Religions and Development Programme
Seminar No. 1
23rd January, 2007, University of Birmingham

The Role of Religions in Development: Relevant, Relegated or Resurgent?

The aims of the first seminar of the DFID-funded Religions and Development research programme were to

- Discuss some of the issues with which the research team is grappling with a wider audience, to initiate an ongoing dialogue with researchers in related areas. This seminar was directed primarily at an academic audience, but Carole Rakodi, the Director of the Research Programme, noted that it intends in future to widen the audiences with which it is engaged to include faith-based organisations, secular NGOs, policy makers, international financial institutions, and faith communities in both the UK and our four focus countries
- Take advantage of the presence in Birmingham of researchers from our focus countries and partner organisations to engage not just in internal meetings but also discussions with a wider audience and to form links with a wider research community that can evolve over the next few years.

The presentations during the seminar represented work in progress, and so the papers and presentations are not available to a wider public at present. In the interim, this short report attempts to give a flavour of some of the discussion. The research programme launched its working paper series during the seminar. The four working papers already published and all those to come will be available on our website and can also be purchased in paper form.

Religion in the development debate: relevance and rationale
Gerrie ter Haar, Professor of Religion, Human Rights and Social Change, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague

The keynote speaker noted that, although there is an aversion to religion among many development agents, they nevertheless feel the need to consider it, sometimes for negative reasons. She gave three main reasons for taking religion seriously in development:

- Most people are religious – they believe that there is an invisible world, which is distinct but not separate from the material world, and which is inhabited by spiritual forces with whom they can interact. Rather than religion being a quality that gives meaning to live, as for many in the west, for people in many southern countries, the spiritual world is integral to the world as they know it.
- Religion is a social and political reality which instils the motivation to act, provides the inspiration to change lives for the better, and is associated with religious networks which are also used for social, economic and political purposes.
- There is a need to maximise the resources available for development. We call on people’s financial, material and intellectual resources to achieve development objectives – why not also call upon their religious resources which are, she suggested, an integral part of their human resources? These religious resources include ideas (the content of belief), practices (essentially ritual behaviour), social organisation (religious communities) and religious experiences. All, she suggested, produce knowledge that can be beneficial in development. For example, religious ideas can be used to affirm desired behaviour or can seed new behaviour. Ritual, especially ritual associated with rites of passage, can provide opportunities for changing or reinforcing beliefs and behaviour. Thirdly, religious experience is often an
affirmative and potentially life-changing source of inspiration for the marginalised, for example, through the experience of being ‘born again’.

To date, ter Haar suggested, the main religious resources that have been used in development have been its organisational structures. However, these, she believes, represent less than the potential presented by the full range of religious resources. Religion, she asserted, provides people with spiritual power, which gives them control over and the potential for transforming their lives, thereby addressing development problems. For example, she suggested that Christian ideas suggest not only that a materially better world is part of human destiny, and so development goals may be seen as embodying Christian ideas of the Kingdom of God on earth, but also that people are not just material beings. However, in practice, as noted by Denis Goulet as long ago as 1980, ‘development experts’ can be likened to ‘one-eyed giants’ who act as if people are purely material beings. The development project has been based on a false dichotomy between spiritually-driven and materially-driven development.

As a result, ter Haar asserted, development cooperation focuses too narrowly on the material goals of development and the economic means of achieving those goals, while paying too little attention to the need to achieve spiritual alongside economic objectives, and to the ‘way of life’, nature of community and desirability of cooperation that are emphasised by the major religious traditions and that can be means of achieving development objectives. In many southern countries, she suggested, people’s social relations extend into the invisible world, enabling them to obtain information from it to further their material welfare. Although she acknowledged that the means by which this occurs vary, she suggested that all believe that spiritual resources can be employed to improve their material lives, for example, through healing. Attempts to realise development objectives such as poverty reduction, she suggested, have sometimes failed because they have tried to change people’s worldviews rather than building on them.

The question for development practitioners, she suggested, is how can the potential of all types of religious resources be realised to help achieve development goals?

Amongst other topics, the discussion focused on alternative ways of understanding religion and ter Haar’s essentially positive view of its potential contribution. It was suggested that an analytical focus on narratives as sources of ideas, giving rise to practices, which in turn provide people with experiences, would have the added advantage that secularity could be conceptualised and studied in the same way as religion. The conflictual nature of many relationships between religious groups and between religious and non-religious social sectors, and the ways in which many religious beliefs and practices inhibit the social changes needed to achieve internationally accepted development goals, were also raised.

**Multiculturalism: a way of managing religious differences?**

Using as their starting point the UN Human Development Report (2004) *Cultural Liberty in Today’s Diverse World*, Professors Gurharpal Singh of the Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham and Simon Caney of the Department of Politics, University of Oxford introduced a panel discussion on whether the concept of multiculturalism provides a way of managing religious differences in multi-religious states – an issue of particular salience in India and Nigeria, two of the focus countries for our research.

