, action, or both, doing *something* together is better than nothing. Perhaps we can put some flesh on those bones during the rest of the day.

Thank you.