Faith in unions: from safe spaces to organised labour?

Abstract

Despite the UK trade union movement’s avowedly secular nature its antecedents show that religious beliefs greatly influenced many early trade unionists and, in some cases, contributed to the formation of a collective trade union consciousness. This paper begins by considering the way that trade union leaders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries drew upon religious teachings of social justice to organise their fellow workers. This historical context provides a background to understanding how today a similar ideological commitment to collectivisation and social justice may be held by workers of faith. Indeed, experience has shown that newly arrived migrant workers often gravitate towards familiar social networks to find help and support, and faith communities can often play a key role in this respect. Yet, the adoption of a ‘militant secularism’ from some trade unionists may result in the closing of these spaces that could be used to organise sections of the labour market that are currently, largely, unorganised. Drawing upon empirical data collected from stories from mainly migrant workers and observation of community organising campaigns, the paper considers the extent to which social networks (faith or otherwise) may provide safe spaces for workers to be organised into trade unions.

Key words:
Religion, trade unions, migrant labour, ethnic minority, social networks, living wage, London Citizens, IAF.

Introduction

In many parts of the world, the UK included, trade unions have seen their power, influence and membership drastically decline over the last few decades. As global and local economies have rapidly changed affecting significant aspects of work and the employment relationship, unions have faced challenges to traditional workplace organising: there are new and complex subcontracting relations, the spatial dispersal of workers across multiple sites means workers have less connection with fellow workers, there are also higher levels of job mobility and people commute and live in different residential patterns, which affects traditional community life (Holgate 2007). Further, the individualisation of the employment relationship has also changed the relationship that workers once had with their unions – making many view their membership as a ‘contract’ for a service, should a problem arise, rather than a collective response to workers’ problems (Heery and Kelly 1994).
The forced migration of labour, either due to political unrest, war or economic necessity, has also created new divisions of labour based on nationality, ethnicity and migration status (Massey 1995; Wills et al. 2010) and the most vulnerable of workers – often new migrants – have attracted the attention of union activists who are looking for ways of bringing them in to union membership, recognising that their super exploitation has negative impact upon other workers and wider society (Bonacich 2000; Castells 1975; Cornfield 2006; Fitzgerald 2006; Gordon 2005; Martínez Lucio and Perrett 2009; Milkman 2000). All these factors have meant that UK unions have recognised the need to (re)build links outside their direct constituencies and there has been a shift – sometimes only in rhetoric, but also in some practice – towards greater engagement with local migrant communities (Holgate 2009a; Holgate and Wills 2007; Martínez Lucio and Perrett 2009; McBride and Greenwood 2009; Perrett and Martínez Lucio 2006b; Wills 2001).

For example, in the UK, we have seen the development of broad-based community organising in London in the form of London Citizens – a London-wide coalition of faith groups, schools, tenants’ associations and universities which has been campaigning (relatively successfully) for a London Living Wage (Holgate and Wills 2007; Wills 2004b) and for regularisation of immigration status for long-term migrants. There have been a few trade union branches that have joined the coalition, but the UK trade union movement is, organisationally and institutionally, avowedly secular, and unlike unions in the US, for example, where we have seen joint faith community/union alliances in organising campaigns, trade unions in the UK are much more reticent about or hostile to working alongside faith-based organisations like London Citizens (Holgate 2009a). This trade union reticence is often a result of perceived ideological and practical concerns about ‘faith’ issues such as abortion, patriarchal values and the treatment of gays and lesbians. Unions in North America, however, have embraced and courted faith leaders to speak out about social injustice in relation to work and the employment relationship (Berman 1998). Sometimes, cynically, publicity events around union organising campaigns are called whereby it is seen useful to ‘rent a vicar’ to add ‘moral authority’ to the occasion. But other union/faith alliances are much more egalitarian where parties have common understanding and work closely together to build organisations to improve the lives of workers – particularly those most marginalised or vulnerable (Fine 2005a; Fine 2005b; Peters and Merrill 1998).
In many cases, faith communities represent ‘safe spaces’ in a hostile world and, particularly so for some newer migrant workers when they are the main social networks that link to people from their national or ethnic group (Jamoul and Wills 2007; Warren 2001). However, recent academic literature in the UK has paid little attention to the role of social networks in union organising among migrant groups and mainly focused on different tools that may be useful for drawing in new groups of workers (Simms et al. 2012). For example, there have been assessments of union learning programmes providing English language training and basic skills provision and the extent to which these are a useful organising approach (see for example Hayes 2009; Martínez Lucio et al. 2007) and others have focused on organising in particular sectors where migrants are working (Fitzgerald 2006; Holgate 2005; Turnbull 2005). But apart from the work of Martínez Lucio and Perrett and Perrett and Martínez Lucio (2009; 2006a) academic work has not really focused on workers as part of wider communities, such that attempts to understand organising beginning from the lived experiences of migrant workers, their histories, geographies, diasporic influences and personal and family lives has largely been overlooked. Indeed current research on trade unions and migrant workers and minority ethnic workers is, overall, extremely limited (see Holgate 2009b for an overview). Interestingly, where this work has been undertaken it has been geographers (see for example, Holgate 2011; Holgate and Wills 2007; Wills 2004a; 2008; Wills et al. 2010 for work in this area) who have argued that ‘geographically-specific constructions of collective identity—whether place-based or not—have implications for the basis on which particular social movement organisations are built, including the possible avenues for and barriers to alliance formation’ (Miller 2000: 21). When we add into this mix the issue of faith and how faith-based social networks may operate to create space for the organisation of migrant or vulnerable workers there is a dearth of current literature in the UK context (for exception see Jamoul and Wills 2007; Wills et al. 2010).

Accordingly, this paper attempts to bridge a gap in understanding of the link between religious teachings and trade unionism by considering the past in relation to the present. It does this by looking at the antecedents of the formation of the UK trade union movement where ideas of social justice in relation to work were influenced by religious teachings and the way these were used to build a collective response to injustice. The purpose of this is not merely for historical context, nor is its aim to present a comprehensive historical account of the influence of religious teachings on the labour movement, but an attempt to
reflect and understand the social, cultural and economic position of migrant workers in the past, but also in today’s society, by considering the way in which faith communities may act as spaces and places where people seek individual help and support, and also the potential for collective responses to injustice. This then leads to questions about whether or not the ‘militant secularism’ of some UK trade unionists is closing off potential avenues for migrant workers’ involvement in trade unions by a refusal to consider working with or alongside those from faith communities.

