Are we just ‘Oxfam with hymns’? The role of religion in faith-based organizations.

A seminar organised by ACT Alliance and the World Council of Churches, Geneva, 22\textsuperscript{nd} November, 2010

This seminar was organized for ACT Alliance (a newly formed alliance of Christian organizations engaged in relief and development), the World Council of Churches and international FBOs working in development to consider the role played by religion in their organization. Addresses were given by Professors Michael Taylor and Carole Rakodi of the Religions and Development Programme, University of Birmingham. The fifty participants from ACT Alliance, departments of the World Council of Churches and international Christian FBOs based in at least six European countries then considered the implications of the questions raised and findings presented for their own faith identity and activities.

Relating faith to development

Michael Taylor posed five questions:

1. **Who are we, as international Christian FBOs?**
   How do FBOs (noting that there are many differences between them) articulate themselves both to the outside world and to each other? He noted that the organizations participating in the seminar are all associated with institutions – they are appointed by or act on behalf of churches and they are inspired by a faith to which they try to be true. However, he also raised the question of whether and how FBOs concerned with relief and development are distinct from mission organizations. He noted that development organizations, while often seeing themselves as distinctive, have made some of the same errors as mission organizations (e.g. failing to respect their intended beneficiaries) and many mission organizations are both increasingly sensitive to those of other faiths and regard mission as more than just evangelization. As a result, the relationship between mission and development is more complex than in the past, raising tricky questions for both types of organization.

2. **What does faith do? How does it influence policy and practice?**
   He suggested that it
   - motivates and inspires e.g. the injunction to love your neighbour, biblical teachings on justice
   - supports the people involved, including when their actions fall short of their principles, do not produce beneficial results, or make less progress with reducing poverty than hoped
   - informs policy and practice e.g. the prohibition of riba in Islam.
   He suggested that most people working in Christian FBOs understand the first, but fewer realize the second and that faith rarely informs policy and practice, many not even realizing that it can do so.

3. **Does faith make a difference?**
In some instances, he noted, FBOs are not distinctive. For example, both FBOs and other development organizations enter into partnerships or campaign against MNCs’ evasion of taxation. If they are not distinctive, he posed the question, why does faith not make a difference, and if it does not, does it matter? Possible explanations he identified are

- firstly, that Christian INGOs mostly work in Christendom, where everyone shares the same broad values
- secondly, both religious and secular organizations are influenced by the ‘mediating disciplines’ that provide knowledge about the world, such as economics or medicine, with the result that ‘people of faith’ can arrive at similar decisions to those who are not adherents, especially on technical issues
- thirdly, FBOs deliberately or unwittingly take on the values and ideology of the wider society in which they operate, with theology following rather than leading, as happened with respect to environmental degradation and climate change or the general critique of capitalism
- fourthly, FBOs may not have engaged deeply enough with their own faith and its distinctive elements for central values and teachings to be reflected in their aims and approaches.

4. **What does faith say?**

Michael Taylor suggested that their faith should be reflected in the approaches of Christian FBOs, at least with respect to the following teachings:

- The stewardship of God’s creation
- Christian understanding of human nature: that people do not live by bread alone; that Christians should enter into respectful relationships with others because all are made in the image of God; that all humans are sinners who do not live up to their values, but also forgiven sinners who have the potential to do so; a priority for the poor; and that the creation of a new earth through standing with the poor and challenging the powerful will require sacrifices.
- A mature understanding of sin, which recognizes that we all act in our own self interest, but that some are better equipped to do so than others, so that the aim of Christian organizations, when thinking about their policies and practices, should be to reduce the relative imbalances between the powerful and the powerless.

In his view, in our quest to understand better what faith is, theology has an important role to play, but it must realize that it is a humanly created discipline like others. Every discipline must be asked to explain its idea of the reality with which we are dealing, what our goals should be (where should we be going?) and how they can be achieved.

5. **Do Christian FBOs add any value?**

In this, he suggested, they need to be clear whose values are being referred to, how they are selected and prioritized, how progress towards realizing values can be assessed, whether compromise over values (for example between FBOs’ and funders’) is acceptable, and whether we should be more concerned with measuring ourselves against our own values than against those of others.

6. **In conclusion,** he recognized that the questions he posed have no easy answers. Christians are all human beings, and so in his view, their faith is a human faith. Thus any answers to questions
about whether their faith makes Christian FBOs distinctive must be provisional. While they should be actively committed to the poor, a continuous cycle of action and reflection is essential for all.

**Religious organizations in development: are they distinctive?**

Carole Rakodi presented findings from research carried out by researchers involved in the Religions and Development Research Programme on the characteristics and approaches of FBOs engaged in humanitarian and development activities in Nigeria, Pakistan and Tanzania. She outlined the supposed advantages of ‘FBOs’ over ‘secular’ NGOs, referring to the difficulties of adopting a simple dichotomous view of FBOs and NGOs as two types of organisation. She then summarized some findings from research that first tried to map the scale and scope of FBOs’ activities in parts of Nigeria, Pakistan, India and Tanzania; and second, undertook more detailed case studies of organizations or districts, in each case comparing FBOs with NGOs/professional development organizations. Finally, she posed eight questions arising from the research that participants might discuss. [Click here to see her powerpoint presentation.](#)

The research findings on which the presentation was based are published as working papers:

