

Faith in politics

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Abstract

Civil society is often seen as providing a social foundation from which to combat injustices perpetuated by the state and the corporate sector. Faith institutions are an integral and often overlooked component of this abstract civil society. In this paper, we argue that faith has an important role to play in offering answers to the challenges posed by increasing inequalities and urban injustice. The major faith traditions share a commitment to ‘looking out’ to the wider community, and testing faith through action. While this is often expressed as charity, service provision or inter-faith dialogue, there is also the potential to politicise this impetus to engage. At present faith institutions have been encouraged to get involved in ‘community cohesion’ and ‘regeneration’ schemes in urban areas, but we argue there is scope for faith organisations to develop a much more independent form of political engagement within their local communities. We use the example of London Citizens, a broad-based organisation, to suggest that there is an alternative political route for faith institutions with an emphasis on the battle for justice. London Citizens is an alliance of about 80 civil society institutions, predominantly from the faith sector, but it also includes labour, educational and community-based organisations. It now has a decade of organising under its belt and the paper explores the basis on which people of faith join the alliance, how they work together and the effects this politicisation has on the institutions and people involved.

Introduction

Whether explored in terms of ‘globalisation’ or ‘post-Fordism’, the changing economic and political landscape has meant that academics have been re-reading and re-imagining civil society in overtly political ways. The contemporary academic literature on civil society as a set of socio-political spaces is often framed in the context of a changing world in which global networks are more powerful than nation-

states. In the late 20th century particular changes led to the academic Left abandoning the idea that politics was about the struggle over the nation-state. In light of the collapse of Soviet communism, and with it, the collapse of state socialism as a desirable ideology, the Left was forced to reconsider progressive politics. Stirred by the role that civil society played in the collapse of Eastern European regimes, Left academia in a post-communist era began to pay close attention and champion the political agency of non-state actors that were not necessarily organised on a national scale. The notion of ‘civil society’ – and particularly urban-based civil society – gained momentum as a political ideal (Amin et al: 2000, Amin & Thrift: 2002).

While the world was changing in Eastern Europe, elsewhere, the post-war consensus of Western capitalist nations was eroding. The welfare state was being rolled back which meant the role and coherence of the nation-state, the centre for delivering services, was being called into question. On both Eastern and Western fronts, the nation-state was being reconfigured, fragmented and de-legitimised (for better or for worse). If the state, and therefore by extension political parties, was no longer desirable or relevant, what would be the new terrains and who would be the new actors of struggle?

In this paper we provide an overview of these debates highlighting the need to address faith organisations in debates about the political possibilities of civil society organisations. While much attention has been paid to exclusionary faith-based politics that tends to polarise, such as the Christian Right in the USA and Islamic fundamentalism, we argue that there is another, largely overlooked, form of politicisation that can be developed in faith organisations: one based on fighting injustice with other civil society organisations. Moreover, in a country like Britain, government is increasingly dedicated to engaging faith organisations in urban regeneration partnerships as part of wider efforts to foster community cohesion, but this poses the risks of both co-opting and de-politicising the organisations involved. Drawing on the experience of London Citizens, an alliance of about 80 civil society institutions, predominantly from the faith sector, but also including labour, educational and community-based organisations, we look at an alternative route to political engagement. London Citizens now has a decade of organising under its belt and the paper explores the basis on which people of faith join the alliance, how

difference is managed and the effects this politicisation has on the institutions and people involved.

In what follows we review the literature about the political potential of civil society with a view to including faith organisations more centrally in the debate. We then look in more detail at contemporary efforts to engage faith organisations in urban policy making and argue that broad-based organising offers an alternative route to engagement. In the latter parts of the paper we draw on original research material collated through our involvement in London Citizens to explore the basis on which faith organisations engage in the organisation, how their differences are managed and the implications this has for the organisations and individuals involved.

Faith in civil society

The democratic possibility of cities has been a consistent preoccupation for political geographers in recent years (Amin & Thrift: 2002 Amin et al: 2000). Amin et al (2000) look for spaces of democracy beyond the democratic state and formal representative politics, and find democratic promise in what they see as the rich and complex associational life characteristic of cities. In a similar vein, Habermas points to “the forms of interchange and organisation, the institutionalisations of support of a public sphere unsubverted by power” (1992, 453) as being vital to a healthy political culture. Habermas is talking about civil society and while the definition of civil society may cause some controversy, there is a common understanding that it comprises the realm of associational institutions that are outside the state and the market. We want to use this idea of civil society and its elements, which have been referred to as ‘associationalism’ and ‘social capital’ by different theorists to examine the possibilities of the revitalisation of democratic publics in the city. While it can be argued that the voluntary organisations that constitute civil society “are not directly political in character” (Leca: 1992, 21), it is also clear that the institutions and individuals of civil society can become politicised. Moreover, theoreticians of democracy regularly point to the ways in which the political process is founded upon the skills, experiences and connections made possible through civil society. The networks of civil society are argued to be the places where people learn, practice and

develop civility, without which democratic politics would be impossible (Warren, 2001).

Michael Walzer (1992, 89) argues that ‘civil society’ is the: “space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology that fill this space.” Examples typically include faith institutions, labour unions, political parties, social movements, independent media, sport clubs, citizens’ groups, pressure groups, and housing co-operatives, which are all arguably hallmarks of urban life. In the associational networks of civil society, groups of people communicate with each other, share experiences, identify individual and collective needs and develop decision-making processes. Civil society makes democratic politics accessible; participation is not defined by intensity but simply by association and given this association, people can be engaged. Moreover, the permanence of civic associations, based on people’s daily lives is argued to be an antidote to the “sullen indifference, fear, despair, apathy, and withdrawal” (Walzer: 1992, 105) that characterises the political landscape today.

