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**RELIGION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF DEVELOPMENT  
STUDIES: RE-ASSESSING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN  
RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT**

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# **RELIGION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES: RE-ASSESSING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT**

Séverine Deneulin and Carole Rakodi

## **Summary**

This paper re-assesses the treatment of religion in development studies thirty years after the publication of a special issue of *World Development* on 'Religion and Development'. Given the changes in the social and political context, consideration of the subject of religion can no longer be avoided. The paper identifies two implications of this for development studies. First, the assumptions of secularization and secularism that supposedly define the relationships between religion, society and politics have to be revisited. Second, development studies must recognize that religion is a dynamic and heterogeneous social category. Both development studies and religion are concerned with the meaning of 'progress' or a 'better life'. Therefore, attention has to be given to social and historical processes of meaning creation. This has the methodological implication of a shift from positivist to interpretivist research methods. The paper concludes by looking at how consideration of religion is transforming development studies.

**Key words:** Religion, secularism, research methods, faith-based organizations

# **RELIGION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES: RE-ASSESSING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT**

Séverine Deneulin and Carole Rakodi

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In 1980, *World Development* published a special issue entitled ‘Religion and Development’. This was a time when international policy defined development largely in terms of economic growth and religion was neglected in the academic field of development studies. This, of course, is not to say that religion’s significance in processes of long-term political, economic and social change was unrecognized in analysis and practice. No-one observing the tensions that led to partition in South Asia or the role of the Christian churches and missions in Latin America, Africa and Asia could fail to acknowledge the political salience of religion. It was, however, neglected by post-colonial governments which sought to emulate the development trajectory of Europe and North America and multilateral and bilateral donors, as it was by the emerging academic field that sought to provide the supporting analysis for the transformation of post-colonial societies, namely ‘development studies’.<sup>1</sup>

There are many reasons for this neglect (Rakodi, 2007). The long history of religious competition for dominance and state control in Europe had led to a preference for church-state separation. This meant that government agencies were reluctant to be associated with any activities that could be construed as proselytising or favouring one faith tradition over another. Other reasons include: a belief in the capacity of governments to deliver prosperity and wellbeing; the confidence that economic policies could deliver economic stability, growth and prosperity; and a perception of religion as irrelevant to modern societies and a constraint on progress. The neglect of religion in both the academic field of development studies, and

development policy, thus reflected historical and cultural processes in the colonizing countries more than the reality in newly independent countries.

The editors of the 1980 special issue argued that this discrepancy between the reality of previously colonized countries on the one hand, and the aspirations of a development project modelled on processes that had occurred in the colonizing societies on the other, called for a re-evaluation of the relationships between development and religion (Wilber & Jameson, 1980, p. 6). However, their plea fell largely on deaf ears. For example, Ver Beek (2002) conducted a search of papers published in three of the most prominent development studies journals between 1982 and 1998 and found only rare references to the role of religion in development. *World Development* was typical: only five articles focused on religion, while 83 dealt with the environment and 85 with gender.

It was not until much more recently that academics in development studies, as well as those involved in development projects and programmes, started to respond in more appropriate ways than the ‘one-eyed giants’ Goulet labelled them at the time (Goulet, 1980). The volume of material published on religion and development has increased considerably in the last few years (e.g. Clarke, 2007; Clarke et al, 2008; Deneulin with Bano, 2009; Haynes, 2007; Lunn, 2009; ter Haar & Ellis, 2006; Thomas, 2005; Tyndale, 2006). In 2005 the UK Department for International Development gave a major grant for a research programme on ‘Religions and Development’ managed by the University of Birmingham.<sup>2</sup> The World Bank has since 2000 had a unit, the ‘Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics’ that aims to improve understanding of, and advise on, links between faith, ethics and service delivery. This builds on an earlier programme on faith and development, which had a strong ‘advocacy’ tinge (Marshall & Keough, 2004; Marshall & Marsh, 2003). And many development funding agencies, national as well as multi-national, such as DANIDA, NORAD, Sida, DFID, the World Bank and various UN agencies, have formed partnerships with faith communities to

achieve the Millennium Development Goals. The rationale behind the belief that faith communities are vital and effective partners in international efforts to reduce poverty is their perceived closeness to poor communities and their highly motivated staff and volunteers (Alkire, 2006) .

