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# FAITH IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: THE EMERGENCE OF RELIGION IN THE POLITICS OF AN INNER LONDON BOROUGH 1975-2006

## Abstract

This paper examines the impact religious affiliation and faith commitment exerts on the political life of one inner-London borough. It gives a historical sketch of the interaction of faith and politics in the period from about 1975-2006 and attempts some explanation of the patterns of voting in local elections and political involvement by members of the many faith communities which are found in the borough. The key to this is seen in the changing urban ecology of the area and the communal interests of particular ethno-religious groups who have striven and, to a measure, succeeded in gaining representation in local politics over this period. Drawing on many years participation observation, an analysis of the religious and community affiliations of elected members, and a series of interviews with Councillors and faith leaders, it reflects political issues and conflicts involving faith communities. Evidence will be presented which suggests that while many Christians involved in politics are primarily motivated individually by beliefs and values which centre on service to the whole community, politicians from other faith communities are more likely to be cast in a role as communal representatives and advocates of particular sections of the community.

**Key words:** Christianity, Ethnicity, Faith Communities, Labour Party, Local Government**.**

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to sketch the interaction of faith and politics in an inner city London borough in the period from about 1975-2006 and to attempt some explanation of the developing patterns of political involvement by members of the many faith communities which are found in the borough. The period in question has seen a global transition from the politics of class articulated largely at the level of nation state to politics of identity and single issue campaigns worked out both locally and globally. Since 2001 the interaction of religion and politics has taken on a new salience in the light of Al Quaeda attacks and the responses of Western and other governments. However, in the local government of East London the key developments in religion and politics predate the events of 9/11 by many years. The growing significance of faith in politics has emerged as a result of the changing urban ecology of the area and the decline in politics based on organised labour. New identity based politics has reflected

the communal interests of particular ethno-religious groups who have striven and to a measure succeeded, in gaining representation in local politics over this period. Such ethno-religious politics sometimes also reflects political and religious conflicts at a global or trans-national level. Yet alongside these political processes it is also possible to discern within the motivations of some of the local political actors, faith commitments and moral values which go beyond personal ambition to gain status, honour and power, and beyond the struggle to achieve the aims and further interests of one's own identity group. Despite the progress of secularism and the hesitancy of British politicians to explicitly mention personal faith, I will show in this paper that many local politicians are far more willing to discuss their religious commitments.

The methodology behind this study has three components. Firstly, I present a reflective account of local community politics based on over a quarter of century as a resident, community worker, Christian lay minister, social researcher, and political activist in the borough. Secondly comes an analysis of the religious and political affiliations of the borough council and voting patterns in Council elections in the early years of the 21st Century, together with some commentary on trends in local elections. Finally, I draw on some interviews carried out with religious and political leaders in the course of a project on Faith in Urban Regeneration funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2001 (Farnell et al., 2003).

### Local Background

The borough in which this analysis is set is an area of long term poverty and multiple deprivation, and has long had a reputation as the first landing place of migrants and refugees escaping poverty and violence from every corner of the globe. In the last half century German bombing was followed by municipal reconstruction, catastrophic decline in the docks and local industries, followed more recently by a plethora of regeneration schemes and projects (Evans and Cattell, 2000). During the same post war period the neighbourhood changed from being a predominantly white working-class community, with a small intermingling of Jewish residents and black seafarers, to a tremendously diverse borough in which, by 1996 the majority of residents were said to come from ethnic minority backgrounds (Widdowson, 1986). In the 1960s the main groups settling in the area originated from the Caribbean, West Africa and South Asia, while more recently refugees, beginning with East African Asians in the 1970s, and migrants from all parts of the less developed world (African countries like Uganda, Somalia, Congo, Latin America, and Eastern Europe) have settled. It is not surprising that religious diversity is extensive with all the major world faiths present in organised forms. There are increasing numbers recently of Muslims (mainly from Pakistan and Bangladesh) and Pentecostals from an African background. If one compares analysis of census figures for 1981, 1991, and 2001 (Brimicombe, 2007; Smith, 1995; Smith, 2000) it becomes clear that processes of invasion and succession, familiar to the Chicago school of sociologists are under way (Park et al, 1925). One can observe continued 'white flight' and the relocation towards outer suburban areas of Punjabi speaking Sikhs and Gujerati Speaking Hindus. However, for the most part their established worship centres remain located and active in the inner city area.

This borough may be diverse in faith and culture but in party politics it has been

for over a century more or less a one party state. Keir Hardie (a founder of the Labour Party) was elected from the area as the first independent Labour MP in the 1890's and the Labour Party has remained dominant. Also, the Trade Union movement remained a highly central feature of local working-class politics until the 1980s. Exceptionally there were Christian clergy in East London who were socialists (see Leech, 2001: 43 ff) and in the 1920's the leader of Poplar Council, its MP and for a time leader of the Labour Party was George Lansbury, a committed Christian layman (Holman, 1990). However the most significant political intervention of the churches in the first half of the 20th Century was a campaign in 1911 for seats on the West Ham Borough Council by an alliance opposing the introduction of Sunday Cinemas. This was roundly defeated at the polls (Marchant, 1986). Nonetheless, there was an ethos of mainline Christianity in the Council chamber right down to the 1980s.

