Lived religion: religious values and beliefs in developing countries and their implications for development thinking, policy and practice


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Religion is an important source of values and beliefs that influence the ways in which people see the world and live their lives, and the aims and operation of a variety of organizations, from faith-based organizations and religious political parties to the congregational and other organizations associated with a particular religious tradition. Convinced insiders typically claim that if all its followers adopt and practise the values and beliefs associated with a particular religion, they would be happier and more moral human beings and the societies in which they live better places. Depending on their religious tradition and denomination, they also advance exclusive claims to ‘truth’ and seek to convert non-believers.

While many social scientists are themselves insiders (or rebels) when it comes to religion, they and other scholars recognize that teachings vary within faith traditions; the values and beliefs people hold depend not just on the religious teachings they hear but also on their wider cultural context and personal experiences; motivations and identity are influenced by many factors, not just religion; and the history of political and social relationships between religious actors and organizations, states and civil society organizations are critical to contemporary national and local alliances and tensions.

The relationships between religious values and ethics in developing countries and mainstream development theories, policies and practices are complex and often troubled. This results from the long history of religious competition in some parts of the world, the close associations between religion and colonialism, the origins of development thinking in the colonial encounter and the continued dominance of development policy and practice by the (essentially Christian) rich north. While often being happy to support and work with religious organizations when the latter are prepared to keep their ‘development’ activities separate from their religious activities, especially proselytizing, for mainstream development thinking and practice, religion has been best avoided: a source of conflict and an obstacle to desirable social change, best relegated to the private sphere, and expected to decline in importance as societies modernize.

However (and not only in developing countries), religion has not declined as expected: it continues to influence people’s attitudes, beliefs and practices, and to play a critical role in politics and society globally, nationally and locally. Development thinkers and actors would be ill advised to see religion (and faith-based organizations) as a panacea that, if it can only be harnessed, can make a significant contribution to the achievement of development objectives, or alternatively, as an obstacle that reinforces patriarchy and social conservatism. Above all, they can no longer treat it as invisible, understood by all (because everyone is brought up within a religious tradition) or too difficult to understand.
Research on how religious teachings are interpreted by people in developing countries, how they inform their values and ethics and how these are reflected in attitudes, social relationships and practices need not be concerned with the ‘truth claims’ of individual religions. Instead, it is useful to distinguish between beliefs (the cosmological lens through which people make sense of the world in which they live) and values (the moral principles on which people draw to make decisions in their everyday lives).

Although religion cannot easily be disentangled from other social and cultural spheres, research presented in the panel considering Lived Religion (see list of presentations below) shows that it provides ideas of right social ordering against which people compare both their own lives and the wider communities and societies in which they live. Its teachings, rituals and organizations are resources that can help people negotiate their everyday lives, influence their aspirations and provide them with sources of hope and dignity. Research amongst members of various faith traditions in different countries (for example Hindus and Buddhists in India) reveals these characteristics of religion, both for poor people and for those motivated to address destitution and social inequality. However, the nature of and authority accorded religious teachings varies, with ‘religious rules’ for living more a feature of Islam than the Indic religions.

Because of Hinduism’s (and Sikhism’s) association with caste, conversion (for example to Buddhism) and the emergence of new religious movements have been important. Research in India shows that this is less because of a rejection of the truth claims of Hinduism (or Sikhism) and its rituals than as a means for socially marginalized groups to achieve dignity and social recognition.

Research also shows that there is no single or simple answer to the question of whether and how religion makes a difference in development practice. Some attempts to base development interventions on religious teachings (such as the nationalization of zakat collection and disbursement in Pakistan) do not appear to have fulfilled their proponents’ expectations. While religious organizations may play a role in service delivery (especially education and health) in some countries, and the services they provide are valued by both governments and users, they do not have a significant role in every country, their coverage is never geographically comprehensive and they cannot be a substitute for government.

While strong traditions of religious philanthropy may give rise to large locally financed organizations, research in Pakistan shows that they concentrate on short term charity and welfare, rather than attempting to foster lasting poverty reduction or sustainable development. International links may encourage them to conceptualize development in a different way (for example Caritas in Pakistan) and provide significant funds. However, the nature and source of the latter is important: research in India and Tanzania shows that funds (grants, remittances) from overseas members of a religious tradition are more likely to enable an organization to achieve its aims than funds from mainstream bilateral and multilateral donors, which reduce the autonomy of local institutions, forcing them to comply with programmatic and organizational templates decided by others.

Research findings on these hitherto neglected topics provide some pointers for mainstream development thinking and practice, although the implications are not the same for all development actors or all contexts.
Mainstream development actors must be aware that their own assumptions about religion may blind them to the different nature and organization of religion in other contexts.

Although the connections between religious beliefs and values and actions are complex, understanding needs to be improved in order to better assess the potential and pitfalls of ‘bringing religion in’ to attempts to achieve improved wellbeing and social change.

The motivations, priorities and capacity of faith-based organizations vary: while some play significant philanthropic, service delivery and developmental roles, they often cannot be easily distinguished from non-religious organizations, may be socially exclusive and politically motivated, may concentrate on short term charitable activities rather than lasting solutions to poverty and inequality, and may have little autonomy in terms of finance or development thinking.

List of presentations

Session 1: religious teachings, values, attitudes and practices

Tamsin Bradley (presenter) and Zara Ramsay “‘The people know they need religion in order to develop’: The relationship between Hindu and Buddhist religious teachings, values and beliefs and visions of the future in Pune”

Tamsin Bradley and Zara Ramsay (presenter) “Buddhist engagements with social justice: a comparison between Tibetan exiled Buddhists in Dharmsala and Dalit Buddhists of Pune, India”

Heather Marquette, Vinod Pavarala and Kanchan Malik “Modernity and tradition, religion and corruption: discourse in India in a globalised world”

Session 2: Religious values and engagement in social development

Gurharpal Singh (presenter), Charlene Simon and Darshan Tatla “Religious values, diaspora links and their implications for development activities: a case study of a transnational faith-based organisation: Dera Sant Sarwan Dass, Ballan, Punjab, India”


Nida Kirmani “The role of religious values and beliefs in charitable and development organisations in Karachi and Sindh, Pakistan”

Session 3: Does religion make a difference in development practice?

Mohammed Ralf Kroessin “‘Islamist’ banking and development in Bangladesh: subverting, challenging or re-claiming the dominant paradigm? The case of the Islami Bank’s Rural Development Scheme”

Claire Mercer (presenter) and Maia Green “What has religion got to do with it? Donor-driven diversion of FBO and NGO values and activities in Tanzania”

For findings from research in India, Pakistan, Tanzania and Nigeria undertaken as part of the Religions and Development Research Programme, see www.rad.bham.ac.uk