

TRUST-BUILDING TODAY: TASKS FOR PUBLIC FAITH AND CHURCH

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NEVER MIND TELLING BRITISH VOTERS WHAT THEY WANT TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THEIR LIVES. Listen to local church gatherings about their priorities. Always near the top of the list is local crime and disorder. The government is therefore at last becoming aware that at the heart of such concerns is a question of the quality of relationships between individuals, families, neighbourhoods and local associations. It reflects a deep unease that these relationships are being gravely threatened by individual and communal misbehaviour, from yobbish activities to more serious crime. Equally, they are also being challenged by the growing reluctance of people and institutions to be actively involved in creating good communities and societies, from reducing involvement in voluntary activities to the refusal to take individual and collective responsibility for social disease. Such a picture reflects much of the life in villages, towns and cities across Britain and, particularly, it is increasingly seen as at the heart of the task of regenerating our more deprived communities.

Fortunately, Governments have done a U-turn in their approach to the contribution of churches and Christians (and other faith communities) to such local regeneration. When I began my ministry in the 1960s, local and central government increasingly assumed that public provision was rightly replacing such voluntary activities in education, health care, welfare and housing. Churches simply went along with the religious retreat from the public square, aided and abetted by a liberal rights-based culture increasingly divorced from private and public responsibilities.

Now the situation is quite different because there is growing recognition that the problems and challenges we all face locally and globally (*glocally*) are increasingly complex and intransigent – what we call multifaceted (with a variety of aspects including economic, cultural, social, gender and race), multidimensional (with a variety of levels including local, regional, national and international) and multi-causal (with a variety of causes).¹ Out, therefore, are simple diagnoses and equally simple solutions, provided by one ideology or account, or by one sector, whether government, business or voluntary. In, and rightly so, are partnerships² between different understandings or disciplines for analysis, and between different sectors for practical policy-making and delivery, whether for tackling crime and disorder, area deprivation, or environmental crises. So governments are now increasingly recognising that churches and faith communities now play a central and indispensable part

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► in such partnerships for analysis and practice, because they are at the heart of the reality of, and growing interest in, *civil society*.³

It is these human groupings which stand between individual and government, as churches, universities, trade unions, and a whole host of voluntary bodies. Such groupings are regarded as vital for flourishing democracies, for protecting and sustaining personal rights and freedoms to be and to do, and for providing opportunities for practising responsibilities. It is not surprising that, for example, local chapels became schools of democracy where Christians learned, and still do, to lead speak and organise, with skills transferable from local preaching and class leader to trade union organiser, business entrepreneur or community activist. It is not surprising, therefore, that today, the building up of such civil society is regarded as indispensable for flourishing community life in nations moving from communism, which prohibited such independent associating because it challenged the totalitarian claims of the party (or, now, fundamentalist religions), to capitalism which has traditionally encouraged it. This still remains the case in postmodern, post-industrial societies.

This valued contribution of civil society to social regeneration is also a recognition of the importance of social capital for individual and communal flourishing, and the traditional role of churches, Christians and now other faith communities, in its formation.⁴ For at the heart of a good society and community lies a variety of relationships which constitute social capital,⁵ including: (1) *Bonding social capital* – as strong relationships or social glue, between people in groups, including acting as a mutual support system, particularly valuable when “the going gets tough”. Churches and chapels provided such support in early nineteenth-century Britain, and mosques do today. (2) *Bridging social capital* – as the commitment to strong personal bonding relationships which also encourages strong relationships with strangers outside the chosen community. (3) *Brave social capital* – as moving, for Ann Morisy, beyond bridging social capital into caring not just for strangers, but for strangers as threat or menace.

Now it is precisely at this point of overlap between the increasingly essential roles of social capital in civil society in promoting healthy good societies that the particular, and at certain points distinctive, contributions of churches and Christians are strongly evident.

First, churches have been, and are, foundations of civil society in their own right, as the most important

voluntary bodies with a physical (buildings including churches, parsonages, halls and schools) and personnel (members) presence in each locality. Their ordained staff are often the only professionals who both live and work in an area. Significantly, they also reflect the changing nature of voluntary associations, and the challenges they now face. For churches have not only undergone a process of severe institutional membership decline (shared with other voluntary bodies from trade unions to political parties) especially since the 1960s, in terms of what the sociologist Grace Davie called “believing without belonging”.⁶ They have also, more importantly, sought to constructively address the changing nature of contemporary society. Witness, for example, the rise of network churches, using new communication systems like IT, so engaging cultural consumerism and individuality as pick ‘n’ mix spirituality. Like other forms of civil society, churches have begun to develop new non-institutional forms, from contemporary youth worship, including the Eden Project, to electronic networking of concerned individuals.⁷

Second, the key forms of *social capital* are not surprisingly both reflected in different forms of church life and in the lives of individual Christians. For at the heart of Christian discipleship are values which both demand and resource such living because they spring from the very nature of God and our relationship with him. For belief in a God who is always faithful has always engendered faithful living in his followers. Such discipleship has traditionally been manifested in a variety of lived values, from truth-telling, compassion, solidarity and responsibility to self-sacrifice, justice, peace and trust. As Robin Gill has so wisely observed, it is ordinary Christian discipleship, expressed through regular attendance at church, which engenders and informs such social capital values.⁸ At the heart of this virtuous living lies the formative influence of the frequent corporate worship of God. For example, hymn singing together covers the great themes of Christian doctrine and the ecclesiastical year, irrespective of denominational loyalty: “It may not be too surprising, then, that regular churchgoers who sing hymns together with other worshippers week by week and over many years are likely to assimilate these distinctive features.” The use of Bible, sermons and eucharists also combine to “a re-ordering of lives to God but also a re-ordering of lives to other people”.

