

## Faith-based services for homeless people do not 'bible bash'

What difference does faith make? This was the question Sarah Johnsen and Deborah Quilgars asked in relation to the provision of services for homeless people in a project funded by [the Religion and Society Programme](#). It is often presumed


that Faith-based Organisations (FBOs) will not be able to 'help themselves' but try to convert service users or make moralistic demands of them. The study showed that, on the contrary, FBOs did not 'force' religion onto homeless people, and very rarely demanded particular behavioural changes. In fact, faith-based and secular services shared many characteristics, and any differences were not as obvious as commonly assumed.

For centuries religious communities have provided welfare services for the very poor. FBOs have retained a significant presence in the homelessness sector in Britain even after the establishment of the welfare state. In a climate in which government is increasingly 'outsourcing' services, it is important to make a systematic analysis of the 'difference that faith makes'. To do so, Sarah and Deborah made use of British welfare service databases and undertook research in a range of voluntary agencies – both secular and religious – in London and Manchester offering services to homeless people. Christians, Hare Krishnas, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs were involved, as well as people describing themselves as agnostics or atheists.

They found that whilst FBOs continue to play a significant role in Britain's homelessness sector they have evolved diversely and differences between FBOs and secular agencies are not at all clear-cut. There was, however, a continuum of degrees of 'interventionism' across agencies, with some pushing for lifestyle change more than others: the strongly interventionist end of this continuum was dominated by secular agencies, whilst FBOs were clustered at the non-interventionist end.

The research also found a significant mix of beliefs amongst staff in both faith-based and secular services. Profession of faith was not a prerequisite for frontline staff in any FBO, but sometimes was for those in managerial posts, introducing a controversial 'glass ceiling' for staff without faith. Significantly, many homeless people found it difficult to discern whether projects they used regularly had a faith affiliation at all, and the majority were indifferent with respect to services' faith affiliations (or lack thereof).

The research finds that the common distrust of FBOs which endures in the sector is misplaced and founded on outdated views of faith-based provision. There was no evidence that FBOs used such funds to propagate religion, or excluded potential users on grounds such as religious belief or sexual orientation. These findings should allay concerns about the propriety of using public funds to support faith-based services. Although many FBOs have positive relationships with statutory bodies, in a wider climate of increasingly interventionist homelessness policy it may be the religious providers who find themselves out of step.

Research Report

The Role of Faith-Based Organisations in the  
Provision of Services for Homeless People

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

## Find out more...

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- Read the team's project report , which the Centre for Housing Policy at York University supported, here: <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/publications/PDF/FBOFinal.pdf>
- Visit the project website: <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/Projects/faith.htm>
- The project's principal investigator Sarah Johnsen is now a senior research fellow at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh. Contact her at: [s.johnsen@hw.ac.uk](mailto:s.johnsen@hw.ac.uk).
- Listen to/watch Sarah taking part in the Westminster Faith Debate on welfare and religion: [http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/faith\\_debates/religion\\_and\\_welfare](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/faith_debates/religion_and_welfare)

## You might also be interested in...

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- The report and podcasts from the Religion and Society Programme co-organised event on faith and policy which asked the question 'where next for faith in the public sphere?' and featured Conservative adviser Francis Davis as well as Lord Bhikhu Parekh: [http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research\\_findings/featured\\_findings/faith\\_and\\_policy](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/faith_and_policy).
- Reading about a Religion and Society Programme co-organised conference about innovative methods in the study of religion at which Sarah Johnsen spoke about this research. She is also contributing a chapter to the book arising from this conference: [http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research\\_findings/featured\\_findings/innovative\\_methods\\_in\\_the\\_study\\_of\\_religion](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/innovative_methods_in_the_study_of_religion).
- The Department for Communities and Local Government with whom the team have shared their findings: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/corporate/>

## Project Details

### Award Title

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**The difference that 'faith' makes: faith-based organisations and the provision of services for homeless people**

### Team

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**Principal Investigator:** Dr Sarah Johnsen (Heriot-Watt University)

**Co-Investigator:** Deborah Quilgars (York)

### University

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University of York



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council



## Award Type

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Phase 1 Small Grant

## Key terms

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faith-based organisations, FBOs, faith, homelessness, service provision, social policy, policy, government, local government, voluntary sector, secularism, secular, Sarah Johnsen, Deborah Quilgars