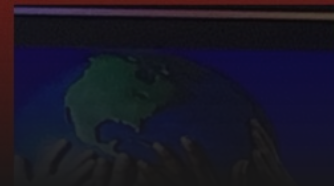
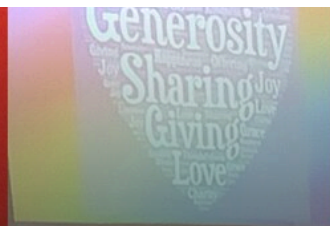


Christian Aid Week



Duncan Green

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How can faith-based advocates 'faith up' their influencing?

Duncan Green reflects on a recent workshop with Islamic Relief and Christian Aid, aimed at helping their advocacy work become more deeply rooted in faith-based values and narratives.

The training/facilitation requests coming in to our new Activism, Influence and Change programme are often 'rich and varied' (aka weird). Recently Tom and I, both confirmed atheists, were asked to help Christian Aid, Islamic Relief and other NGOs 'faith up' their advocacy work. Talk about imposter syndrome.

The challenge appears to be that both agencies want to move from 'faith-inspired' to 'faith-based' theories of change. That means:

Deepening their roots in faith communities, in terms of coalitions and narratives

Convincing decision makers to go beyond an instrumental view of faith (hey, can you get some Muslims to come to our meeting?) to a more profound understanding of the role of faith in the lives of individuals, communities and their peers.

It was Chatham House rule, so no names or institutions, other than the organizers who have given permission, but some overall impressions.



Creeping secularism is a problem, and worse in advocacy than programming. The grammar of activism – the tools, conversations etc, largely ignore faith (where's the F in a PESTLE analysis; what about a faith v influence 2x2? What would faith-based SMART asks or policy-making look like? How does the 'prophetic vision' fit into those tools and approaches?). Throughout the day we had to keep catching ourselves as we drifted away from the faith-based discussion – stakeholder maps that could have been produced by pretty much any advocacy NGO; parliamentary briefings that barely mention faith.

The stakeholder maps were a bit of a revelation, with dozens of entries for decision makers and then a single category of 'faith leaders' or 'muslim voters'. Surely the USP of faith-based agencies should be to immediately break these monoliths down to identify potential allies, opponents and undecideds on any given issue?

There is still a level of embarrassment – people not wanting to shove faith in decision makers' faces, or wear faith on their sleeves. Talking about adding 'the faithy bit', which I think betrays a certain lack of confidence. Shades of Tony Blair 'we don't do God'.

But there are plenty of positive stories too, things faith agencies do better than secular ones, because of who they are. They have a massive and stable base for fundraising and conversations in faith communities for a start; some faith-based campaigns like Jubilee 2000 are among the iconic activism of the last 25 years; they are innovating with faith-based tactics like prayer walks by clerics as an alternative to the rather tired resort to protest marches.

There were also signs that the agencies have really done their intel – a complete mapping of British MPs in terms of their faith and positions of influence on select committees etc. When I was at CAFOD (Catholic agency for England and Wales) in the noughties, that knowledge seemed to be tacit, held by the bosses; now it seems to have become more systematic.



I asked the organizers of the event – Shazia Arshad of Islamic Relief and Lila Caballero of Christian Aid – if they had anything to add, and here's what they came back with:

- Providing a values based perspective – especially important in distinguishing us from other NGO peers. We can add to the factual evidence of advocacy briefings and lean into the faith values we share. (I thought this was a really key point you made Duncan – it’s almost a bit a superpower for FBOs and one we could be taking much better advantage of).
- Shared faith perspectives/values with politicians/opinion influencers of faith – mapping those against how/where they can influence gives us added advantages. We are already doing this and have mapped out these groups – but looking at how we can work with them to drive our advocacy asks further where there is a cross-over is an additional step we can add into our tactics.
- Community organising (as we model through our community fundraising) is a potential model to emulate in advocacy and campaigning. This model would provide us with a knowledgeable cohort of campaigners who could amplify our advocacy calls. We do this at a small scale through **Campaign IR** but would need additional resources to significantly scale this up.

This was mainly a facilitation exercise (back to our shared imposter syndrome), but I did come away thinking a couple of things would be worth exploring:

Changing the rules of thumb of faith-based advocacy, including

1. What are we saying/proposing that is different from secular agencies? If the answer is ‘not much’, then think harder
2. Moving narratives from a default of ‘secular unless there’s a reason to speak in terms of faith’ to ‘faith-based unless there’s a reason to dial it down’.
3. ‘Faithing up’ the basic tools of advocacy (see above) to help prevent secular creep
4. Working out how to address the issue of faith in interactions with decision makers, who may see their faith as a private matter. For example, there are signal words (‘stewardship’) that allow people of faith to connect, without it becoming awkward.
5. Thinking further about how they can build coalitions of grassroots faith organisations and congregations into advocates on issues they care about.

The agencies in the room are doing a lot of this already, but it felt like there is still a way to go.

Fun, fun, fun. Who’s next?

About the author

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