### Labour Hegemony 1919-2006

In local politics the Labour Party first took control of West Ham Council in 1898 and after 1919 held power continuously until the borough of Newham itself was formed in 1965 by the amalgamation of the boroughs of West Ham and East Ham In the years since 1970, despite the ups and downs of political parties at the national level, and internal turmoil and radical remodelling of its image, the Labour Party (now New Labour) has maintained a stranglehold over the life of the borough. For much of the three decades as a result of the first three past-the-post voting system, the majority in the Council chamber has stood at sixty-nil. There have been short periods when as many as three opposition councillors have been elected, from the rate payer party in the 1970s, from the Liberals in the early 1980s and the Conservatives in the later Thatcher years. And from time to time a council bye election has produced a surprising result, or one or two disgruntled Labour members have walked out of the Party while remaining as an independent councillor. However, it was only with the 2006 Council elections, fought in the aftermath of the unpopular invasion of Iraq that the number of Labour Councillors fell to 54 with three Respect Party (all Muslims, one of whom was a former Labour councillor and mayor), and 3 Christian People's Alliance councillors elected. Also in 2006 the directly Elected Mayor of Newham who represented the Labour Party was returned with a just over 50% of the total vote on a turnout of just under 35% of the electorate. The Respect Party candidate (a Muslim) came second, followed by the Conservative (a Muslim), the Christian Peoples Alliance, and the Liberal democrat (a Muslim). Most recently at the election of May 2010, when the UK Labour government was defeated, the Labour vote in Newham increased substantially in both Parliamentary and local elections and the Labour Party regained it's 60 nil majority in the Council chamber.

**Table 1 : The results of the 2006 Mayoral Elections in Newham**

| Candidate | Count | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 1st preference vote | 2nd preference vote | Total |
| Choudhury, Reza Ahmed Shafi The Conservative Party Candidate | 8,822 | - | 8,822 |
| Craig, Alan Christian Peoples Alliance | 6,559 | - | 6,559 |
| Hussain, Anwar Liberal Democrats | 2,886 | - | 2,886 |
| Jafar, Abdurahman Akhtar Respect | 12,898 | 2,983 | 15,881 |
| Wales, Robin The Labour Party Candidate | 28,655 | 5,406 | 34,061 |

The Parliamentary seats are also extremely safe Labour strongholds, with all MPs elected in the various constituencies of the borough since 1945 representing the party. One seat has been held since 1994 the same MP who since 1998 has served continuously as a government minister, and is well known locally and nationally as an Evangelical Christian. However to the present time the borough has not been represented in the House of Commons by a person from an ethnic or religious minority background. Keating and Moore (2001) helpfully review the nature of parliamentary representation and the democratic deficit in the area, through an analysis of interviews with local MPs and conclude that party interest and representing constituents act as more significant motivations than faith or ideology or the national interest.

One issue of electoral concern to the Labour Party over recent decades has been the relatively high support for far-right parties such as the BNP (British National Party) and National Front in certain wards dominated by white working-class residents. Clearly this represents a move away from Labour movement loyalties of the white working class, towards politics based on ethnic identity. Significantly the leaders of Christian churches in the borough consistently voiced their opposition to such anti-immigration parties. The campaigning of the far-right emerged as early as the 1974 parliamentary bye-election where the Labour party as usual secured a substantial victory. The winning candidate, who remained as MP until 1997 was a committed church going Christian (Congregationalist / Protestant) and this was well known to the local public. On certain subsequent occasions with the extremely low turnout for council elections, the margin has been alarmingly close.

In relatively recent history there have been some important changes in the ethos of the local Labour party and the organisation of the borough council. In the earlier 1970s the vast majority of elected members were white and male, and the politics was generally traditional and paternalistic. The leader of the council was known as a churchgoing Methodist and a number of Councillors made no secret of their Roman Catholic affiliations. At this time a small number of local clergy who were active community workers and well connected to leading councillors, were co-opted onto vari-

ous Council committees or served as aldermen. During the late 1970's party activists who were increasingly of a radical left-wing persuasion came into conflict with two of the sitting MPs who were seen as class traitors. By the end of the 1980s a new generation of more radical younger members controlled the party and the Council and the traditional Labour politicians with strong links with manual Trade Unions were in the minority.

The 1980s saw the ideological struggles within the party, and against the forces of Thatcherism, played out at the local level, as in many London boroughs. However, unlike some neighbouring boroughs and the gentrifying boroughs in South and West London there was never any danger of Labour losing its absolute dominance in the Council. The party membership and mechanisms were quite weak and ripe for take over by infiltrators. Militant Tendency was present, but never as strong as the other Trotskyist 'Socialist Current Group', while most of the hard left activity took place outside the party in the Workers Revolutionary Party and Socialist Workers Party. The latter were particular active in teachers' and local government officer trade unions. Nevertheless, the politics of Newham continues to take place mainly within the Labour movement, and it is the jockeying for position between different interest groups, factions and personalities within the party that provides most political interest, in a borough where public interest in organised politics is remarkably low. Occasionally an issue emerges which mobilises community based direct action or intensive lobbying against the Labour council, but it is rare indeed for anyone to make a serious attempt to mount a serious electoral challenge.

### De-Secularising Politics

Three other strands of activist also joined the party in the 1980s. All of these can be seen as representing the transition from fundamentally class based politics towards identity and issue politics. First of all a loose network of evangelical and other Christians joined the local party branches and worked hard within them at this period, although they hardly shared a political programme or ideology, merely a desire to work for social justice and on behalf of the urban poor. In an article I published in (Smith,1986) entitled the Newham Sect (with a conscious reference to Wilberforce and the Clapham sect), I described how a small group of Labour Party activists who were all members of a new independent charismatic fellowship supported each other and discussed and prayed about their political activity. Their agendas were housing, education, rate-capping, urban poverty, racism and equal opportunities rather than the expected contemporary evangelical ones of Sunday trading, abortion and censorship of violent and pornographic video recordings. A subsequent offshoot of this group was a wider support group of Christian local politicians, across several London boroughs and across the main political parties. This latter group was short lived, but the core of the Newham sect group continued to meet until 2002 and a remnant remains in 2009.

A second strand was ethnic minority community activists particularly from the various south Asian communities who sought to lead and represent their communities and took advantage of the equal opportunities climate of the day. A number of them became politically active through the local Council for Racial Equality or Racial Harass-

ment Monitoring Project. This account is not untypical:

> *Over the last 27 or 28 years I participated on behalf of the Islamic association in the monitoring project, in the rights centre, in the race relations council and held various positions in those organisations Nowadays I am an advisor on inter-faith in the college management board. And I am an elected member as you see and recognised by the transport and general workers union. I am currently chair of the mosque. For a number of years I've held that position or general secretary.*

The first Asian councillor was elected in the mid 1980s. In 1986 some Asian activists feeling excluded from Labour Party structures formed a new local Party called the Alliance and ran against Labour in local elections but gained little support. Within a few years most of them had rejoined the local Labour Party and some are now councillors. In 2004 after the Iraq war some again defected, this time to the Respect Party. A third strand which partially overlapped with the other two comprised community activists working in the growing voluntary sector. Community development agencies, disability rights groups, Friends of the Earth and local community arts projects all produced activists who eventually found themselves elected to the Council. Increasingly the voluntary and community sector began to play the dominant role once held by Trade Unions.