Research approach

In considering the relationship between migrant workers, minority ethnic workers, faith organisations and organised labour in the UK, this paper draws on a wide range of empirical data. The first from a 3-year ESRC research project that has been looking at how workers attempt to resolve problems they face at work. The focus has been on three minority ethnic communities in London and the places/individuals/organisations to which they turn when they are in difficulty. The groups studied were Kurds in Hackney, South Asians (originating from the Indian sub-continent) in Ealing and people of Black Caribbean heritage in Lambeth. By ‘problems’ we are referring to issues of disciplinary and grievances, where workers are subject to bullying, harassment, victimisation and discrimination – as well as breaches of statutory rights, such as health and safety, failure to pay wages (including National Minimum Wage), provide holidays and abide by the Working Time Directive, amongst others. Each of the communities has their own religious (e.g. Alevi, Christian, Hindu Muslim, Sikh), political and secular traditions, which allowed for an exploration of if, how and why these might contribute to providing support within each community – a question seldom asked in trade union/industrial relations research, which keeps its focus primarily on class.

In addition, there were interviews with 64 key respondents, including people working in third sector organisations such as Law Centres and other advice and advocacy organisations like Citizens Advice (a national UK charity), local solicitors, community organisations, faith groups and local council representatives. Interviews were conducted with 185 workers from the three minority ethnic groups and of these, 125 were born outside of the UK. The 125 included, 60 Kurds, 54 South Asians and 11 from the Caribbean. Interviews varied in length from 30 minutes to 3 hours, the average was approximately 1.5 hours. In this research, participants (who included trade union and non-trade union members) were questioned about whether they were members of any faith
organisations and whether they had used or considered using these when they were in difficulty at work. All workers volunteered to take part, and were identified using a range of methods from leaflets in local libraries, faith organisations, doctors’ surgeries, union notice boards and local shops, to email broadcasts from trade union networks, employers’ staff lists, and social networking websites (see Holgate et al, 2011 for details).

The second set of empirical data is from research into London Citizens, a broad-based community alliance of predominantly, faith organisations, but also schools, universities and other community-based groups. There is some trade union involvement but this is currently very limited (just 4 branches). The organisation is part of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) network, which was formed by the ‘godfather’ of community organising, Saul Alinsky, after he began organising in Chicago stockyards in the 1930s. Alinsky’s (1972) model of community organising has been one of the most influential, spurning a number of similar networks to the IAF and has resulted in tens of thousands of people being trained in his particular community organising philosophy/techniques.

Based on the organisation of established communities through the technique of ‘relational organising’, whereby individual one-to-one meetings are used to build relationships of power, IAF affiliates like London Citizens have been effective in using the leverage of local communities to campaign for issues of social justice. The model adopted by London Citizens (and other IAF affiliates) is to organise people where they already congregate – in their churches, community centres, schools and trade unions – thereby broadening the base from which to build strength. Many of the people who have become involved with London Citizens are migrant workers where they have formed tight communities with strong social and cultural support networks often through their faith communities. This research, from a second ESRC-funded project, has included extensive observation from 2001 to 2012 where a wide-range of events/meetings/public actions were attended, and 36 recent in-depth interviews with organisers from London Citizens and trade unionists with links/knowledge of the organisation. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymised and analysed using qualitative software. Analysis entailed dividing raw data into major themes identified from the research questions and the original literature review, each of which being further sub-divided to allow for more nuanced analysis. These themes include knowledge of community organising, motivation for unionisation, ideological viewpoint, instrumentalism, personal/political affiliations, living wage campaigns,
organisational aims and objectives, critiques of organising approaches, respect and tolerance, organisational constraints, issue v relational organising, approaches to training, dealing with worker problems, purpose of trade unionism, union organising culture v community organising culture, organisational structure and forms of democracy.

Religious teachings and their influence on early trade unionism in the UK
This section aims to provide a brief background to understanding the way that trade union leaders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries drew upon religious teachings of social justice to organise their fellow workers. The aim is to reflect upon how today similar ideological commitments to collectivisation and social justice may be held by workers of faith, and to what extent these ideas and religious spaces can be utilise to organise people into trade unions in the current period.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to write an in-depth historical analysis of religious teachings and their influence on early trade unionism in the UK, and indeed that has been done elsewhere (see Wearmouth’s works in the bibliography); the purpose here is to merely highlight, for the unfamiliar, that the early UK union movement was indeed influenced by religious teachings and there are perhaps lessons to be learnt from the way in which trade union organisers made use of these in building union consciousness and organising using those strong social networks. Further it is acknowledged that not all religions or churches adopted progressive views on worker collectivism, but those that did had a significant impact on workers’ understanding of the need for collective action to combat injustice.

There is much (unread) material languishing in trade union archives that demonstrates how early trade union leaders were influenced by words they had read in their Bibles and heard in their chapels. Most familiar is the story of the six Tolpuddle Martyrs who were found guilty of ‘administering illegal oaths’ and transported from England to Australia in 1834. As the most notable early trade unionists, their crime was to combine to form The Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers. A few years earlier, the Combination Acts of 1824 and 1825, which had made it illegal to organise for better working conditions, were repealed but a vindictive local landowner invoked a little known law from 1799 that prohibited people from swearing oaths and one of the early attempts to combine was thwarted when these farm labourers were convicted. As the men were sentenced, one of the labourers, George Loveless, wrote; ‘God is our guide! from field, from wave, from plough, from
anvil, and from loom; We come, our country’s rights to save, And speak a tyrant faction’s
doom: We raise the watch-word liberty; We will, we will, we will be free!’.

