What’s faith got to do with welfare?

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I want to begin with a quotation that always brings a smile to my face and see how familiar it is to you.

“The clergyman ... was shy and embarrassed, and did not speak except for a brief good evening; he simply hurried down the line of men, thrusting a ticket upon each, and not waiting to be thanked. The consequence was that, for once, there was genuine gratitude, and everyone said that the clergyman was a ------ good feller. Someone (in his hearing, I believe) called out: ‘Well, he’ll never be a f------ bishop!’ This, of course, intended as a warm compliment.”

George Orwell’s experience of Christian charity when he was down and out in Paris and London was a mixed one. No apologist for Christianity, let alone church-based welfare provision, he knew from first-hand experience that clergymen could be found in some of the grimmest locations – such as the Embankment above – often doing thankless and unthanked work.

He also knew, however, that well-intentioned as such charity was, it was could also be problematic. Shortly before his encounter on the Embankment, Orwell had enjoyed tea that was served by a small evangelical church, which then invited him and his fellow tramps to stay for a service. It was not a success. Those vagrants who didn’t instantly bolt for the door went out of the way to disrupt the worship, taking “revenge upon the [evangelicals] for having humiliated us by feeding us.”

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Such encounters as these may serve to remind us of a number of things. They may remind us that the link between “faith” and “welfare” – by which I mean, in this instance, the feeding, clothing, housing, training, and supporting of people in need – long predates our current debates on the subject. In this historical sense at least, it is pretty obvious what faith has to do with welfare: an awful lot.

The specific connection between the Christian faith and welfare (admittedly a rather anachronistic term) is, of course, most readily seen in practice. For the vast majority of British history, it was the Church – through Anglo-Saxon minsters, later mediaeval monasteries, post-Reformation parishes and charitable foundations, and the great outpouring of evangelical, Anglo-Catholic and Quaker activity in the nineteenth century – that met the needs of indigence and vulnerability.

There is, however, a second, often unnoticed connection, whose impact on ‘welfare’ has been just as important; namely, the way in which we conceive our moral duties towards one another. Christian teaching – on charity and poverty, equality and fellowship, moral responsibility and accountability, redemption and sinfulness – has informed national attitudes to privation, prevention and provision – often in some very different and even contradictory ways – for as long as there has been a nation.

Right into the twentieth century the moral framework on which we constructed the institutions and practices of mutual care and assistance was identifiably, if by no means uniquely, Christian. That is the connection between faith and welfare that I would like to pursue in this seminar. But first, some background history.

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In some minds the post-war welfare settlement was supposed to have severed the various links between the Christian faith and welfare. Voluntary welfare provision was inadequate and ineffectual (at best) or patchy, conditional, unfair, and abusive (at worst). “Charity”, in some circles, became a sneer word, self-evidently second best when compared to the centralised, professional activity, funded by taxpayers and organised by the state. If there were to be religious and other voluntary activities in this area, they should be on the periphery of society.

In reality, this opinion was never the majority one, even in 1945, not least because the post-war welfare settlement drew on by Christian social thought, particularly in the shape of Archbishop William Temple, R. H. Tawney and the Christian Socialists that informed the thinking of many in Attlee's cabinet.³

Christian opinion, particularly episcopal opinion, was as favourable to the welfare state as everyone else’s, perhaps even more so. Cyril Garbett, Archbishop of York wrote in 1951, “Christians should welcome [it as] the embodiment of the principle, ‘Bear ye one another’s burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ’. In bringing relief to the poor, giving food to the hungry, finding work for the unemployed, caring for the children and the aged, and providing healing for the sick it is carrying out the word of Christ.”⁴

More generally, those who engineered the welfare state did not intend it to be anti-Christian, still less that it would eradicate voluntary activity. William Beveridge’s wartime report, Social Insurance and Allied Services, had specified that the state “should not stifle incentive, opportunity, [or] responsibility in establishing a national minimum [and] should leave room and encouragement for voluntary
action by each individual to provide more than that minimum for himself and his family”.5

Following its implementation, Beveridge himself grew more sceptical about state involvement in welfare provision, and in particular its impact on friendly and co-operative societies, and in 1948 he published a report on Voluntary Action, in which he recommended an eight point programme intending to safeguard and foster such activity.6 Twenty years later, Harold Wilson insisted that the voluntary sector had and made a “distinctive, indispensable and socially irreplaceable role... in tackling social problems and creating a better society.”7

However much prominent bishops, social reformers, and politicians welcomed the welfare state as a continuation and development of the nation’s rich and varied pre-war welfare ecology, which it was intended to enhance and protect rather than altogether replace, the fact remains that the 1940s marked a sea change in the way in which people conceived welfare, and in the way welfare itself was organised and delivered. The churches were ousted from their long-standing central role of pastoral and practical provision,8 the state replacing them as the heart of the nation’s welfare vision. Voluntary activity became a supplement to, rather than the core of, British welfare.

