

Religion and Development

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Religion is no panacea, but aspects of it can complement as well as motivate development. It can also obstruct or undermine. The avenues by which religion influences development activities in different faiths and regions are haunting in their complexity. The literature is likewise rich and varied. Religious people and institutions may be agents of advocacy, funding, innovation, empowerment, social movements, and service delivery. Equally, religious people and institutions can incite violence, model hierarchy, oppose empowerment (women should stay at home); deflect advocacy (we care about the next life); absorb funding (build a new worship hall); and cast aspersions on service delivery (they are trying to convert you). A further complication: the gusto of development experts who resonate with religion is enthusiastically matched by the repugnance of those who revile it.

To scan busy contemporary intersections between religion and development is to neglect the long and varied historical associations and literatures. As Amartya Sen points out, Ashoka, a convert to Buddhism in the third century B.C., explicitly championed religious tolerance – as indeed did Moghul Emperor Akbar in a Muslim state nearly two millennium later (while the Christian Inquisition was in full swing) (Sen 1999: 236, Smith. 1964). Bartolomé de las Casas, a fifteenth/sixteenth century Dominican friar and Spanish missionary to Latin America, wrote in defence of indigenous persons' rights to self-determination. Abdullahi An-Naim reminds us that Gandhi's 'secular' India intended to draw upon and incorporate spiritual insights rather than sideline them (Anheier et al 2002: 59-61. See Terchek 1998). Many less salutary writings and incidents could also be mentioned. The point is that religion and development have often been intimately interwoven for good or ill.

Contemporary intersections between religion and development can be examined and mapped from a variety of perspectives, which inevitably overlap to some degree.

Intrinsic Value

Religious faith may open an independent route to serenity and meaning whether one is in prison or in penury, or suffering illness or exclusion or bereavement or other troubles. Thus religion may contribute directly to a person's flourishing or contentedness, and comprise a dimension of human well-being. Attention has been indirectly drawn to this facet of religion (among other forces) by Amartya Sen, who notes that instead of grumbling many of the extreme poor have reconciled themselves with their lot and seem 'grateful for small mercies'. While Sen regards such unnatural happiness to be a momentous achievement he points out that their happiness is a poor indicator of their quality of life in other respects. Still, as Aquinas and the Aristotelian tradition among others show, religious practices stand alongside and complement other aspects of human flourishing that are intrinsically valued – such as safety, health, knowledge, meaningful work and play, self-direction, culture and the like (Alkire 2002a,b; Finnis 1998).

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The contribution of religion to happiness is empirically studied within psychology (Argyle 1999, Ellison 1991) but in ‘participatory’ and ‘multidimensional’ development initiatives the religious factor also arises. For example, the *Voices of the Poor* study by the World Bank, which synthesised conceptions of well-being articulated by approximately 60,000 people in 60 countries, who consider themselves to be poor and are so considered by their community, found that ‘harmony’ with transcendent matters (which might include a spiritual life and religious observance) was regularly considered to be part of well-being (Narayan et al 2000a, b; Alkire 2002b). If development aims to expand the freedoms people value and have reason to value, and if religion is so valued, then religious freedoms should be part of development (alongside tolerance and democratic practices), as the 2004 *Human Development Report* argued (UNDP 2004).

Vision of Development

Visions of development from faith perspectives may differ significantly from economic development. As Goulet wrote, to religious groups, development experts may seem like ‘one-eyed giants’ who ‘analyse, prescribe and act *as if* man could live by bread alone, *as if* human destiny could be stripped to its material dimensions alone.’ (Goulet 1980. See also Ryan 1995). For example, Seyyed Hussein Nasr’s writings critically evaluate modernisation and development with respect to the extent to which it distracts Muslims from their true nature, or enables them to live out their true purposes better (Nasr 1975; see also Nasr 1997, Akhtar 1990). The Roman Catholic social teachings, and in particular those since *Populorum Progressio*, articulate a faith-based view of development in which the contributions of spiritual disciplines and of ethical action to a person’s ‘vocation to human fulfilment’ are addressed alongside contributions made by markets, public policy, and poverty reduction (*Populorum Progressio* 1967. See also *Centesimus Annus, Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, Veritatis Splendor*. Also Reed 2001, Beckmann 1981, Lebret 1965).