Loveless, along with two of the other men, was a Methodist Wesleyan lay preacher who
drew upon lessons learnt from religious teachings to talk about the poor conditions and
treatment of the working-class. Richard Wearmouth has written extensively on the
influence of Methodism on the working-class movements of England during the
nineteenth and twentieth centuries and whilst he argues that the attitude of official
Methodism to trade unionism can be described as ‘non-committal or neutral, neither
hostile or sympathetic’ this was often not the case on the ground where there was often
great local support for trade union activity (Wearmouth 1937; 1948; 1954; 1957). He
quotes from Dr Rattenbury, author of Wesley’s legacy, who stated ‘Methodists flocked to
the flag of trade unionism without forsaking the flag of Methodism. No body of people in
England have been more conspicuous in their oneness with labour aspirations and
propaganda that the Primitive Methodists’ (Wearmouth 1937: 204). Home Office papers
of the time report on activity of Methodists in various parts of the country; the Reverend
Westmoreland from a village near Wakefield, informed the authorities that ‘the greater part
of the people called Methodists are united with the Radicals. They assemble in the evening
in certain cottages in the country under the pretence of religious worship’ (Wearmouth
1937: 204).

Methodism was particularly strong around the mining towns and villages of
Northumberland, Durham and Lancashire and Wearmouth’s books contain hundreds of
biographies of trade union leaders, many of who were Methodist preachers. Robert Moore
also describes how Methodism provided an education and training ground for leaders and
that from their ranks came an outstandingly large proportion of trade union leaders;
‘whatever orthodox Methodists may have preached, the chapel was a school for democrats
and a source of popular leaders’ (Moore 1974: 13). While many of these leaders are lost to
current trade union consciousness there are some that are still well known today. Henry
Broadhurst, a Wesleyan, was born in 1840 and became a stonemason in Oxfordshire and
he went on to lead the stonemasons union before becoming secretary of the parliamentary
committee of the TUC. Ben Pickard, born 1842 was the most prominent trade union
leader to emanate from Wesleyan Methodism and was the pioneer of the Miners
Federation of Great Britain from 1889 to 1904. Arthur Henderson who became the MP
for Barnard Castle in 1903, chaired the Labour Representation Committee conference that gave birth to the Labour Party in 1906. Wearmouth describes how ‘religion coloured and shape [Henderson’s] whole life’ leading to him becoming a Wesleyan preacher. He spent eleven years as a trade union organiser where ‘he took the spirit of his church into unionism and found many men who did the same’ (Wearmouth 1954: 174). JT Murphy, a well-known radical trade unionist who became leader of Shop Stewards’ Movement in 1917, was in his earlier years religious and became a preacher in the Primitive Methodist Church where he would argue with his work colleagues about the importance of religion. Later on he abandoned his religious faith and became a revolutionary socialist. Kier Hardie was elected to Parliament in 1892 as an Independent Labour candidate in London’s east end and was the country’s first socialist MP. Prior to this he was a miner’s leader the first secretary of the Scottish Miners’ Federation in 1886 and wrote for the Miner. Unlike many other radicals who had been brought up in religious households he was raised as an atheist but later became a lay preacher for the Evangelical Union Church. His first article in the Miner reflected his religious and socialist values: ‘So it was in the days of Christ. They who proclaimed a God given gospel to the world were the poor and the comparatively unlettered. We need to-day a return to the principles of that Gospel which, by proclaiming all men sons of God and brethren one with another, makes it impossible for one, Shylock-like, to insist on his rights at the expense of another’ (Stewart 1921: 31).

Besides the influence of Methodism on working class activism, other religions and faith-based organisations involved themselves in the concerns of the labouring poor. The Labour Church Movement founded by John Trevor in 1891 was ‘dedicated to the idea that the emancipation of the working classes from capitalism was a religious movement’ (Pierson 1960: 463). Pierson explains how it was while listening to Ben Tillett, a Christian Socialist and one of the leaders of the 1889 London dock strike, speaking at a Unitarian conference, that Trevor had the idea of forming a radically new kind of church to appeal to those sections of the working class that were part of the growing labour movement. Trevor described the labour movement as the ‘greatest religious movement of our time’ and it was not long before 50 Labour Churches sprang up, first in the industrialised areas of Lancashire and Yorkshire, followed by other parts of England. The Labour Churches were a response to the dogmatism and middle-class domination of orthodox churches and as such they were stripped of the many of the rituals and trappings of Christianity. As Bevir (1997: 54) describes; ‘the typical [Labour] church had no priest, no pulpit and no bible’.
The *Labour Prophet*, the newsheet produced by John Trevor, reported how sermons in the Labour Churches mainly dealt with labour and social problems where well-known socialist and labour leaders were invited to speak to audiences of 400-500 or more. Along with the Salvation Army, the Labour Church raised money for workers and their families in time of industrial unrest, most notably during the 1889 dock strike. During the strike, Cardinal Manning, who was the leader of the Catholic Church in Britain, was influential in helping to broker a settlement and an end to the successful strike. Manning’s commitment to issues of social justice made him popular among the working classes and he was an enthusiastic supporter of *Rerum Novarum*, the 1891 encyclical of Pope Leo V111 on the rights and duties of capital and labour, which stated that workers should have the right to live free of destitution and should be paid a living wage. Although it said that workers should have the right to form associations to improve their lives, it stated clearly that these should not be socialist trade unions as the Catholic Church was opposed to socialist doctrine. Many within the Catholic Church in the UK, both lay and clergy, believed it was a ‘religious duty to become active within the world of work and politics in order to advance workers rights and that a labour party could be a vehicle for such activism’ (Keating 1994: 44). Developing from the Catholic Church’s new teachings on social justice saw the establishment of the Catholic Workers’ College to provide an education to working class activists who could show an interest in trade union activity or workers education. There was stiff competition for places and it recruited miners, metal workers, textile workers and dockers who had missed out on earlier education and it trained them to be leaders in the labour movement.

