Resurgence and Convergence: Religion and Development, with a Focus on Social Capital among Akha in North Thailand

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**Abstract**

This Masters thesis research aims to contribute to the fledgling body of development industry literature that seriously considers the intersect of science, religion, and development. Religion is gaining recognition as an important aspect of development processes; previous neglect of it has been cited as one reason for the failure of many development efforts. An evolutionary framework would suggest the interaction of the large human movements of religion and the development industry would inevitably include resurgence of religion, sometimes in unfamiliar forms, along with religion's convergence with development, both among societies generally as they evolve into multiple modernities, and through interactions specific to the development industry and religion. This thesis identifies and discusses these trends and interactions with reference to improving development research and practice.

Having demonstrated that religion does matter for development, I go on to show *how* it matters in one instance. This thesis assesses the potentials and limitations of one indigenous religion's ritual practices for creating and maintaining social capital among an indicative sample group of people who have experienced dislocation resulting from development. Fieldwork using primarily qualitative methods was among Akha hilltribe people living in Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand, with a focus, though not exclusively, on those living in slums. Findings indicate that among city Akha, their religious ritual has lost the primary role it previously occupied in Akha villages as a social capital generator. However, further analysis suggests Akhas' religious experience predisposes them to conversion to access the social capital evident among Christian Akha in Chiang Mai, and that through this process is occurring a negotiation of convergence between Akha religion and modernising forces which will affect all Akha. I conclude that both the identified wider trends and context-specific example of religion-development interaction demonstrate the value in development practitioners and theorists moving towards understanding and applying a non-instrumental valuing of religion.

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*Note*

Reference is made to the baht, the currency of Thailand. While foreign exchange values fluctuate, over the last several years about 22 baht have corresponded to $NZ1.

## Abbreviations

| | |
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| ADB | Asian Development Bank |
| AFECT | Association for Akha Education and Culture in Thailand |
| CMU | Chiang Mai University |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| IDRC | Canadian International Development Research Centre |
| ILO | International Labour Organisation |
| IMPECT | Inter Mountain People Education and Culture in Thailand Association |
| LPD | Local Projects Database |
| MPCD/SEAMP | South East Asian Mountain Peoples' for Culture and Development |
| MPCD/SEAMP-HRI | South East Asian Mountain Peoples' for Culture and Development - Highland Research Institute |
| NGO | Non-government organisation |
| PRA | Participatory rural appraisal |
| SRD | Science, Religion, and Development project |
| SRI | Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University |
| TICD | Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development |
| TRI | Tribal Research Institute (Chiang Mai) |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNCT | United Nations Country Team |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |
| WEF | World Economic Forum |
| WFDD | World Faiths Development Dialogue |
| WHO | World Health Organisation |

**Chapter One**

**INTRODUCTION**

**1.0 Introduction**

**1.1 Religion: important and neglected**

Religion remains central to the way many of the world's people understand and act, to how they conceive of and perceive development, and to the resources they draw on to negotiate crisis, tragedy, and inequity (Ribeiro de Oliveira 2001, Wamue 2001:457, Bahá'í International Community 2000, Ver Beek 2000:31, Goulet 1996, Weber 1965, Swanson 1963:1). There has, however, been profound disarticulation between religion and much international development work (Marshall 2001:1-4). Many spheres of the development industry have long neglected religion, principally because it was seen as irrational and an impediment to material and scientific progress, a view which complemented the dominant development ideology which privileged European cognitive systems and reduced wellbeing to a crude materialism (Tyndale 2002:46, Ver Beek 2000:39-40, Spretnak 1997, Goulet 1996).

This is a "monumental omission" (Goulet 1996[1]), but one to which the development industry is awakening and responding, as part of the mainstreaming of alternative development theories and practices. At the least, this response prioritises gaining more comprehensive understanding of societies by requiring attention to a "sociology of the supernatural" (Moberg 2002:135), something oddly absent from secular development spheres given Weber's (1965) powerful early argument that religion is of prime causal significance to economic and social development both as initiator and differentiator. The aim of this response might be to enable better instrumental use of religion, such as in its proven ability to ease the dislocation of modernisation by providing identity and community, while inculcating such things as civic virtues (Armstrong 2000:297,192) – that is, in fact, by producing social capital.