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Many commentators think that we are going through a similarly seismic change in welfare today. The more creative have taken to composing obituaries for the post-war settlement. Writing in the Guardian in January 2013, Aditya Chakrabortty wrote “For much of its short but celebrated life, the Welfare State was cherished by
Britons. Instant public affection greeted its birth and even as it passed away peacefully yesterday morning, government ministers swore they would do all they could to keep it alive.”

This may be judged a slight exaggeration, given that the Department for Work and Pension (DWP) budget stands at around £165 billion and that spending on welfare as a proportion of GDP has risen from 4.7% in 1951 to 7.2% today. However, it is certainly true that the welfare state today is a very different beast from that of the 1940s. In the words of the Institute for Fiscal Studies “very little of today's welfare system bears even a passing resemblance to the system envisaged in the Beveridge Report.”

This difference may be seen not only in the size, range and distribution of welfare spending, but also in the increased range of welfare providers and the greater emphasis on means testing. The 1978 Wolfenden Report on the Future of Voluntary Organisations called for an increased role for both the private and voluntary sectors in welfare provision, and this theme has been taken up with ever greater vigour by successive governments.

In spite of such change, an atmosphere of perpetual crisis has hung about the welfare state for the last forty years. In 1984, the theologian Duncan Forrester began his book on Christianity and the Future of Welfare by observing “the time of little adjustments here and there is past; today a radical reconsideration leading to far-reaching changes is inevitable... welfare is in crisis.” Others have said the same thing pretty much every year since then.
And they are saying so today. The financial crash and ensuing multi-dip recession have created economic conditions in which politicians say that welfare provision of the kind and extent heretofore expected has become unsustainable. However one interprets it, the 2012 Welfare Act is the most substantial change to the system since its inception. This, coupled with the Big Society idea – remember that? – in which local, community and voluntary organisations are encouraged and helped to take on and deliver public services, constitutes a substantial change to the welfare landscape.

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The proximate reason for many of the changes outlined above is economic. On the one hand, there are those who argue that total National Debt, and the interest payments on it, are considerably lower as a proportion of GDP than they were for much of the 20th century and that, in fact, both welfare cuts and reforms, and the Big Society agenda, are driven by, or serve as a cover for, an ideological (i.e. neo-liberal) agenda, round two.

On the other, there are those who point out that national debt still stands at nearly £1.4 trillion (over 85% of GDP), that it is increasing by around £2 billion per week, and that the annual cost of servicing it amounts to 3% GDP. Or, put less numerically, just because things might have been worse in the past, it doesn’t mean they are not bad now.

Important as such economic debates are, the numbers in question remain proximate drivers, reflecting deeper trends and ideas about who we are and how
we live together. The amount of money we do/ don't have is shaped by how much we spend and on whom, behind which lurks the further question, why.

Three areas stand out as particularly relevant in this context: demographic trends, social trends, and shifts in public opinion. The first two may be taken together, briefly, the last alone and at greater length.

If the welfare state has changed out of all recognition in the last 65 years, it is because the society it serves has. This has been well-charted by the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Beveridge's proposals, in the IFS's words, “were for a country in which, for the most part, men worked and married women didn’t, the only lone parents were widows, and life expectancy was lower than the pension age... At the time of the report less than 1 in 20 births was outside marriage; today more than 1 in 5 children grow up in a lone parent household. Male life expectancy has climbed from around 63 in 1940 to 78 in 2010.”

In addition to this, since the mid-1990s Britain has experienced the largest net inflow of immigrants in its history, in particular following the accession of eight countries to the EU in 2004, when net inward migration peaked at 245,000 (not all of whom stayed long term). The resulting change in the size and composition of the population was evidenced by the 2011 Census.