This paper does not intend to provide an overview of the contemporary relationships between development organizations and religious communities. Rather, it seeks to consider some implications of recognizing religion as a significant feature of society for the academic field of development studies. On the one hand, the unavoidable presence and importance of religion in the lives of people in developing countries – and in most developed countries too – invites development studies and its constituent disciplines to reconsider one of the assumptions upon which they are often based: that secularization is a universal, desirable and irreversible trend. On the other hand, because religion deeply influences people’s construction of meanings about the world, development studies needs to engage with believers’ interpretations of social, economic and political reality in the light of their faith. This not only poses epistemological and methodological challenges to those constituent disciplines that are dominated by positivist approaches, but also has significant implications for the way development is conceived and enacted by development organizations.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 identifies a number of changes in the public face of religion in the last 30 years. While in 1980, religion could be invisible to development analysts, policy-makers and agencies, in 2010 acknowledgement of its presence is unavoidable. Section 3 analyzes some changes within development studies, which have implications for the conceptualization of the relationships between religion and development. Sections 4 and 5 examine two major consequences of these changes: the need, first, for the assumption of secularization to be reconsidered, and second, for a shift in emphasis from positivist approaches to more interpretivist and contextual research methods, given that the

roles of religion in development are mediated through socially and historically constructed meanings. The heterogeneous, dynamic and contested nature of religion is emphasized. The paper concludes by urging development studies researchers to be more critically aware of their own assumptions and open to dialogue with religious understandings of key development issues.

## **2. THE CHANGING CONTEXT**

By 1980, mainstream development theory had been dominated by modernization theories for three decades. The concern was to create the conditions for economic growth. Interest in religion was primarily influenced by Weberian ideas about the Protestant ethic and its link to economic growth. Certain religious beliefs were thought to nurture attitudes regarded as conducive to a virtuous savings-investment cycle, such as thrift and hard work, while others such as contentment with one's lot in life, were considered detrimental to economic growth (Lewis, 1955).

The 1970s saw a growing discontent with equating development with economic growth, as it became clear that in the vast majority of developing countries the rapid growth of the 1950s and 1960s was not trickling down to reduce poverty. Dependency theory and related perspectives became influential in development studies and more proactive policies to ensure that the benefits of economic growth would be spread widely were advocated. Among them was the 'basic needs approach' to development (ILO, 1976), which was taken on board by some members of World Bank staff (e.g. Streeten & Burki, 1981). Basic needs included 'a sense of purpose in life and work' (Streeten & Burki, 1981, p. 34) but religion, as a major component of what gives meaning and a sense of purpose to many people's lives, was never explicitly mentioned. Given the context of the development debate in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the 1980 special issue of *World Development* on religion appears as a real oddity.

However, the late 1970s witnessed an event which posed some puzzles for the international development community with regard to its attitude towards religion. This was the Iranian revolution that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power. Wilber and Jameson (1980) took the event as a warning: if development processes failed to take religion adequately into account, there was a real risk of a backlash and of developing countries rejecting the development project altogether. They argued that “religion is more than a mere instrument for development. A broad definition of development as meeting basic human needs would include religious values as one of those needs that are ends in themselves (Wilber & Jameson, 1980, p. 475). Religion constitutes a framework that provides sets of norms with which to assess the legitimacy and validity of the development process. This moral framework, they warn, should not be ignored.

But events in the 1980s soon eclipsed the innovativeness, and warnings, of the 1980 special issue. The debt crisis and structural adjustment policies ensured the continued dominance of economics in, and predominantly positivist character of, development studies, especially in the most influential international agencies. Re-establishing economic stability, reforming economic policy and rolling back the state were policy priorities. Concerns with matching the development process with people’s ‘sense of purpose in life and work’ or their religious values were sidelined within the discipline, but did not disappear on the ground.

Thirty years later, various trends have brought religion back into development studies. First is the rise of so-called ‘political Islam’.<sup>3</sup> The inseparability of religion and politics are at the roots of Islam, but its emergence in a contemporary guise can be traced back to the early twentieth century, with the rise of the Deobandi movement in South Asia and the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928. Reactions to the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the perceived failure of Arab nationalist and secular governments



to deliver economic development reinforced the role of Islam in political change in a range of countries in the second half of the twentieth century. The success of political parties that claim explicit allegiance to religious principles in gaining political power in some countries, especially Iran, alarmed Western countries, as did the emergence of Islam-inspired movements engaged in armed struggle. The international political dimensions of Islam, or at least a certain interpretation of Islam, have contributed to broader changes in the global geopolitical context and the transformation of international relations, making the topic of religion unavoidable in the study of international relations (Thomas, 2005).

These events, in addition to internal shifts in development studies (from modernization theory to Marxist political economy to post-modernism), require a reassessment of two fundamental assumptions: that the significance of religion will decline as societies modernize, and that the political space can and should be strictly separated from the religious space, points to which we shall return below.