Further visions of development arise in the liberation theologies, which criticize structural injustice and call for greater religious engagement in political and economic institutions to ensure equitable development processes. While these began with the publication of Gustavo Gutierrez’ *Theology of Liberation*, distinct liberation theologies have emerged on other major faiths (Gutiérrez 1973, Queen and Sally 1996, Rowland 1999, Akhtar 1991, Phongphit 1988). Popular books also explicate development to the faithful – such as Bernardo Kliksberg’s *Social Justice: A Jewish perspective* (Kliksberg 2003, see Sacks 1998) or Buddhist Sulak Sivaraksa’s *Seeds of Peace* (See also Schumacher, Loy 2003). From the interfaith perspective, fora such as the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) have mapped areas of convergence among the faiths’ visions of development agendas – relating to relationships of service and solidarity, harmony with the earth, and the vital but limited contribution of material progress (http://www.wfdd.org.uk/documents/publications/poverty_development_english.pdf; see also Kumar 2003, Gremillion & Ryan 1978. Harper 2000). Obviously religious and secular ethical approaches to development also have strong commonalities – some of which have also been explored (Iguíñez 2003, Serageldin and Barrett 1996, Daly 1996, Freire 1970).

Born-again and Pentecostal forms of Christianity and fundamentalist forms of Islam and Hinduism, which are also on the ascendant, hold yet other visions of

development, which tend to emphasize the protection and promotion of the virtuous individual and family through behaviours of sobriety, industry, and self-discipline. Pentecostal Christian leaders tend to be dismissive about the state's ability to introduce meaningful change and often advocate liberation through micro-enterprise or penny capitalism. They contrast religious visions with 'the world' (with its wasteful demands or spiritually suspect traditions). They would also stress individual responsibility and decision-making based on religious principles, even if these upset traditional obligations to family and community (Meyers 2004, Robbins 2004).

Resurgent Religion

Many had argued that religion would decline with the advent of secular development (Berger 1999). Instead, religion has arguably surged in numbers as well as visibility, with conservative branches of all religions and religious political parties (such as, temporarily, the Hindutva in India) being particularly ascendant. For example, over the last 100 years, 'the share of the world's population that is Muslim has risen from 12.5 per cent to 20 per cent.' (Anheier et al 2003: 154-155). Jenkins predicts that in 2050, the ratio of Christians to Muslims will be three to two (with 34% of the world being Christian), but by then most Christians would live in Africa and Latin America (2002). Even in countries with low religious attendance and high levels of economic development such as the US and Switzerland, studies indicate that people still have strong religious beliefs – they just spend less time on them (Barro and McCleary 2003, Iannaccone 1998). Such findings have given rise to a vigorous set of studies on the changes of religious values as economies develop – many of which have been able to make use of substantial new data sets on religious affiliation and beliefs (Jenkins 2002, Berger 1999, Inglehart et al 1998, Esposito and Bourgat 2003). Pragmatically, it has also underlined the need for the engagement between religion and development to be enduring.

Faith-based organisations

Moving to more practical matters, local, national, and international faith-based organisations (FBOs - organisations whose motivation or funding sources derive partly from their faith) are, in some areas, significant purveyors of education, service delivery and other non-market goods. They may also introduce cultural values. Islamic Relief, Catholic Relief Services, the Aga Khan Development Network and others deliver significant resources. The Christian evangelical development agency World Vision, with a 2003 cash budget of \$819 million, and an effective budget of \$1.25 billion due to in-kind contributions, is among the largest and more studied of such international NGOs (World Vision 2003. See also Myers 1999, Whaites 1999, Tripp 1999, and Bornstein 2002). The economic views of these organisations are quite varied. For some the provision of social services by such private organisations is consistent with neoliberal agendas that would prefer to see the state shrink; other FBOs pose structural challenges and demand greater political responsiveness to social ills.