While there is not the space here to delve further into the influences of religion on the early labour movement it is clear that many of the messages and lessons learnt from religious texts were translated into social justice issues closely related to the messages of early socialist teaching. As Mark Bevir (1997: 50) explains ‘although British socialism owes a debt to Marxism and Fabianism, its leading characteristics derive from an ethical socialism exemplified by the Labour Churches…we should recognise they express a set of religious beliefs of continuing relevance for modern politics.’ We can also take a history lesson of religion’s relevance to modern politics from the Industrial Christian Fellowship (ICF) formed in 1877, which was set up to specifically provide support to migrant workers on the canals and railways (see Studdert-Kennedy 1982 for history of the ICF). The Rev
Goddard Studdert-Kennedy, an important figure in the ICF just after the First World War, was a ‘passionate advocate of social justice’ who said, ‘if finding God in our churches leads to us losing Him in our factories, then better we tear down those churches for God must hate the sight of them’ (see ICF 2010 for history of the ICF). Although perhaps less radical today, the ICF operates as a membership organisation that is committed to research and reflection in the area of faith and work, but in those early days it recognised that migrants formed their own communities as they were often marginalised and scorned and the ICF advocated on behalf of these un-unionised workers.

Despite these positive examples of religious teachings being used to advocate for social justice among the labouring classes, it would also be possible to unearth contrary messages from religious bodies but this is of little concern here. The point being made is that, historically, religious teachings have at times been used to advance the cause of labour organising and it is useful, in drawing upon these, to understand how faith communities today may still draw upon these social justice messages and how unions or community organisers can perhaps use these social networks, drawing upon reservoirs of social capital in faith organisations, to organise workers such as those from migrant and minority ethnic communities. It is acknowledged that this a very brief overview of some of the influences of religious teachings on early trade unionism in the UK and that there is much more ground that could be covered, but its purpose here is to highlight the fact that although the official or institutional UK labour movement has been predominately secular in nature, its antecedents are a mixture of religious and socialist beliefs – often with individuals seamlessly weaving ideologies together.

This understanding of history is important to understanding the present. Early trade unionists were able to marry their religious and socialists beliefs drawing out the messages of social justice combined within each ideology. This was put to good use in helping to organise those early industrial workers that faced considerable poverty and exploitation. Not all early trade unionists held on to their religious ideas, many became radicalised by their activity in the labour movement, yet they understood the need to organise workers where they were at that particular stage in their consciousness. Workers were familiar with their churches and chapels and, even then, they provided safe spaces in which to organise. Today, a similar situation remains among migrant workers who use their faith communities
for help and advice (Holgate et al. 2011; 2012b; Jamoul and Wills 2008; Wills et al. 2009; 2010).

This paper began with reference to how in the process of migration, newly arrived workers tend to gravitate towards familiar social networks and how the ‘safe spaces’ of religious communities can provide a link or opportunity for workers to become organised in trade unions. It now takes a look at the findings of interviews with (mainly) migrant workers who have experienced problems at work and the way they sought to deal with these. We explored two main questions, one to look at the individual and the second, the collective. We asked to what extent did the research show faith communities as support organisations for individual problems and secondly went on to consider whether or not they offer opportunities for building collective responses to social justice issues relating to employment.

**Individual problems at work: where do workers seek help and advice?**

We first begin with a look at individual problems. In face-to-face interviews with 185 workers we asked to whom did they turn when they had problems at work. Interviewees were further probed to find out whether they were members of any faith organisation and whether or not this was somewhere they might seek help or advice with a work-related issue. As we were interested in social networks and collectivisation our focus was on local ethnic communities based in different parts of London. Beginning with Caribbean workers in Brixton in Lambeth we discovered that around half of interviewees were either regular or sporadic attendees at churches who said that their faith was important to them. Of the remainder, a handful was either sceptical about or hostile to religion and the remainder were fairly ambivalent. While we used a wide variety of means of finding interviewees, we only had a couple of interviewees who contacted us because they had seen the leaflet in their local church and one was Annie who attended a ‘mostly white’ Church of England church. Annie described how she only went there for the service and then went home – she did not see the church as part of a wider community and explained that she did not get involved in church activities. She was dismissive about the large evangelical black churches where ‘everyone knows everyone’s business...[because] I don’t think churches should be like that’. Annie felt that the role of the church was spiritual and all other matters should be kept separate and when asked if she would ever think about talking to the vicar about the problem she was having at work she was emphatic in her response: ‘No! No! Because in all that time, I’ve never spoken to anybody at church about it, it just never happened’.
While other interviews were less emphatic than Annie, the majority of Caribbean interviewees said they would be unlikely to speak about their workplace problems to people at church, although they seemed happy to talk about other personal issues they might be facing such as those relating to family matters. This raises some important issues relating to the increasing individualisation of the employment relationship and both collective and individual responses to problems at work. Firstly, has the fact that the employment relationship become more individualised meant that workers have subconsciously accepted that the problem they face is ‘their problem’ even in unionised workplaces? Have unions too accepted management directives that each case is personal, confidential and not a collective matter? Has there been a shift such that problems experienced at work in are now more likely to be dealt with as individual rather than collective problems and are there different responses from different groups of migrant workers, and to what extent might these relate to the time since migration?

It is not expected that answers to these questions are necessarily straightforward or universal, but historical, cultural and social factors are likely to influence and change the way workers behave and it is certainly the case that the three ethnic groups have a different time/space trajectory. For example, from the 1960s to the 1980s, the black community of Brixton had much more of a collective response to issues or racism and discrimination – both in and outside of work – than is the case today (Sivanandan 1981). For example, the Brixton Advice Centre (BAC), located in the centre of Lambeth in South London was established in 1966 as a response to lack of help and support for the growing numbers of black Caribbean workers living in the area. It was formed by volunteers from the community in a local Methodist church and is now one of the few legal advice centres in the borough to have survived cuts in funding to voluntary sector organisations. Its origins are typical of the self-help response from migrant communities who are either marginalised or face discrimination from wider society:

*The advice centre itself, for various reasons I think, has got quite strong roots in the black community and they love it a lot. It’s got a great deal of kudos amongst the community, so hence they are by far our largest client group. I think, they probably would be anyway in Brixton based here in Lambeth, but I think for added reasons, it’s historically where they always used to go, when the other places weren’t there…especially 40 years ago [advice centres] weren’t set up in the same way to represent black people. (BAC advice worker)*
Other interviewees explained how the black community in London was often built around community organisations and particularly local churches:

*I think black churches are very [community based], for example, my wife was brought up in the black church in South London. And that was the whole community, all age groups spending a lot of time there over the weekend and they had the sense of community, I think. And if they needed help, they probably got help in terms of whether it was issues at work or at home. And people did come, that’s what we did a lot of that when I was there and my mother for example did a lot of helping people who’d got slapped across the face at work in a shop, in the restaurant, and this, that and the other. Ok we’re talking a long time ago but those were the things that unions weren’t helping with.* (Key respondent, black voluntary sector organisation)

The vicar at St Matthew’s Church in the centre of Brixton, talked at length about the history of churches in Lambeth and how many of the new black Caribbean settlers had been turned away or not made welcome in the 1950s and 1960s, but that today his church had many congregants who were migrant workers from many different ethnic backgrounds. He explained how he saw new arrivals in London tending to gravitate to ‘ethnic churches’ where there is a critical mass of others from their country of origin. They did this, in addition to spiritual fulfilment, to find out about work, talk about their experiences of work and how they are treated, as well as who is a good and who is a bad employer. There were strong social networks of people who were looking for contacts from people in similar circumstances to themselves. Many of these new migrants have issues around their immigration status and are perhaps working without the required papers. The vicar reported that there were a lot of people in church communities who were undocumented, but that workers did not talk about it openly because of fear. As he said: ‘so they don’t come so much to talk about specifically with problems at work, but they will talk about their experience of work’. St Matthew’s church had become a member of London Citizens, the broad-based community coalition, in order to give church members the opportunity to ‘reconnect outside of the wall’ of the church and to campaign for regularisation and employment rights for migrant workers. He was fully aware of the difficulty of unions engaging these workers and felt that being part of a wider community-based group and using faith organisations as a means to organise, was perhaps a way forward:

*The other difficulty of course is how do you unionise groups like that and how do you support them, particularly in the current state of the labour market, the movement, the flexibility, the way people get into work by standing on street corners, being picked up from one day to the next and*
not knowing from one week to another whether there’s jobs still going to be in the same place, but maybe going somewhere else. The unions should be thinking about how to do that [organise] and going through churches maybe is the way to do it, to get the unions in churches, or to have reps in churches. (Vicar, St Matthew’s Church, Brixton)

The responses from other interviewees, Kurdish workers in Hackney and South Asians in Ealing, to questions about where they would turn for help and advice and the role of religion as a support network differed considerably from those of black Caribbean interviewees. Like earlier migrants from the Caribbean, South Asians were, as British Commonwealth citizens, entitled and encouraged to come to live and work in the UK during the post-war reconstruction era. From the 1960s onward increasing numbers came and one area of settlement was Southall in west London, which today has a minority white population. Southall has been described as ‘little India’ where Asian dress, shops, business, temples, mosques and gurdwaras dominate the high streets (Bauman 1996). Most interviewees identified as religious, but levels of observance varied considerably. To some, religion was central to their lives and it had an important social and cultural dimension, to others it was much more peripheral, but most would attend services, even if only for special occasions. In many senses, the religious communities operated as community centres, they were places that people would use to seek advice in an informal manner. As one key respondent explained: ‘It may be an initial starting point, it may be a form of a support network and through word of mouth you may be referred on to some other more appropriate form of support.’ A local councillor concurred when he said:

Places of worship, I think, occupy a different space in our lives. In a sense, they were and still are places of social and cultural activity also, but the level of expertise to deal with, say domestic violence, or employment or education. They give advice on a very elemental basic level...they do not have the resources or capacity for dealing with these issues. (Local councillor)

We did, however, find that some people used their faith communities when they had problems at work. A few places, a Southall mosque and a gurdwara, both held formal advice sessions, although these tended not to concentrate on employment advice. Nevertheless, people would sometimes use these as a starting or referral point to more useful advice elsewhere. A couple of prominent Southall South Asian trade unionists who were also considered community leaders would often be approached in mosque or temples by workers seeking help and advice. Mostly they were un-unionised workers but
sometimes they would be union members unable to get advice from their unions. As one said, ‘if they don’t go to trade unions, they go to the Indian Workers Association, or some will go to the gurdwara or to their mandir (temple).’

There was, however, a similar reticence to that spoken of by other interviewees about using faith communities as a place to seek out individual advice for problems at work. As one interviewee said, ‘Basically if I’m not getting anywhere, then I would turn there as a last resort, because being a community member it will be a bit embarrassing for me to go there and say I have got a problem with this woman at work.’ Yet there was a very different attitude to more collective work issues. For example at a high profile industrial dispute with the company Gate Gourmet in 2005 the local community and gurdwaras supported the strike and we interviewed a number of people involved in this dispute. A spokesperson from the Indian Workers Association, for example, talked about the help provided by the gurdwara for this particular dispute:

> Well in the Gate Gourmet workers’ struggle, initially there was support from the faith organisations, from the community pressure behind them. Later on, I think it trickled a way a bit because of the level of consciousness. Whereas the working class organisations have a high level of consciousness, they’re able to see the direction in which the struggles go and the commitment is much longer. Whereas in the faith organisations, with due respect to the various religions, and their lack of political consciousness they can sometimes be supportive, sometimes not supportive. People do turn to the faith organisations because that’s where they gather in large numbers. (Spokesperson IWA)

A number of worker interviews also described how supportive the gurdwara had been, providing daily food on the picket lines throughout the dispute and providing space for union meetings. Local South Asian trade unionists appeared aware of this disjuncture between the individual and the collective response to problems at work and, as such, recognised that there was great potential for union organising in working with local faith communities, because as the above interviewee described, these are the places that people gather in large numbers and because religious institutions appeared to be playing a greater role in the community at a political level that they had in the past. Tahir, a long time respected trade union organiser described how he had often used local mosques and temples as organising spaces:
I think it is important to work through some of these religious churches and groups because the advice they have is very limited. I think these religious groups, as I already mentioned, there is possibility of success. I have had success recently because we go door-to-door campaigning and use our links with religious people. (Tahir, union organiser)

It was here, he argued, that workers appeared more comfortable in familiar social spaces and places that they regularly attended (which were, in the main, faith communities). They recognised union leaders who attended the mosques and temples as insiders as part of their community and knew they understood their social, economic and cultural experiences. It was through these methods of community-based organising that Tahir and his colleague Vikram, were able to organise thousands of South Asian workers in over 20 workplaces across London (see Holgate, 2005).