From the late 1990s one of the most interesting and effective challenges to the Labour party has come from a small group of Evangelical Christians based in the least multi-faith wards in the South of the borough. By 2006 over 20 individuals had been candidates in local council elections or bye elections under the label Christian Democrat, or Christian People's Alliance (CPA). The tradition of Christian Democracy has been largely silent in the UK in comparison with Western Europe but CPA draws on that tradition. It was articulated by Alan Storkey (1979) who became one of the founder members alongside former Liberal MP (Lord) David Alton of the Movement for Christian Democracy which was launched in 1991. One of the CPA candidates, Alan Craig, who for a number of years managed a local Christian Community centre, and once stood as a Conservative Parliamentary candidate, eventually managed to win a seat in 2002. His original political platform and support based emerged through his role as a leader of tenants and residents action against ill thought out housing renewal schemes, and by outspoken statements on traditional moral and 'family' issues such as abortion and homosexuality. At the same time he made public statements supporting the rights of Muslim communities to build new mosques in the borough at a time when they were engaged in bitter disputes over planning permission.

Paradoxically one significant element of his 2006 manifesto was opposition to development of a major mosque within the borough of Newham. This was argued largely in terms of the inappropriate site of the proposed building and with a specific critique of the Islamic movement Tablighi Jamaat which backed the scheme. Craig has criticised them as advocating separatist residential enclaves and worldwide physical Jihad and of having associations with some of the 7/7 suicide bombers and other convicted terrorists. While arguing closely and carefully in a way which distances him from accusations of Islamaphobia and racism it is clear that these views resonate with

the fears of many white residents about their neighbourhood and culture being over-whelmed by Muslim settlement, and with fears of conservative evangelical Christians that the UK is in danger of rejecting its Christian heritage and becoming an Islamic nation. It is also noteworthy that the CPA draws significant support from the growing African population in the south and west of the borough, many of whom are members of a thriving range of Black Majority evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Not only do they tend to see differences between Christ and Mohammed as a conflict between truth and error, good and evil, but they are intensely aware as trans-national com-munities of recurring violent conflict between Muslims and Christians in countries of origin such as Nigeria.

### The Council at the Millennium

From the 1990s the politics of New Labour emerged in the borough. In the lead up to the 1997 general election party membership peaked at about 600 but has since fallen away. The council serving in 2000 comprised 60 Councillors elected as Labour Party members. My analysis based on personal acquaintance (see Table 2) shows eleven of them could be identified as active Christians (including one Anglican priest). Nine are Muslims (including two who were members of the executive committees of local mosques). Five are Sikh (a sixth Sikh Councillor elected in 1998 died soon after-wards), of whom most are actively involved in the life of that faith community. There was one Hindu and one Jewish Councillor although in each case their religious com-mitment and involvement is mainly nominal. A small number of members could be identified as specifically secular, atheist or anti-religious. It is significant that of the 10 powerful Cabinet Office holders 3 (including the leader of the Council) were known to be avowed secularists or atheists, and a further 5 had no obvious interest in religion. Only two people of faith had reached higher office, a Christian who held responsibility for social inclusion, and a Sikh who was business manager.

**Table 2: Newham Borough Councillors in 2000**

| Cllr. Number | Cabinet Posts | Religious Affiliation Publicly Known | Activity/ Employment or other relevant factors |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Social Services | | Voluntary Sector Community Worker |
| 2 | Social Inclusion | Christian Church of England | |
| 3 | Regeneration | Committed atheist | |
| 4 | Mayor (ceremonial not executive) | Sikh ex gurdwara committee | |
| 5 | Leisure | | Religious studies degree |
| 6 | Leader of Council | Secular | |
| 7 | Housing | | |
| 8 | Environment | | |
| 9 | Education | Secular | |
| 10 | Customer services | | |
| 11 | Business Manager | Sikh | |
| 12 | | | Voluntary Sector Tenants Activist |
| 13 | | Roman Catholic | Trade Union Activist |
| 14 | | Baptist Deacon | Voluntary Sector |
| 15 | | Muslim | |
| 16 | | | |
| 17 | | | |
| 18 | | | |
| 19 | | | |
| 20 | | | Community activist |
| 21 | | Christian | Church community work |
| 22 | | | |
| 23 | | | Voluntary Sector Disability Rights Agency |
| 24 | | Christian | |
| 25 | | Muslim | |
| 26 | | | Voluntary Sector Employee |
| 27 | | Muslim (mosque leader) | |
| 28 | | | |
| 29 | | | |
| 30 | | | Community activist |
| 31 | | Muslim | Voluntary Sector Employee |
| 32 | | | |
| 33 | | | |

| Cllr. Number | Cabinet Posts | Religious Affiliation Publicly Known | Activity/ Employment or other relevant factors |
|---|---|---|---|
| 34 | | Christian | |
| 35 | | Christian | |
| 36 | | Christian | |
| 37 | | | |
| 38 | | Muslim | |
| 39 | | | |
| 40 | | Sikh | |
| 41 | | Muslim | |
| 42 | | | Voluntary Sector Employee |
| 43 | | | |
| 44 | | | |
| 45 | | | |
| 46 | | | |
| 47 | | Jewish | Voluntary Sector Employee |
| 48 | | Muslim | Voluntary Sector Employee |
| 49 | | Church of England | Lay reader |
| 50 | | Roman Catholic | Trade Union Activist |
| 51 | | Hindu | Voluntary Sector |
| 52 | | Church of England | Priest |
| 53 | | Muslim Mosque President | |
| 54 | | | |
| 55 | | | Voluntary Sector Employee |
| 56 | | Sikh | |
| 57 | | Sikh | |
| 58 | | | |
| 59 | | Muslim ('I'm not a very good Muslim') | |
| 60 | | Christian (Tamil church) | Refugee worker |

At least 11 Councillors had strong connections with or are employed in the local voluntary or charitable sector. While it was not possible to check out Trade Union affiliations for all councillors, it is my impression very few of these Councillors have strong linkages with organised labour.