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[1] Please note regarding this and some other references: Those journal articles which were obtained solely via the Internet, and thus are described in the bibliography as an electronic source, are cited without reference to page numbers where the page numbers do not appear in the online article. However, the journal page numbers are included where possible in the bibliography to aid the reader.

However, the instrumentalist approach to culture by development has a poor track record, and contradicts recent reconceptions of culture, and of religion, beyond an economistic focus on them as resources to be tapped to further spiritually-attenuated material development. Religion has historically contributed to the quest to realise possibilities for humanity other than an industrial modernity that represses identities, values, and issues, and renders environments incoherent for large numbers of people (Armstrong 2000:298). Within the development industry there are moves to value religion and engage it at this deeper level (eg, Verhelst and Tyndale 2002, IDRC 2000, Marshall 2000, UN 1995). This is the departure point for this thesis, which in addressing interaction between ritual and social capital demonstrates that non-instrumental integration of religion into development research need not be an esoteric exercise. Chowdhry (2003:2), for instance, focuses on sanitation in an attempt to show the importance of combining scientific knowledge with inner awakening to reduce poverty or advance sustainable development.

It was inevitable that the very modernising forces that are accompanied in many places by religious resurgence and its convergence with modernities, would lead the development industry from an espousal of the value of endogenous development to demonstrating this regards the multiplicity of endogenous religious phenomena (Gumucio 2002:79, IDRC 2000). These phenomena are widely differentiated in content, import, and externalities, but at core they can represent an aspect of the wealth that poor people have (Berger 1969). The industry's reorientation is being fed and pushed from widely varied sources, including two decades of multidisciplinary research that has re-valued religion (eg, Sosis 2004, D'Aquili 1999, Alexander 1987). "The relevant data suggest that most religious behavior is … associated with good mental health, is sensitive to perceived costs and benefits, and is compatible with scientific training" (Iannaccone, Stark, and Finke 1998:2).

Ultimately, development is about religion, whether or not this is appreciated (Marshall 2001:5); this thesis argues that by being more aware, reflexive, and tolerant, the industry can engage in a way that enhances religion's time-proven adaptive properties for bolstering social order, continuity, and meaning in service of holistic wellbeing, especially where there is dislocation physically, culturally, and psycho-spiritually. This is an imperative because dislocation is the partner of the pluralism that development generates.

This thesis is addressed to development practitioner-theorists to both argue for and set a precedent of taking religion seriously, and draw generalisable lessons from one attempt to do so in a complex fieldwork situation characterised by dislocation and inequality.

## 1.2 Religion: exploring how it matters

This research was motivated by and designed in light of the need that is apparent for contextualised specific research based on firsthand fieldwork, to answer the generalised negative attitudes to religion in development and to present comparative case studies of the role of cultural and religious values in local development (Stuckelberger 2002, Marshall 2001:7,14, Various 2001:2, Candland 2000:355, IDRC 2000, Ver Beek 2000, Von der Mehden 1986:vii,16). While there is no consensus on how to incorporate religion or spirituality, I concur with Arbab (cited IDRC 2000) that sufficient consensus exists on "the significance of a spiritual dimension to human life to support new approaches to development research" that expand the accepted notion of science and technology to incorporate other forms of knowledge and alternative perceptions of reality.

This thesis is in two parts: Part one (Chapter 2) demonstrates that religion does matter in development by tracing its resurgence across societies, alongside its convergence with modernisation. Part two (Chapters 3-5) shows *how* religion might matter, by demonstrating the potentials and limitations of religious ritual performance for producing and maintaining valuable social capital, among the Akha people in northern Thailand. Information on the Akha cultural-religious system, Akhazang, is derived from anthropological literature from the last 20 years, oral interviews with adherents, and participant observation at rituals.

