Religions and Development Research Programme 3rd Annual Seminar

Religion in the public and private spheres: implications for development policy and practice

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University of Birmingham

The third annual seminar organised by the Religions and Development Research Programme considered some of the implications of increasing recognition of the importance of religion for development theory, policies and practices. Religion has always been important both in the private sphere of people’s lives and in the public sphere, where religious values and beliefs influence attitudes and behaviour and religious organisations play important roles in society. Presenters at the seminar presented findings and reflections on the above themes to the audience of over 70 participants, based on research being carried out as part of the RaD programme as well as their own work.

The seminar opened with a plenary, in which Ian Linden (Department for the Study of Religions, School of Oriental and African Studies and Tony Blair Faith Foundation) discussed ‘Demythologising secularity’. The presentation provided an historical perspective on current debates in religion and development. Secularity implies the loss of explanations related to God, the repudiation of a religious consciousness, decline in institutional religion and the clearance of religion from the public sphere, leading to the neglect of religion in development policy and practice (except by faith-based organisations - FBOs). Although the academic discourse on religion typically treats it as a set of beliefs, this excludes many other dimensions, including the use of symbolism to give meaning to lives, the performance of rituals, the acceptance of sacred texts and narratives that contain a core of ethical values, and different sources and structures of authority. Typically, secularity is presented as the opposite of religion, but such an oppositional approach is, in his view, unconstructive – indeed secular approaches to human development have some of the characteristics of a faith community, with texts (e.g. the UN Declaration of Human Rights), values (those underlying the Millenium Development Goals) and structures of authority. Weber and Castells, he argued, provide only a thin theoretical framework for understanding the relationships between religion and development. Clearly, the links between religion, values, beliefs, wellbeing and development are complex. In unravelling this complexity, insider accounts of the meaning of religious ideas, values and practices must be considered, to assess their potential contribution to concepts of development and wellbeing. For example, he suggested, many religious traditions prioritise social justice, dignity and value-based conceptions of wellbeing. He concluded by stating that development actors should focus less on the potential for using religions instrumentally and more on what their distinctive characteristics (such as the ethical values with which they are associated) can bring to attempts to realise human development.

Secondly, Robert Dowd, Director of the For Family Program in Human Development Studies and Solidarity at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, presented preliminary findings from his research on ‘Christianity, Islam and development in Sub-Sharan Africa: evidence from Nigeria, Senegal and Uganda’. Based on a 2006/7 survey of 3,600 individuals, the presentation examined the impact of involvement in Christianity or Islam on individuals’ socio-economic characteristics (educational achievement, income) and attitudes relevant to development issues. The analysis showed that religious involvement is more strongly associated with indicators of development and attitudes thought to be conducive to development (belief in
expanding opportunities for women, separation of the state and religious authority, and tolerance of differences of opinion) in the more religiously plural setting of Nigeria than in predominantly Muslim Senegal or predominantly Christian Uganda, suggesting that religious pluralism may promote rather than impede development and democracy.

Two sets of parallel sessions followed.

The role of FBOs and service provision

Masooda Bano’s (Oxford University) paper on ‘State-madrasa engagement: experiences from Pakistan and Bangladesh’ was presented by Richard Batley (International Development Department, University of Birmingham), who is coordinating the larger project of which the research forms part. It reports on the varying level of success of state-led madrasa reform programmes in the two countries. The political elite in both countries clearly expressed their commitment to ‘modernising’ madrasa education. Today in Bangladesh there is a fully developed Madrasah Education Board working under the Ministry of Education, which manages 9,000 Aliya (reformed) madrasas, roughly the same number as the Qom (orthodox) madrasas (10,000). In contrast, in Pakistan, the reform programme was only rolled out in 2001 and to date only 300 of the 16,000 registered madrasas have accepted the changes. Important explanations of the outcomes include levels of trust in the reformer, the strength of financial incentives and the specific characteristics of the programme. In Bangladesh, the reforms have concentrated on introducing a secular curriculum alongside the traditional one, rather than educating ulama (religious scholars), with the result that the ulama of the elite Qom madrasas retain the authority to interpret the religious texts. In Pakistan, the total impact of the reforms has been extremely limited. As a result, in neither country has the orthodox religious elite been displaced.

Valeria Saggiomo (University L’Orientale of Naples) examined ‘Islamic charities and governance in Somalia’, assessing the role of organised Islam in substituting for the government in south-central Somalia with respect to social services (health and education) and justice (Islamic courts). She explained the growth of Islamic organisations in terms of both internal and external factors, examined their normative basis in Islam, and concluded that they are de facto replacing the state in some key areas.