Gurharpal Singh noted that the concept of multiculturalism originated in North America in the early 1970s, was then adopted in Europe, and later spread to the Asia-Pacific region and India. A distinction has been drawn by Tiryakian between ‘multiculturalism demographic’, a description of diverse social, ethnic and religious societies, and ‘multiculturalism ideological’, a critique of public institutional arrangements that are seen as injuring cultural minorities or
depriving them of their rights and a way of managing social difference by introducing policies and political mechanisms to protect the interests of minorities. The basic political arrangements of liberal democracy came to be denoted ‘multiculturalism thin’, while meaningful recognition of the rights of minorities and more extensive and sophisticated arrangements were labelled ‘multiculturalism thick’. Possible policies and arrangements are outlined in the Human Development Report referred to above: they may include federalism or other sub-national arrangements to give political autonomy to geographically concentrated minorities, power-sharing, policies to recognise minority languages, legal pluralism, affirmative action and exceptions from general rules.

With respect to religion, the main tension in developed liberal democracies is considered to be between equality and culture/religion, for example, tensions between individual and group rights or over gender. The HDR adopted a highly normative position, suggesting that states should not sponsor a single vision of religion, citizens should be free to make responsible criticisms of religion and people should have the right to leave the religion of their birth. Singh suggested that India presented us with perhaps the best example of secular multiculturalism, yet significant Muslim under-achievement casts doubt on the success of the model. Pakistan, in contrast, is portrayed ideologically as mono-cultural, despite its history of ethnic, linguistic and religions divisions. Some analysts suggest that developed countries are more likely to be ideologically multicultural, while developing countries are more likely to be demographically multicultural. The latter, therefore, typically still face the challenges of state consolidation and democratisation in culturally and religiously diverse societies. The application of the concept to understand and manage very different societies means that there is not a single set of multicultural policies and political arrangements that can be exported from one country to another, any more than there is a single type of multicultural society.

Simon Caney suggested that the principle on which multiculturalism is based is that justice should be designed so that each person is able to further their own cultural identity and way of life, as opposed to approaches that maintain that principles of justice and policies should be ‘culture-neutral’ (i.e. indifferent to persons’ cultural identities). The case for a multicultural approach rests first on the need of all people for recognition and inclusion; second on liberal arguments that individual autonomy is valuable, that it requires a culture that allows people to make choices and that for minorities to have such choices, governments must protect their cultures; and third that ‘cultural liberty’ is part of development, as suggested by the HDR. The principle of multiculturalism can, Caney suggested, be expressed through a range of possible policies, as suggested by Kymlicka (1995) and Levy (2000). However, he warned that some people consider that such policies can be harmful to individuals and minorities within cultures, and that they can undermine the social solidarity needed to pursue other goals (such as state-wide redistribution) and the social cohesion needed for stability. Not all agree: others argue that multicultural policies do not undermine national solidarity and might indeed be needed to generate widespread support for the state.

Muslim backwardness in India and the significance of the Sachar Committee Report, 2006

In November 2006 a highly significant report on the socio-economic situation of Muslims in India was published by a committee of enquiry established by the central government. Although the disadvantaged position of Muslims has been well known for a long time, the substantial data analysed and evidence assembled by the committee are already giving rise to wider and more serious debates within India and an apparent determination, this time, to act to address the problems revealed. Professor Surinder S. Jodhka of Jawarharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, the Indian country coordinator for the Religions and Development programme, sketched the background to the report and summarised some of its main findings. He will be organising a seminar in Delhi in late March to discuss the
findings of the report and to compare the situation of Muslims with other religious minorities in India.

**Religion as a methodological tool for development: a critical analysis based on Indian experience.**

Dr Tamsin Bradley of the Department of Applied Sociology, London Metropolitan University reflected on her experience of conducting anthropological research in rural Rajasthan, suggesting that religion holds potential as a methodological focus that can help us understand how and why people act as they do, including an appreciation of the often contradictory beliefs and attitudes people display. By combining ethnographic, micro techniques with a focus on religious spaces, she suggested that it is possible to gain a detailed insight into human behaviour, to unravel the complexity of development processes and to understand why change may or may not be desired in a particular area and by a specific group.

The literature within the anthropology of religion clearly shows that religion encompasses more than just having faith in a God: it is also a space that people turn to for an understanding of their world and their place within it. These spaces are turned to over and over again in order to work through problems and seek answers. They can be formal (temple, church or mosque) or informal (in private moments when the individual or group feels the need to reflect on an experience or work through a common problem in a safe and secure space) and are marked by ritual and communication. Illustrating her presentation with selected examples of women’s rituals and the practices of FBOs, Bradley showed how the spaces used and practices engaged in by individuals and groups vary over time depending on their circumstances and needs.