In the post-paradigmatic environment that now characterises both development (Nederveen Pieterse 1998) and religion (Riddell 1998, Tomlinson 1995), grand theories and meta-narratives are suspect. This hypothesis then is presented not as a claim as to how things are, but as an exploration of evolutionary social processes in local contexts. While a grand theory of religious resurgence and convergence may hold across societies, the dynamics of the multiplicities outlined here indicate any such resurgence/convergence would be so diversely manifested to render the theory of no practical use: Development studies must seek to serve and empower the poor (Edwards 1994:281), so research must begin with grounding in the poor's realities, in this case, their religious realities.

UNDP estimates are that by 2010 70% of all world poverty will be urban poverty (cited Daniere 1996:374); thus I have sited data collection for this research in slums in Chiang Mai, north Thailand. The dislocation of many Akha urban migrants is not untypical of urbanisation experiences generally. I have focused on religious ritual performance because it is observable, measurable, and has clear affinity with the concept of social capital. I am not concerned with

ritual content, though I agree with Buadaeng (2003:287) that fluctuation and diversity of religious practice is a result of ongoing negotiations of the meanings that make the practices relevant to people's lives. I focus on ancestors' role in ritual because a society's ancestor network is part of its social capital network.

This thesis deliberately avoids addressing as a separate category from secular agencies the place of faith-based development agencies, and the often problematic territory these representatives of the "world" religions inhabit between service and proselytisation, empowerment and paternalism. Significant gaps remain in research about these agencies' roles (Stuckelberger 2002, Marshall 2000:13, Candland 2000:355); however, my concern is with indigenous, minority religions, and the intersect with world religion is addressed from that side. Negative manifestations of religion, such as some fundamentalist forms, are touched upon here but space does not permit in-depth analysis. [2]

## 1.3 Core concepts

An evolutionary understanding of human society pervades this research: from the selection of literature, to what has been observed and its interpretation, and the conclusions drawn. Effort has been made to be consistent throughout in recognising the importance for analysis of historical continuity, whether in the development industry, religion per se, Thailand's religious milieu, or Akha religion. This is an explicit counter to a stress in development studies on presumed socio-historical breaks, which are part of a presumption in the social sciences that because modernity is remaking the world, studies of change are what matter (O'Connor 1993:7).

Religion is approached using Durkheim's definition (1972:224 – see page 36) that emphasises collective practice, and interpreted in the vein of social solidarity theorists (Sosis and Alcorta 2003:266). Zinnbauer et al (1999) argue spirituality and religiousness overlap so much in human experience that it is wise to integrate them in scholarly studies; I sometimes refer to religion-spirituality, but am concerned with religion embodied in practices, and not in the subjective processing of that into personal spiritual experience. It is not enough that many development workers are now open to discussing spirituality but not religion (Arbab 2000a:177), given that it is religion that is the "system of knowledge and practice that has played a determining role in the advancement of civilisation" (Arbab 2000a:178). What suits

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[2] Armstrong (2000) presents a strong argument about the close relationship between modernisation and religious fundamentalism.

the personalising relativism of Western idioms of belief would obscure understandings of historically vital religious collectivism and structures.

The concept of social capital also has extensive range; this research focuses on networks - actual connections that result from ritual - and only peripherally on norms, in the form of trust as a subjective variable that results from these connections, or implications that arise for bonding social capital.

While I sometimes speak of "traditional" and "modern", it is at all times in the understanding that these terms represent highly problematicised processes: I use them for brevity's sake but also because these terms hold such sway that using them to subvert them is perhaps the best approach to cracking the colonising, dichotomous development discourse.

Three arguments that shaped this research are those by Eisenstadt (1973,2000) that multiple modernities are emerging from non-Western societies' complex interactions with the forces of modernisation; costly-signalling theory (Sosis 2004, Sosis and Alcorta 2003), that considers religious ritual as a threshold of trust and a foundational cooperation generator in society; and Edwards' (1999) argument that a basis for development research and intervention is acknowledging that Western understanding of social capital in non-Western contexts is "extremely shallow", and that supporting an enabling environment of "paths and meeting grounds" for people to make connections is essential..

## 1.4 Findings

### 1.4.1 Religion matters for development

Chapter two outlines the literature which suggests that widespread neglect of religion within development is related to misconceptions of culture and tradition, as well as the industry's ideological bias. A reconceiving and re-evaluating of religion is now occurring within a wider reconception of culture, demanded by the failure of simplistic interpretations of modernisation theory to explain, and of development models to respond to, emerging pluralistic cultural environments.