### Demography and Democracy

In order to analyse the patterns of representation of the electorate it is important to understand the processes by which Labour Party candidates are selected to stand for election as Councillors. The Newham Labour Party is divided into branches corresponding to the electoral wards. Since active participation in local party politics is very much a minority interest, the average number of eligible members in a ward party is less than 30 people, much fewer in the weakest wards. This presents two problems. In some wards it is impossible to find anyone residing within the ward to stand as a candidate. The choice of possible candidates is limited and therefore likely to be less than high quality. Thus it is difficult to claim the person selected has a convincing strong mandate from the local party. Secondly it is remarkably easy for a small highly organised group to take control of a branch and control the selection process so their favourite candidate is ensured the nomination.

**TABLE 3: Council Elected 2002 & 2006 By Ward population of Main religious Groups enumerated in 2001 Census**

| Ward name | % Chrstian | % Hindu | % Muslim | % Sikh | % No religion | % Religion not stated | Ethno religious group of winning candidates 2002 | Ethno religious group of losing candidates 2002 | Ethno religious group of winning candidates 2006 | Ethno religious group of losing candidates 2006 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Beckton | 50.62 | 2.88 | 18.47 | 1.46 | 13.67 | 10.89 | 2 white, 1 Muslim | 4 white | Labour (2 white. Of whom 1 active Christian, 1 Muslim) | Respect (3 Muslim) Conservative (2 Muslim 1 White) CPA (2 white?) |
| Boleyn | 46.42 | 7.9 | 26.82 | 2.86 | 7.21 | 7.75 | 1 white 1 Muslim 1 Black | 2 White 1 Black | Labour (1 Muslim, 1 white, 1 Black Caribbean heritage) | Respect (2 Muslim, 1 white) Conservative (2 Muslim 1 White) CPA (1 white) |
| Canning Town North | 65.38 | 0.9 | 10.33 | 0.77 | 11.96 | 9.49 | 3 white | 4 white 1 Black | Labour (3 white one of whom active Christian) | Respect (3 Muslim) Conservative (2 Muslim. 1 African) CPA (2 White, 1 Pakistani Christian?) |

| Ward name | % Chrstian | % Hindu | % Muslim | % Sikh | % No religion | % Religion not stated | Ethno religious group of winning candidates 2002 | Ethno religious group of losing candidates 2002 | Ethno religious group of winning candidates 2006 | Ethno religious group of losing candidates 2006 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Canning Town South * | 68.38 | 0.9 | 8.63 | 0.2 | 11.53 | 9.59 | 3 white | 2 white 1 black | 3 Christian people's Alliance (2 white, 1 African) | Labour (3 White) Respect (2 Muslim 1 ?) Conservative (1 White, 1 ?) |
| Custom House | 65.39 | 1.53 | 7.32 | 0.57 | 12.49 | 11.28 | 3 white | 3 white 1 Black | Labour (3 White) | Respect (2, Muslim, 1 White) Conservative (1 Hindu, 2 White) CPA (2 White, 1 African) |
| East Ham Central | 36.64 | 14.93 | 31.84 | 2.95 | 5.41 | 7.5 | 2 White 1 Hindu | 2 white | Labour (1 white, 1 Hindu 1 Black Caribbean heritage) | Respect (2 Muslim, 1 Sikh?) Conservative (2 Muslim, 1 ?) CPA (1 White) |
| East Ham North | 22.14 | 15.88 | 43.87 | 8.48 | 3.54 | 5.62 | 1 Sikh 2 white | 1 Muslim 1 Hindu 3 White | Labour (1 Tamil Christian, 1 Sikh, 1 White) | Respect (2 Muslim, 1 White) Conservative (2 Muslim, 1 Hindu) CPA (1 African) Green (1 white?) |
| East Ham South | 60.7 | 3.75 | 13.96 | 1.07 | 10.11 | 9.57 | 3 White | 2 white | Labour (1 Hindu, 1 white Anglican priest, 1 white) | Respect (2 Muslim, 1 White) Conservative (3 Muslim) Lib Dem (2 Muslim) CPA (1 African) Independent (1 White) Green (1 White) |

| Ward name | % Chrstian | % Hindu | % Muslim | % Sikh | % No religion | % Religion not stated | Ethno religious group of winning candidates 2002 | Ethno religious group of losing candidates 2002 | Ethno religious group of winning candidates 2006 | Ethno religious group of losing candidates 2006 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Forest Gate North | 52.21 | 3.68 | 17.81 | 1.96 | 13 | 9.77 | 2 white 1 Muslim | 4 white | Labour (1 Muslim, 1 white active Christian, 1 Black Caribbean heritage) | Respect (2 Muslim, 1 White) Conservative (3 white?) CPA (1 white) Green (1 white?) |
| Forest Gate South | 39.34 | 4.31 | 28.38 | 3.55 | 11.01 | 12.06 | 1 Muslim 1 White 1 Black | 4 white 1 Muslim | Labour (1 Muslim, 1 Caribbean Heritage, 1 white) | Respect (2 Muslim, 1 White) Conservative (1 Muslim, 2 white) CPA (1 white) Green (1 white?) |
| Green Street East | 23.74 | 17.67 | 41.79 | 5.8 | 3.19 | 7.09 | 1 White 2 Muslim | 3 Muslim 1 white | Labour (3 Muslim) | Respect (2 Muslim, 1 White) Conservative (3 Muslim) Lib Dem (1 Muslim) CPA (1 white) Green (1 white?) |
| Green Street West | 21.22 | 14.1 | 47.26 | 4.75 | 3.8 | 8 | 2 Muslim 1 Sikh | 1 Muslim 1 White | 3 Muslim (all Respect Party) | Labour (2 Sikh 1 Muslim,) Lib Dem (3 Muslim) Con (2 Muslim 1 white) CPA (1 African Christian) Green (1 White active Christian) |