So, while there is a long history of trade union membership amongst Caribbean and South Asian workers, this is not the case for new groups of migrants. For example, the extent of Kurdish membership of trade unions is undocumented in the UK and there is little anecdotal evidence that suggests much involvement in unions. In a sense, this is unsurprising given there is not much information on work practices within this community other than the tendency for people to find work within local ethnic businesses (Holgate et al. 2012a). Also another difference was that, without exception, Kurdish interviewees did not identify as religious – only a handful nominally allied themselves with the Muslim faith, but more from a cultural than a religious perspective. What was more important was the existence of strong social networks based around community centres, rather than religious institutions. A considerable number of Kurdish community centres exist in the locality and play an important role for Kurds, both first and second generation, in the context of being a repository of Kurdish identity, helping to retain links back to the homeland, but also encouraging the expression of Kurdish culture and language, which has been forcibly suppressed over decades. They are the hubs of community activity and include advice surgeries for people with housing, finance or migration problems, as well as operating as social centres and places where people go to find work:

*When we first came here we did not speak English. If you had the problem you would go to community centre. If you wanted help to find work you can go to community centre. And especially our community centre provides different activities. Like the language school, teaching Kurdish at GCSE level courses. They provide translations. They provide help to the elderly. They provide*
help to the mentally disabled. The list goes on. I would use my community centres more than I would use Citizen Advice bureau or Law Centre, because in the community centres we have friends who are lawyers, friends working in different positions. So it’s a big resource actually to tap in to. (Kurdish male, housing officer).

Most interviewees reported that they attend weekly activities at Kurdish community centres, therefore it was expected that the workers in particularly those that work in ‘ethnic economy’ might turn to these community centres for help and advice when they are facing problems at work. But, while workers talked about using advice services for issues of immigration, housing and language, this was not the case for individual employment problems. The reasons were fourfold; firstly there was a belief that community centres were for ‘community issues’ defined in terms of housing, immigration and financial problems and that employment was more on an individual issue. There was also a lack of specialist employment advisors in the community advice surgeries. Thirdly, many workers are reluctance to discuss what they considered to the ‘private issue’ of employment in these public spaces (despite the surgeries being conducted confidentially and in closed offices). And, fourthly, the kinship nature of the much of the employment among Kurds was an important factor as Kurdish employers and employees tend to be members of the same communities and in these tight social networks where people are well known to each other, it was understandable that there was caution about raising complaints against other people within the community. Yet despite this there was considerable support from interviewees for the idea of unions being more rooted in the community.

What was, therefore, evident from these interviews was that migrant workers tend to gravitate to familiar social networks for help and support and that, these were an important resource for each of the communities under study. However, our findings suggest that neither faith organisations nor community organisations were really places workers would go if they had individual problems at work. This then leads us on to the second question as to whether or not they offer opportunities for building collective responses to social justice issues relating to employment. Although this was touched upon a little above in the case of South Asian workers and the early collectivisation of Caribbean workers, it is to the issues raised by the vicar of St Matthew’s Church and the work of London Citizens to which we now turn.
London Citizens: organising migrant workers through faith communities

As noted earlier, St Matthew’s church had become a member of London Citizens because it was felt that it provided ‘a good way of helping the congregation here to re-engage with what goes on outside’. As a parish with a considerable number of migrant workers it wanted to connect with the work of London Citizens who had considerable success over the last 10 years in organising migrant workers through their faith communities. This section will look at the response from trade unionists to this form of faith-based community organising and will reflect upon whether or not hostility to working with faith communities is restricting the spaces in which migrant workers become collectivised.

London Citizens is a broad-based community coalition comprised mainly of faith organisations which campaigns around issues of social justice such as the rights of workers to earn a living wage and for the regularisation of undocumented migrant workers. London Citizens has a different approach to collective organising than trade unions. It finds already established ‘communities’ and draws upon their ‘core values’ to bring members of those communities together to act as a community, but also as a collective membership of a larger coalition and as such does not recruit individual members. The aim is to show the power of communities acting together around issues of social justice. Faith communities, as one of the most stable and enduring community-based organisations, are often the main focus of the coalition building: it is their rootedness and their ability to turn out members and raise dues, rather than their faith, that is attractive to London Citizens’ community coalition-building approach and this is contrasted with unions who seem to have a more difficult job in mobilizing their members (see Tapia 2012 for a discussion on union/community mobilisation).

Also, similar to the historical review earlier about the influence of religious teachings on early trade unionism, we find the faith communities who are members of London Citizens drawing on similar messages of social justice. One Jewish leader quoted from the Bible, Aristotle, Adam Smith and John Maynard Keynes in a London Citizen’s assembly when talking about their campaign against usury (Ivereigh 2010). While the coalition itself is religiously (and politically) neutral, its member organisations, be they faith or secular, are encouraged through organising training sessions to draw upon their core beliefs relating to social justice to campaign for a politics of the ‘common good’. Another London Citizen’s leader, in his book on Catholic social teaching and community organising, makes a link
between the current global economic crisis, immigration and social injustice. He does this with reference to the parallels between the Victorian age in which Pope Leo X111 wrote about how workers should have the right to live free of destitution and should be paid a living wage, and the situation facing the vulnerable in society today (Ivereigh 2010).

These messages are then used to mobilise members of the coalition into activity: for example, for the last few years, London Citizens has organised a May Day Mass for migrant workers at Westminster Cathedral, where all the affiliated communities paraded down the aisle with their parish banners and commanded a congregation of 2,000. In 2009, this was expanded to included Methodist, Anglican and Roman Catholic May Day services, each arranged to end at the same time so that attendees could march to a central point for a rally in Trafalgar Square, central London calling for the regularisation of migrant workers. In his sermon, the Catholic Bishop said; ‘The Church is concerned for all workers - documented and undocumented. A migrant’s legal status is quite separate from his or her human dignity. A human being’s worth is defined by their God given dignity, not by the papers they do or do not carry’. An estimated 20,000 people attended this event – a much larger number than attended the traditional trade union organised May Day rally, which generally only attracts around 2,000. Although there were a handful of trade union banners on London Citizens’ march, trade union involvement in London Citizens’ organised events has been quite marginal. Further, while trade union meetings are often poorly attended and remain the preserve of an ageing and predominantly white membership, London Citizens’ assemblies are incredibly diverse and attract 1,000-2,000 people, mainly migrants, but also British-born citizens.