In other words, if the economics of Britain's state-based welfare provision have changed in the last three generations, that is because Britain has changed over the last three generations, different and greater needs emerging with changes in population, longevity, and shifting marital and reproductive habits.
In reality, however, demographic and social changes, even on this scale, would be unlikely to matter were the public universally committed to state welfare provision, or even as committed as they were in the later 1940s. And this leads us to the crucial issue of public opinion.

Affection and support for the post-war settlement remains high. According to various research studies conducted for/ by British Social Attitudes, Prospect/ YouGov, and BBC/ ComRes, only one in ten people disagrees that the creation of the welfare state is “one of Britain’s proudest achievements”, compared with 51 per cent who agree.

However, public attitudes to its present operation are much more complex. A growing proportion of the population associate the welfare state with inefficiency and dependency. So, for example, around half of people believe that people would “stand on their own two feet” if benefits were less generous, compared with a fifth (20 per cent) who disagree. That is the reverse of the situation 20 years ago when only 25 per cent agreed and 52 per cent disagreed with the statement.

The context of the public’s view that is important. Historically (meaning over the last 30 years) the public has tended to be more sympathetic towards benefit recipients and more supportive of increasing welfare spending during economic downturns, and vice versa.

This makes intuitive sense. During periods of recession people feel more vulnerable, as well as knowing more people who are on benefits, thereby drawing
the stigma that is often attached to welfare. During times of plenty, the opposite is true.

Research over recent years has shown that this inverse correlation – between wealth and attitudes to welfare – is becoming decoupled, and public opinion about universal, state-based welfare provision is much more reserved than it once was, in spite of the deepest and longest recession in the post-war period.

Thus, the proportion thinking the government should increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits declined steadily between 2002 and 2010. In 2010, three in ten respondents recommended an increase in taxation and spending compared with five in ten who did so in 2002.

Support for extra spending on benefits has continued to fall through the double-dip recession. While 55 per cent of people in 1987 agreed that government should spend more on benefits, 36 per cent did in 2004.

And a considerable section of the public view welfare recipients, and people receiving unemployment benefits in particular, as simply undeserving. Three quarters of people agree that “the government pays out too much in benefits [and] welfare levels overall should be reduced.” Nearly as many (69 per cent) thought that “our welfare system has created a culture of dependency [and] people should take more responsibility for their lives and families”.18

It is worth noting that the most recent data from British Social Attitudes survey for 2012 indicate a slight reverse in recent trends.19 Thus, the public were more sympathetic to government redistributing income, more sympathetic to government spending on benefits, more convinced that “cutting benefits would
damage too many people’s lives”, and more antagonistic to the idea that unemployment benefits are too high and discourage work in 2012 than they were in 2011.

This may be the impact of the recession which began in 2008/09 beginning to bite (though if it is, it is hard to explain the 3-4 year delay). Alternatively, it may be a blip. As BSA 2013 said, “data for 2012 may indicate a break in the long-term trend, although it should be noted that similar shifts in opinion in recent years have proved temporary.”

Only time will adjudicate on this. Nevertheless, whatever the next few years data show, the direction of travel since the mid-1990s is clear. It is away from state intervention and towards personal and family responsibility.

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One has to be precise in all this, however, as there is significant and relevant detail within the overall picture that should not be overlooked.

Public opinion usually differs according to the kind of welfare being provided. Whatever the overall direction of public opinion, support for public spending on health, disability and old age remains constant and reasonably high.

In 2010, nearly nine in ten (88 per cent) people agreed that government should be mainly responsible for paying the cost of healthcare when someone is ill, and only slightly fewer (84 per cent) that it should be mainly responsible for ensuring that people have enough to live on if they become sick for a long time or disabled.

By comparison, support for payment in retirement has always been lower, with 52 per cent agreeing that government should be mainly responsible for ensuring
people have enough money to live on in retirement in 2010. However sceptical we are about state-based welfare provision, it is not about its use to cover sickness, disability or, for the most part, old age.

By contrast, the public is more sceptical about state welfare support for parents on standard rate tax receiving child benefit. Although half of respondents think the balance was about right, twice as many (21 per cent) supported the lower tax/ lower support option than did the higher tax/ greater support option (9 per cent).