This said however, the challenge remains to politicise civil society in such a way to foster engagement. Not only does this depend upon the strength and density of associational networks, but also upon the form of political engagement on offer. It is now widely accepted that in Western societies, like the UK and the USA, there has been a sharp weakening of associational connections, and an erosion of political engagement, particularly amongst the poorest parts of the population. Indeed, Robert Putnam (2000) identifies the decline of civil association as one of the defining features of early 21st Century Western society and he argues that this decline has profound implications for the democratic possibilities of civil society. Tracing different forms of citizen involvement since the 1970s to the end of the century in the USA, Putnam found that although there has been an increase in the education and skills that cultivate associational life, there had also been a marked decrease in civic engagement. As he put it: “fewer and fewer... [people] took part in the everyday deliberations that constitute grassroots democracy” (2000, 43). He argues that there was a decline of more than a third of America’s civic infrastructure between the mid 1970s and the mid 1990s. Alarming, while financial investment in US politics increased, relational political activity, “those political activities that brought citizens

together, those activities that most clearly embody social capital” (Putnam: 2000, 45) are the forms of civic engagement that have declined more rapidly. Although Putnam finds an impressive increase in the number of voluntary organisations, these “proliferating new organisations are professionally staffed advocacy organisations, not member-centred, locally based associations” (2000, 51). It is politics based on people’s self-organisation that has declined. Putnam describes the result as a ‘hollowing out’ of institutions (72); the institutional surface may appear undamaged, but the very quality that make the institutions of civil society what they are, their associationalism, is fractured.

It is significant that Putnam finds religion to be one of the few remaining generators of strong social connections. Yet despite this, faith does not feature strongly in academic debate about the role of civil society in the political life of Western cities. As Bridge & Watson (2003) point out, most work on ‘city publics’ have been conducted within a secular framework perhaps reflecting the interests of academics rather than realities of urban life.ⁱ This is despite the fact that faith is very important to urban life and civil society, particularly amongst immigrant communities. Statistically, Putnam finds religiosity to be a strong correlate of civic engagement and the philanthropy and voluntarism characteristic of church life (and faith institutions more generally) is more productive of ‘connectedness’ than many non-faith traditions. Of course, it might be that the role the church plays in civil society is particular to American culture in that “[it] has provided the organisational and philosophical bases for a wide range of powerful social movements” (Putnam: 2000, 68), but this situation is changing in places like London.ⁱⁱ As evidenced by the impact of anti-debt and fair trade campaigns such as Jubilee 2000 and Make Poverty History, and the anti-war movement, it is clear that faith organisations have both the values and people necessary to organise over matters of social and economic justice.

Moreover, at a time when there is increasing concern about the democratic deficit in Britain’s poorest communities, faith organisations become ever more salient as one of the few vital points of association that still exist on the ground. In their recent Citizen Audit, Charles Pattie and his colleagues (Pattie et al., 2004), for example, found very

clear correlations between income, occupational status, level of education and democratic engagement. The richer, better educated and highest achievers – particularly middle-aged men – were more likely to vote, take part in political activity, have active membership in civil society organisations, and have an interest in and knowledge about politics (for similar trends in patterns of social capital more generally, see Li et al., 2002). Politics is now, more than ever, dominated by middle class people who tend to be atomised citizens, working alone or in temporary alliances while the poorest are largely excluded (Pattie et al., 2004, 275; see also Rogers, 2004).

In inner cities, the decline in trade union organisation and falling membership of political parties have had very damaging effects upon the participation of working class people in public life (see Parry et al., 1992; Power Inquiry, 2006; The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society, 2004). As working class associations have declined, there are fewer opportunities for the powerless to engage in public and political life (and this is not unrelated to the widespread disrespect of working class life and culture that is now endemic to the UK, see Haylett, 2003; Mount, 2004; Skeggs, 2004). Thus in a city like London where membership of trade unions and political parties has declined and the traditions of association at branch meetings have declined even further, faith organisations represent one of the only opportunities for poorer citizens to associate, take on leadership roles and work with others to engage in the world.

Of course, there is a danger that without attention to a politics of difference, associational networks can be uncritically championed. Often these networks may not be overtly violent as in the case of ‘Islamic modernities’ (Watts: 1999) but they may well perpetuate cultural and social inequalities and exclusion, such as homophobia or sexism. Bonnie Honig (1996, 277), for example, is critical of Walzer’s view of association as a “conflict-free”, underplaying the importance of difference. Faith organisations are often strongly criticised for perpetuating classism, racism, sexism and homophobia and acting in defence of the status quo. But while this may well be true, it is a one-dimensional and solely critical understanding of faith institutions, ill-suited to analysis at a time when faith organisations are emerging to play a much more prominent role in urban civil society. Faith institutions are conflicted spaces that

contain radicalism alongside reaction. We do not seek to ignore these contradictions even if this were possible. However, we would also argue that it is time academics paid greater attention to the role of faith organisations in civil society and the ways in which faith can be a positive base from which to connect across difference.

It is well known that politics in cities *has* to engage across difference. In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, for example, Iris Marion Young (1990) warns of privileging face-to-face associations and advocates a politics based on the ‘being together’ of strangers who are different and unfamiliar. In a similar vein, Holston and Appadurai (1999, 2) highlight “the nonlocal, the strange, the mixed and the public” in cities. But the question then remains whether and to what extent, it is possible to foster strong associations that are able to work with and across difference in progressive rather than exclusionary ways. And in so doing, the extent to which they can contribute to democratic life in the city.

In this paper, we address these questions in relation to faith institutions as a central component of civil society. Faith institutions do not have an inherently political nature. They have to be politicised and the nature of this politicisation and its geographical imagination is critical to the future of politics in cities today. In what follows we explore the limitations to the ways in which neo-liberal governments are trying to engage faith communities in cities today before going on to explore an alternative as exemplified in the work of London Citizens, a British broad-based organisation.

Faith and civic engagement

The British Government has increasingly recognised the role and potential of faith communities in the life and politics of the inner city. During the 1990s, New Labour re-invented a discourse of community participation around their local government policies and plans for urban regeneration. The Government has promoted the idea of ‘partnerships’ as a way in which local people would be ‘key partners’ in the implementation and delivery of services directed at social exclusion. Whereas some commentators have commended these initiatives (Pearson & Craig: 2001, Stocker: 2004, Mayer: 1993, 2001), others have been much less positive (Pierson, J.: 2001, North & Bruegel: 2001, Miller: 2001, Quilley: 1999, Cochrane: 1996). However, the

key factor is the way in which participation is circumscribed to meet the needs of the powerful. There is no space for local people to set their own agenda and develop their own views about what needs to be done.

