**United Nations Special Rapporteur on Poverty and Human Rights**

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**Submission from ‘Life on the Breadline – Christianity, Poverty and Politics in the 21st century city**

**Preface**

Faith groups across the UK are more deeply rooted in socially excluded communities than most other statutory or voluntary institutions. Any attempt to understand the cost of austerity and initiatives that are tackling poverty in breadline Britain needs to recognise that faith groups are in the vanguard of this struggle, in large part because of the enduring social capital that they possess. ‘Life on the Breadline: Christianity, Poverty and Politics in the 21st century city’ is a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, which focuses on the Christian engagement with contemporary poverty in the UK. Our multidisciplinary team is exploring the effect that the ‘age of austerity’ has had on levels of poverty and inequality in the UK and on the growth, nature, scope and impact of such Christian activism. The project team is comprised of political theologians and social geographers [Dr Chris Shannahan](https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/en/persons/chris-shannahan) (Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University); [Professor Robert Beckford](https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/arts-and-humanities/school-of-humanities/Staff/Profile.aspx?staff=808b8b72e44374d0) (Canterbury Christchurch University); [Professor Peter Scott](https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/peter.scott.html) (University of Manchester) and [Dr Stephanie Denning](https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/en/persons/stephanie-denning) (Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University). The project represents the first evidence-based sustained theological analysis of poverty in an ‘age of austerity’ to be undertaken in the UK.

**Breadline Britain**

Pinning down poverty is like trying to catch water in a net, such is its complex and contested nature. Categorizing poverty as absolute, relative, persistent or severe provides us with useful measuring sticks but underestimates the complexity of poverty by focusing on income levels rather than the deeper structural and systemic factors that fuel poverty in the first place. [Gustavo Gutiérrez (1988 xxi)](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Theology-Liberation-SCM-Classics/dp/0334028531), the pioneer of liberation theology, highlights the complexity of poverty, ‘Poverty means lack of food and housing, the inability to attend to health and educational needs, the exploitation of workers…lack of respect for one’s human dignity’. The adoption of an intersectional lens helps us to place economic poverty within a multifaceted matrix of poor housing, ill health, discrimination, unemployment and a lack of educational opportunities. Writing about social exclusion under New Labour, the sociologist Ruth Levitas (2007, 10) helpfully suggests we need to think about exclusion from ‘resources’, ‘participation’ and a good ‘quality of life’ and points to the ‘deep exclusion’ that results when people or communities experience multiple exclusions. Such exclusion does not just cause physical suffering. It can also cause deep psychological and existential damage, what the Anglican theologian Kenneth Leech (1997: 10) called, ‘emptiness and a loss of meaning.’

Over the last ten years there has been a shift away from redistributionist government responses to poverty and inequality in the UK to an individualizing and moralizing approach to addressing social exclusion. A culture of blame and shame has, seemingly, displaced an ethic of redistribution, blaming people for their own poverty. Five years ago as the ‘age of austerity’ began to bite, the ecumenical Christian think-tank, the [Joint Public Issues Team](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/), published *The Lies We Tell Ourselves – Ending Comfortable Myths About Poverty*. Revolving around a series of myths about the nature and causes of poverty, the report highlighted this culture of blame and shame – people living in poverty are ‘are lazy and don’t want to work’ (JPIT, 2013, 13); ‘are addicted to drink and drugs’ (JPIT, 2013, 18); ‘don’t manage their money properly’ (JPIT, 2013, 19); ‘are on the fiddle’ (JPIT, 2013, 21) and ‘have an easy life on benefits’ (JPIT, 2013, 23). By blaming people who are poor for their poverty we side-step the need to examine its structural causes. Whilst none of the myths identified are based on credible evidence, they have circulated on television programmes like the 2014 Channel Four documentary ‘Benefits Street’ or ‘Shameless’, a long-running comedy show that revolved around a family from the North of England apparently enjoying an ‘easy life’ on benefits. Leading politicians have perpetuated these ‘convenient myths’ and former British Prime Minister David Cameron, even citied ‘Shameless’, as he launched his ‘Troubled Families’ policy programme in December 2011. This depiction of

poverty as a reflection of individual inadequacy has taken root in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Such a shift has made it culturally acceptable in both public and government discourses to label people living in poverty as ‘irresponsible’, ‘work-shy’ and ‘morally inadequate’ ‘scroungers’. Given the dramatic rise in the use of foodbanks, homelessness, the number of people on ‘zero hours’ contracts and those taking out high interest ‘pay-day loans’ during the ‘age of austerity’ it is perhaps not surprising that the Cameron and May led Conservative governments quietly dropped talk about poverty as the ‘age of austerity’ ground on.