By far the greatest number of FBOs are local or national. One famous example is the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka, founded by A. T. Ariyaratne in the 1950s, which awakened members to their inner person, and urged them then to change outer structures by common activities such as volunteer work camps – with the famous slogan 'We build the road and the road builds us' (Lean 1999, Chapter 3. See also Zadek

1994, Tyndale 2003). In some cases religious institutions also deliver services directly; for example religious schools may be subsidised and run directly by churches or monasteries/convents. Some government programs are also faith-based – for the separation of religion and state that is apparent in most industrialised countries is not found in many developing countries (Barro and McCleary 2004).

The prevalence of FBOs has led to their scrutiny by development institutions but the literature is widely dispersed. Most are case studies with respect to a particular sector or region or organisation (Marshall and Keough, 2004, *Development* 2003; *World Development* 8:4 1980, Lean 1995, Belshaw et al 2001). Some are country-wide – such as World Bank findings that for the poor ‘in Benin, church-affiliated organizations represent the most prominent and effective protection network’ (Kliksberg 2003:58. See Narayan 2000a:104-105) or that in Malawi ‘in the mid-1970s, it is claimed that the annual budget of a prominent ecumenical organisation, the *Christian Service Committee of the Churches of Malawi*, was 1.5 times the size of the entire government allocation for development.’ (wfdd 2003. citing Arnold Mhango, Executive Director *Christian Service Committee of the Churches of Malawi*, WFDD workshop Canterbury, 24 February 2003). The World Bank’s *World Development Report 2004: Making Services work for the poor* refers frequently to religious schools and organisations as existing delivery mechanisms for essential services.

Religious Professionals

The possible impact that religion might have economic behaviour has been the subject of empirical study since the writings of Max Weber at least (1930; see Walton and Rao 2004) and has saw a resurgence in the 1990s. Professionals working in secular organisations and governments may also be motivated in part by religion, and see their engagement with development as an outgrowth of their values. In some cases, their beliefs may impact their professional behaviour. A study of religious health care NGOs in Uganda found that despite being paid lower wages, staff of religious not-for-profit organisations were more likely to charge less, and to use additional funding to decrease fees and increase services, rather than to raise their own salaries. Thus the paper concludes that staff seem partly driven by altruistic concerns, and that such behaviours quantitatively improve their performance (Reinikka and Svensson 2003). In any institution (religious or secular), religious professionals may also stress the need for respect and dignity among staff and partners and thus an alternative *process* of collaboration (Myers 1999). Thus faith may have an instrumental impact because people remain motivated although they witness imperfect progress. Indeed one of Gandhi’s reasons for cultivating theism was pragmatic: that it sustains persons in times of failure (Shri Ramaswamy's conversation with Gandhiji as noted down by Shri Pyarelal, Gandhiji's secretary).

The recognition of human imperfection may be the most distinctive and understudied feature of religions. While many approaches to development implicitly attribute human misbehaviour to misunderstanding, or to a lack of education, or to perverse incentives, religious professionals and the groups they animate calmly acknowledge human evil and weakness of will, and have structured avenues for expressing sorrow and seeking and granting forgiveness among a community as well as before a deity.

Global Encounters

Intersections between poverty-focused development agencies and religious individuals and institutions are also increasingly active. For example in 1998 Jim Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank and then-Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey founded a 'World Faiths Development Dialogue' to promote dialogue between religious groups, and between the World Bank and IMF and religious groups. It has supported case studies, and organised publications and workshops with faith and development leaders, on themes of the *World Development Reports*, on Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and, in 2002, on the Millennium Development Goals. (Marshall and Marsh 2003, www.wfdd.org.uk). Other fora include the Inter-American Development Bank's initiative on Social Capital, Ethics, and Development (www.iadb.org/etica), the World Council of Churches Dialogues with the ILO, the UN, the IMF, and the World Bank, and UNFPA's ongoing dialogue with faith leaders.