Indeed, while the Government has called for increased community participation and empowerment, expressing a desire to include faith groups along with other communities in urban policy making and civic life, the terms of engagement and the opportunities for decision making are extremely limited. Cities like Manchester and Sheffield where elected politicians once led struggles around popular democratisation (Lowe: 1986, Quilley: 1999) are now characterised by depoliticised governance where decision-making processes are devoid of contestation and struggle. People's voices are now channelled through 'partnerships' set up by the council, or not heard at all. Moreover, while 'partnerships and grant coalitions' generate a strong elite consensus on how to manage the city, they "demobilise opposition and deny discursive space to any alternative script" (Quilley: 1999, 205).

Echoing the same arguments from across the Atlantic, Jonathan Lepofsky and James Fraser (2003) find that the urban community-building programmes in the US are increasingly driven by 'professional community-builders' to the exclusion and marginalisation of residents (Lepofsky & Fraser: 2003). Coalitions by city authorities, non-profit organisations and foundations, established to deliver 'urban revitalisation' and 'community-building' to impoverished neighbourhoods end up "privileging the professional over the local and reifying neighbourhood residents as lacking the ability to change their situation" (Lepofsky & Fraser: 2003, 133). The community itself can be further disempowered by these new initiatives that claim to speak in their name.

Thus the notion of democracy deployed in the contemporary vision of urban regeneration is a limited one. Government officials welcome the participation of faith institutions in government initiatives rather than their power to effect change, or their interest in struggle over the policy agenda and decision making or their need for autonomy. Indeed, genuine community empowerment would mean conflict and counter-politics (Amin et al 2000, North & Bruegel: 2001) and to pretend otherwise will always mean rubber-stamping the status quo.

Thus as Bridge and Watson put it: “this is the city separate from its grassroots” (2003, 513), meaning that public policy appears to be determined outside the public interest. And in an attempt to re-connect the city with its grassroots, London Citizens and other broad-based organisations in the USA, have sought to put the issue of ‘power before program’ (F. Pierson: 2001). It is argued that meaningful engagement is only possible when citizens have the power to set their own stall. At a time when the poor and disadvantaged are largely unorganised and unheard, there is little scope for genuine engagement. Thus an organisation like London Citizens seeks to foster connections between civil society organisations, to strengthen each of the parts, and to do this through active politicisation. Such politics is unusual in that it straddles both agonistic and deliberative modes of engagement (see also Benhabib, 1996). Whereas the former is focused on a challenge to power, the latter advocates engagement, and London Citizens accepts the need to do both.

The work of London Citizens is outlined in more detail below. The following section tells the story of London Citizens, its aims and objectives. The next section then goes back to the matter of faith, highlighting the reasons for membership and the ways in which internal differences are managed within the organisation. The penultimate section then addresses the ways in which the process of joining London Citizens and undergoing this form of politicisation impacts on the faith organisations and the people of faith involved.

Broad-based organising in practice

Broad-based organising is ‘politics unusual’ⁱⁱⁱ. The aim is to create a strong alliance of civil society organisations that is not a political party, not an advocacy organisation, not a social provider, not a single issue campaign group, not a social movement, not even a community group in the conventional sense. The aim is to create a permanent, diverse alliance of civil society institutions, working in a specific location to effect social and economic change. In the process of relationship-building, training and political campaigning, the aim is to make citizens out of residents in the city.

This approach to politics and alliance building across and beyond faith institutions was introduced to Britain through the Citizens Organising Foundation (COF) in the

late 1980s. COF was established after a decade of Thatcherism when the social contract between labour and capital and the post-World War II consensus had broken down. Under Thatcher's Conservative government, the welfare state was rolled back and the trade unions were politically and legislatively decimated. At the time, the main Christian institutions in the UK were beginning to try and address the crisis facing inner city communities. The Church of England broke new ground in the publication of 'Faith in the City,' documenting the political and economic deterioration of urban life and advocating a new role for the church. In recognition of the fact that the Church of England was failing to deal with neighbourhood and city deterioration in the UK, the Church Urban Fund was established. The fund was designed to support projects that could fill the political, social and economic gaps in Britain's poor urban neighbourhoods, and the money was used to support some of the early activities of the COF as it began to develop broad-based organising in the UK.

Neil Jameson (who later became director of COF) was a social worker in the 1980s and he, like many others, grew increasingly frustrated about cleaning up after the failures of the state and the corporate sector. Echoing efforts that were made to foster community level empowerment during the previous decade, Jameson wanted to reinvent the rich traditions of labour and community struggles in Britain. Drawing on the lessons of organising in the East End of London, as exemplified in the Matchgirls strike of 1888, the Great Dock strike of 1889, the Suffragette movement of the early 1900s, and the Poplar Council revolt in the 1920s, he sought to create a powerful alliance across civil society organisations. The labour and community struggles of the late 1800s and early 1900s laid the foundations for the creation of the Labour Party and while it was clear that the New Labour Party had reneged on these roots, this tradition was being re-worked a hundred years on (see Wills and Simms, 2004).

COF's model of organising is also rooted in the work of Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in the USA. Founded by Saul Alinsky in the 1930s and institutionalised by Ed Chambers and the IAF movement since the 1970s (Fisher: 1984, Alinsky: 1945, 1971, Horwitt: 1989), the IAF now has approximately 56 affiliates in 21 states. Its veteran organisers have refined the methods of broad-based organising into what is called the 'art of politics' (Chambers: 2003, Gecan: 2002, Greider: 1992). And building upon this experience, the COF set up a number of broad-based organisations in the UK

during the 1990s. Of these, a strong alliance developed in London, and a similar venture is now underway in Birmingham. In London, the initiative began when the East London Communities Organisation (TELCO) was established in 1995 and since then, newer alliances have been initiated in South and West London (called South London Citizens and West London Citizens). With more than 80 member organisations, the pan-London body, London Citizens is now the largest and most diverse civil society network in London, with a decade of organising experience under its belt.

London Citizens encourages all civil society organisation to join and now has churches, mosques, a Buddhist centre and a synagogue in membership along with trade union branches, community centres, schools and the Department of Geography at Queen Mary, University of London. Each organisation pays annual dues to belong to the alliance and this allows the organisation control over its agenda while also having the funds to employ professional organisers. As we will see below, institutions join a broad-based organisation for a variety of reasons, but they value the opportunity to work with people they would not otherwise meet. Both London and Birmingham Citizens are organisations that include a wide range of people and membership gives these constituents a means to go beyond the walls of their institutions and get into public relationships with each other.