It was a similar story for the low paid receiving support through benefits. Two fifths of the public thought the balance was about right, whilst a nearly quarter (23 per cent) supported lower tax/ lower support and a nearly fifth (18 per cent) higher tax/ greater support.

Moreover, the public are considerably more hostile about the government taking responsibility for ensuring that people have enough to live on if they become unemployed. The proportion agreeing fell from 85 per cent in 1998 to 59 per cent in 2011. A similar point can be made concerning “social security benefits”: having been a top choice for extra government spending for 12 per cent of respondents in 1983, in the wake of recession, according to BSA it is now prioritised by just four per cent.

As one might expect, the counterbalance to these views is an increase in the proportion of people thinking that employers, individuals or their families should take more responsibility. For example, more than a third of people (35 per cent) believe that individuals and families should take the main responsibility for
ensuring sufficient income in retirement, with another 11 per cent laying that responsibility on the person’s employer.  

It is not, therefore, that the public is necessarily much more heartless than they were a generation ago concerning those in need; rather that they see the responsibility for their care shifting away from the individual as taxpayer and towards the individual as employer, employee or family member.

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The reasons for this shift in public opinion are complex. A major driving force is wealth. A wealthy population – Britain in 2013 may not feel wealthy to many but it is considerably richer than Britain in 1945 – feels less need for state-based welfare support than a poorer one. Wealth affords autonomy and autonomy undermines (the perceived need for) universal, centralised welfare provision.

Another is diversity. Public support for large scale welfare is predicated on a sense that their money is going towards people like them, people who are going through, will face, or simply risk the same experiences that they do.

This explains why support for disability and old age payments remains high while that for single parents is lower. We all may suffer from illness or disability, and most of us will grow old. Public support for these benefits is, therefore, rational and, in an oblique way, self-interested.

By contrast, waning support for single parent families reflects a sense that such needs are more distant than, say, my prospective needs in old age and also, crucially, that such a condition is chosen, in the way that illness or disability is not.
The fact that single parenthood is very often not chosen does not seem to make a difference.

This being so, however, it does not explain the waning of support for unemployment benefit, particularly in a time of recession, unless public opinion understands unemployment as somehow a choice – improbable, one would imagine, during a time of recession, unless opinion has been unduly swayed by some media reporting.

Perhaps, then, a third reason for these trends in public opinion is a lack of trust in government, state, the welfare system and, indeed, one another. People feel their money is not being administered well, fairly or to people who genuinely deserve it. The public call for more conditionality and more responsibility in the deployment and use of tax-funded welfare reflects a sense that the current system has undermined the norms of behaviour and networks of reciprocity that pre-date it and on which any society worthy of the name must ultimately depend. While there are certainly issues around complexity and specific cases of fraud, there is more general and pervasive problem, which is neither economic nor political in nature, but fundamentally moral.

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This is where I can finally address my title question, “What’s faith got to do with welfare?”

The usual response to this question will focus on the role of faith groups within welfare provision; the variety, depth, commitment, and provenance of religious
actors in attending the needs of others. This is the practical connection between Christian faith and welfare mentioned above.

This is, of course, an important area and, as noted earlier, the direction of travel appears to be towards greater rather than less involvement of faith groups in such provision. This itself introduces important, and increasingly urgent, questions about the proper freedoms and responsibilities of such groups vis-à-vis public money and statutory provision, and we may come on to discuss those later. However, I want to emphasise that the question of what faith has to do with welfare is wider than the simple question of provision.

The reason for this is that the welfare question, such as it is, is really a sub-set of a wider set of questions around how we understand one another and live together. It is a fundamentally moral question, deeply tied up with questions of trust and predicated on a sense of who we are, of who comprises ‘us’. We do ourselves a disservice by identifying a thing called welfare, reifying it, and then sealing it off in on corner of our public discourse, or one government department, where it can solved by better policies and more – or less – public money. Welfare is about ‘us’ and ‘us’ is a fundamentally ethical word. Indeed, in idler moments I wonder whether all politics is an extended discussion of the definition of the word ‘us’.

The reason for this is that as soon as you deem ‘us’ to be a legitimate word in a particular circumstance, you also are acknowledging responsibilities towards others. Simply by using the word ‘us’ you are denoting that you have something in common with another agent, and that very commonality creates a bond of some kind of mutual interest or respect. That bond can be thinner or thicker – indeed, its
very thickness is what preoccupies us in this debate – but it is nonetheless always there, predicated in the very fact that somehow I am prepared to identify you.