The ability to mobilise this number of people from a wide range of background and across civil society has provided London Citizens with the power to call those in power to attend their assemblies and account for their actions and commit to making changes for the common good. At one assembly London Citizens were able to tell the great and the good that ‘we are 2,000 gathered here, representing over 150 institutions, who in turn represent over 50,000 people from across the city’ (Ivereigh 2010: 78). These numbers and the power behind them appear to matter to those called to account as they are politely (but firmly) asked (forced?) to accept the demands requested of them. This approach of public pressure in front of a big audience has been used to good affect. Since London Citizens began the London Living Wage campaign it is claimed that more than 10,000 workers have
been lifted out of poverty (Wills 2011). Yet, despite this success in engaging people (often migrants) into political activity and around issues which are of central importance to trade unions, there has been only minor involvement of unions in the coalition. Overall, the union response has been sceptical about this community organising approach and in some cases expressed as outright hostility.

Interviews with trade unionists and community organisers have evidenced difficulties in establishing co-operative joint working relationships between London Citizens and trade unions. Although the two have worked together in the past, the relationships have often been short-lived or encountered difficulties and disagreements (Holgate 2009a). Unions in London were often suspicious of working with an organisation that was made up of faith organisations from which they had differences of opinion, but it was also the case that community organisers were sometimes distrustful of union motives for joining in the community alliance. Also, London Citizens’ campaign tactics sometimes differ from those of trade unions particularly the use of ‘moral authority’, whereby faith leaders will stand up to pronounce the lack of social justice and morality in companies who exploit their employees. This has been used to great effect in the living wage campaign, but this troubles many unionists who are more used to dealing with more ‘rational’ economic arguments.

While a number of union branches became active within London Citizens in the early days, particularly around the living wage campaign, in the main, membership and activity has not been sustained other than by a few local branches (Holgate and Wills 2007; Wills 2004b). This is largely expressed as a result of a deep antipathy and suspicion among some trade union officials and members about working with London Citizens because of the membership of faith organisations in the coalition. One trade union leader interviewed said; ‘I genuinely imagine that religion might be an issue for a lot of people’ while another reported; ‘there’s obviously an hostility to faith organisations because a large proportion of activists, including full-time officials, are fairly militantly atheists’ and a union organiser asked; ‘why are they not more successful in dealing with secular organisations of all descriptions, not just trade unions. Why is it that all their leaders’ have a faith background and, not just background, not just even go to church on a Sunday or synagogue or wherever, but are hardcore’. These are just a few of the many union activists interviewed who were opposed working with London Citizens on the living wage campaign or the
regularisation of undocumented migrants for example, because of the membership of faith organisations in the coalition.

Picking up on the earlier discussion about the ‘militant secularism’ of UK unions, one union leader said, ‘I think it’s always going to be a problem for the union movement because we’ve got a very secular left in the UK’ and another remarked ‘there’s a real anti-religious movement within the unions and I think most reps would find that really difficult because they just wouldn’t be able to relate to it’. These views were evident through many interviews where there was an uncomfortable-ness with what they term the ‘evangelistic’ culture of London Citizens meetings and assemblies. In addition, the idea of inviting religious leaders, chief executives of multi-national companies and the Conservative Mayor of London to public assemblies was also abhorrent or alien to trade unionists who view themselves in permanent opposition to such figures they view on the right of the political spectrum. But London Citizens organising approach is not to give these figures a platform to air their views but to place them before 2000 London citizens and hold them to account. There were also other concerns relating to democracy and trespassing onto what is considered trade union territory, but the issue of religion was the one that is most often expressed (see Holgate 2009a for a discussion on this). Yet London Citizens, through their living wage campaign and the support for migrant worker regularisation have done what trade unions have largely failed to do and that is to attract migrant workers from across London’s many diverse communities into collective political and organising activity in significant numbers. We will now consider what relevance these views and ideas have for thinking through the strategies for union organising.

Conclusions
What this paper has attempted to do is to take a brief look at the influence of religious teachings and beliefs on the formation of trade unionism in the UK and the way that religious ideas of social justice were transmuted into the secular form to combat injustice at work. The purpose being to try to reflect upon the way unions organised in the past to see if there are any parallels today, particularly in relation to the organisation of migrant workers. Early trade unionists were adept at translating messages from scriptures into stories that related to workers’ lived experiences and they used their churches as social networking spaces to organise their fellow workers – the ‘safe spaces’ referred to earlier in the paper. As in the past, many migrant communities gravitate towards familiar social networks to provide assistance in their new homeland and this was evident from the
research particularly among the three main ethnic groups that were the focus of the research into individual problems at work. Often, these are faith networks, which not only provide those who are religious with moral and spiritual support, but they also provide material support in the form of assistance in finding housing, jobs and information on immigration issues. Further, they offer social and cultural activities, which provides comfort and familiarity (particularly so in the newer Kurdish migrant community where faith-based networks were less important).

There has been an increasing interest in the notion of ‘community-unionism’ in recent years but it is relatively underdeveloped (both theoretically and practically) in the UK (McBride and Greenwood 2009). While it is not claimed here that the London Citizens model of community organising is the only module of this form of broad-based organising, it does provide an opportunity to question why it is so much more successful in drawing workers (often migrants) into campaigns than trade unions – and on issues like the living wage that are considered by trade unions as industrial issues and not necessarily community concerns. One answer to this question is that social networks and the use of already established ‘communities’ in the mobilisation of workers has been little analysed by industrial relations academics who have tended to remain in the confines of their academic field where the focus has remained on the main industrial relations actors as defined by Dunlop (1993). Yet, by taking a look at successful interventions like the London Living Wage campaign, this has the potential to add to the small but growing literature on ‘new actors’ in the industrial relations arena (Bellemare 2000; Heery and Frege 2006; Hicks et al. 2009).