| Ward name | % Chrstian | % Hindu | % Muslim | % Sikh | % No religion | % Religion not stated | Ethno religious group of winning candidates 2002 | Ethno religious group of losing candidates 2002 | Ethno religious group of winning candidates 2006 | Ethno religious group of losing candidates 2006 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Little Ilford | 41.83 | 6.12 | 33.33 | 4.28 | 6.47 | 7.24 | 3 white | 3 Muslim 1 Chinese | Labour (1 Muslim, 2 white) | Respect (2 Muslim, 1 White) Conservative (3 Muslim) Lib Dem (1 white) Green (1 Muslim) CPA (1 white) Other (1 Muslim) |
| Manor Park | 34.93 | 7.82 | 36.16 | 5.69 | 7.03 | 7.28 | 1 Sikh, 1 White Brit, 1 Muslim | 3 Muslim 1 white | Labour (1 Muslim, 1 Sikh, 1 White) | Respect (2 Muslim, 1 White) Conservative (2 Muslim, 1 white) Green (1 white) CPA (1 Pakistani Christian?) |
| Plaistow North | 47.21 | 3.67 | 25.31 | 1.64 | 8.31 | 12.3 | 2 Black 1 Muslim | 4 white | Labour (1 Muslim, 1 African, 1 white) | Respect (3 Muslim) Conservative (3 White) CPA (1 white) Independent (1 Muslim) |
| Plaistow South | 60.44 | 3.03 | 16.05 | 1.22 | 9.93 | 7.84 | 3 white | 7 white | Labour (3 White) | Respect (2 Muslim, 1 White) Conservative (1 Hindu, 2 White) Lib Dem (1 Muslim, 2 white) CPA (1 African) |
| Royal Docks | 63.93 | 1.37 | 7.39 | 0.89 | 15.28 | 10.3 | 3 White | 3 white 3 black | Labour (2 white 1 Black Caribbean heritage) | Respect (2 white, 1 Chinese?) Conservative (3 White) CPA (3 white) |

| Ward name | % Chrstian | % Hindu | % Muslim | % Sikh | % No religion | % Religion not stated | Ethno religious group of winning candidates 2002 | Ethno religious group of losing candidates 2002 | Ethno religious group of winning candidates 2006 | Ethno religious group of losing candidates 2006 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Stratford and New Town | 54.81 | 3.23 | 16.8 | 0.78 | 12.41 | 10.54 | 3 white | 4 white? 1 Black | Labour (2 white, 1 Caribbean heritage?) | Respect (2 Muslim, 1 White) Conservative (3 white one of whom Polish heritage?) CPA (1 African?) Green (1 white) |
| Wall End | 37.83 | 17.65 | 26.85 | 5.11 | 6.04 | 5.71 | 2 Tamil (christian?) 1 White | 1 Muslim 6 White | Labour 3 (1 Tamil, 1 white, 1 Caribbean heritage?) | Respect (3 Muslim) Conservative (1, Muslim 2 Hindu Tamil?) CPA (1 White) Independents (1 African, 1 Hindu Tamil?) |
| West Ham | 57.18 | 3.82 | 15.86 | 1.25 | 11.2 | 9.37 | 2 white 1 Black | 3 white | Labour (3 white) | Respect (2 Muslim, 1 White) Conservative (3 white one of whom Polish heritage?) CPA (1 White) Green (1 white .. retired Christian minister) Lib Dem (1 white) |

| Ward name | % Chrstian | % Hindu | % Muslim | % Sikh | % No religion | % Religion not stated | Ethno religious group of winning candidates 2002 | Ethno religious group of losing candidates 2002 | Ethno religious group of winning candidates 2006 | Ethno religious group of losing candidates 2006 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | 10 Muslims, 2 Tamil 1 Hindu, 3 Sikh 5 Black <br><br> 59 Labour elected *1 Christian Peoples Alliance | 10 Muslim Conservatives Of 8 Christian Peoples Alliance 6 had African names, | 13 Muslims <br> 2 Sikh <br> 2 Tamil <br> 1 Hindu <br> 3 African <br> 6 Caribbean Heritage <br><br> Labour 54 <br> CPA 3 <br> Respect 3 | 57 Muslims <br> 6 Hindus <br> 6 African <br> 1 Sikh <br> 1 Chinese <br> 2 Pakistani Christian? <br> 2 Polish Heritage |

On the positive side the local ward system can be shown to have responded to the changing patterns of demography in the borough. Table 3 shows the population of each ward broken down by religion and the corresponding ethno-religious identities of winning and losing candidates in the 2002 and 2006 borough council elections. It can be shown that in broad terms at least the pattern for representation by councillors from particular groups does tend to follow the religious make up of the wards, with minority ethnic councillors predominantly representing ethnically diverse wards in the North and East of the Borough.