Put another way, a society comprised of solely of ’me’s is not a society at all. It is, rather, to borrow a metaphor that the now former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, has popularised, a hotel we inhabit, sealed into our private dwelling spaces from which we foray to negotiate our encounters with others through rights, contract and exchange.

A society of ’us’s, by contrast, is “a home we build together”. It is a society built up of bonds of trust; of bonds of mutual interest and habits of reciprocity; of perceived duties and shared endeavours. It is a society where there are, to use the theologian Oliver O’Donovan’s felicitous phrase, “common objects of love”. Precisely what are those bonds, duties and objects – or, put another way, who exactly are the ’us’s that comprise society is the crucial question, to which I will return.

Going back to the welfare state first though, it was precisely an overpowering sense of ‘us’ that enabled its creation in the first instance. A nation that had pooled its resources as never before to come through the greatest national threat in its history was a nation acutely conscious of that sense of ‘us’. In the vernacular, if we could pull together like this in wartime, why not also in peace.

That did not make the creation of the welfare state an easy process even then; certain professional bodies were resolutely opposed to nationalised provision. But it did create an overwhelming sense of mutual responsibility which, coupled with
the success of central planning during the first half of the ‘40s, translated into a
welfare settlement.

Put in the terms of my title question – what has faith to do with welfare? – the
answer becomes that the type of welfare we choose is determined by the kind of
faith in that we have in other another.

A ‘society’ that thinks itself a collection of individuals, each bearing rights by
means of which he or she negotiates shared space in pursuit of his or her own
rationally and freely-chosen ends – that kind of society will not long sustain an
extensive or possible any system of national welfare.

A ‘society’ of strangers, of individuals, or of de facto ghettos where geographical
areas are parcelled out according to different ethnic, cultural or religious groups; a
society in which the interaction between individuals and groups is minimal or
suspicious or hostile is similarly unlikely to sustain an extensive welfare system.

And a society of ‘consumers’, in which people choose, pursue and attain their
goals by means of contact and exchange, is, again, unlikely to sustain a welfare
system.

The way we conceive and relate to one another will dictate, in the long run, the
way in which we organise and fund – or fail to – our welfare.

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Now there is a very easy and extremely provocative premature conclusion to
draw at this point, which runs something like this.
If welfare is determined by a sense of ‘us’, only the great religions are able to sustain that sense of ‘us’ and that therefore, in Britain, only Christianity is capable of sustaining extensive state-based welfare provision. Throw Christianity away and you end up throwing away the welfare state.

Were I intent on simply being provocative I would push that line for all its worth. but the problem is that I don’t think it’s true. It is undoubtedly true that in Britain many of those who designed and promoted some form of extensive state welfare provision did so on the basis of the nation’s historic and, they believed, future Christian foundations, foundations that provided a sense of identity, of mutual responsibility, and a personal moral code that were deemed necessary for such a welfare state.

However, Britain was, I think, slightly anomalous in this and that although Catholic Social Thought did play a role in the establishment of welfare traditions on the continent, British Christian socialism was still a somewhat unusual beast in this regard.

More pointedly, anyone who knows about the history of Christian political thought over the last two centuries will also know that, widespread ecclesiastical support of the post-war welfare state notwithstanding, some of the most cogent and intelligent critiques of welfarism came from Christian pens drawing on Christian arguments. Christianity is simply too big and complex a phenomenon, as is welfare, for there to be any clear and easy lines drawn between the two.

The point I want to make, then, is not the normative one that Christianity is the only means of sustaining state welfare but rather firstly, a descriptive one – namely
that Christian presuppositions did underpin the formation of that state in Britain – and secondly, and humbler normative claim that, for all its technocratic details, ‘welfare’ is a fundamentally moral idea, and that accordingly it is necessarily determined by tacit articles of faith – the faith we have in one another, and in the nature and depth of mutual dependence and duty.

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I could end there. In a sense that is my case, or my central point. Faith not only delivers welfare, but determines it; and faith-based individuals – if I can use that ghastly term – have as much a place at the table as other professionals, not simply because faith groups provide so much welfare provision, but because it is ideas of the human, of the individual, of the community, of responsibility, and so forth – all of which are by very nature ‘faith-based’ – that determine the shape of welfare.

