

“Doing God” and Policy: In Search of Social Capital and Innovation



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For a comparatively new democracy such as South Africa, discussions of the ideas, role and potential of religious institutions and communities can provoke very particular emotion: looking to the past those now in government may recall the role of some religious groups in helping to sustain ‘the struggle’ and protect the truth and reconciliation process. Others might think of explosions on the Cape waterfront. Others still may react with scepticism as they remember the manner in which President Frederick Chiluba sought to legitimate his position internally, and secure resources and political cover globally, by presenting himself as a ‘Christianiser’ of the Zambian constitution and society. Reaching further still across the South they may perceive a reactionary role of religious organisations in the formation of South American elites and in diluting women’s rights. Concurrently, others still might judge that the privatisation or secularisation of religious convictions ought to be an administration’s priority not least if it secures advances for minorities.

In a short article such as the present one, it would not be appropriate to attempt to address this wide range of questions in detail. It is my contention however, that a tendency in bureaucracies to treat policy challenges, in general, in ‘silos’ and to deal with religious questions with patchy regard to social evidence, in particular, can mean that- especially in times of economic scarcity and social risk- unnecessarily time-consuming policy problems can be created for decision makers, on the one hand, while significant opportunities for public and civic innovation are lost on the other.

For the policy prize in seeking to engage with ‘faith’ is not only a question of legal equality. Religious bodies have budgets, people, cash flows, assets and organisational narratives with, usually, social responsibility at their core. From the World Bank to micro-finance institutions in the Cape Townships, from central European social enterprise banks founded on religious institutional branch structures, to schools, hospitals, arts groups, community development and even co-op and firm formation not to mention individual philanthropy from members of the Johannesburg, New York and London Stock Exchanges, the world of religion is potentially, possibly, a reservoir of social capital and a pool of models of social innovation which decision makers need to read, understand and harness as appropriate.

Establishing a stronger framework by which to address policy making and politics in this realm is a legitimate task in any democracy then, but perhaps especially

in those seeking to unlock civic assets to redress national historic disadvantages in a straitened global economy. First I turn to the case of the recent UK Labour government so as to elucidate the questions at hand before teasing out a tentative framework for policy analysis and setting out my conclusions.

Blair, Brown and the 'Personal Question'?

The former UK Premier Tony Blair once expounded that in government he did not 'do God'. For those closely watching his policy development however, this comment was perplexing; for Blair (and his successor Gordon Brown) 'not' doing God meant establishing an extensive post 9/11 programme to 'prevent violent extremism' designed around a UK Muslim head count, which included a civil service 'theology team' targeted at 'contextualising' and diluting radical accounts of Islam. It also comprised the creation of a central 'Faith Communities Consultative Council' where Ministers could engage with the British manifestations of the nine major world religious communities as equals, notwithstanding huge variations in their demographic profile in the UK context. Other initiatives saw the launch of a state funded 'Faith Action' network to support religious NGO involvement in public service reform and outsourcing; encouragement for state funded Church schools; and the introduction of an Equalities Act offering new legal protections to lesbian and gay people despite complaints from religious leaders. Fascinatingly, those involved in designing many of these policies report that often they did so without recourse to research evidence, by drawing on insights provided from religious communities alone, and without any depth of inter-departmental collaboration despite a very junior committee of officials debating 'religious' questions.

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Meanwhile, Blair appointed a former senior Minister as his 'Faith Envoy', but outside of any policy making department, to represent him to the faith communities. Later, Brown appointed a Minister as Vice Chair of the Labour party for 'Faith Groups' to affirm their contribution, while simultaneously appointing the said Minister to departments with no related policy responsibilities.

Thus not 'doing God' actually occurred in a context where relevant policy making was meaningful in scale and included a raft of policies impacting across national security and policing, education, human rights law, public service innovation, legal reform and foreign aid. Upon Blair's retirement from office he converted from one branch of Christianity to another, provoking comment that his denial of religious attitudes had been skin deep. Conversely once back in Opposition Gordon Brown gave a major speech at the headquarters of the Anglican Communion saying that his religious principles had been omnipresent but that it would have been an excessive political risk to articulate them in a predominantly secular culture. How might we learn from this outline example?

Politics And Policy?

Perhaps a first observation might be to clearly distinguish personal convictions, the influence of personal convictions and prior experiences on particular policy choices,

and the potential (or otherwise) for politicians and policy makers to mobilise people of faith, their networks and institutions for political – especially vote securing - and social purposes.