However, it was still the case in 2002 that only 21 out of 60 elected councillors seem to be from minority backgrounds, while in 2006 this rose to 26. This is in a borough where the 2001 Census shows that just 34% of residents are of white British ethnic background. In terms of religion 47% were counted as Christian, 24% as Muslim, 7% as Hindu and 3% as Sikh. Many of the faith communities are quite strongly represented in the Council Chamber with Muslims accounting for over 20% of member after 2006 and also appearing in large numbers in the list of unsuccessful candidates, especially for the Respect, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. It is significant to note who is missing. Hindus are certainly underrepresented and the Black Majority Pentecostals were entirely absent in 2002 (although some of the Black councillors do have other Christian church connections and in 2006 one of the CPA members elected was an African Pentecostal Christian). In both cases this may reflect the fragmentation of these faith traditions into a plethora of independent movements, caste associations and congregations. Local involvement may be limited as the congregations of large African churches in Newham are predominantly gathered ones, with members com-

muting from across London. Likewise Hindu and Sikh communities have dispersed away from their original settlements and the places of worship which were built there. These groups may also tend to prioritise the spiritual over the social and political in contrast to the holism found in Islam, in incarnationally rooted mainstream Christianity and what the Sikhs describe with the term 'miri-piri'. Some committee members of a local Hindu temple reflected thus on the situation:

> *What we haven't got is a councillor from the community or somebody who is involved  in politics. Or mayor or an assistant mayor or whatever. There are a lot of Sikh  councillors and Muslim councillors are not many Hindu councillors, there aren't any*
> *I think maybe there is one…….*

> *…….we should have some sort of encouragement from the local Labour Party to make sure that we are represented equally there,…so that we can eventually try and progress and bring someone onto the council.*

Faith communities are represented in the council, yet it seems they have not been able to grasp the reins of power. In contrast the more symbolic but less powerful office of ceremonial mayor of Newham has been held by a succession of councillors who have strong links with religious communities. Between 1991 and 2006 three Muslims and two Sikhs have worn the chains of office. One might question whether this assignment of roles is something to do with the meek inheriting the mayor's parlour and limousine while the political hacks inherit control of the budget. There is almost certainly an element of the mayor being voted in on a rotating basis, as a civic honour and that faith communities as a whole receive this honour (one should remember the significance of the concept of 'honour'/*izzat'* in South Asian cultures). From May, 2002, the borough has had a directly elected executive mayor, and the previous council leader (an avowed secularist) won the election and was returned again in 2006.

### Issues in the politics of Urban Pluralism

Interviews with political activists and councillors who have strong linkages with local faith communities and with religious leaders who are involved in community issues, tended to suggest that there are two main themes which motivate them to political action. These are a broadly egalitarian philosophy and advocacy for the community who are their constituency. Long observation also suggests that personality politics, inflated petty factionalism, gossip and mistrust over the political implications of sexual relationships of councillors and activists are also found in the political culture of the borough. However, politicians would not be likely to admit in on the record interviews to having personal ambitions and status seeking motives.

The first theme is a general desire to improve social conditions for local people and resonates well with the New Labour philosophy of working for the good of 'the many not the few'. It also resonates with many religiously inspired values, though cannot in itself be described as theologically or doctrinally driven. A Sikh councillor put it like this

> *I think initially when I became councillor it wasn't because I was there to represent the Sikh community, it was more to do with some of the difficulties there are (for people) like corresponding with the council, which you couldn't do as an individual but you can pursue as a councillor. So if you're in the voluntary sector or helping out people generally and there were difficulties, and I saw getting into the council would help….*

While a Christian councillor stated

> *in general you might find among us, the members of faith communities, people are committed to ideals beyond themselves, and who in general might be committed to broader groups of people, so therefore you might expect find among those communities people who are broadly committed to the building of community. I mean you will find them elsewhere of course, among people of no faith.*

An elder of a Sikh gurdwara identified common cross community issues such as education and health.

> *I think school is the major problem. Because we have not had good education in Newham compared with other boroughs. If the Council or government can improve it, it would be better.*

The second theme of advocacy on behalf of the communities and individuals from whom they draw political support emerges in the interviews and in debates in the Labour party and local press over recent years in numerous examples of political action or disputes over: advocacy for community members over housing improvements; equal opportunities policy; racial harassment and the institutional racism of the police; immigration and asylum rights; representation on strategic bodies and consultations; planning permission for religious buildings; grant funding for faith based organisations; and faith schools and religious education.

The first group of four issues above have been approached by the council as a whole, and by Asian councillors in particular, as general black and ethnic minority rather than faith community issues. Over the years there has been strong and to some degree successful advocacy by activists and councillors on such equalities issues. However the issues towards the bottom of the list have had a specific religious dimension and in some cases have lead to rivalry, jealousy and suspicions between the different faith communities and we will now consider them in some detail.

### Representation, Partnership and Empowerment

With an increasing rhetoric and practice around the local state becoming an enabling, partnering and regulating body there are new openings for civil society organisations to gain influence and resources. Since 1990 Government has explicitly encouraged religious groups to engage in partnership and seek funding for commu-

nity projects (Furbey et al., 2006). Also in Newham Council as in some other London boroughs there has emerged a regular consultative meeting with 'borough deans' a group of leaders of churches, which has recently expanded to include minority faith leaders. However as resources are limited, an atmosphere of competition can easily develop between the faith communities. Some feel they are excluded from influence as this Muslim activist who said

> *Look at the local regeneration partnership how many Muslim represent-atives are there there?*

It is indeed the case that, although the borough wide local strategic partnership has a place reserved for 'faith communities', it has been filled by a white Anglican and other seats have been taken up by white Christian leaders nominated by local community forums. A black pastor of a large and active Pentecostal church commented:

> *.... my last experience with the local strategic partnership.... I felt and I said it at the borough deans meeting with the Council. I said we don't have any black representation as far as I know on the whole LSP board, and I applied and you guys didn't vote for me, and I felt so what is this all about? If you feel that black communities are hard to reach areas, and here is someone who for the last three years has been trying his own little way to do what he can, now putting himself forward....For me not be elected… now it wasn't one person's decision it was democratic...but......*

Despite this exclusion some small progress has been made on religious and cultural issues for example a Muslim activist told us:

> *We have had a few successes in terms of dealing with the council on the Muslim burial issue. You may remember a few years back in the early nineties we managed to get a piece of land in the local cemetery, with help from the leader of the council at the time. And then we've been involved in various other discussions on issues that have been raised, halal meat, school holidays at Eid and we persuaded the council to recognise these issues.*

**Planning Permission for Places of Worship**

On planning permission a Muslim councillor told us:

> *There are still three or four planning disputes over mosques which are not finalised. Over a number of years the Muslim community at large has been very concerned and they are unhappy about it. Last year there was a demonstration outside the Town Hall over the big mosque that is planned and were headlines in the local paper about it.*

His role in such disputes has been as part advocate for his fellow believers, part go between with Council Officers, and ultimately as a member of the Council as enforcer

of the planning regulations.