Analysis of such religious spaces and practices can, Bradley suggested, help development practitioners to identify the needs of others through accurate representations of their lives and/or by fostering appreciation of how people creatively work through solutions. Second, religion can act as a reflexive tool for the critical evaluation of the development relationships: the spaces created by FBOs for quiet reflection on their work can, for example, provide insight into processes of policy making and project planning. It becomes possible to appreciate how FBOs represent the needs of their partners, and how they perceive the relationships between themselves as ‘givers of aid’ and their partners as ‘recipients’, because this relationship is often expressed and talked about through religious images, language and practices (e.g. prayer). Third, by tracking changes in religious practices, it is possible to understand shifts in people’s life priorities and perceptions of their environment. Lastly, she suggests, by locating dialogue between partners within religious spaces, empathy can be generated that cements a lasting connection rather than a brief engagement determined by the funding life of a project.

**Understanding the roles of religions in development: the approach of the Religions and Development programme**

Carole Rakodi, Director of the RaD programme, closed the day by outlining the programme’s approach and identifying some of the dilemmas faced when researching in a neglected and sensitive area like religions and development. She suggested that the relationships between development theory and practice and religion have been neglected because religion has been seen as irrelevant,
especially by development economics, or as an obstacle (by modernisation theory and because of religious conflicts, especially in S Asia, that led to supposedly secular constitutional settlements at independence). Belief in economic development planning, the need to forge national unity and deliver on the promises of independence under-wrote a state-centred approach to social and economic development that was reinforced by secular international financial institutions and bilateral development agencies.

Nevertheless, it is important to study religions and development because religion is a key dimension of many people’s lives and influences their actions; religious organisations are significant in many societies; religion and politics are linked in controversial ways; the role of religion in public life is being radically reassessed; conventional approaches to development and poverty reduction have generally ignored the role of religion in human lives and societies; and relationships between development actors and religious organisations are poorly understood.

First, we have to develop understandings of ‘development’ and ‘religion’. Early conceptualisations of development regarded it as progressive change, in terms of either material prosperity or social modernisation. Critics, however, regarded both these models as imperialistic. In reaction, approaches such as the capability approach, emphasised empowerment: societies, it is advocated, should identify the capabilities (the opportunities people have to achieve a certain kind of life) that are central, given people’s value framework; and governments’ role is to ensure that people have these opportunities (i.e. the freedom to choose). Religion is clearly relevant to this approach: it is linked to values (for example, the unique value of each individual, social justice, personal salvation, the sacredness of the material world) and it may also influence opportunities, by providing a basis for positive or negative discrimination, a means for accessing or being excluded from power, and through the nature and functions of religious organisation.

A broad distinction can be drawn between ‘substantive’ and ‘functional’ definitions of religion. First, religion has certain attributes that distinguish it from other social phenomena, including belief in a transcendental reality and/or (a) spiritual being(s), religiosity (marked by beliefs and practices) and adherence to or membership of a religious organisation. It also plays a role in the construction of people’s worldviews and the maintenance of social cohesion. It provides meaning and order, which are revealed and transmitted through symbols and ritual, and interplay with class/caste, gender and ethnicity to influence beliefs and behaviour – a sense of personhood, social relationships and socio-political organisation.

In identifying the questions for research, a broad distinction can be drawn between the nature and role of religion for individuals, and the relationships between organisations explicitly motivated for religion and wider socio-political organisation. The research programme, therefore, has two main focuses:

- The relationships between religious belief and/or membership of a religious organisation and people’s values and attitudes, social relationships and behaviour. Various components of the research will study these links through analysis of religious teaching and its interpretation by teachers and listeners, constructions of well-being and attempts to achieve it, engagement in politics,
attempts to secure or resist social change, and involvement in social development and welfare activities. In each case mediating factors such as culture and ethnicity will need to be considered in addition to religion.

- The relationships between organised religion and societies/states, with respect to politics and governance, social conservatism and change, and living out religious ethics. The research will examine how religious organisations exercise voice and influence, how religious values and beliefs influence the engagement of FBOs in service delivery and development activities, and how all of these are mediated by politics and culture. It will examine examples at the local, national and international levels: madrassa education, the service providing activities of religious political parties, community development, the role played by religious organisations in the reconstruction of social capital in the aftermath of local conflict, the engagement of transnational diaspora communities linked by religion in remitting funds for development activities, and attempts to influence national governments and UN agencies on development issues.

Research into both religion and development, however, poses dilemmas for interdisciplinary researchers. We have to find ways of

- recognising and dealing with the different views about the nature of knowledge held by adherents of different religious and practitioners of different disciplines
- studying religions and development without either simplifying complex and contested concepts or essentialising religion as the main source of people’s identity and motivation
- understanding complex relationships, for example, those between religion and culture; or religion and subjective/objective well-being.
- dealing with the complexity of comparisons between and within the six faith traditions we are studying, and between and within four countries, and clarifying the nature of conclusions that can be drawn from such comparative international research.