Organisers work hard to find and develop leaders within member institutions. These are people who are identified as having the vision and imagination that the world can be a better place, who are angry in the face of injustice, but are also able to make strategic decisions about action. Such leaders are also the people with the ability to develop a following within their member organisation. By identifying and then developing such leaders, the organisers can reach the wider communities of which each leader is part. Moreover, leadership is itself prioritised as the means by which communities can come into public life and engage in the process of politicisation. By organising a minority, broad-based organising can reach the majority and develop the human capital and political skills of the leaders at the same time. TELCO, the oldest COF organisation, is centred on a substantial number of leaders who have been with the organisation for 10 years, who have strong relationships with each other, and who nurture the organisation as their own.

Broad-based alliances like TELCO and London Citizens are multi-issue campaigning organisations. For example, TELCO has campaigned on issues that affect their members, from local issues like waiting times at Newham General Hospital, safety on the Barking Road, a smelly lard factory in Canning Town, street lighting on Whitechapel Road to larger scale issues such as a Living Wage for London or the treatment of migrants coming into the UK (see Holgate and Wills, 2007; May et al 2007; Wills, 2004). The leaders of London Citizens argue that the core problem of urban communities is that people do not ordinarily have the power or the capacity to shape their social, economic and political destiny. From campaign to campaign, organisers and leaders thus try to build a powerful organisation and an active citizenry that have the capacity to act. While London Citizens is keen to win each campaign, its prime purpose is to develop the capacity for political action more generally.

London Citizen's experience points to the importance of faith organisations as key civil society institutions that can be recruited into membership in order to take part in this work. As already outlined, these organisations have a strong congregational base in inner city areas but they also have the traditions and values that promote engagement in the wider polity beyond the church, mosque or temple wall. They are repositories of human talent and leadership, and they develop the skills of their congregants. Although less overtly political than a trade union branch or tenants organisation, they have proved themselves more willing to join, with stronger lay leadership and active participation than many other civil society groups. As outlined below, we explore the reasons for membership by the faith institutions and the ways in which any internal tension is managed. Before doing so, however, we provide a brief detour into the methods deployed to conduct this research.

'In and out' in the process of doing research

The research material reported here is part of a much wider and multi-dimensional engagement with London Citizens which began in 2001. At that time, Jane approached TELCO as an outsider with a research interest in the soon-to-be-launched living wage campaign. She conducted interviews and started to map the progress of the campaign. However, this quickly developed into a much deeper relationship that has strengthened over time. As early as 2001 Jane co-ordinated a piece of action

research that mapped the circumstances and conditions of employment of those falling in the gap between the minimum wage and the living wage in East London (Wills, 2001). She then secured ESRC support for a CASE PhD studentship with the COF, and Lina took up this work. We also started to teach our undergraduate students research methods through their engagement in ‘real world’ action research projects with TELCO. These projects have included mapping civil society in Plaistow and Canning Town, exploring the role of community policing in Whitechapel and Canning Town, and working with nine different community groups during 2006.

In Autumn 2005 the Department of Geography at Queen Mary, University of London, agreed to become a member of TELCO, and thus of London Citizens, giving students access to training in community leadership and the opportunity to take part in further research and campaigns. Over time, our research relationships have evolved from being those of outsiders to insiders and we have developed strong connections with the organisers and many leaders from TELCO and London Citizens. We have found a strong mutual interest in research activity and this is currently reflected in joint projects which involve London Citizens as well a number of colleagues.^{iv}

While we have both conducted what is more usually called action research as part of London Citizen’s campaigns, this has also been combined with more conventional research enquiry. The research that is reported here was conducted for Lina’s PhD and for Jane’s ESRC-funded enquiry into the political identity being developed by London Citizens. These projects were both developed according to conventional academic research etiquette: we started with a set of research questions, based in part on academic debate about the new landscape of politics in Britain and the potential for using existing institutions of civil society as a basis for politicisation. We sought to explore what is still a novel way of doing politics in Britain today by scrutinising the rationale for involvement, the kinds of relationships that were being fostered between civil society groups and the impact of politicisation on member individuals and their organisations. This involved us both in interviewing key leaders and participating in the organisation to map outcomes and observe relationship-building in practice. Lina’s PhD also involved more in-depth case study research with three member organisations (a trade union branch, a school and an Anglican parish) that were engaged in the 2004 Mayoral campaign (see Jamoul, 2006).

Our insider status has been invaluable in gaining full access to the organisation, its internal processes and its leadership. People have trusted us, they have been willing to talk to us and they have allowed us to conduct participant observation within their organisations. Without active involvement in the alliance this would not have been possible. But while our relationships have facilitated our research, they have not determined its outcomes. We have always had the freedom – and indeed, the organisers have encouraged us – to be as critical as we choose with the information we have garnered from this research.

In various outlets, we have used – and continue to use - our interview, focus group and participant-observational material to tell various stories about the organisation, its work and its implications for contemporary politics. Here, we draw on material that Jane collected in interviews with TELCO leaders during 2005/6 to explore their reasons for joining the organisation and their subsequent experiences, and material from Lina's case studies conducted during 2004. We have selected the material that allows us to explore why broad-based organising appeals to faith organisations, the importance of managing relationships across difference and the implications of politicisation for the people and institutions involved.

Faith institutions as spaces of congregation, values and action

TELCO has a very diverse membership including faith and secular organisations (see Figure 1). The largest faith organisations are the Catholic churches and the East London Mosque. There are five large Roman Catholic Churches in membership, each with very diverse congregations of about 1000 attending each Sunday. The East London Mosque is the largest Muslim institution in the country, regularly welcoming 7000 through its doors for prayer every Friday. These are strong, rooted institutions with a very large congregational base, but there are smaller faith communities involved in the alliance as well. Bryant Street Methodist Church in Stratford has a strong community of about 80 regular members, and the Anglican Parish of the Divine Compassion has a similar base of support. Here we explore the reasons for membership and the way in which faith traditions are already primed to looking outwards to the wider community. The key issues pertain to faith and values,

developing and training their own membership, the shared interests that arise from living together in the city and the feelings of solidarity that have developed through their existing relationships in London Citizens.