One of the Hindu temple leaders commented:

> *If you want to have a Hindu temple or a community centre, (and it helps if
> you call it a community centre rather than a place of worship)….or whether
> it's for Sikhs or Muslims…..but the difficulties we Sikhs and Hindus face is the
> issue of planning permission, and the availability of land at a reasonable
> normal price. When other communities like the Roman Catholic or Church
> of England, if they want to have a community centre or church being built,
> they don't seem to have this sort of difficulty, whereas we seem to have an
> uphill task on this.*

It seems therefore that over planning issue there remains a perception of discrimi-
nation and mistrust.


## Funding for Faith Based Community Centres

There has been a history of disputes and rivalry over the funding of community
centres designated for the use of specific communities. Official council policy ap-
pears to be that designating resources for the use of specific religious as opposed to
ethnic groups is not permissible. In the early 1990s there were some difficult issues
over Council funding of the Mayflower Family Centre which had a strong evangelical
Christian ethos. The Council withdrew funding for youth and community work when it
proved impossible to resolve differences over equal opportunities policy, specifically
in relation to gay rights issues.

However, there has been a lot of fudging of the issue. In 2001 the Council Leisure
services department managed two centres which everyone knew catered mainly for
Muslim and Hindu residents respectively. Several years ago small grants were given
towards the development of a Sikh community centre associated with a local gurd-
wara. They have also recently handed over the management of another community
centre to a community association in which the dominant interest and driving force is
an evangelical Baptist church.

One Muslim account of the situation voices suspicion that his faith community has
been unfairly treated for being too religious or exclusive:

> *But take the U…… centre, it is funded by the Council… it is not said to be,
> but really it is a Hindu Centre, yet the council will not accept it is a Hindu Cen-
> tre, they say we have a policy of not funding any of these religious organisa-
> tions. But practically that's what that centre is, and Muslims have suffered
> in the situation and they are not been given the right priority for whatever
> reason.*

A Hindu leader comments:

> *There is always a tug of war when money comes from secular funding. It is a question if you look at it from a government point of view of why should we give this particular religious faith, and why not that religious faith....If there is a policy of not giving to one they should have policy of not giving to all of them*

The gurdwara leaders gave an account of an open welcoming approach to community work backed up with a reference to a story from the gurus where Sikhs were urged to offer service equally to Muslims and Hindus:

> *Look at the sports centre there. You will probably find there are more children coming from the other communities are coming to play there than our children. The majority of the children are Chinese or West Indian or English. And they won the tennis tournament it was actually a Chinese*

The interviews with faith community leaders suggests that where there is a commitment to openness and social inclusion, and a willingness to compromise or use the language of the statutory world, funding has been forthcoming.

### Education

Some issues particularly around education remain contentious and highlight the social boundaries between faith communities. Local Roman Catholic schools have a reputation of producing remarkably good academic results and are in high demand by parents from a wide range of faith backgrounds. However, the limited number of places mean that even Christian families active in Protestant denominations find it almost impossible to secure a place, and there is concern among the local politicians about the impact of religious segregation in schooling. Such segregation is also compounded by the preference of Muslim parents to choose single sex schooling for their girls, with the result that other faiths are almost absent from at least one local girls secondary school. Meanwhile demands for planning permission for an independent Muslim school have been repeatedly turned down, and there appears to be antipathy from the Council leadership to the idea of any new faith based schools.

Judging from the local press there has also been a small backlash coming from white members of the community against multi-faith education, and the recognition of non-Christian religious holidays. One white evangelical Christian parent (who moved in many of the same networks as some of the Christian People's Alliance activists) brought and won a legal case that the primary school his children attended were contravening the law in not providing regular assemblies in which worship was of a mainly Christian nature. It would appear significant that not a single one of the Christian councillors sided with the parent, nor as far as I am aware, any of the Christian teachers or school governors who had connections with the school concerned.

### Values and Faith In Politics: Can We 'Do God'?

There remains a challenge for individuals involved in politics to resolve the con-

tradition between being elected to public office to represent all the constituents of different faiths, and the reality of being perceived as a representative of a faith community, who look to the councillors to deliver what Americans (very inappropriately in this case) would call the 'pork barrel', i.e. tangible rewards for their supporters and constituents. One Muslim councillor recounted how it was approached differently by actively religious members compared with more nominal Muslims, less well connected to the mosque networks.

> *In total there are seven or eight elected members of the Labour Party who sit on the local authority who are Muslims and one or two who are heavily involved in the running of the mosques. But there are some who have got no clue what the community is all about and are just simply political party members and just happen to be Muslim as well. They say are we are Labour Party and any only try to toe the party line. ….there is no harm in toeing the line of party policy (as long as) at the same time they are looking after their constituents.*

In this comment he does seem to identify fellow Muslims as his constituents. In contrast a Sikh councillor said.

> *… I didn't come to the council with the perspective that it is because I wanted to help the Sikh community….although the perception might be now that I am in council then I should be doing more for the Sikh community. But my view is that all communities are to be represented fairly, and if you have got a case that case has to be measured on its merits.*

Christians linked with the Labour party seem even less inclined to support a sectarian ethos in politics. One councillor commented about his concept of social justice for all:

> *I am prejudiced against any Christian or Muslim group that wants to establish a power base, from which to oppress people.*

A Christian minister, from an African Pentecostal church, not directly involved in politics gave an account of his social theology which would be widely owned in the churches and left leaning Christian political activists of the borough:

> *I have an ideal utopian fantasy if you like or goal. And that is seeing environment where Christians living alongside Muslim and people of other faiths without their being unnecessary conflict and tension of contrary beliefs and opinions. I want to see the values and virtues of Christian living the lifestyle of Christians translated into everyday life. No crime at all, elderly people being taken care of, and children being taught properly at home and at school, and the establishment of justice that is fair and balanced, and the removal of racial misunderstanding.…My ideal is to see the Christian faith lived out more than preached verbally, but preached through our living if that makes*