**The Age of Austerity**

Following the 2010 UK General Election Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, prefaced the ‘age of austerity’ by announcing the government’s intention to make a series of wide-ranging cuts to public spending. The 2012 Welfare Reform act introduced the so-called ‘bedroom tax’ (social housing tenants lost 25% of their benefits if they had a spare room and children were required to share a bedroom), a cap on benefits, the possibility of benefit sanctions and Universal Credit (a new single means-tested benefit). Following a number of delays the roll-out of [Universal Credit](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jan/25/universal-credit-benefits-scheme-iain-duncan-smith) began in 2017. Whilst it was described as a means of means-testing and streamlining of the benefits system that would enable people to move into paid work, Universal Credit has been widely accused of deepening the poverty Ministers claim it will alleviate. In 2017 for example, former government adviser [Dame Louise Casey urged Prime Minister Theresa May to halt the roll-out of Universal Credit](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-41433019.%20Accessed%2027), and in 2018 the columnist [Polly Toynbee described it as a ‘catastrophe’ that has increased foodbank usage by 30 per cent](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/15/universal-credit-colossal-catastrophe-national-audit-office). Potentially aware of the political damage done by this bleak picture, a July 2018 [Department of Work and Pensions directive instructed Job Centre staff to stop keeping records of the number of people they refer to foodbanks](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/foodbanks-records-jobcentre-dwp_uk_5b61c1bde4b0b15aba9ebcc9?utm_hp_ref=uk-homepage&ncid=fcbklnkukhpmg00000001&guccounter=1&guce_referrer_us=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZmFjZWJvb2suY29tLw&guce_referrer_cs=qrFww9gVSZnqIuQ5w45-hQ).

The ‘age of austerity’ was described as an economic necessity by Conservative Chancellor George Osborne; a means of ‘balancing the nation’s books’. Osborne depicted the imposition of austerity policies as a shared burden which would impact on everyone in the UK, as he noted in his 2010 Conservative Party Conference speech [‘we’re all in this together’](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/oct/04/george-osborne-speech-conservative-conference). Eight years later, however, this claim appears increasingly hollow because the burden caused by [‘austerity’ policies have not been borne by everyone](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/comment/david-blanchflower/autumn-statement-george-osborne-claims-we-re-all-in-this-together-but-we-re-not-9902008.html). In the years since the onset of the ‘age of austerity’ levels of poverty in the UK rose more than in any other G7 nation (Credit Suisse, 2014). Whilst more people are in work than before the financial crash, between 2009 and 2016 the number of people earning less than a real living wage rose from 3.4 million to 5.6 million (KPMG, 2016) and average wages in 2018 are £50 per month less than they were in 2008. Between 1998 and 2010 child poverty in the UK fell from 3.1 million to 1.6 million[. In 2018 just under 30%, or 4 million children are living in poverty](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/child-poverty-increase-children-family-benefit-households-a8268191.html) (100,000 more than in 2017). Since the introduction of austerity policies in 2010 the [number of people sleeping rough in the UK has more than doubled](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/homelessness-rough-sleepers-record-england-stats-homeless-people-2017-increase-a8177086.html) and over the same period the [number of people living in temporary accommodation has increased by 64%](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/temporary-accommodation-family-increase-social-housing-support-a8268086.html), including [123,000 children – a rise of 80% since 2011](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/27/child-homelessness-in-england-at-highest-level-since-2007). Perhaps the most graphic illustration of the impact of austerity policies on poverty in the UK since 2010 is the dramatic rise in the number of people relying on foodbanks to feed their families. In 2008 the [Trussell Trust](https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/how-foodbanks-work/) Christian NGO distributed just over 26,000 food parcels at its foodbanks. [In 2017 it handed out over 1.3 million food parcels](https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/), a rise of 13% on the previous year.