Religion vs Development

Religion may become a practical problem when religious leaders or institutions obstruct development or view it as a threat because it promotes western liberal secular culture and human rights, or when religious rhetoric is a veneer for other motives. Classic issues of value conflict surround family planning methods such as contraception and abortion, HIV/AIDS prevention and implicit messages related to sexual morality and women's empowerment; other issues might relate to secularism, sacred sites, dress, or tolerance of outside groups. In development such values and practices may be addressed under the label of 'culture' (See for example Walton and Rao 2004, Eade 2002, Verhelst 1990, Haverkort et al 2003, Warren et al. 1999). Organisations such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) have actively cultivated respectful modes of cooperation with faith leaders and international religious institutions (UNFPA 2004, UNDP 2004). Cooperation with donor countries must also navigate religious values. For example, at the time of writing the popularity of the ABC (Abstinence, Being Faithful, Condoms) approach to HIV/AIDS prevention was threatening US funding for condoms (Green 2003).

Given that patriarchy is engrained in the cultural forms of many world religions, a separate literature has developed on women and religion. Many topics may relate not to development itself but rather to sexuality, prayer, family life, or violence. However an active interface occurs between religious groups and 'gender and development' agendas such as women's empowerment, reproductive health, education, or personal security. This interface is expressed in meetings as well as literature that draws attention to oppressive or theologically disputable practices towards women, and also to devout women in positions of leadership (Balchin 2003, Howland 2001, Ahmed various).

Religious forces in Civil Society

Another literature addresses religion as a critical factor in civil society support for development priorities. The *Global Civil Society Report 2004/5* argues that 'There is no way we can understand the logic, strategies and dynamics of civil society anywhere in the Third World unless we bring the transcendental dimension back into our analysis. Religious devotion is a fundamental motive for many social movements in the South,

from Latin America to Africa and South Asia' (p 45 See also Alkire 2005, Romero 2001, Smith 1996, Casanova 1994, Mandaville 2001). Political and social movements and advocacy campaigns have often drawn upon religious motivations and the support of religious leaders. The churches' mobilisation in support of the anti-apartheid campaign and the Jubilee campaign for debt forgiveness was arguably central to their political visibility. And in Latin America, churches mobilised in support of literacy (Archer and Costello 1990). Insofar as political parties set development agendas that can be exclusive or equity-enhancing, the religious influence on political movements is also important. In India, the rise of Hindu nationalism has been linked to the televised Hindu epic series *Ramayana* (Rajagopal 2001). Religious regimes and parties, whether in Bhutan or Iran or Arab States or Pakistan or Latin America or Europe, may influence development priorities to some extent. The international MDG campaigns are actively collaborating with faith groups to mobilize the faithful for advocacy and non-violent symbolic actions.

Religious extremism

However benevolent and indeed inspiring some religious expressions may be, development is regularly stymied by conflict and violence – some of which is also caused by religious groups (or groups with a religious veneer). An enormous literature has emerged, and gained further momentum after Sept 11th, on religious contributions to conflict and violence (See for example Armstrong 2000, Juergensmeyer 2000, Kakar 1966). Whether in Sri Lanka or Central Asia and Chechnya, the Middle East or Gujarat, or Bosnia or Southern Africa, armed groups have claimed religious support for their endeavours. Given that conflict both causes and exacerbates poverty, and interrupts development, careful attention needs to be paid to the possible negative consequences of cooperation with religious groups.

Conclusion

Much literature on religion (or faith, or spirituality) and development remains diverse, and unconsolidated. Some development publications or collections address religious topics with the air of discovery, and do not refer to previous literature, nor to the much more consistent attention that religious groups have paid to development processes. Thus far religious influence on development has not been a primary topic of any international report on world development, health, trade, children, food insecurity, water, refugees, least developed countries, or population, although it has received occasional mention. Religious themes did achieve prominence in the 2004 *Human Development Report on Cultural Liberty*, and special issues in *World Development* (1980 **8:4**), *Gender and Development* (1999 **7:1**), *Daedalus* (2001), *Journal of Urban History* (2002) and *Development* (2003 **46:4**) address religion and development-related issues.

Part of the difficulty arises from fuzzy boundaries: religion cannot be tidily isolated from other factors at work within and among people and groups. Perhaps the very best writings on religion and development are deeply local historical, anthropological, economic, missiological or sociological studies in which religion takes its place alongside other variables, and in which a much more nuanced account of interactions is allowed to emerge than has been possible in this brief sketch (Maxwell 1999).

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