A second trend that has made religion unavoidable in development studies is the continuing importance of religion in people's lives and identities (to the dismay of some, for example, Richard Dawkins), especially in developing countries (Jenkins, 2007). Assessing the evidence for this is not straightforward. As Casanova (2009, p. 9) notes, "when people around the world use the same category of religion, they actually mean very different things...[The meaning] can only be elucidated in the context of their particular discursive practices", an issue that is taken up again in Section 5. We understand 'religion' as an institutionalized belief system that unites a community of believers around social practices, rather than 'spirituality', which concerns the individual, potentially in a socially and historically detached way.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, attempts to assemble internationally comparable data tend to use a few standard indicators, such as whether respondents 'consider themselves to be religious people', regard 'God as important in their lives' and attend religious services.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Although international data are limited, the results of some recent sample surveys give an indication of the current position (see Table 1). Gallup polls in 1999 and 2005 found that two thirds of respondents “give God high importance” or consider themselves to be “religious people”. The proportions vary between world regions and countries, with the vast majority of people considering themselves religious in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, the Middle East and the US, but fewer elsewhere. However, as the figures in Table 1 show, estimates of religiosity are difficult to make and vary considerably, in particular depending on the question asked.

The total number of people who profess adherence to the major world religions is still growing, due to demographic growth and conversion, although more slowly than in the past (Barrett et al, 2001). In parallel, there appears to have been a decline in the proportion of people who profess adherence to traditional belief systems. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion professing traditional religion as their sole belief system appears to have declined from three quarters in 1900 to an estimated 13% today, while the proportion of Christians increased from 9% to 57% and Muslims from 14% to 29%, with the most rapid changes occurring in the 1950s and 1960s (Pew Forum, 2010, p. i). However, not only are traditional religious beliefs resilient, they often influence interpretations of the teachings of the world religions.<sup>5</sup>

Within Christianity, evangelical Christianity has continued to expand in Latin America, Africa and Asia. It is estimated that at least a quarter of the world’s two billion Christians are “renewalists” (Pentecostals and charismatics<sup>6</sup>), ranging from 5% of Christians in India to about a quarter in the US and Nigeria and half or more in countries such as Brazil and Kenya (Pew Forum, 2006, p. 1-2). Despite the Communist repression of religion in the former USSR and China, World Values Survey trend data show increases in attendance at

religious services since 1990 in most Eastern European Christian countries (Halman et al, 2007, p. 210) and a (largely urban) 2006 survey by the Pew Global Attitudes Project found that 31 per cent of the Chinese public considers religion to be very (12%) or somewhat (19%) important in their lives, while 16% regard themselves as religiously affiliated (mostly Buddhists).<sup>7</sup>

Revivalist movements within many of the major world religions have emerged, such as the Tablighi Jama'at movement, which encourages people to become 'better Muslims' (Metcalf, 1998; White, 2009). Regardless of the intensity of their personal religious commitment, in countries such as Pakistan and Nigeria, people's identity is reported to be increasingly seen in religious terms. Religious identity is often expressed, and reinforced, by overt religiosity. Observers note that in such countries many people seem to be feeling socio-political pressure to become more publicly religious, demonstrating their religiosity by engaging in rituals or attending religious ceremonies more frequently, wearing religious symbols or adopting specific dress codes. This heightened sense of religious identity is shaping the manifestation of religion in the public arena (see also Sen, 2006). Religion appears to be increasingly forming a basis for social and political mobilization, as witnessed by, for example, the increasing frequency of inter-religious conflict and violence, or the opposition or support by religious leaders and organizations for women's rights movements, in Nigeria, or the quest for Dalits in India for dignity and empowerment through conversion to Christianity or Buddhism.

A third trend, which has accompanied the rolling back of the state during the 1980s structural adjustment decade and which calls for a reassessment of the way religion has been conceived so far in development studies, is recognition of the important service delivery functions of non-state providers, including religious organizations, often known as 'Faith-Based Organizations' (FBOs). These are typically defined as "any organization that derives

inspiration and guidance for its activities from the teachings and principles of the faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within the faith” (Clarke & Jennings, 2008, p. 6). In practice, of course, it is often difficult to distinguish ‘secular’ from ‘faith-based’ organizations (Linden, 2007).<sup>8</sup>

Religious bodies have always been associated with educational provision, not least because of the need to socialize children into the faith tradition. Thus the spread of Islam was associated with the establishment of madrasa education systems that persist today, as well as religiously-based charitable giving that is used for the provision of welfare services such as care for orphans (Berkley Center, 2008). Christian mission activity during the colonial period was (for a variety of motives) accompanied by welfare activities, typically concentrating on education and health. By the mid-twentieth century, the provision of services for all was generally believed to be a government responsibility. However, recognition of the limits on government capacity and pressure to downsize the state in the 1980s led to renewed reliance on non-state providers in service delivery.