**Faith-based responses to the ‘age of austerity’**

During the ‘age of austerity’ faith groups and faith-based organisations have become increasingly important players in the battle to defeat resurgent poverty and inequality in breadline Britain. This ‘new visibility of religion’ in civil society politics raises important questions about the long-term future of the welfare state in the UK and the role that faith groups play in grassroots politics and social policy debates. Adam Dinham and Vivien Lowndes summarise, ‘Academics, policy-makers and practitioners are grappling with the emphatic return of faith to the public table’ (Dinham and Lowndes, 2009: 1). The renewed political significance of faith-based action on poverty has gone hand in hand with the partial withdrawal of the state from social welfare during the ‘age of austerity’ (Bretherton, 2011). Despite claims that the UK is a secular society, UK successive Prime Ministers since the late 1990s have recognized the ongoing influence that faith groups have because of their enduring social capital in local communities (Baker and Skinner, 2014). The long-term engagement of faith groups in local communities can often mean that they have deeper and wider relationships in socially excluded communities than any other institutions. Sometimes owning the only public building on a housing estate or village, faith groups possess what Baker and Skinner (2014) call ‘religious capital’. When shaped by an ethic of social justice and a commitment to standing alongside people living in poverty, such a resource can become a powerful source of social inclusion, community building, pastoral care for people living on the breadline and advocacy for more just government policy.

Christian action on poverty in breadline Britain draws on two broad traditions of Christian social teaching, although it is important to recognise that in a minority of cases action for justice can be connected with proselytism. On the one hand we have witnessed the increasing significance of can be termed ‘caring’ responses to resurgent poverty, which arise from theologies of the common good, an ethic of service and social responsibility. The foodbank, the children’s breakfast club, the soup-run and the pensioners’ lunch club exemplify such an approach. On the other hand, we have glimpsed the re-surfacing of ‘campaigning’ responses to poverty and inequality, which arise from more radical theologies of liberation that foreground long-term solidarity with marginalised communities, advocacy and an ethic of social justice. Such a perspective is characterised by a greater willingness to challenge government policy and to campaign for structural economic and political change. Campaigns around a ‘living wage’, the growth of personal debt, rising levels of homelessness, zero hours contracts and social housing exemplify this approach. These two traditions are not mutually exclusive, and organisations’ approaches and emphasis can vary both within organisations and over time. Consequently, Christian NGO’s historically shaped by a ‘caring’ ethic have in some cases become increasingly involved in advocacy and campaigns for structural political change. A challenge that has accompanied this increasingly visibility of Churches and Christian NGO’s in action on poverty during the ‘age of austerity’ touches on the relationship between Christian denominations and the British government. Initiatives that care for the casualties of austerity policies can often rely on funding from national or regional government. This financial reliance on state support can inhibit the extent to which Christian NGO’s or national Churches feel able to publicly critique government policies that they consider to be unjust.

**The impact of faith-based action on poverty**

As the state as seemingly withdrawn during the ‘age of austerity’ faith-based organisations have become increasingly important players in civil society politics in general and in the battle against resurgent poverty, in particular. The importance of the support that foodbanks, breakfast clubs, [‘junk food’ shops](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/real-junk-food-project-food-waste-shop-supermarketadam-smith-pay-what-you-feel-a8443496.html), [cafés](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/the-real-junk-food-project-founder-adam-smith-on-how-to-make-restaurant-quality-meals-out-of-food-a7316231.html) and [‘citizens’ supermarkets’](https://www.feedingbritain.org/citizens-supermarkets) provide for people at the end of their tether cannot be overstated. However, such initiatives often do not directly address structural poverty or the culture of blaming people for their own poverty. However, in recent years organisations like Feeding Britain and the Trussell Trust have increasingly provided debt counselling, housing and legal advice and energy vouchers to counter fuel poverty. Faith-based campaigning coalitions such as the [End Hunger](http://endhungeruk.org/) alliance have begun to translate concern for people living in poverty to networked political action that challenges systemic social exclusion. Such campaigning for the introduction of a [genuine living wage](https://www.livingwage.org.uk/) and a guaranteed [‘basic income’](https://www.basicincome.org.uk/what_is_basic_income) arise echo the approach of the [Poor People’s Campaign](https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/) led by the Revd William Barber in the USA.

However, without a cultural shift that replaces a culture of blame, shame and the individualising of poverty with a culture characterised by a shared commitment to the common good, such political campaigns to tackle poverty are unlikely to pave the way for the building of an equal and inclusive society. If the UK is to move beyond austerity such a cultural shift is vital. In light of their enduring presence in socially excluded communities, faith communities in the UK are not only in the forefront of tackling austerity induced poverty but can be important players in the forging of such a new culture of mutuality. Any future attempts to tackle, not just poverty and inequality, but also the policy narrative and culture that underpins austerity that fail to include faith groups and faith-based organisations from such conversations will not hear an important part of the story about life in breadline Britain. The ‘Life on the Breadline’ project addresses such complexity.

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Dr Chris Shannahan

Research Fellow, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations

Coventry University

Principal Investigator - ‘Life on the Breadline…’

Email – [Christopher.Shannahan@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:Christopher.Shannahan@coventry.ac.uk)