*any sense. What I want to see is a complete eradication of poverty, and a fair distribution of wealth. Some people when I speak to them like that think I am a communist. I say I'm not. And they say you're socialist. And I say I'm not but if you look at the Scriptures the Bible says that none of them lacked in the Acts of the Apostles, and a distribution was made to everyone as they had need.*

If this is typical of the style of (post?)evangelical and other Christians in inner city politics, and my experience suggests it is, it leaves us with a couple of questions. Firstly is such a stance distinctive to Christians or could politicians from other faith traditions share it? There are some hints in the data, at least in the case of Sikhism that there is a shared understanding and developing practice around the notion of the common good. While such an approach is not totally alien to the Muslims or Hindus we spoke to, they do seem to have more difficulty in stepping out of communal loyalties and inter communal rivalries. Indeed in all the interviews we carried out with Muslim political and community activists it was rare to find explicit comments which related Islamic values, theology, scripture or personal belief to political action, as opposed to the needs and views of the local or trans-national Muslim community.

Secondly if it is Christians in the Labour Party who find it easiest of all in this urban context to talk about and operate the New Labour 'Third Way' position working for the 'good of the many not the few', why should this be the case? A large element must surely be to do with their location in the social structure of the nation state. Christians (with the exception of black majority churches) come from the majority culture and have a long tradition of engagement with 'Caesar' through the Christendom model of the established church. Individuals who have the capacity to engage in politics are likely to be drawn from the educated classes rather than the socially excluded. They are unlikely (in London as opposed to Northern Ireland) to be beholden to a power base which takes the form of a well organised group based on religious loyalties, who have legitimate demands for social justice. In short they have the luxury of being able to stand up for justice in the abstract, and for the rights of others beyond their own kith and kin. Significantly the emergence of the Christian People's Alliance in Newham and the policies they advocate can be interpreted as the emergence, or perhaps the recession back into, a communal form of religion in politics, and away from the politics of social justice or notions of the common good familiar in Roman Catholic, Anglican and Radical Evangelical social theology.

However, we should note that the Christian socialist approach does resonate with some well-developed theological themes that can be rooted in the Bible and the example of Jesus who in the words of St. Paul in Phil 2:v 7-8.. 'emptied himself, took the form of a servant, and being made in human likeness humbled himself and became obedient….even to death on a cross'. This approach to politics also has roots in a tradition informed by Archbishop Temple's seminal pamphlet Christianity and Social order (1942). This sums up an approach which would resonate well with the thinking of Christian political activists in East London, although there is inevitably a huge empirical question as to how well they put these values into practice. There is indeed a real paradox in the notion of seeking to acquire power only to give it away to others.

A contrasting and more radical approach came out of the liberation theologies of

the 1980's and the black theologies of the South African struggle (which were greeted with sympathy by those struggling against Thatcherism (Rowland and Vincent, 1995). In these knowledge and action from below is the key to empowerment and social change. It does however appear from our study of politics in one borough that radical empowerment has been trumped by the new communitarian, pragmatic politics of 'Third Way' and a rhetoric of the common good. The Newham Christian Socialist version of this appears to be attempting politics without the hard work of building a base in an organised interest group to speak out on behalf of oppressed people.

An alternative model of engagement may however be emerging as churches and other faith and community groups are being attracted to the community organising and campaigning models of political action developed by Saul Alinsky (1972). In East London an organisation founded as TELCO and now renamed London Citizens is currently leading campaigns for economic and social justice and accountability of politicians with growing support from churches and other groups in Newham (Bretherton, 2010; Furbey et al., 1997; Warren, 2005).

## Conclusion

It is probably the case that the particular demography and history of the London Borough of Newham makes it a unique case for the interaction of religion and politics. Research in other localities is needed to discover whether processes described in this paper are at work elsewhere in the UK. Is local politics across the country becoming more about ethno-religious communal interests or will value issues of social justice remain important to politicians with faith? In a society where elected politicians are despised rather than trusted will their claims to be motivated by faith and values derived from it be seen as credible? Or will new forms of political organising and campaigning from below, either on single issues or more broadly based, on behalf of and with the active participation of social excluded people, be the future political role of people and communities of faith? In a world where religious identity is becoming more, rather than less, important, but where establishment European Christianity seems to continue in decline, it will be fascinating to see how the values and teachings drawn from the traditions of various world faiths are appropriated and adapted in various political struggles in both local and global politics.

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## Грег Смит

# ВЕРА У ЛОКАЛНОЈ САМОУПРАВИ: ПОЈАВА РЕЛИГИЈЕ У ПОЛИТИЦИ ОПШТИНЕ ЦЕНТРАЛНОГ ЛОНДОНА 1975-2006

**Резиме**

Овај рад испитује утицај верске припадности и посвећености вери на политички живот једне општине централног Лондона. Он даје историјску скицу међусобног утицаја вере и политике у оквирном периоду 1975-2006 и покушава да објасни поједине принципе гласања на локалним изборима, те политичког ангажовања од стране припадника многих верских заједница које се налазе у конкретној општини. Кључ за то види се у промени урбане екологије и јавних интереса појединих етно-религијских група које су се током наведеног периода бориле и у извесној мери успеле да се изборе за заступништво у локалној политици. Дугогодишње посматрање са учествовањем, анализа религијских и припадности заједницама изабраних чланова, као и низ интервјуа са одборницима и изабраним члановима, указују на политичка питања и спорове који укључују верске заједнице. Докази који ће бити представљени показују да многи хришћани који су укључени у политику превасходно бивају мотивисани веровањем и вредностима које се базирају на служби целој заједници, док ће се политичари из других верских заједница пре наћи у улози јавних представника и заступника њихових посебних делова.

**Кључне речи:** хришћанство, етничка припадност, верске заједнице, Лабуристичка партија, локална власт.