In Search of ‘Frames of Sensitivity’

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This paper will report the initial findings of a pilot project exploring the work of voluntary organisations that have been formed to bring people together across religious and communal divides. The pilot involves interviews with six organisations located in India, Israel and Northern Ireland.

How we can best respond to the growing tensions and violence between different religious communities is becoming one of the most critical problems of the twenty-first century. Although the underlying issues may be more economic and political than religious, inter-communal tensions are increasing in many parts of the world and are also increasingly being framed by a hermeneutics of religion. Ashis Nandy calls for the development of a ‘post secular political awareness’ in which ‘the challenge is to bypass the division and discover the frames of sensitivity within which respect for – and celebration of – the unthinking, casual, everyday forms of religiosity converge with serious scholarly vision of a sacralised cosmos and sanctity of life’ (Nandy 2009: 12).

The research method I am using draws on my previous work on the founding stories of voluntary organisations (Schwabenland 2006). In this work I argued that the stories about how and why voluntary organisations were founded could be regarded as creation myths, stories that encoded the founders’ values and their utopian visions for a better world. In this project I am focusing on organisations working in areas of conflict and reconciliation in order to discover more about the ways in which organisational actors conceptualise the good society in Nandy’s ‘post secular world’ and how they frame organisational responses to its challenges. The organisations that I have chosen to research have all been established with a primary objective of working across religious divides. Each is also located in a part of the world that has experienced very serious disruption and on-going violence. The causes of such violence are many, local, and complex, however they are increasingly being identified in the media (and in much political discourse) as being the reflection of religious differences (although rioters rarely debate doctrinal differences while they throw petrol bombs at each other). Drawing on Cockburn’s work researching voluntary organisations in Belfast, Israel and Bosnia, my study aims to uncover the conceptual devices that people use to frame their experiences, and in particular, their motivations to act.

To cite Nandy again, ‘the intellectual challenge of our times may well be to identify the means – institutional structures and personality resources – that can reconcile diversity with exclusions that are not destructive, demeaning or driven by hate’ (ibid: 7). This study aims to make a small contribution to this challenge by exploring the responses developed by people coming together to create organisations that represent a challenge to the hermeneutics of hatred, firstly by their very existence, and secondly, by the patterns of engagement that they are creating in their work.

References
