

**Geographies of faith, welfare and substance abuse:
From neoliberalism to postsecular ethics**

Submitted by Andrew Williams to the University of Exeter
as a thesis for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Geography
In April 2012

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Signature: (Andrew Williams)

In memory of
Richard 'Biscuits' Taylor
(12 January 1985 – 20 December 2011)

A best-friend who led by example in loving God, loving mercy and welcoming the stranger

Acknowledgements

A vast number of people have played a role in helping me produce what is read in this thesis. First and foremost I am grateful for all those who participated in the research process. Special thanks needs to go to all the staff and residents of the two placement sites who welcomed me as a volunteer and researcher, opening up their homes and/or places of work, and sharing their time, support and guidance with me which has proven invaluable.

A number of people deserve a particular mention for playing a significant part in my intellectual development during this thesis. Enormous thanks goes to my supervisors Paul Cloke and Mark Goodwin, especially Paul for his encouragement, friendship and editing expertise. I would like to thank everyone in the Exeter Geography department who have provided not only intellectual stimulation and a critical sounding-board for ideas, but also have become very good friends. Thanks goes to Paul, Justin Beaumont and Sam Thomas, and others on the EU-7FP FACIT project who have wrestled with, and helped co-produce, the debates found in this thesis. Intellectually there are number of other people who have helped inform this thesis. I would like to thank the staff at Bristol Geography who 'roughed me up' intellectually and theologically when I was an undergraduate. Also Pete Orphan, the pastor of my church in Swansea who lent me Jim Wallis' *God's Politics* back in 2006 – who would have thought it would turn out like this! I would like to thank Paul Hazelden for introducing me to Phil Harris' work, particularly *Empathy with the Devil* and *Drug Induced*.

The enormity of writing a thesis drags one through the whole gambit of human emotion. I am indebted to all my friends and family for their steady love and support irrespective of the highs and lows of the PhD. In particular, I would like to thank my parents, brothers, and sisters-in-law for their encouragement, patience and their knack of getting me to see beyond this keyboard and computer monitor. Thanks for showing me the beauty of this world in a time when my glasses needed a good clean...

A big thank you goes to my close friends and housemates here in Exeter, Swansea, and scattered across the country, all of whom have helped keep me sane throughout the last four years. Thanks particularly to those who at various stages have supported me and loved me even when I was a wee bit obsessive and intense. You know who you are, and thank you for being solid in life's turbulence.

Abstract

The increasing prominence of faith-based organisations (FBOs) in providing welfare in the UK has typically been regarded as a by-product of neoliberalism, as the gaps left by shrinking public service provision and the contracting out of service delivery have been filled by these and other Third Sector organisations. In this way, FBOs have been represented as merely being co-opted as inexpensive resource providers into the wider governmentalities of neoliberal politics – a process that allows a particular secularised form of religion in the public realm. In contrast FBOs working outside the financial and regulatory frameworks of government are understood to resist co-option and maintain the integrity a faith-motivated approach - an approach commonly assumed to be ideologically coercive and tainted by proselytising self-interest.

This thesis challenges these conventional accounts of FBOs and the bifurcation of third sector welfare providers into “insiders” and “outsiders”. Drawing upon in-depth ethnographic research with FBOs providing drug rehabilitation services in the UK – and with the clients of these services – this thesis illustrates how neoliberalism can be co-constituted through the involvement of FBOs, which can offer various pathways of resistance in and through the pursuit of alternative philosophies of care and political activism. I critically question the difference faith makes in the processes of care and welfare in FBOs, critiquing the varied ethics of care derived in part from theological belief, and emphasise the relationships of care embodied and performed within organisational spaces as to complicate oversimplified stories of neoliberal co-option, proselytisation and social control. Equally, I argue that some accounts of secularisation of FBOs overlook a broader rapprochement between secular and faith-based ethical motivations, which can solicit new political and ethical spaces that run counter to, and sometimes actively resist, neoliberal (and religious) governmentalities. By drawing attention to the ethical agency of staff and clients in these spaces of care and regulation, this thesis paves the way for a more nuanced understanding of the geographies of faith, welfare and neoliberalism.

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