But I feel I should go further and make a few suggestions about what the Christian traditions from within which I speak, might have to say about welfare today. To do so, I should put a caveat in place first.

Please notice the might. The Anglican tradition, let alone the Christian tradition, is hardly univocal on the subject. I may speak from within the tradition but I don’t speak for it. I have no cathedra from which I may speak ex cathedra.

What I will say is tentative – not simply because Christians disagree on this subject (which is only to be expected) but also because, in as far as I am in a position to judge, the proper function of the state in the contemporary world has received woefully little attention in Christian political thought. I co-edited a book
the subject five years ago and there has not been a huge amount of work done on it since then. What follows is not gospel.

The Christian concept of the human rejects the autonomy or individualism or strict independence that underpins some contemporary liberal though. Humans are dependent creatures, from conception to death.

We are famously made in the image of God and although that much-abused phrase had been interpreted in all sorts of ways over the last two millennia, one of the consistently acknowledged interpretations is that of relationality. Humans are made in the image of a God who is Trinity, who is love, and who seeks relationship. To be human is to be relationship. Or, borrowing a phrase from the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, being is communion.

Thus, in answer to the first political question in history, posed by Cain in Genesis 4.9, the answer is yes, I am brother’s keeper.

That is a non-negotiable. However, that acknowledged, it does not follow that my fraternal keeping should necessarily, or exclusively, be mediated by the state. I can, indeed I must, legitimately use the word ‘us’ when talking about my ‘brother’, my neighbour and me. However, returning to the point I raised earlier, there are different kinds of ‘us’.

‘Us’ is no mere monochrome term but representative of a whole range of different relational networks that make up my personhood. No one single relationship exhausts my identity, which is comprised by a complex and ever-shifting ecology of such relationships, of different us’s.
A few years ago the economist and political theorist Amartya Sen published a book called *Identity and Violence* in which he attacked the “solitarist” theory of identity, which claims that human identities are formed by membership of a single social group. This, he pointed out, is not only wrong but dangerous, promising a stand-off between different identities which are so defining to the individual concerned that they must be defended at all costs.

Sen was writing in a global context, in which religious and cultural identities not only promised but delivered conflict. No such situation exists in domestic issues of welfare. However, the principle still stands. It is all well and good and right to recognise that we are an ‘us’, each other’s keepers, but unless we recognise the different us’s that comprise our identity, we are in danger of creating a flat land in which we are and solitary individuals and tax-paying citizens, and nothing else besides.

As an aside, I think people intuitively get this, whether they count themselves as members of the faithful or not. Several thousand years ago when I worked for the Henley Centre, we conducted some consumer research that looked at people’s sense of identity within a consumer society. How did they understand and identify themselves? Were the consumers? If so, how did that inform their decision making?

The researches got them talking about their lives and got them drawing their relational maps. And they found out pretty quickly that no-one – or virtually no-one – thought of themselves as a consumer. Indeed, interestingly, virtually no-one thought of themselves as an individual.
People were a husband or wife or father or mother or son or daughter or brother or sister first (usually). Then they were a friend. Then they were a colleague. Then they were a neighbour. Then they were a fan or a supporter or a sportsman or a club-member or a worshipper or a citizen or a voter or a motorist or a cyclist, and so on and so forth.

In other words, people's identity was naturally relationally constituted. They considered themselves to be a person-in-relationship but not just one person-in-relationship but a network or stack of persons-in-relationship.

This points us back to the point made earlier that welfare cannot be sealed into a particular box of public rhetoric or a particular department of state and dealt with there. Welfare is not a political issue. Rather, it is my problem as a father, a husband, a friend, a neighbour, a colleague, a Christian, a local resident, a pedestrian, and a taxpayer – to name just a few of the sites of personhood that comprise my life. Each of those roles carries with it an identity, bonds of trust and mutual interest, responsibilities and duties, common objects of love and shared endeavours. Our common welfare depends on the recognition and exercise of the full range of these.

This, then, by way of conclusion, is what Christian faith has to do with welfare.