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Blair/Brown judged it politically risky to articulate personal religious language in a way that those in other democracies – or localities within particular democracies – may in turn judge politically misguided because of the political and social significance of ‘values voters’. Religious language in parts of the US, Poland, Czech Republic, Nigeria and South America, for example, can often do candidates no harm. Notwithstanding this personal assessment of political risk, Blair and Brown appointed key colleagues to reach out to religious networks seeking support for their party and government. Crucially neither the privatisation of personal beliefs nor the strategy of

political outreach, or any learning from it, fed into the quality of policy reflection, design or engagement. In fact it can be argued that civil service outreach became conditioned by a (controversial) ‘security’ and ideological emphasis on identifying ‘acceptable’ Muslim voices combined with extremely patchy encounters with other communities. Without deep knowledge how could rich progress be made?

Is – Ought, Evidence, Structure And ‘Representative’ Interlocutors?

In the West departments of state charged with relating to industries and sectors of the economy and rural trades often develop advanced skills in teasing out the relevant importance, role, and contribution of varying sectors, industries and firms. One industry association may claim to be ‘national’ while actually drawing on a sector which has become fully clustered in a particular region or city. Another would list only six members (representing 80% of, say, the sports industry) while its competitor with thousands of affiliates represents tiny sports venues and only 20% of the sector. A major multi-national may never see the need to act with any other body or institution while others may be backed, for example, by the full force of Chinese or US diplomacy. Indeed there is an increasing literature that suggests that the rhetorical claims made by the leadership of industry bodies and sectors in their relations with government can be as much to do with ordering their position and membership ‘in the sector’, of addressing shareholder concerns, or as a consequence of elite conflict on the association’s governing body, as it can be about empirical factors ‘on the ground’. Discerning such patterns has knock-on effects for policy priorities and impact, the assessment of political risk, government partners and time.

The challenge in the religious case internationally is that some institutions and communities have been ‘theologically’ or culturally resistant to social research. Yet this has not stopped their ‘leadership’ from making extensive claims about the views, behaviours and civic contribution of their members. Declining Christian denominations may make outdated ideological claims based upon a previous ‘monopoly’ of cultural force which is now usurped by socially poorer but greater numbers of members of, for example, Pentecostal Churches or Islamic movements. But as ‘members’ drop off, access to cashflows and international networks may endure for longer than they would in a declining industry.

Meanwhile, many civil servants have sensed that to expect standards of evidence with regard to these kinds of entities as they would elsewhere – for example from the aforementioned trade associations – is to enquire into the realm of 'private beliefs', or to assess organisations that a 'neutral' state should avoid, or to make unrealistic demands upon their 'capacity'. The UK Faith Communities Consultative Council treated each 'idea' of the nine major communities as equal but hardly any attention was paid to their varying organisational structures, wealth reach, and impact. This omission can leave both politicians and decision-makers walking in one direction blindly while missing opportunities in another.

An example of this point: a member of the Clinton administration informed me that they had met with some leaders of a large US religious national community who claimed that 'their community' held views X and Y on a certain matter (suggesting that the religious leader had mass political support in opposition to the President). As the religious leader made this case, the administration member had in hand opinion polling showing the community's majority views were the direct opposite. What the administration wanted to discuss was the heavy presence of that community among new migrant communities at risk notwithstanding the religious community's 'embarrassment' at its changing demographics.

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In South Africa, the flexible and democratic structure of the South African Council of Churches both enabled it to make the decision to resist apartheid earlier than others, but also harder to maintain that line, especially when compared with, for example, the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference. Researching empirical structure, assets, the quality of representation and roots to neighbourhoods should all influence state engagement with religious social capital more than rhetoric and the 'idea' of the relevant religious community.

Two examples of this from the UK perhaps make the point: in the North West of the country research from the regional economic development body showed faith communities and institutions to be both significant economic contributors, and that that economic activity was disproportionately concentrated in poorer communities. This was very significant for those seeking to encourage capital formation and accumulation at the bottom of the economic pyramid, but it also mistakenly, fuelled the often repeated claim of Cabinet Ministers throughout the Labour years that 'faith motivates voluntary action'. While the notion that a 'belief' gives rise to particular behaviours may seem instinctively correct, there is hardly any – and hotly contested – evidence to suggest a correlation between 'religious belief' in this context and improved civic and economic behaviours. From his US research, Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam has long suggested that it is 'belonging' to religious congregations that shifts (and enhances) civic behaviours rather than 'believing'. This is mirrored in anecdotal evidence of successful loan servicing by Pentecostal congregations in South African townships. Again now in Opposition, UK Labour is taking this question seriously with a major theme of a research programme at the think tank DEMOS centred on 'faith and belonging'. But to have invested in the entrepreneurial potential of 'believers' in the UK (an average of 75% in the North West at the last census) based on their expressed 'belief' alone would have diluted the significance of their economic activity in the poorer areas and the unique forms of participation it sustained in those excluded localities.