There are no systematic data on the contribution of faith-based providers, although it is acknowledged to be significant in many countries. For example, two World Health Organisation studies estimated that FBOs provide at least 40% of health services overall in Sub-Saharan Africa (WHO, 2007), although other studies reveal considerable variation between countries in the nature and scale of their contribution (e.g. ARHAP, 2008). Another attempt to assemble data from a variety of sources revealed that Christian health services are estimated to contribute about a third of national health services in Malawi and Zambia, and between 40 and 50% in several other African countries; and about 10% of all health services in India (despite only 2.3% of the population being Christian) (Rookes, 2010, p. 65).<sup>9</sup>

The role of religious organizations as civil society actors has to be reckoned with, not only in the delivery of social services but also in advocacy. Their influence may be

conservative (for example, the prominence of the religious right in the US since the 1980s) or radical. Social justice is central to the teaching of many religions. Some churches have had a significant role in pro-democracy movements worldwide. They played a critical role in overcoming apartheid in South Africa (De Gruchy, 1995), in opposing authoritarian rule in Latin America (Medhurst, 1992), and in the transition to democracy in the Philippines (Moreno, 2007). Evangelical churches are deeply affecting democracies in Latin America and Africa today (Freston, 2008; Roger, 2008). Muslim groups also have a considerable impact on state formation, as there is a direct link between Islam's teaching and the nature and scope of state power (Esposito and Voll, 1996).

The international ties that characterise the world religions have given an international as well as a national dimension to their political voice. Their international links enabled many churches to resist oppression when they challenged authoritarian rule, while trends in the character of Islam in poorer countries have been influenced by the sources of international support. The Jubilee campaign, inspired by the Old Testament's teachings on debt relief, drew many religious traditions together in its 2000 campaign for debt relief, which contributed to debt cancellations for many countries. Religious organizations have collaborated internationally in supporting achievement of the Millennium Development Goals through their involvement in the Make Poverty Campaign. Such engagement by religious groups in the public sphere will be considered further in Section 4.

### **3. CHANGES IN DEVELOPMENT THINKING**

In addition to these observed trends, changes in development thinking have made the subject of religion no longer avoidable in development studies. The gradual understanding of poverty as a multi-dimensional phenomenon has made it explicit that religion is an important dimension in many people's lives in developing countries,. On the basis of interviews with

thousands of people throughout the developing world about how those living in conditions of poverty understand poverty, the World Bank study *Voices of the Poor* (Narayan et al., 2000) noted that religion permeated people's conception of wellbeing. From Jamaica to Indonesia to Bangladesh, poor people repeatedly mentioned that having a quiet place to read the Bible and pray, undertaking a pilgrimage to Mecca, or attending/performing religious ceremonies was part of what they conceived of as living a good life.

Improved understanding of wellbeing has changed conceptions of development in the last three decades. Recognition of the shortcomings of increased (per capita) GDP as the primary indicator of progress has contributed to a re-orientation of development's aims from economic growth to more holistic concerns for human wellbeing and environmental sustainability. Dissatisfaction with monetary conceptions of poverty and wellbeing started with the basic needs approach in the 1970s, and was followed by an emphasis on livelihoods in the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1990s, in parallel, post-development critiques of the Western dominance of development debates, over-reliance on expert knowledge, lack of recognition of local culture and agency, and failure to acknowledge the contribution of social movements and grassroots mobilization to producing alternative visions of wellbeing and means of achieving social change emerged (Escobar, 2006). Particularly influential has been the human development approach, based on the conceptual works of Amartya Sen and his 'capability approach', which has enabled religion to be granted some room within development studies.

For the capability approach, development is about expanding what people have reason to value (Sen, 1999, 2009; Nussbaum, 2000). The insight of Kilber and Jameson (1980) that the development process should be based on people's values, and not external to them, is now fully integrated into development thinking. This opens the door for religion to be considered as a dimension of development, although Sen himself would be reluctant to grant it a possible role because of its association with identity-based conflict and violence (Sen, 2006). Because

religion is an important force that shapes people's values, what they consider worthwhile and valuable in life, it is integral to social, political and economic life. Nevertheless, there is clearly scope for clashes between religious values and beliefs and development objectives advocated by most in the international community, such as gender equality.

However, there is still a long way to go for the capability and other recent approaches and their insights to fully permeate development policy and practice. The 'new Washington consensus' remains a powerful driver of development policies worldwide, with economic growth still being seen as the number one priority – as illustrated for example in the report of the Commission on Growth and Development launched in April 2006.<sup>10</sup> A third of the world's population lives under governments which have pursued aggressive economic growth strategies in the last decade, despite considerable and irreversible environmental costs and worrying levels of inequality and social exclusion. Moreover, the role of religion in development, when acknowledged, remains instrumental, not intrinsic. Religious organizations are recognised in their role in humanitarian relief or as carers for the sick, orphans and marginalized, as witnessed in the growing partnerships between them and government bodies (Berkley Center, 2008; Clarke, 2007; Clarke et al, 2008). However, their role in shaping people's values and conception of development is rarely considered. Religion in developing countries is much more than welfare provision and charity. A transformation of development studies is required if it is to take the relationships between religion and development fully into account. The remainder of the paper focuses on the conceptualization and methodological dimensions of this.

