You can trust us to run welfare services, say religious groups — but for how long?

Posted: Wed, 21st Mar 2012

New academic research released this week claims that welfare services provided by religious groups do not, on the whole, demand religious adherence or impose religious demands on service users.

The research into the involvement of faith groups in social and charity work claims "inaccurate and out-of-date assumptions" still affect the way they are perceived by grant-making bodies and pubic authorities.

Academics Dr Sarah Johnsen and Dr Adam Dinham have now claimed fears about religious groups are misplaced, with "no foundation" in modern-day community work.

Dr Dinham, head of the Faiths and Civil Society unit at Goldsmiths, Universityof London, told the *Daily Telegraph* that he had identified a "subconscious secularism" running through modern society.

He said: "It's not outright hostility, but a misconception that faith-based groups want to evangelise or will restrict their services to people of the same faith. People and authorities which commission services from faith-based providers are often concerned they will have strings attached. If they can find other services to use, they will do. Charity funders are prone to assuming the same thing; that groups will only provide help to people of the same faith. It goes back to a general concern about 'what's in it for them'. If you are coming at it from a point of subconscious secularism, you may have suspicions and not feel very relaxed about it."

He added that without "invisible" services of faith groups backing up state-run projects, a "huge amount of value will be lost and core welfare services would decline quite rapidly."

His research is supported by that of Dr Sarah Johnsen, a senior research fellow at Heriot-Watt University, who conducted interviews with 150 managers and front-line staff and homeless people at charities.

In her report, she noted that commissioners administering public funds often feel "squeamish" about supporting faith-based organisations, amid fears they might use taxpayers' money to "promote religion or discriminate against certain groups". She said "we found no foundation for such anxieties" and added: "Our findings should allay the fears of those who are suspicious of faith-based organisations' 'motives'."

She added: "It is true that in the past some faith-based organisations did expect homeless people to 'sing for their supper', but attending worship or scriptural study, for example. Such practices have however been discontinued by virtually all."

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "Religious charities may be trying to change their image and convince us that they will not use their involvement in social work to evangelise, but there is no guarantee that this state of affairs would hold once they take over a

large section of social welfare provision. And we are not as convinced as Sarah Johnsen that everything is hunky-dory, as we have reported recently.

"The National Secular Societyis concerned that religious organisations are exempt from some equality laws and can discriminate in who they employ or promote. Dr Johnsen's own research has found that there is a glass ceiling for staff without faith in some faith-based organisations even though those staff are just as committed and motivated as staff with faith.

"There is a simple answer that will allay suspicions and remove many objections – and that is to bring in a simple piece of legislation. It should make public funding of services provided to the public by religious groups contingent on

1. No proselytising as part of this work and no religious demands being made at the point of service.
2. No discrimination over service users – i.e. be available to everyone.
3. No discrimination in employment (including on grounds of religion or belief, something neither Labour nor Conservative governments have been prepared to require, despite these jobs while in the public sector being with equal opportunities employers)

"If such a law were put in place it would remove many of the barriers that at present stand in the way of religious groups being involved in service provision. It would also protect vulnerable service users from exploitation by those who won't be able to resist the opportunity to foist religion on to them," said Terry Sanderson.

He continued: "Although these organisations are supposed to improve social cohesion, the current Government has selected the Church of England as its favoured partner to lead the faith-based welfare contribution through the Near Neighbours programme. This aims to 'help people from different faiths get to know and understand each other better and to encourage people of different faiths, or no faith, to come together for initiatives that improve their local neighbourhood'. Favouring the Church of England does not send out a message that all faith groups and people of no faith are equal, as Johnsen herself admits when she calls the decision 'anachronistic'."

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