Values, Faith and Homelessness – What Space for Atheism?

Suzanne Fitzpatrick

Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, UK

Introduction

Despite the faith origins of many, if not most, homelessness service providers in the UK, as an atheist researcher in the field it is actually pretty unusual to be confronted directly with people's religious affiliations and beliefs in any kind of professional forum. It is perhaps part of the British tendency to understatement and to shy away from anything too emotional or 'personal' that there seems to be an unspoken under-standing that one keeps such matters to oneself in 'mixed company'.

I understand from colleagues that this can be quite different in other national contexts, including in some other European countries, where quite prolonged declarations of faith are routine at homelessness conferences and in other formal settings. I have also now had the experience, at several international events, of discussions on the role of 'values' in inspiring work with homeless people being given over almost entirely to matters of faith. This apparent elision of 'values' and 'faith' has made me feel discomfited and caused me to reflect on my own value base and its connection with my (non) faith and attraction to this field of study.

Homelessness and Social Justice

Ever since I can remember, I have been angry about social injustice and, intuitively, homelessness has always seemed the apotheosis (or nadir) of such injustice and thus a natural focus for my energies. As a young law student, I was shocked to discover that in a rich society like the UK, some homeless people (those who were 'single' and not in priority need) could quite lawfully be left on the streets by local authorities whose statutory responsibilities were limited to housing families with children and some 'vulnerable' adults. I have since learned that even this incom-

plete safety net is a great deal stronger than that which pertains across much of the rest of the wealthy, developed world, where any sort of enforceable entitlements for homeless people are very much the exception and not the rule.

But my moral animation was not inspired by faith. Quite the reverse. While the teachers at my Catholic primary school did their level best to inculcate their values into my and other young minds, encouraged by my parents who desired above all else that I think for myself, I had firmly rejected all religious belief by my early teens. By that stage I had also noted that the most reactionary attitudes displayed in my working class West of Scotland community were frequently (though not invariably) justified by direct reference to faith.

In my subsequent career I have worked with many people with more or less overt faiths, whose progressive political perspectives are very far removed from the religious reactionaries of my home community. It has been a relief to find that a faith commitment is not necessarily associated with social or economic conservatism. However, this welcome revelation has no logical bearing on the quite separate question of whether God exists. On that point, I remain steadfastly in a different place from my friends and colleagues of faith (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2015).

Moreover, atheism is intrinsic to my commitment to social justice because a) it tells us that there is no God or afterlife, meaning b) that the here and now is all that exists, and has ever existed, and we have to make the most of it; and c) it renders it ethically unacceptable that anybody's short time on this planet be spent in misery, especially d) given the human (rather than divine) nature of the agency that shapes the social and economic structures that generate these unjust outcomes.[1] Hence, the moral urgency of 'ending homelessness' is, for me, not rooted in religious belief but rather in the rejection of such belief.

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[1]   My thanks to Dr. Beth Watts for drawing this last point to my attention – one of many improvements that she contributed to this piece.

Homelessness and Atheism

People of faith sometimes argue that atheism is 'just another belief [system]'[2] – and as a non-believer the only part of that I would seriously query is the somewhat belittling 'just'.[3] Atheism is undoubtedly a core metaphysical tenet, or if you like 'belief', and for me, it is the one that is most plausible and enables me to make sense of the world and find meaning and comfort in it. Many (probably the great majority) of people across the globe take a different view and find meaning and comfort in faiths and religious orientations of myriad types and origins. There are countless sociological, psychological and evolutionary theories that seek to explain the power and attraction of religious belief, all of them hotly disputed. For myself and many other atheists, the attraction of religion is baffling. Equally, I can imagine that the metaphysical 'naturalism' underpinning atheism is perplexing to many people of faith (Baggini, 2003). This diversity of world views is just how it is and we all have to live with that. Freedom of thought as well as freedom of speech is the mark of a civilised society.

But the key points here are that a) it can feel unacceptable to explicitly articulate an atheist position at homelessness conferences and similar contexts where it is expected that other belief systems will be politely entertained, and b) embedded in the elision of faith and values noted above, there sometimes appears an assumption (with a long if dishonourable historical pedigree) that atheism is 'value-less' in both senses of the word (i.e., it excludes the holder from possessing a moral core – "If God is dead, everything is permitted" (Mackie, 1977, p.227) – and it has no worth).

Some of this sense of being silenced may be down to self-censorship on the part of atheists; I have yet to hear an atheist speak up for their own value system or challenge the veracity or impact of faith-based world views at relevant events. So I guess we can't be sure what the reaction would be were we to do so. But I would suggest that our collective silence is borne from painful experience of the extraordinarily strong reactions that tend to be provoked when people's faith is questioned by non-believers. These reactions are usually justified on the basis that one must 'respect' other people's belief systems, but it is seldom made clear what 'respect' demands in this context. Does it require atheists to accept these religious beliefs as valid and defensible? If so, that is something that an atheist, by definition, cannot do. If it is the much weaker position that we 'respect their right to hold these views', then this can readily be conceded but does not explain the requirement to treat faith-based values as unchallengeable. I can respect the right of conservatives to

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[2]   A position implicit in the supposedly neutral, but in fact highly theistic, 'all faiths and none' formulation commonly used in the UK in a misguided attempt at 'inclusivity'.