In many places religious resurgence is accompanying this modification or indigenisation of modernity. As well, a convergence is occurring between religion and modernisation in general,

and between religion and the development industry in particular, evidenced by increasing recent interactions. Many more examples of initiatives at the interface of development and religion were found than I had anticipated, despite suggestions of a dearth of interactions (eg, Ver Beek 2000). One, the Science, Religion, and Development (SRD) project run by Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC), was preceded by interviews with more than 180 development theorists and practitioners worldwide, in which the IDRC's Dr William F Ryan SJ recorded an almost universal desire for development initiatives to give more place to the spiritual dimensions of human existence. All interviewees agreed local cultural and religious values should be integrated into development research (Ryan 1995), though the question remains of just how to do that. Also, the pertinent issue of how indigenous religion might matter for development has not been widely researched, and is addressed by this thesis.

## 1.4.2 How religion matters for development

An attempt to work out exactly how religion matters for development requires analysis of select religious phenomena in interaction with select development concepts or activities. Chapters 3 to 5 attempt this, at the intersect of religious ritual practice and social capital, contextualised in fieldwork among a minority people, the Akha, in northern Thailand. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology; Chapter 4 places Akha in the context of Thailand, its hilltribe development experience, and its own social capital and religious milieu; Chapter 5 presents fieldwork findings and analysis. This analysis postulates that the concept of social capital, recently popularised in the development industry, has a natural affinity with religion as a site of production of social order, continuity, and ultimate meanings, and with ritual that has historically been a prime generator of social cohesion and cooperative behaviours.

As to the Akha, religion is a significant factor shaping urban migrants' activities and attitudes within the pluralistic and marginalising environment of Chiang Mai city. Ritual practice and resultant social capital is severely constrained, a factor favouring Akha conversion to Christianity to access its social networks. For Akha, their "indigenisation of modernity", as Sahlins (2000:48) calls it, includes in its multiple processes a convergence of their own and a world religion to create an Akha-ised Christianity.

## 1.5 Conclusions

The development industry will be failing people if it does not pursue nascent moves towards serious engagement with religion. That engagement must vary hugely depending on local contexts, with a key determining factor the investigation and analysis of the interaction of religious forms – both of institutions, religious goods, and embodied spiritual dispositions – and social capital processes, beginning with evaluation of existing systems and connection points, as recommended by Anacleti (2002:69) as a stepping stone towards development.

The complexities of interactions between modernisation and cultures require that analysis extends to how external cultural-religious resources are being appropriated by people. Systematic gathering of case studies and comparisons will aid incorporation of alternative epistemologies and priorities into endogenous development approaches, while wider modernising forces of convergence, ironically, favour such diversification alongside homogenisation. This thesis reinforces Cohen's argument (1991) that institutions and processes of religion and modernisation cannot be taken for granted, and Eisenstadt's notion (1973, 2000) that underlying cultural patterns often persist despite surface changes in societies that are best described as unique multiple modernities, rather than as traditional, modern, or in transition to Westernised modernity.

This conclusion is supported by analysis of the situation of Akha urban migrants in Chiang Mai, where on the face of it indigenous religion is severely constrained from realising its time-proven potential (in villages) for social capital production, but which further analysis shows is a prime mover of Akha conversion to Christianity; the two religions interact as an evolutionary adaptor mechanism, with an ongoing role for ritual as trust threshold and generator. An ongoing process both of cultural destruction and cultural continuity within the modification of modernisation by Akha is manifest in evolving, syncretised religious forms which for urban migrants may in future be a primary site for both persistence of modified indigenous religion and the hybridising of modernity, as well as of social capital production and maintenance.

The resurgence and convergence of religion and development provide rich ground for what Starkloff (1994) foresees as collaborative analysis that maps out "new cultural systems that will have become symbolic of a certain world 'mosaic' of interacting and collaborative cultures"; and from such a mosaic may emerge genuinely alternative, sustainable developments.