INSERT Figure 1: TELCO's Affiliate Members, November 2006 about here

As might be expected, many faith leaders started to explain their membership on the basis of their own faith-based traditions and teachings. In all the faith communities involved, religious faith was argued to require an engagement with the wider community, and efforts to make a difference to the world that exists. The Methodists, for example, spoke about the social gospel or taking religion to the wider community. As this Minister put it: "John Wesley ... said, there's no holiness that is not social holiness and it was very much about not just converting people" (Reverend Jan Atkins, interview 24.11.05). The Catholics pointed to their traditions of Catholic Social Teaching that "encourage us to engage and use what we consider the principles of the Gospel and the teaching of the church to engage in the world in which we live" (Father John Armitage, interview, 27.1.06). Likewise, the leader of the East London Mosque spoke about seeing "Islam as practical, as a way of life, it's not just a religion" (Dilowar Khan, interview, 16.12.05). For the Buddhist Centre, membership of TELCO allowed them to develop a connectiveness that is critical to the practise of Buddhism: "if we were enlightened, we'd see the connectiveness, not just between human beings but between all things and how actually everything is linked, spatially and temporally, and we're not separate. So those teachings can translate very powerfully or very squarely with forming community, forming relationships" (Jnanvaca, interview 2.2.06).

Such sentiments are often be expressed as charity and service delivery, and all the faith leaders interviewed were engaged in a wide range of such activities. However, leaders also argued that belonging to a broad-based organisation like TELCO could help realise this need to 'look out.' There was scope to include alliance building and political engagement alongside a more traditional focus on charity and good works. Indeed, while charity and service provision were emphasised as a means to support the community, many leaders recognised that this did nothing to get to the root cause of the problems facing local communities. Joining TELCO was thus another stop they

could take to make a difference to the wider collective rather than acting on an individual scale.

More instrumentally, some faith leaders also spoke about the ways in which TELCO could help them develop their ministry more effectively. For a Methodist minister, being involved in TELCO helped to secure the purpose of the church which was to “help people to be liberated from whatever it is that stops them from being as God created them” (Reverend Jan Atkins, interview, 24.11.05). And for this Anglican Priest, TELCO gave him a model for organising the church:

I think organising for Anglicans is about a recovery of faith that the congregation matters. That your social action and ministry are not done vicariously through the clergy but the clergy are precisely there to develop lay leaders, and those lay leaders are precisely there to develop other leaders. Reverend Angus Ritchie (interview, 17.3.05)

For these faith leaders then, belonging to TELCO allowed them an additional means to develop their own membership and associational culture. Indeed, belonging to a faith group and leadership in other walks of life seemed very ‘natural’ for many of the faith-based respondents. As this Catholic trustee explained: “[P]eople would just instinctively feel that going to church on Sunday and being involved in their trade union or in their neighbourhood or in the Labour Party was utterly compatible” (Richard Zipfel, interview, 23.1.06). Whereas such involvement can take the form of charity, service delivery or participation in urban regeneration partnerships, as outlined above, it is also the basis on which faith groups and people of faith can be politicised and encouraged to take part in community activism and political organisation.

All the faith groups involved in the alliance expressed an interest in the quality of the locality, including its workplaces, housing, services and environment. As local residents and participants in long-established and important local institutions, often with a striking physical presence in the community (particularly in the case of the Anglican, Catholic and Muslim places of worship and in cases where these communities supported local schools), members of faith communities had a very personal interest in the quality of the local environment. For many, this provided an

obvious point of contact with other people in the area. And beyond faith too, these issues reflected a wider interest in the common good which could embrace those of no faith as well. As this respondent from the Methodist Church in Stratford put it:

There is a lot of commonality. Stratford is not Methodist, Stratford has mosques, a Hindu temple, synagogues, whatever has its place. And if we are looking to improve the quality of life in Stratford, we all have to come together, that's what we have in common: a neighbourhood. We want to make the neighbourhood a better place. Because crime, fear of crime, the local hospital ... that affects everybody, it's not just Methodists or Catholics or whatever that go to that hospital, it's everybody, that's one thing we share in common, because we want our environment to be a better place. (Tony Ogunniyi, interview, 15.12.05)

Later in his interview Tony went on to argue that “the quality of the life you lead is also necessarily dependent on the quality of life of people around you. If they have quality of life that will influence your quality of life, so we're all in it together” (Tony Ogunniyi, interview, 15.12.05). So just as a matter of common sense, respondents recognised the extent to which they shared space and the way in which this produced a shared interest in the socio-political and economic environment of the locality.

The research highlighted the extent to which faith could augment a shared sense of place that runs counter to the isolation, segregation and exclusion that some writers have associated with a politics of place (Amin: 2002, Sandercock: 2003). People of faith argued that their religious values demanded that they take an interest in the quality of life experienced by their wider community. Their faith was affronted by the suffering of others in their midst and they recognised the need for political action as at least part of a response. Thus in addition to demanding that they take their faith out of the church or mosque as a way of demonstrating their love for humanity through charity, some leaders recognised the political message of faith. As this trade unionist and Muslim put it during a focus group meeting:

I am my brother's and sister's keeper. You see, I cannot devolve myself. Because I live in Dulwich therefore people who live in Whitechapel can go to hell. [If I accept such a thing then] I am in hell myself (Roland Biosah, trade unionist and Muslim, focus group 3.6.04).

In the main, this recognition of interdependence on the basis of shared geography highlighted concrete local concerns such as hospital food, housing, crime or low wages that were common across member groups.

However, the issues raised were less concrete too. As this respondent from the Buddhist Centre put it, TELCO was serving common interests by simply bringing people together and countering the problems of isolation and loneliness faced by people living in cities:

Our culture tends to emphasise material prosperity for the individual or the nuclear family and you forget about everybody else and that's happening at an alarmingly, you know, fast rate. I think all the faith groups and the people of no faith feel the effects of that and some people are more conscious of it than others ... people don't feel connected with each other and I think there's a lot of anxiety as well and that kind of breeds, a sense that it's you against – or me against everybody else. ... I think that what TELCO is trying to do through building community is to counteract that and say that actually we've got – there are values there that would make life richer for all of us if we could live by them more. And that can only happen through relationships .. in the context of the common ideal ... I think to build relationships on their own is difficult but if you're doing it in the context of a shared ideal then you can stand shoulder to shoulder with people, can't you? (Jnanvaca, interview 2.2.06).

In a city like London, there are multiple personal trajectories co-existing side-by-side (Massey, 2005). London Citizens provides a means of fostering connections between them and has found faith a particularly rich resource in this process. The organisation has allowed faith leaders to find common cause with each other but has done this deliberately through action as much as through talk.