The conclusion Gill’s research reaches – using careful analysis of national and international, religious and secular statistics – is therefore very powerful with

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profound implications for Church and government. He identifies the particular and distinctive significance of churchgoing for belief, values and participation in the voluntary activities of communities. Churchgoers have "significantly greater concern about standards than non-churchgoers". This links to US surveys which connect churchgoing with lower crime levels. Clearly, such findings speak directly to government and public concerns for morality and order.

In addition, and central to arguments for building up social capital, Gill notes how churchgoers are more likely to be involved in voluntary service in and for the community: "a surprisingly high proportion of voluntary workers do go to church and churchgoers are far more likely than other people to become voluntary workers." It is typically "an unspoken part of church-going culture." In other words, such Christians and churches contribute powerfully to bridging social capital, but also to brave social capital, for example, by working for those refugees so often vilified by the populist media, because churchgoers are also likely to be more benevolent and altruistic, what theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr have described as that Christian love, embodying the love of Jesus Christ taken even unto death, that heedless, self-sacrificial, sin-bearing love of agape.

Importantly, in terms of the need to promote more inclusive outreaching churches, so essential for building up comprehensive social capital, Gill recognises, given the evidence of US surveys, that non-literalist, non-fundamentalists, are more likely to be active in voluntary service in civil society. Current trends to fundamentalism in Christianity (both Catholic and Protestant) and in other faiths (Islam, Judaism and Hinduism) are therefore particularly disturbing for those seeking to promote the interaction of Church and community for their mutual benefit, because more fundamentalist beliefs and practices have a tendency rather to give priority to internal church agendas: for Gill, "a greater proportion of their organisational activities catered to their own members maintaining the social fabric of the church, or are thinly disguised missionary enterprises." In other words, they promote that bonding social capital of like with like, rather than also reaching out to the Other, as bridging and brave social capital.

Of course, this is not to underestimate the importance of bonding social capital, both historically (as Methodism in early urban-industrial communities in Britain) and contemporarily (as Pentecostalism in the

sprawling cities of Latin America, and as Islam in British towns and cities), because all of them provided much needed "warm" communities of support for often more disadvantaged people faced with disturbing and threatening change as they moved from familiar traditional rural communities to unfamiliar, fragmented urban societies. It is these endeavours which can also be embodied, as in Britain and America, in faith schools, health and housing provision, social services and economics. These can either be alternatives or complementary to state provision, and affect both Christian and other faith developments. For example, Islamization in Egypt has developed faith-based social initiatives remarkably similar to Catholic and evangelical ones in Britain and the USA. Hopefully, such bonding social capital will develop, over time, into faith communities and individuals of a bridging social capital type, reaching out into constructive relationships with other communities.

That is a journey representing a move to engage trustingly and lovingly with the Other, for it is the ability to engage the Other which lies at the heart of faith, and especially Christianity. Engaging the Other, as transcendent sovereign God, lies at the heart of Christian worship and, in turn, requires Christian service of the Other. That is why Christian involvement in the regeneration of communities must always include bonding social capital but always as a basis for moving into bridging and then brave social capital, because it is the latter which also particularly reflects the prophetic dimensions of Christian biblical faith. Engaging with, and embodying, altruistic love, for example as the refugee, is a most powerful challenge to those, whether individuals, communities or governments, who will not move from love of the similar to love of the different. So this will involve churches in condemning the current government and media for their often hostile, ignorant and vicious treatment of refugees. It is a reminder to us all that we always stand under the judgment of Almighty God, of the Beyond embodied in the Other. So we always strive for justice, democracy and peace, in relationships, communities, churches and nations, even though, despite our most faithful endeavours, we never achieve them in their true fullness. That is why, although we are called to work in partnerships in today's world, we both stand in solidarity with others in government, business and voluntary sector, yet always also enter into criticism of them and ourselves when the faithful Other is not properly worshipped and served. ■

NOTES

1. See John Atherton, *Marginalization* (London: SCM, 2003), chapter 3.
2. See John Atherton, *Public Theology for Changing Times* (London: SPCK, 2000), chapters 4 and 5.
3. Archbishop William Temple called them intermediate associations. See his *Christianity and Social Order* (London: SPCK, 1976), pp. 25, 70–3.
4. North West Development Agency, *Faith in England's Northwest*, N.W. Development Agency, 2004 (Monsignor John Devine, Churches' Officer for the NW, c/o NWDA, PO Box 37, Renaissance House, Centre Park, Warrington, WA1 1YB).
5. Ann Morisy, *Journeyming Out: A New Approach to Christian Mission* (London: Morehouse, 2004), chapter 3.
6. Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).
7. William Temple Foundation, *Regenerating Communities. A Theological and Strategic Critique. End of Year One Report, 2003* (William Temple Foundation, Luther King House, Brighton Grove, Manchester, M14 5JP).
8. This and all subsequent quotations are taken from Robin Gill, *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).