Similarly trade unions, have neglected the wider spaces and community networks for many decades – focusing their attention on the workplace (the point of production) as the place in which to organise. And, it has been mainly the work of labour geographers and political scientists who have provided much of the theorisation in this area in arguing about the neglect of wider social spaces as area for study or political praxis (Datta et al. 2007; Fine 2000; Herod 2001; Holgate and Wills 2007; Rainnie et al. 2007; Wills et al. 2010). The findings and observations from this paper then also add to the request from Cornelius and Martínez-Lucio (2012: 588) to rethink community dynamics and ‘understand how “old social movements”, as Giddens (1994) calls them, and social gatekeepers such as trade unions (re-)engage BME [black and minority ethnic] workers in
terms of community structures and politics as a way of reinvigorating their own social agenda and that of BME networks'.

The approach of London Citizens of bringing together already organised communities into a wider coalition with a common purpose is unique (and effective) in that it circumvents many of the weakness associated with current trade union organising practice where unions, faced with dispersed and fragmented workforces, struggle to build a collective identity around workplace identities. As Jane Wills (2012: 114), long-time observer of London Citizens, points out ‘this model of politics locates institutional islands of social solidarity and forges connections between them, creating a new community that is able to mitigate some of the effects of population turnover and stretched social networks in the city-at-large.’ This ability to make use of social networks and link them together for a general concern for the ‘common good’ provides a simple narrative that taps into messages of morality (in the case of faith communities) or social justice (in the case of non faith communities), yet it is one that is missing from union organising approaches.

Another issue for unions is how to overcome the issue of individualisation, which many of the interviewees felt when they faced problems at work. Many of the workers, unionised and non-unionised, felt their problems were deeply personal and tended to internalise them rather than see them as a possible collective issue (see Holgate et al. 2011 for more discussion on this). This was consistent across the three minority ethnic groups interviewed, but often for different reasons. So, for example, a number black Caribbean workers, who were, in the main unionised, faced issues of racist bullying and stereotyping at work. Although some went to their union for help and advice, past experience had taught them that claims of racism were difficult to prove or seldom believed and thus they felt isolated. Many of these interviewees reported little sense of community belonging – although a number reminisced about a strong black community of yesteryear.

The South Asian communities of Southall had similar historical experiences to that of the black community, where during the 1970s and early 1980s they mounted community wide responses to provocative marches by Far Right fascist groups. However, their community ‘infrastructure’, unlike the black community, has survived, having a much greater purchase in local and national political representation. Much of this is organised through the local
faith communities whereby mosques, temples and gurdwaras have provided support over the years through the many industrial disputes in the area. Nevertheless, the research also found that this community support did not really extend to individual support for employment problems. While community organisations and tight social networks within the South Asian communities maybe useful in providing direction for help and advice, there is little that is available locally for individual workers to draw upon (Holgate et al. 2011; Pollert et al. 2008).

The research, therefore, concurs with other work which has found that that the shift in the employment relationship from collectivism to individualism, has had and is still having significant implications for trade unionism (Bacon and Storey 1993), but we would add to this that trade unions in the UK have found it difficult to find a way to address the situation. However good unions are in providing individual support, necessary as this is, significant trade union growth can only be achieved through building collective responses to common problems. While most trade unions have accepted the need to organise their way out of decline and that this includes organising migrant workers, the UK union movement has few social and cultural networks with which to engage different groups of workers and so has made few inroads into migrant communities. Thus the London Citizen’s approach of organising in established communities is a lesson that can be learnt by unions. Here, their tactic of building relationships though the use of regular one-to-one conversations helps to build cohesiveness within and across the member organisations in the coalition such that individuals can understand that their issues are widely shared. So too, public testimony in meetings and assemblies has the same effect of translating individual issues into collective concerns.

Yet, as we saw from the discussion around London Citizens, many trade unionists in the UK are hesitant (and in some cases hostile) to working with faith communities to organise migrant workers. The findings, however, suggest that unions may be restricting the opportunity to reach some of the most marginalised workers they would like to draw into union membership. Although London Citizens is a fairly unique organisation, and it remains to be seen if it can replicate its success outside the capital city, it has managed, through community-based organising, to tap into the concerns of workers by using social justice messages.
While some trade unionists may have serious and justifiable reservations about religious ideology and thus not wish to engage with faith organisations it is nevertheless and important principle of organising that one must begin from where workers’ consciousness is, rather than where organisers would like it to be. It is also important to recognise the reality of migrant workers’ lives and how social networks play a huge supportive role for many new migrants. Faith communities are often the most stable and enduring organisations in the community as other voluntary sector organisations come and go and they are a recognisable institution for many migrants. As one church pastor explained: ‘the church in the beginning was somewhere between a religious group and a community centre…this was so important for people who had left everything behind…it was like finding a second home right away’ (Ley 2008: 2062). This is exactly how it is for many new migrants – even for those who are not necessarily particularly religious. London Citizens has managed to tap into these sentiments to build a strong organisation that is capable of punching above its weight. It has drawn in thousands of migrant workers via their faith communities without committing to religious ideology. London Citizens may have faith group members, but it is not a religious organisation. It is a broad-based coalition that recognises it needs communities to build collective strength and faith communities provide the space (and places) to do this – just like the early trade unionists who used lay preachers and chapels to get their messages out to workers. It seems, therefore that there is much to be learnt from the founding fathers of trade unionism that could benefit union organising today.

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ii Only 20% of Caribbean interviewees were born outside of the UK and thus could be described as migrants. The remainder had parents or grandparents who had migrated to the UK between the 1950s-1980s.

iii We used this term to refer to people from the Indian subcontinent.

iv London Citizens uses the term leader to describe those people in their communities who are able to organise their fellow citizens into activity.

v This is an individual and incorrect (but not uncommon) perception of some trade unionists about London Citizens leaders.

vi Although not covered in this paper, it is worth remarking that trades councils and Labour and socialist clubs played a similar role in the community while these have long ago diminished – thus reducing the trade union profile and presence outside the workplace.