Thus as this Anglican Priest explained, faith organisations can be repositories of anti-materialist values that have a lot to contribute as a riposte to contemporary life, but for a small church like his, it is much easier to mobilise these values by working in a larger collective which has the capacity to act:

Capitalism breeds phobia, sets in illusionary fear and for capitalism to benefit people are kept in a state of fear. That is the opposite of happiness. The message of our faith communities is that each of us can live differently. There has to be an engagement of what are our desires? What kind of world do we want to live in? Communities of faith have a role to play in this and

that we don't do it alone, this is where broad-based organising comes in. (Reverend Angus Ritchie, interview, 23.6.03).

However, as acknowledged earlier, faith communities are both radically anti-materialist and socially conservative at the same time. Leaders readily criticise a social system geared towards maximising profit and characterise it as economic greed but they also understand the problem to be at least partly a product of the dearth of religious values in everyday life. People from faith backgrounds tend to talk about the lack of a belief in God as being partly to blame for prevailing economic and social injustice. They argue that re-arranging the dominant values of the economic and political system around religious belief and principals will make for a much better world. They suggest that the adoption of religious faith and values more widely would right the wrongs of the world. And as such, their engagement in TELCO is partly a reflection of a much more general desire to demonstrate the value of faith to those who have none. By living a religious life and putting your values into action, the faithful aim to demonstrate the value of religion and its positive role in the world. Moreover, if by joining TELCO, they can demonstrate the political vitality and power of their church, mosque or temple, they may attract new adherents who can see that faith has a purpose and virtue beyond any personal spiritual need.

Many secular organisations – and academics – have no truck with this belief in the power of religious faith to change lives, institutions and systems. Indeed, they fear religious proselytisers for spreading a new ‘opium’ that encourages acquiescence or misguided reactionism and even violence in the face of social and economic inequality. Many emphasise the patriarchal and homophobic traditions of all the major religions and argue that there is no scope for working across the secular and religious divide. Yet in practice, many of the secular organisations in membership of London Citizens have come to recognise the strength of the religious organisations and their traditions. Marxist trade unionists have found they have a lot in common with faith leaders in their shared struggle for a living wage and they have been able to put aside their differences over questions like abortion, women's and gay rights. As this trade union leader put it:

If we can make progress on things like the living wage, why do you want to talk about abortion? You've got to take things where they are, you know? And that's the point. And in a sense there's a tacit understanding that there are a range of issues including any sexual issue whatsoever that you could ... conceivably think of which you don't talk about. (Jean Geldart, Tower Hamlets UNISON branch, interview 5.05.05).

In this regard, it is very significant that London Citizens carefully creates a space in which different traditions find what they have in common and not what divides them. Rather than adopting the established model of political coalition in which participants are urged to articulate but respect their differences (Hardt and Negri, 2004; Wainwright et al 1979), London Citizens has a policy not to explore such differences unless absolutely necessary. As Neil Jameson, the Director of COF put it during interview:

[People] don't leave their values at the door when they come to TELCO meetings but they have to leave their prejudices at the door. We have managed to avoid the big, moral issues apart from the big issues about justice of course, for ten years. And every now and again they pop up, like abortion. But hopefully people will realise the issue is that if we walk out that's it ... We don't want people in membership who are so fragile that they're offended by one mention [of something like abortion] ... It's not that there's no ideology in there, but there is a sort of pragmatism that if you walk away you lose the solidarity which is what you want.
Organiser (interview 13.04.05)

The argument is that by coming together across diversity to do politics, leaders find common ground and create new relationships with each other. Over time, people come to relish the solidarity they experience with each other and they start to value the relationships on their own terms. Their differences become less significant than the things that bring them together.

In sum, London Citizens provides a vehicle for faith organisations to join a very diverse body of civil society organisations. Faith organisations are motivated to do this due to a mixture of religious traditions and values, the need to realise their core purposes, the imperative to demonstrate the power of faith and the desire to act over shared material needs and concerns. London Citizens has demonstrated the potential to politicise faith organisations and marshal them to work together alongside secular organisations. Moreover, in a diverse and poor inner city area like East London, faith

organisations represent the largest concentrations of social capital and anti-materialist values. The trade union leaders might express more radical ideas in relation to moral issues such as sex and marriage, gender and sexuality, but they are unable to mobilise people on the same scale. Faith organisations are thus particularly important in terms of securing social and economic change but also in reaching and engaging people in the political process. As outlined in the following section, this process of engagement feeds back into the faith organisations and the ways in which leaders practise their faith. In this way, London Citizens is helping to move faith organisations in a more progressive direction, and if nothing else, it opens them up to other ways of practising faith and being good citizens.

Changing faith identities

As outlined earlier on in this paper, London Citizen's prime goal is to develop leadership, and through that, engage people in the political process. In this sense, the aim is to give people the opportunity to change themselves as well as the world. As this organiser suggests, taking part in activity changes people and their sense of self: "It's easy to talk yourself into despair. Hope is physical and visceral. I don't think you can talk yourself into it. I think you have to *do* yourself into it" (Gecan: 2005, 242). 'Doing' has a tremendous impact on participants and our research has explored some of the changes in the people who take part in TELCO activities. One of the congregation members at St. Martin's church in Plaistow, Beatrice Piloya, described how going through leadership training and speaking in assemblies gave her the confidence to lead evening prayers in her church and really helped her to: "come out of her shell". Rose Kisakye, a cleaner at the Homerton Hospital described the sense of self-respect and confidence she gained from her experiences with TELCO: "It's put something in my life which nobody can snatch or grab or buy anywhere – part of me. And if I go tomorrow, I'll go with it".

We also found that involvement in London Citizens could change people's political identity in a wider sense, connecting them to the democratic process in the UK. As this respondent from the East London Mosque explained, his involvement in TELCO made him feel more like a citizen, more firmly rooted in the wider political community of the UK:

I've become more British in a way. Day by day, through my involvement with TELCO. There was a time when I used to feel like an outsider in society, where I was not interacting with any non-Muslims or people from other communities. So now I communicate with anyone. (Dilowar Khan, East London Mosque, interview, 16.12.05)

These experiences speak to Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) notion that politics is not just about the articulation of certain interests, but about the formation of identities. Such identities are made through the practice of citizenship in a very personal and individual way. And as Bridge (2004, 151) suggests, this has implications for the way in which we think of the public realm: "as fluid, emergent and as much about the formation of self as the constitution of a wider public" (Bridge: 2004, 85).

