Why 'Faith in the City'?

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This week as part of the ESRC's Festival of Social Science 2011, I will be hosting the event, "Faith in the City: communities, regeneration, interaction". The event sets out to explore the way in which faith inspires and influences people to live, work and act in the diverse, vibrant urban space that is today's Birmingham. Despite Alastair Campbell stating the British "don't do God", the event is interesting to many.

Faith – whether one has it or not – is more important and topical today than it has been for decades. As the theology think-tank Theos recently noted, "religious identity is a feature of national and international affairs today in a way that was unexpected, indeed unimaginable, just twenty years ago".

This is not to suggest that faith and religion are any less contentious or emotive than they have ever been, on the contrary. But what it does show is the timeliness and relevance of faith to Britain, and British people, in the 21st century.
Subjectively referencing the 2001 Census, an overwhelming majority of British people identify themselves as Christian (71.6%). These figures can however be misleading as there is a disparity between identification and practice with only about 2% of the population regularly attending church. Grace Davie describes this as 'believing without belonging'. For her, the majority of Britons are increasingly drifting away from traditional institutional forms of religion to more personal forms of faith and spirituality.

However, identification remains. Last month's Integrated Household Survey reaffirms that three Britons identify themselves as Christian for every one that does not. Perhaps surprisingly, this is also true amongst the young: 59% of 16-24 year-olds and 60% of under-16s identify themselves as being Christian.

Maybe this accounts for the reason that, since the turn of the century, more new churches than Starbucks have opened across the UK, more Britons believe in heaven now than they did in 1970, and the number of adult Christian baptisms is rising year-on-year. And even though overall church attendance remains in decline, that decline is slowing. Today, a third of all churches are reporting growth.

This, however, needs context. Growth in church attendance and the number of churches seems to be fuelled from within Britain's minority communities. For example, in London, black churchgoers now outnumber white counterparts and a growing number of churches are what might be termed 'black churches', especially those of African heritage. Britain's minority communities have wider relevance. Since the late 1980s, some minority communities have preferred to identify themselves by their religion rather than their 'race' or ethnicity. This prompted the inclusion of the religion question in the 2001 Census and, since then, more has become known about the scale and diversity of Britain's minority faith communities: Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews and Buddhists. For many of these communities, research shows that faith – belief and practice – continues to be important, and so the relevance of faith to their everyday experience and encounter is much more pertinent and non-differentiable.

Faith today has negative connotations also. Prejudice, discrimination, hostility and hatred based upon faith and religious markers has been on the rise for more than a decade, prompting the introduction of legislation under the Equality Act 2006 that afforded protection on the basis of religion or belief (and no religion or belief). Individuals and groups identifying themselves with Islam perpetrated the 7/7 attacks; others with similar identifications have been behind a series of failed or thwarted attacks. Resultantly, the phrase 'Islamist-inspired' terrorism has become commonplace in both the media and the political spaces.

Maybe as a response, far-right political organisations and movements increasingly draw on religious themes to support their ideologies. The British National Party for instance ran an election campaign under the slogan "What would Jesus do?"; and the English Defence League protests against the perceived 'Islamification' of Christian Britain.

Elsewhere, the BBC are debating whether it uses what critics describe as the 'non-Christian' Before Common Era and Common Era in preference of Before Christ and Anno Domini; books by leading atheists remain in bestseller lists and are available to buy from supermarkets; a bus company is asking 'Mormons' to refrain from converting passengers; whilst a Muslim man from Birmingham – Tariq Jahan – is credited as having brought the summer's riots to a peaceful end in Birmingham.

Irrespective of whether you 'do' or 'don't do god', faith cannot be overlooked or disregarded. Faith today inspires and influences and it can lead people to act in both positive and negative ways. Faith undeniably exists and this is what we are exploring.

Dr Chris Allen is a Lecturer in the School of Social Policy, and author of "Islamophobia"

If you would like to attend the 'Faith in the City' event on 2nd November in Birmingham, you can reserve a place by emailing Chris Allen at **c.allen.2@bham.ac.uk (mailto:c.allen.2@bham.ac.uk)**

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