#### **4. THE ASSUMPTIONS OF SECULARIZATION AND SECULARISM**

Development studies was founded on the belief that religion is not important to development processes, for, as societies develop and modernize, it was assumed that they

would also undergo a process of secularization, defined as “a process in which religion diminishes in importance both in society and in the consciousness of individuals” (Berger, 2001, p. 443). Thus strictly, secularization denotes a process by which religion is removed from the public sphere of governance and policy, as a result either of social change (particularly the process by which religion comes to be seen as a matter of individual choice), or the development of a political settlement based on the doctrine of secularism: the belief that religion should not intrude into political (worldly) affairs. As the previous section described, the empirical reality of developing countries does not match this assumption. Religion remains a significant force in both the public and private spheres. Should the secularization assumption therefore be rejected?

Norris and Inglehart (2004) contend that the assumption remains correct. On the basis of data from the World Values Surveys 1981-2001, they explain the continued significance of religion in people’s lives in developing countries in terms of their existential insecurity. Given that the more secure people feel, the less religious they are, and that countries which cannot provide adequate security to their populations have larger populations than those that can, it is not surprising, Norris and Inglehart conclude, that religion remains significant. However, as countries become more able to guarantee security, religiosity (if not individual spiritual concerns) declines. They attribute high religiosity in some developed countries, notably the United States, to the high level of inequality, and hence the insecurity experienced by a significant proportion of the population.<sup>11</sup>

Another prominent sociologist of religion, José Casanova (1994), is more cautious in accepting the assumption. He distinguishes three forms of secularization: religious decline, privatization and differentiation. On the first, he notes that religious decline in Europe had more to do with the rejection of a caesaro-papist church that united throne and altar than a decline of religion as such. On the second, he acknowledges that the privatization of religion



is indeed an historical empirical fact in Europe, but is problematic when it becomes prescriptive and sets normative standards for the proper place of religious institutions in the modern world. It is the third form, Casanova concludes, which remains valid. As the world has modernized, it has passed through a process of differentiation between the economic, social, political and religious spheres, with the social and scientific spheres progressively emancipating themselves from the prism of religious institutions and norms. However, he argues, this is not the same as religion becoming privatized and losing its influence in the public sphere. Differentiation may or may not lead to the privatization of religion. While Western liberal democracies have chosen this path, he argues, other countries may not adopt the strong state-religion separation that some of them have endorsed (Casanova, 1994). Even between ostensibly secular states in Europe and North America, a spectrum of forms of religion-state entanglements can be identified, with truly secular and explicitly confessional states at the extremes (Casanova, 2009; Hallencreutz and Westerlund, 1996).

Any academic discipline is based explicitly or implicitly on assumptions influenced by the social, political and cultural context in which it develops. As a result, the social science disciplines that provide the basis for development studies have tended to make the normative claim that religion and the state should be separate; assume that the perceived decline in institutional religion in Europe was a worldwide trend; and, in line with enlightenment thinking, regard religion as an obstacle to technological and social progress. The first influenced post-independence political settlements, the second led most (except anthropologists) to neglect to study religion, and the third gave rise to modernization theory. All of these were, of course, full of contradictions: for example, many so-called secular states within and beyond Europe granted (selected) religious groups a special status; some scholars believed that religious composition explained differences in the development levels of

European countries; and colonialism was strongly associated with the expansion and influence of Christianity.

A major explanation, Casanova concluded, for the continuing public presence of religion, in Western and non-Western countries alike, is its normative influence, its role in shaping a society's values.

The economic, political, social, cultural and scientific spheres cannot function totally independently of normative considerations, of which religion is an important source (Habermas, 2006; Taylor, 2007). For example, when the logic of markets results in employees being paid less than a living wage, religious bodies in the UK have raised their voices in the public sphere to demand that workers' dignity be respected. When a political system becomes totalitarian, religious authorities have denounced the authoritarian tendencies of a head of state, as in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, the Philippines and South Africa in the 1980s, and Zimbabwe more recently.