It alerts us to the fact that welfare is in the first instance a moral discussion, predicated on our understanding of and relationships with others. If you like, it reminds us not that faith has something to do with welfare, but that welfare has something to do with faith.
It insists that, being a moral endeavour, it is not solely a political issue to be solved by policy and budget but a universal personal and public matter, which demands the attention of us all.

It claims that humans are not individuals, best left to negotiate allegedly neutral space through contract and exchange but fundamentally and non-negotiably relationally constituted, part of an ‘us’ to whom we have responsibilities. We are our brother’s keeper.

It contends that that ‘us’ is not simple or monochrome but that it is a composite or ecology of relationships, shifting, maturing, fading, strengthening, each of which constitutes something of who we are and each of which comprises a series of responsibilities. One of these is undoubtedly the ‘us’ of nationality, the sense of mutual responsibility owed to one another by virtue of living in the same geographical space under the same political authority.

But – and this really is my final point – simply living in the same geographical space or under the same political authority is a pretty ‘thin’ us (as innumerable examples from history and today’s news reminds us). In reality, the sense of responsibility we get from national identity is are often dependent on a submerged ‘thicker’ sense of ‘us’, such as that which is fostered by a common culture, a common language, a common history, a common religious faith (each of which is itself problematic).

The reason for the public’s decline in (some of) its positive attitudes to national mutual responsibility is because those common foundations feel weaker today than they did one, let alone two or three generations ago. That national mutual
responsibility cannot be easily abandoned and the Christian faith does, I think, need to speak up for it. But not at the expense of recognising the myriad of other relational identities that form us and should form a holistic and broad-based conception of welfare in 21st century Britain.

2 Orwell, Down and Out, p. 184-86
3 Such as Stafford Cripps, Lord Jowitt, Arthur Greenwood, Ernest Bevin, and Atlee himself
7 Quoted in Matthew Hilton and James McKay (eds.), The Ages of Voluntarism: How We Got to the Big Society (Oxford University Press & British Academy, 2011), p. 88. See: http://www.vahs.org.uk/2012/05/review-ages-of-voluntarism/
8 In such a way as has led some historians to see this as the prime driver of secularisation; see, in particular, Frank Prochaska, Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: The Disinherited Spirit (CUP, 2006)
10 http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/6475
11 Duncan Forrester Christianity and the Future of Welfare (XXXX) ix, 3
12 With its introduction of the universal credit, a new "claimant commitment", a Personal Independence Payment, a cap on total benefits, changes to Housing Benefit, and reforms of the Social Fund System, Employment and Support Allowance, and Child Support benefit. For more details on these see: http://www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/welfare-reform/legislation-and-key-documents/welfare-reform-act-2012/
13 http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/6475
15 See Peter Kellner, 'A quiet revolution', Prospect, March 2012: http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/a-quiet-revolution-britain-turns-against-welfare/
16 Of course, this being public opinion the results are never straightforward. Thus, the proportion that agrees that the welfare state encourages people "to stop helping each other" has remained reasonably constant (at around a third) since BSA surveys began in the early 1980s. Nevertheless the trends – more of which in a minute – tend to be in a certain direction.

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Clery, Elizabeth (2012), 'Are tough times affecting attitudes to welfare?', p.6.

There is, of course, the question of the extent to which we can trust public opinion on such matters; specifically, the extent to which we trust whether what the public tells pollsters and social researchers actually reflects what the public thinks and feels. A good example of this may be seen in BSA 2013 which records that "the public’s view on taxation and social protection are very similar to those seen in 1983.” That this seems somewhat far-fetched may be seen by the fact that no party election manifesto has come close to the taxation message of the Labour 1983 (or 1987 or 1992) manifesto in twenty years. Public opinion on taxation may be the way it is because the public thinks it is very unlikely to get what it claims to wish for.


That recognised, public opinion for this kind of spending has not changed much, with the first two figures (healthcare, disability) actually increasing since 1998, when they stood at 82 per cent and 80 per cent respectively, and the third (old age) only falling slightly, from 56 per cent.

In a similar vein, when it comes to support for the unemployed, one in three (33 per cent) think the individual or their family should be mainly responsible, compared with one in ten (10 per cent) who thought this in 1998.

On this see David Goodhart’s essay, ‘Too diverse?’ in Prospect, February 2004:
http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/too-diverse-david-goodhart-multiculturalism-britain-immigration-globalisation/