London Citizens is engaged in a process of identity-making on a very large scale and to conclude this paper we want to demonstrate this by looking at the changing identity of the Anglican Parish of the Divine Compassion. This parish is made up of four churches (St. Martin's, St. Phillips, St. Mary's, and St. Matthias') in Plaistow and North Canning Town in Newham, one of the poorest and most ethnically diverse boroughs in Britain. St Martins has a diverse congregation, situated in a heavily Muslim-populated area. The internal diversity of the congregation, coupled with the multicultural location in which the church is situated demand that the ministry is open to different kinds of religious worship and faith. While the church is focused on the values of Christianity, it is also open to changes from within its community but also from the wider neighbourhood.

At the time of the research, Reverend Angus Ritchie was the vicar at St Martin's, and he explained that Anglican churches are supposed to provide for the entire neighbourhood in which they are situated. As he put it:

"We're supposed to be in some way the church, ... for this area, we're not the biggest church, we're not the only church, we're 150 - 200 worshippers on a Sunday across the parish with 60,000 people" (20/5/04).

By belonging to TELCO, Reverend Ritchie and his church could fulfil their Anglican mission to represent the wider community. Interviewees saw St Martins as a church that got involved in neighbourhood issues and placed importance of the 'thickness' of

relationships within the congregation. The vicar's preaching was also community-oriented and he asked his congregation to reflect on their relationships to each other and the wider neighbourhood (Adewale Adenekan, Interview 5.4.04).

At the time of the research, St Martin's gave its money and support to both TELCO and Christian Aid precisely because the church members wanted to focus their efforts on both the local and the international scales (Adewale Adenekan, Interview 5.4.04). While donations to Christian Aid were to help an organisation continue with its good work abroad, membership of TELCO enabled the church to take action on issues in (East) London (Adewale Adenekan, Interview 5.4.04). As argued above, the church used the same rationale to simultaneously support charitable work alongside engagement in TELCO at the local scale. Membership of TELCO allowed the church to reach out to other denominations, other faith groups and secular institutions in London. In so doing, the church sought to empower its leaders, its members and itself as part of its Christian mission. Individual members had familial and other connections to their home countries, the church had institutional links to the wider Anglican communion and to organisations like Christian Aid, and through TELCO and London Citizens, they also connected to many organisations that were co-present in place. Despite the fixity of the church buildings, the church thus had a 'global sense of place' with multiple connections at multiple scales (Massey, 2005).

As a result of its membership of London Citizens and its involvement in various campaigns, the parish of the Divine Compassion has changed. These changes range from the internal re-organisation of the church into cell groups, the greater cohesion brought to the Anglican churches in the parish, and relationships built with other institutions. The Priest at this parish at the time of the research was (and remains) a leading member of London Citizens and he used his experience of organising in TELCO to think about the way in which his own church was structured. As intimated in the previous section, he devised a cell group structure to increase the relationality amongst members of the congregation and he saw this as a way to increase the responsibility that church members had for each other and the institution to which they belonged, changing the very meaning of the word church:

... [cell groups] help people to realise that the word 'church' applies ...to

different levels, you know there's the worldwide church, there's the Anglican church, Church of England and the Parish, there's the St Martin's church and then there's something even more local than that: church which is you and your fellow Christians and your neighbourhood (Reverend Angus Ritchie, Focus Group 20.5.04).

Localising the meaning of 'church' and bringing it closer to home, meant that congregation members needed to feel more of a responsibility and an active ownership over the church. To this end, the cell groups connected parishioners in very local areas, calling on them to relate to their colleagues on a more regular basis (fostering social capital). This also helped to identify the talents, skills and potential within each member of the church, and was particularly beneficial for the church at a time when the number of clergy was shrinking, despite a growth in the number of people going to church (Focus Group 20.5.04). It meant that St. Martin's felt like a shared project, people took on responsibility and it was possible to develop a weekly rota to share all the different tasks involved in Sunday worship. Over time, this further developed leadership skills in the church (Focus Group 20.5.04).

Although this could have been developed independently of membership of TELCO, the focus on social connectedness and leadership development that was being fostered through TELCO membership also helped to unite the different Anglican churches that made up the parish of Divine Compassion . As this parishioner explained:

I think actually in many ways, TELCO help[ed] unite the parish. ...if you stop to think about it, [now] we see one another. There are four churches and if it hadn't been for TELCO some of them wouldn't know one another...they are four churches individually... stuck in our own little ways. ...I think we have to thank TELCO because they help[ed to] bring the parish together (Eutal Spence, Interview 16.1.04).

For many of those involved, membership of London Citizens also increased the power and profile of the church in and beyond the location. Their engagement in political organisation and action had put the church on the map, and it meant that the church and its members were recognised in the wider community. Such recognition helped to reinforce the pride congregants felt in belonging to and participating in the Divine

Compassion. As this church member explained:

Everywhere we turn it's 'where are you from?' 'My name is Eutal Spence, I'm from the parish of Divine Compassion'. It's become much more well-known. I mean the whole of East London and the whole of the south of the river in fact has heard of the parish of the Divine Compassion (Eutal Spence, Interview 16.1.04).

The priest argued that the church had also become more powerful due to its capacity to make social change in the local area, and was now known as an institution with something to say:

...there have been changes to the local hospital; there are people in this area who are on the living wage who wouldn't be if it wasn't for what we've done in TELCO. If by power we mean you've got a set of values and how are we actually helping to transform lives, then yes, I think it has [more power] (Reverend Angus Ritchie, Focus group 20.5.04).

TELCO membership changed the church from being a small local institution for worship to simultaneously being a public entity that was able to participate in local and city politics. The congregation was given the means to participate and this had changed how they thought about their church and their faith, but it had also changed the very culture of the church itself. While worship remained central to the life of the church, the significance of worship had been reconfigured for at least some church members. For these congregants, their faith now involved a wider engagement in society beyond the walls of the church, in a politically engaged way. As this congregant put it:

Worshipping is the main thing of being a Christian, but I have always wondered whether just worshipping alone and waiting for something to happen... who's going to do it? ...Yes we have to be worshipping but we need to live on life, we need to improve our lives and we need to have care for people, you know care for one another, love, but that cannot happen when you're not, in practical terms you're not doing anything about it. *You have to be ...engaged and participate and be involved in some way you know to make a change because without that I don't think you can worship.* That's why I feel TELCO is going to ...enhance our spiritual development and practical development (Beatrice Piloya, Focus group, emphasis added, 20.5.04).