[3]   Though a great many atheists would offer a robust retort to the notion that their rejection of the (unevidenced) assertion that there exist deities amounts to a 'belief'. They might also query whether one 'belief' can constitute a 'system', but I digress…

hold a very different political position from my own but that doesn't prevent me from putting an alternative view to them in the hope of changing their minds (however hopeless a cause that might be!). Perhaps what is intended is some pragmatic middle ground; there is no need to accept the views themselves as valid or defensible, but it is unacceptable to say so within earshot of anyone who might be offended by this stance. But such a position presumably requires polite silence on both sides of the metaphysical divide?

Therefore the most basic (and surely uncontroversial?) point for me is one of parity of treatment. In contexts where atheists are expected to listen respectfully to accounts of religious values and inspiration, there should be an expectation that people of faith listen to those of us without faith, about our non faith, with equal respect. People of faith should be no more entitled to take 'offence' at the world view of atheists – i.e., our rejection of their metaphysics – than we atheists are expected to take offence at the implicit dismissal of our world view in religious belief. Equity requires, of course, that the reverse position also holds; in contexts where atheist views are being aired freely, those with a religiously-informed viewpoint should not be made to feel silenced (a scenario which colleagues with faith tell me is an all-too-familiar experience for them, in the UK at least). [4]

Homelessness and Faith-based Values

Moving onto more difficult territory, perhaps, I personally would argue that if faith-based values are deployed in political and other public forums, then it is perfectly legitimate, and indeed necessary, that those values be challenged and disputed by those who do not agree with them, as with any other value base informing the shaping of societal norms that affect us all. This is in keeping with the healthy scepticism essential to rigorous academic debate and, more generally, democratic discourse. It is the expectation that faith beliefs be exempted from the usual forms of challenge that probably irks atheists most.

One could argue that the protected status of faith is justified by the evident reality that this aspect of a person's world view tends to be more fundamental to their core identity, to their sense of self, than other values that they might hold. I actually find this argument pretty persuasive. But here's the thing: it cuts both ways. Just as a person of faith might feel that to challenge their belief system is to trespass on the very core of their being, so too can an atheist experience religious sermonising (however well intentioned and innocent of proselytising intent) as an assault on their inner identity.

Moreover, the claim to protected status is surely more persuasive with respect to personal faith(s) and beliefs than to public forms of religious and irreligious expression. If beliefs – on either side of the metaphysical divide – are deployed in an attempt to influence public policy or modes of practice or service delivery, then surely they must as a consequence forfeit any claim to immunity from challenge?

Time, then, for atheists to speak up routinely for their values at homelessness conferences and other gatherings, and demand the same respect and 'tolerance' as is given to other world views? Perhaps. On the other hand, one could argue that 'peaceful co-existence' might be better served by a simple acceptance that the values and metaphysics that drive our commitment to shared goals, such as ending homelessness, are many and varied and not necessarily religiously-inspired, and as such may often be better left unsaid in 'mixed' company.

Where one stands on this issue turns on the empirical question of 'what difference faith makes' in the design and delivery of homelessness services and policy. In other words, does it have a substantive impact on how homeless people are actually treated? Does the dominance of the norm of 'caritas' (charity) in some religious communities (Doherty, 2014) mean that services are based on the maintenance of power relationships that enhance the status of the giver at the expense of the receiver? Is this at odds with secular notions of 'social justice' and 'rights' based on challenging such power structures and inequalities? On the other hand, are faith communities uniquely placed to invest their services with feelings of 'agape' (love), which means that they can achieve a degree of human warmth in their service interventions that is missing from secular sites? Does it matter if our motivations for tackling homelessness start from different metaphysical places if we end up in the same place in terms of our practices?

These questions are essentially empirical matters, eminently researchable by those with and without faith who can approach the subject with an open mind (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2015). In the UK there is evidence that the faith origins of homelessness services makes little difference to the service user experience (Johnsen, 2014), but this is in the context of a homelessness sector heavily reliant on government funding, regretted by some in faith-based organisations as begetting a secularising 'mission drift'. It may be quite different elsewhere and hence a values debate – and the role of faith within this – might be something that we can't avoid, even if it makes some of us, on both sides of the metaphysical gulf, feel acutely discomfited.

Conclusion

Finally, it might fairly be argued that many of the themes touched upon above range well beyond the homelessness sphere in attempting to make some general points about the relationship of faith and secular strands of opinion in public policy discourse. However, my contention would be that these themes are particularly apposite in 'our' sector for at least two reasons. First, and most obviously, there is the fact of the still strongly faith-based character of many services for homeless people across Europe; this faith orientation is (probably) even stronger than is the case for other areas of social services in Europe (though here I stand to be corrected). The second, and more fundamental, point relates to the extreme vulnerability of many homeless service users, whose lack of both financial and social capital – their desperation and even destitution in some instances – can place them in a peculiarly powerless position in the face of evangelising behaviour (of either a religious or secular variety). This renders such behaviour, in my view at least, even more ethically dubious than it is in the normal run of things and is the principal reason why I hope this opinion piece helps to provoke (an overdue?) debate amongst all of us concerned with the eradication of homelessness, whatever our metaphysical inclinations…

› **References**

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