In mainstream development studies, the assumption of secularization meant that religion was conventionally considered to be a private matter, which should not affect the public sphere of civil society, political society and the state. Clearly, the assumption that secularization, along with its ideology of secularism, is an appropriate normative basis for the relationships between religion and development was socially and historically constructed. However, it continues to structure the disciplines constitutive of development studies. It permeates their discourses, and is the dominant, if not often the only, analytical grid used to understand the relationships between religion and development. This is deeply problematic. As Hurd puts it in the context of the discipline of international relations, "secularism identifies something called religion and posits its differentiation from the domains of the state, the economy and science" (Hurd, 2007, p. 13). It then becomes "a lingua franca in which influential narratives of modernity, development, and progress have been constructed" (p. 14). Using the cases of

Turkey and Iran, Hurd concludes that what appears from the outside to be a “religious resurgence” is in reality “a political contestation of the fundamental contours of the secular” (Hurd, 2007, p. 12), in which the “basic ontologies of political and religious order” are being questioned and reshaped (see also Westerlund, 1996).

Socio-political contexts are varied and changeable. There is therefore a need, within the academic field of development studies, to acknowledge that there are different understandings of ‘religion’, ‘politics’ and ‘development’. Not only does each need to be disaggregated, but in examining the different forms that relationships between them take, the essentially dynamic and contested, not static and uniform, roles that religion plays need to be acknowledged (see also Casanova, 2009).

Secularization, in the sense of decline in the public importance of religion and its privatization, characterises relatively few societies in the global South. Moreover, the doctrine of secularism is not universally accepted as a basis for the relationships between religion and the state. Both the norms on which constitutional settlements are based and day-to-day political practices reflect complex and evolving relationships between religious values and organizations and the public sphere. This recognition has conceptual and methodological implications, which the next section explores.

## **5. RESEARCHING RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT**

The origins and disciplinary foundations of development studies mean that it analyzes religion with the conceptual and methodological tools that the social science disciplines provide. Reviews of how the major social science disciplines – anthropology, economics, political science, sociology and psychology – have studied religion reveal that (with the exception of anthropology) an empiricist-positivist stance has commonly been adopted.<sup>12</sup> This implies an assumption that no moral judgment is made on the phenomena under study, and

that research is based on the objective collection and analysis of data. Given such an understanding of the nature of research, the role of the social sciences is considered to consist in explaining religion as a social phenomenon and examining how it influences, or is influenced, by other social variables.

Development research has tended to adopt this positivist methodological approach when it has analyzed religion. For example, fixed design surveys that collect data on how religious motives affect people's decisions to donate money to charities or send their children to religious schools are used to explain their decisions and actions. The limited number of economists interested in the area has sought, for example, to ascertain the relationship between religion and economic development at the national level, and religion and economic behaviour at the individual level (e.g. Barro & McCleary, 2003; Noland, 2005; Pryor, 2007). Political scientists may study the relationships between religion and political behaviour in a similar way (e.g. Müller, 2009; Beets, 2007; Paldam, 2001).

The World Values Surveys, which attempt to measure cross-national and longitudinal changes in beliefs and values through a series of national sample surveys, exemplify this positivist research method.<sup>13</sup> The data reveal both extensive cross-national differences in values and changes over time. The most influential analyses of the cross-national data the surveys use factor analysis to identify two scales of cross-cultural variation in values (traditional versus secular-rational, and survival versus self-expression), associating shifts towards secular-rational and self-expression values with economic development, while acknowledging that value change is culture path dependent (Inglehart and Baker, 2000; Norris and Inglehart, 2004). The World Values Survey provides an invaluable database and many of the analyses that use its data avoid some of the pitfalls that beset poorer quality studies (although see, for example, Haller, 2002, who critiques Inglehart's thesis and analytical methods).

However, critics have identified a number of problems with both country-specific studies and cross-national analyses that depend on fixed design surveys and statistical analysis. The analyses that are possible and the conclusions drawn from them depend on what the data measure. This raises issues of correspondence (whether the data from cross-national surveys show similar results to in-country surveys), comparability (whether questions are interpreted in the same way in each country) and theoretical relevance (whether what is measured is conceptually valid) (Adam, 2008). For example, in a review of several cross-national opinion surveys, Heath, Fisher & Smith (2005) conclude that such surveys tend to assume that concepts (e.g. religion, God) are common and interpreted in the same way across countries. In addition, questionnaire surveys may inappropriately detach 'religion' from other social and cultural characteristics, attributing views or behaviour to 'religion' when they are influenced by many other factors. Further, cross-national comparisons often depend on classifying countries as predominantly 'Muslim', 'Christian' or 'Buddhist'. This is clearly dubious in multi-religious countries with unreliable data on religious affiliation, in countries with dominant religious groups of roughly equal size, and in countries with strong regional variations in patterns of religious adherence.