The Parish of the Divine Compassion thus illustrates the dynamic processes that can take place through political engagement. Broad-based organising through TELCO and London Citizens has had some lasting effects on its member institutions: external relationships are made and individuals undergo valuable experiences of political action. In some cases, like the Parish of the Divine Compassion, the culture of member organisations changes, and the meanings and practices associated with faith change too. At a time when there is renewed concern about the growth of fundamentalist interpretations of religious doctrine and faith, the experience of London Citizens suggests that it is possible to find ways of working across divides of faith and secularity. The religious organisations in membership have opened themselves up to the processes of change that come from working together across difference for political change. This suggests that the model of broad-based organising has very positive implications for engaging those faith traditions that may otherwise remain isolated and disengaged from the wider community of which they are part.

Conclusion

Many academic writers and policy makers are preoccupied with the twin perils of religious fundamentalism and the democratic deficit in the contemporary city. On the one hand there is a widespread fear about the power of religion to seduce young people and lead them astray and on the other, there is growing anxiety about the extent to which the young, poor and marginalised are disengaged from the political process. While faith is recognised as a potential route to association and belonging, it is also viewed with suspicion and fear. There is little sense that religion might actually be a means to revive public life nor that it has a central place in local civil society.

Our research with London Citizens, and the arguments made in this paper, suggest that faith-based organisations are an important part of urban civil society. At a time of democratic disengagement and the decline of social capital, faith organisations are often havens of association, support and solidarity in the contemporary city, particularly for ethnic minority groups. The experience of building a broad-based organisation in London suggests that it is possible to foster connections between some of these congregations of faith and between them and secular organisations. All the leading religious traditions emphasise the importance of demonstrating and enacting

faith through charity, service and public engagement and London Citizens has used this as a hook through which to catch and develop a diverse alliance of faith and secular organisations to work with each other for the revitalisation of political life. Religious values have provided a route to engage congregations and their leaders in the broad-based alliance and through their practical experience in relationship-building, training and political campaigns, the faithful have been politically engaged.

As we have shown, this political experience has implications for the culture of associationalism, and the meaning and practice of faith within the religious organisations involved in the alliance. While those institutions and their leaders in membership are already more likely to be outward looking and eager to embrace diversity, being part of London Citizens can also reinforce this strand in their faith. As we have shown, an Anglican Parish that was already open to different forms of Christian practice, necessitated in part by its multicultural congregation and its geographical location, was further transformed through its membership of London Citizens both in terms of the connections fostered between the churches and their locality, but also in terms of the ecclesiastical culture. The experience of political empowerment outside the church fed back internally as church leaders sought to encourage their colleagues to take on new roles and foster new relationships within church.

At a time of increased anxiety about the potential of Islamic fundamentalism to grow on the back of the alienation and marginalisation of young Muslims, coupled with the growth of the Christian Right, this research has important implications. It suggests that it is possible to build alliances between mosques and their Christian and even secular neighbours. Such alliance building can then provide a route for young Muslims or Christians to be engaged in the democratic process as part of the diversity of their wider geographical community. Such political empowerment is likely to have both personal and institutionally-transformative effects, changing the internal culture of the faith organisations and the faith of the individuals involved.

The work of London Citizens suggests that faith organisations are a potentially powerful political resource in the contemporary city. This work further suggests that religious affiliation can be a route to engagement with the mainstream rather than

further isolation and resentment. However, it is not an engagement that buys wholesale into the mainstream political and economic agenda. While the government seeks to engage faith organisations and their leaders in the top-down participatory governance of the contemporary city, London Citizens highlights the potential for faith organisations and their leaders to engage on their own terms, by mobilising their own power to effect social, economic and political change.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the ESRC for funding for this research. Lina Jamoul's PhD ESRC CASE studentship (grant number PTA-033-2002-00004) was also part funded by the Citizens Organising Foundation, and Jane Wills' research was funded as part of the ESRC's Identities and Social Action programme (grant number RES-148-25-0046). We would like to thank Angus Ritchie, Adewale Adenekan, Jan Atkins, Neil Jameson, Catherine Howarth, Andrew Crossley, Jordan Estevao and Matthew Bolton for their enthusiastic support with this research and are especially grateful to all those who have taken part. Parts of this paper were presented at the AAG, Chicago, 2006, in a session organised by Justin Beaumont. We are very grateful to him for encouraging our participation in that event, and in writing this paper. We would also like to thank two anonymous referees who commented very helpfully on an earlier draft.

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ⁱ In this regard, it is significant that scholarship into the relationship between civil society and politics outside a Western context has been much more attentive to the importance of faith. The struggle for justice in Africa, Eastern Europe or Latin America, for example, depended upon the organisations of civil society and the heavy involvement of the Christian Church. Indeed, Catholicism has been especially important in both Eastern Europe and Latin America as the Church provided the social infrastructure, alternative value system and leadership required to support a political challenge to power. Through the development of Liberation Theology, priests read scripture from the point of view of the poor and the struggle for justice (see Gutierrez, 1988; Smith, 1991).

ⁱⁱ In the US, the black church was particularly important as a strong institutional base for the civil rights movement and this relationship typifies the importance of social capital to political movements. As Wolin (1992, 252) suggests the “relationships of family, friends, church, neighbourhood, workplace, community, town, city... are the sources from which political beings draw power”.

ⁱⁱⁱ This phrase is borrowed from Rev Youngblood, who often describes his church, St. Paul in East Brooklyn, as ‘church unusual’ (see Freedman: 1993).

^{iv} The ESRC-funded research projects are *Global Cities at Work: migrant workers in low paid employment in London* (grant number RES-000-23-0694) and for more information please see May et al (2007) and the project website: <http://www.geog.qmul.ac.uk/globalcities>; and *Work, identity and new forms of political mobilisation: An assessment of broad-based organising and London’s living wage campaign* (grant number RES-148-25-0046) and for more information please see the project website: <http://www.geog.qmul.ac.uk/livingwage>.