Shrewd local or national decision-makers seeking to make sense of religious institutions and communities consequently need to know the regional profiles of each community, their organisational strengths and economic contribution just as they would in trade associations, universities, and other sectors. This will include a rich ability to read, and discount, harmful religious social networks which, in larger, communities may even co-exist alongside helpful ones. Moreover, such knowledge must be based in social evidence rather than theological categories that they have sometimes uncritically digested. This is an effort worth making for in some regions (and countries) the potential will be huge.

A Word More About Social Capital And Innovation:

It will be clear by now that I am not making a religious argument for considering the civic potential of religious communities. I am, instead, suggesting that in seeking to do more with less, many policy makers may confine 'religion' to a private choice, a legally recognised 'belief', a source of votes, a form of schooling or to some other silo, and so erase the skills, cash flows, assets and networks of religious communities, institutions and agencies from their vision or social accounting.

It may well be that in some policy areas, and geographies, such social capital does not exist. But when it does, it often goes unremarked and attracts huge leverage. Thus, the pathways to international capital of a comparatively small scale religious initiative in

South Africa, or another country, may be shorter than even a better or larger mainstream project in the same locality. Additionally the innovation profile of some religious bodies may be very high (because achieved in the face of some organisational conservatism), and their access to replicable models of social innovation from their community also comparatively high. Some of the funders of St Augustine's Catholic College in Johannesburg, for example, are among the most innovative supporters of social enterprise education in inner city New York and India. This said management skills may not as strong, or as open to measureable

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'success' criteria as in equivalent mainstream schemes. Conversely, the ability to scale social solutions, client bases and capital accumulation may be stronger because of access to regional and national branch structures.

Structure, Access And Voice

Recognising the potential of faith communities as potential builders of social change requires a thorough knowledge of religious communities and institutions as a basis to subsequently consider the appropriate structuring of relations between them and the state. It also enables decision-makers to move towards making prudential judgments about which priority areas one might avoid political risk and harness civic and economic opportunity by 'doing God' in relation to policy.

In Germany, the role of the major civic sector welfare federations – including the huge Catholic Caritas Deutschland and Lutheran Diakonie Werke network – are written into the heart of the social partnership model of the nation's constitution. In some Scandanavian countries and in Ireland, faith institutions are represented on national social partnership councils alongside rural, small business and other sectors, and are asked to feed directly into policy consultation. By contrast the French state has created a national council of 'acceptable' religious bodies and even appoints the

Imam of the Paris Mosque. Interviews with civil servants in those countries suggest that a good deal of bureaucratic effort is invested in teasing out the relative capacity, local reach and economic significance of each sectoral representative so as to inform a weighting at the centre of the significance of the insights shared.

In this regard President Obama's approach is revealing. Inheriting President George W Bush's 'White House Office For Faith Based Initiatives', Obama decided to broaden the Office's remit while focusing its role. First, the Office became one for faith and community action initiatives sending a clear signal as to the locus of the President's interest. Second, mirror offices were opened in the in strategically important department's of state. Consequently four to five priority policy areas were charged with making access and dialogue easier to enable religious bodies and others to contribute to key reforms. Physically located alongside the head of each relevant department, these Offices provide a bold experiment in moving beyond 'talk', 'politics' and 'equality' debates.

Conclusion

Engaging with any sector of society with deliberate intent can leave any government open to accusations of favouritism. But engagement with some sectors of society becomes, in time, so clearly beneficial as to be self evidently beyond contention. While in the limited space I have not been able to touch on the full range of questions I have suggested that a coherent approach on the part of policy makers to faith communities both carries these risks and contains this potential.

In past decades South Africa's historic religious communities have been among both its most progressive and conservative forces. As the social profile of those and other communities grows and changes, the potential contribution of their talent, resources and assets will change too. But for South Africa, as with any other democracy, approaches from government to accelerate such a putative contribution needs to be handled with both care and professionism. It needs to tease out clearly the private views of politicians, the currency of votes of interest to political parties and their envoys, the beliefs that need to be protected and challenged in law, and the social, economic and capital formation that is driven by faith communities, institutions and organisations. Departments of state that make this effort and structure approaches so as to support policy priorities may find themselves with access to welcome new resources. Those that make that effort and decide not to partner those same communities will at least have clear and accountable reasons for doing so.

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