The challenge facing contemporary Christian health services was discussed by Peter Rookes (International Development Department, University of Birmingham), who noted that Christian health services currently constitute a substantial proportion of total health provision in many countries, reaching over one third in some, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. Much of the network of facilities and services can be traced to the initiatives of missionaries, often more than 100 years ago. The paper explored two concerns: first, how the contribution of these services to national health provision has been affected by their search for funding to replace the dwindling contributions received from Western churches and mission organisations; and second the accountability of CHSs (and their associations) to and their cooperation with their respective governments. The paper noted the dilemma facing many contemporary CHSs: they provide a major share of non-state health services, often in areas under-served by government or for-profit private providers, but lack a sufficient financial base to ensure the sustainability of their services.

Marian Burchardt (University of Leipzig) examined the increasing enlistment of religion as a social service provider under the title ‘When nothing else works: religion in education and youth policy in South Africa’. The presentation analysed faith-based youth programmes and value education in public schools, especially in relation to sexuality and HIV/AIDS, in Cape
Town, highlighting tensions between government objectives and religious autonomy. His empirical findings were situated within a wider theoretical debate around the cultural effects of globalisation and modernity, the cultural implications and effects of international development cooperation, and the co-optive rather than emancipatory use of non-state organisations.

**Formal and informal religious institutions and their impact on development**

Joe Devine of the Centre for Development Studies, University of Bath, began the session by presenting a paper entitled ‘Religion, politics and the everyday moral order in Bangladesh,’ which he co-authored with Sarah White. This paper was based on research on wellbeing and religion carried out as part of the Religions and Development Programme. The presentation provided a discussion of the political and religious backdrop of Bangladesh and the ways in which ‘religion’ is increasingly referenced in the public sphere. It then looked at the concept of ‘dharma’, which is a broader concept that structures people’s lives and relationships, space and time, and the context in which religion and politics are conceptualised and acted out. The paper argues that this sense of ‘dharma’ is important to understanding religion and politics in Bangladesh as it emphasises the everyday moral order in which people operate.

The second presentation in the session was by Victoria Palmer and was entitled, ‘Analysing ‘cultural proximity’: Islamic Relief Worldwide and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.’ In this paper, she presented a case study of Islamic Relief’s work with Burmese refugees in Bangladesh, looking particularly at the idea of ‘cultural proximity’. Her research analysed whether Islamic Relief’s identity as a Muslim FBO made it easier for it to work in Muslim communities and contexts. The discussion pointed out the complex relationships between religion, politics and context for the actual functioning of faith-based organisations and called for a more nuanced understanding of the role of religion in service delivery and humanitarian aid.

Thirdly, Gerard Clarke (Centre for Development Studies, Swansea University) presented his paper, ‘Trans-faith humanitarianism: Muslim Aid and the United Methodist Committee on Relief.’ This paper also looked at a case of study of a Muslim FBO, Muslim Aid, in this case exploring how this FBO interacted with a Christian FBO, the United Methodist Committee on Relief in the conflict-ridden context of eastern Sri Lanka. His work demonstrated the potential for FBOs to work across religious boundaries, and explored the positive and negative outcomes of this partnership from a variety of perspectives.

Finally, Li Dongni (Jiangzi Science and Technology Normal University) presented a paper entitled, ‘Religion and development in China.’ This presentation explored the broad religious and political context of China, outlining the demographic makeup of the country and the various approaches to understanding the divine amongst Chinese people. Her paper focused especially on Buddhism and its relationship to various aspects of development. The presentation was framed in the context of China’s political history and the state’s contentious relationship with religion.

**The activities of FBOs and their role in development**

Olakunle Odumosu (Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research) presented the outcomes of an attempt to develop an overview of FBOs in Nigeria: ‘Mapping the activities of faith-based organisations in Nigeria’. Preliminary research carried out under the auspices of the Religions and Development research programme, the study set out to increase awareness of the nature and scale of FBO activities through a review of documentary evidence and a limited number of key informant interviews. Although the number of registered and active FBOs is
relatively limited, they have an important role in the provision of social services and a number of perceived advantages: their ability to mobilise volunteers, a strong presence in the geographical locations in which services are delivered, a role in organisations that are important for socialising the young and inculcating values (schools), strong influence because their messages are integrated into deeper belief systems, regular contact between religious leaders and their adherents, a wider distribution of activities and organisations in rural areas than secular NGOs, and high levels of trust and respect. However, their implementation capacity lags far behind their vision, and they have very limited involvement in policy debates.

Rick James and Brian Pratt (INTRAC, Oxford) presented a preliminary exploration of the question ‘What is the added value of your faith?’ Questions of identity for European faith-based organisations. They noted that FBOs across Europe are engaging more explicitly with their faith identity than many have done in the past, influenced by increasing donor interest in the role of religion in development and changes in the power dynamics arising from demographic shifts in membership. In response to questions about their distinctiveness, many FBOs are now focusing on their faith basis. However, how they operationalise this is diverse and their effectiveness is likely to depend both on key organisational variables and the extent to which these characteristics are congruent with their core beliefs. INTRAC hopes to initiate research to explore how European FBOs define and operationalise their faith and the implications of this for partnership and capacity building.