Thus the collection and analysis of data about people's religious observance and views are often based on over-simplified conceptions of complex and contested concepts, including religion itself. In particular, there is no analysis of the meanings that religion has for the people themselves, despite it being precisely through these meanings that religion manifests itself differently in the public sphere. For example, one may observe that 50% of Polish people go to Mass on Sunday, and 50% of people in Egypt attend a mosque on Friday. Yet the significance of religion in public life in these two countries is radically different, precisely because of the different social and historical construction of meaning that accompanies religious observance.

Analyzing the reality of religion in developing countries, therefore, poses considerable challenges for positivist approaches to social science research, including research in development studies.<sup>14</sup> Two are highlighted here: 1) the heterogeneity of religion, making its use as a concept or variable problematic; and 2) the meaning-giving and contextual nature of religion, making the use of empiricist-positivist research methods inadequate on their own. These challenges are discussed in turn below.

(a) Religion: concept, variable or complex social phenomenon?

What is religion? Can we analyze religion in the same way as, say, gender or civil society? The answer is complex. Thirty years ago, the conceptual and analytical tools needed to understand gender were lacking. Today it is accepted as a key social category. Conceptual understanding of patriarchy and the ways in which gender roles and relationships are socially constructed is sophisticated, but tools have nonetheless been developed to analyse gender roles and relationships for academic and practical purposes. Civil society is another widely adopted concept, but it is often used in a rather descriptive and a-historical way – there is little agreement over its central characteristics and boundaries and, as a result, it is still a general concept used in different ways by different analysts. Contestation and disagreement over the nature and content of religion are the hallmarks of both religious practice and religious studies, making it an even less well-defined social category.

Various interpretations of religion are found in the social sciences. One way of distinguishing prevalent interpretations is between substantive conceptualizations that focus on what religion *is*, that is, the cross-cultural attributes that distinguish it from other social phenomena, and functional definitions that are concerned with what religious *does*, that is, its role in society (Rakodi, 2007). Another important distinction is between those definitions we

can roughly label as 'static' and 'dynamic'. According to the former, which has been widely adopted in classic sociology and anthropology, religion is @

a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz, 1973, p. 90).

This definition has been critiqued on the ground that it does not capture the reality of the historical and political construction of the very idea of 'religion' (Asad, 1993). Religion is not merely a cultural system, or a set of beliefs or symbols. It requires embodied practices to express these beliefs and convey meanings to symbols, and discipline and power to enforce these practices and sustain an institutionalized community of believers. According to Lincoln (2003, pp. 5-7), religion requires four domains: 1) a discourse with transcendental concerns above the human, temporal and contingent world (religion has a claim to truth based on transcendental authority); 2) a set of practices which embody the religious discourse; 3) a community whose members construct their identity with reference to the religious discourse and its practices; and 4) institutions which, through social relations, reproduce or modify religious discourse and practices, and which ensure the continuity of the religious community over time.

Benthall (2008) adopts a 'fuzzy' concept of religion, arguing that it is not a single category but a social field. He suggests a provisional set of nineteen criteria that might be used to identify 'family resemblances' between social phenomena in order to classify them as strongly or weakly 'religious'. Religion in his view is an evolving setting or arena in which agents are located; in which they share common beliefs, dispositions and perceptions; in which interaction is based on accepted social rules; and which relates to and is penetrated by other social fields such as those associated with class, politics, ethnicity or the arts.

Given that religion is neither a static nor a single variable, we argue that the task for

development research is to understand how religious discourses are embodied in certain social practices, how social and historical processes have led to that particular embodiment, and how the religion itself redefines its discourses, and practices, in the light of changing social, economic and political contexts. For example, in Islam the prohibition on charging *riba* (generally translated as interest but closer to usury) originated in seventh century Arabia after people were forced to borrow money to pay for repairs after natural disasters. It was considered unjust to charge interest in these circumstances because it was seen as exploiting people's misfortunes (Tripp, 2006, p. 128). Whether *riba*/interest should be outlawed is still subject to disagreement within Islam.

This focus on understanding the practical embodiment of a religion and its discourses entails paying special attention to the nature of power relationships within a religious community. Adherents to the same religion often disagree about its discourse and/or how to best embody it in concrete social practices. Which discourse becomes the dominant one and which practices are enforced are not power independent. For example, the official ban on contraception in the Catholic Church, with devastating consequences in HIV/AIDS affected countries, illustrates the power element in interpreting religious teaching: out of the 72 members of the Commission in charge of drafting the position of the Church on contraception in 1960, only nine interpreted Catholic teaching as requiring a ban on artificial contraception (Keely, 1994).

Religions are thus not sets of private beliefs in the minds of individual believers. They are dynamic and subject to conflicts over the interpretation of their core teachings and how these should influence individual lives and social institutions. This leads us to the second challenge that religion poses for development research.