Tamsin Bradley (Department of Applied Social Sciences, London Metropolitan University) presented A call for clarification and critical analysis into the work of faith-based development organisations. Her paper compared three groups of FBDOs: community-based organisations, intermediaries between larger donors and community-based organisations, and missionary organisations that work with communities but see development primarily in terms of religious conversion. Such a distinction enables clarification of what can be included in the category of FBDO and highlights the variety of ways in which faith intersects with development work. Tools that can add further analytical value include an assessment of the faith of organisations along a continuum and the position of FBDOs within the aid chain, both of which may contribute to but also limit the success of an FBDO.

Religious conflict and post-conflict in Uganda and India

This session explored various aspects of the role of religion in conflict situations. It began with a presentation by Ben Knighton, Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, on The state as invader: Uganda’s army invading bush and sacred space in Karamoja. His research explored the state’s invasion of pastoralist land and the multiple forms of resistance by the Karamojong people. The paper argues that the sedentary state has assumed its right to take over land belonging to the pastoralists under the ideology of a ‘strong state’, which has denied the traditional rights of the people living on that land. This incursion by the state has led to a stand-off between the Uganda People’s Defence Force and the Karamojong people, who have responded with physical as well as spiritual resistance.

The second presentation was by Rubina Jasani (University of Warwick) and was entitled Between ‘Sanstha’ (NGOs), and ‘Relief Committees’ (Islamic organisations): Learning to negotiate survival after the violence in Gujarat. Her paper looked at role of Islamic organisations in rehabilitation in the city of Ahmedabad, Gujarat. She argued that the state’s neglect of the area and the inability of NGOs to respond to the violence created a space that was filled by Islamic organisations that participated in the resettlement process. The latter led to further ghettoisation and marginalisation of Muslims within the city. She also looked at the
strategies of survivors for negotiating this landscape in order to rebuild their lives after the conflict.

Finally, Dipankar Gupta (Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawarharlal Nehru University, Delhi) presented a paper based on research conducted for the Religions and Development Programme’s module on post-conflict situations entitled, ‘Negotiating another ‘normal’: occupational backgrounds and rehabilitation choices among Muslims in post-conflict Gujarat.’ His research looked at the ways that Muslim survivors of the violence in Gujarat re-built their material lives. Focusing on the economic strategies of urban survivors, Professor Gupta argued that because many Muslims were either unskilled labourers or self-employed in the period preceding the conflict, it was not difficult for them to resume their economic activities in the post-conflict context. However, although resuming economic normalcy was relatively easy for many, most Muslims experienced various other challenges in the post-conflict situation, including finding replacement housing, the re-creation of social ties, and maintaining a sense of safety and security.

Panel discussion

In the final plenary the discussion was launched by comments from a panel of speakers. Ian Linden noted that there are a large number of faith leaders who are uninterested in (and even obstacles to) development. To overcome these obstacles, it is necessary to understand the ways in which faith communities are ‘manufactured’, with a view to devising strategies that are both acceptable within communities and transformative of them. In addition, a clearer understanding of how religious communities intervene in both development and conflict situations is needed.

Gurpreet Mahajan (Jawarharlal Nehru University, New Delhi), reflecting on the papers presented during the day, stressed the importance of understanding religious identity, organisation, and values and beliefs in particular country contexts. Issues, such as the relationship between faith-based service providers and the state, and concepts such as civil society are all context-specific. In the Indian context, while faith-based service providers operate where the state is inadequate, not enough is understood about the scale of their provision, who uses their services and why, and the relative importance of their roles in everyday and crisis situations. Should they supplement or supplant state services? If they are an alternative to state provision, is there a danger that their users or the communities in which they operate will be insulated or ghettoised, with wider development implications? She also stressed the complexity of relationships between religion and secularity, noting that the values of secularity (the primacy of reason, individual liberty and autonomy, respect for individual differences) are not necessarily compatible with religious values (compassion, solidarity, service, compliance with beliefs and teachings).

Finally, Mary Thompson (Central Research Department, Department for International Development) explained that DFID is supporting the Religions and Development Research Programme because it needs an evidence base for its policies: can FBOs contribute to the achievement of the MDGs? Do faith organisations have a potential for providing services or mediating in fragile states, especially if there is a religious dimension to conflict? In what ways are particular faith traditions relevant to human security (including climate change and conflict)? Should it matter for donors whether faith-based service providers proselytise or not? Are there better conceptual frameworks for understanding the relationships between religions and development than ‘social capital’?