#### (b) The hermeneutical and contextual turn



Hermeneutics emphasizes that interpretation is key to understanding social reality. Social reality is constituted by social practices and institutions that have meanings for those who participate in them. Knowledge is therefore socially constructed rather than being about discovering an objective reality or universal laws of cause and effect governing social phenomena. In a paper on social science research methods for poverty analysis, Kanbur and Shaffer (2007, p. 185) define hermeneutics as “the interpretative understanding of intersubjective meanings”. Development research on religion in this view is not only about collecting ‘data’ that are subject to verification and technical manipulation, but first and foremost about studying the meanings that people give to their social practices and religious adherence and secondly, in line with critical social science, to use this knowledge to empower social actors.

For example, a study might reveal that in some countries, there is a correlation between low female literacy levels and high religious attendance. But such “brute data” (Taylor, 1985) fail to capture the meanings that women might give to literacy and education (for example, that female education might be considered a threat to marital harmony). Interpretive research seeks to ascertain such meanings and how they originate. In this instance, women might interpret their low educational status as the will of (or obedience to) God or Allah, based on a specific interpretation of the Bible or Qur’an. Because beliefs and practices regarding gender relations are influenced by interpretations of religious texts, it is essential to analyse these interpretations and the power relationships that are often hidden behind them. Discrepancies between one interpretation of religion and an alternative that emphasizes the dignity of all people, or between religious values and everyday practices, may suggest potential for action, by re-interpreting texts or calling for social practices and behaviours to be brought into line with religious values. Such understanding, Kanbur and Shaffer suggest, can provide a basis for enlightenment, emancipation and empowerment (2007, p. 185) and inform development

policy and practice.

The meanings that religion gives to people's lives not only vary between religious traditions but also with the economic, political, social and cultural context in which they live. 'Religion' has a different meaning for a Muslim woman beaten by her husband in India than a Pentecostal woman who leads prayers in a church in Brazil. It has a different meaning for a man in a village in Uganda and a male member of a Muslim political party in Bangladesh. Typically, positivist approaches to social analysis detach variables from their context and seek to identify relationships between them that are universally valid; in contrast, interpretive, historical and political economy approaches contextualize their analyses of social phenomena. The longstanding influence of geography, anthropology and Marxist scholarship on development studies has ensured that scepticism over the validity and role of purely positivist approaches has characterized some of its branches for many decades. Increasingly, those constituent disciplines more dominated by positivist approaches have recognized their limitations and there is a growing set of initiatives that seek to combine positivist with hermeneutical methods (Kanbur and Shaffer, 2007).

Thus, in some ways, development studies is well equipped to understand the complex and context-dependent ways in which religion influences people's lives. One difficulty or challenge however remains, and that is dealing with the transcendental nature of religion. All religions believe that there is a higher reality that transcends earthly human realities. This transcendental understanding, which directs how people live their lives on earth, may give rise to conflict between 'religion' and 'development' policy and practice which, as discussed above, remains rooted in the secular tradition and it is, as yet, by no means clear how the transcendent and sacred dimensions can be reflected in development studies. Each religion has its own tradition of scholarship, with different epistemological foundations and methodological approaches from those of the social sciences: for example theology in

Christianity, law and jurisprudence in Islam, philosophy in Hinduism or Buddhism. Of course, not all those engaged in development theory and research can become experts in these ‘insider’ disciplines. But it is important nonetheless that, when studying unfamiliar or multi-religious contexts, they develop a basic religious literacy, particularly with respect to how different faith traditions interpret the core concerns of development, such as justice, equality, poverty and sustainability.

## **6. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Despite the neglect of religion in development studies, it is clear that 1) Religion is a key aspect of millions of people’s lives and influences their actions in many different ways; 2) The major world religions have historically had international reach and influence, provided their adherents with identities and allegiances that reach beyond local social structures and national boundaries, and are being re-constituted and reinforced by contemporary globalization trends; 3) Religion and politics are often linked in complex ways; 4) Religious organizations are amongst the most important social organizations in many societies, and have maintained and even increased their scale and scope.

Because religion is fundamental to people as they try to make sense of and give meaning to their lives, and because it is one of the primary sources of values and morality for the majority of the world’s population, it is important that development studies acknowledges the religious dimension of people’s lives; understands the relationships between religion, societies and states; and appreciates the motives and characteristics of the organizational expressions of the faith traditions, including FBOs. In other words, religion needs to be ‘brought back in’ to development research so that our understanding of challenging development issues can be improved. Whether the potential for harnessing religious values and beliefs or collaboration between secular and religious organizations outweighs the pitfalls must also be subject to critical analysis.

Those engaged in development, whether as researchers or practitioners, need to recognize that development itself is based not only on a particular understanding of the world but also on assumptions about the nature of knowledge. Both research on ‘religion and development’ and development projects and programmes that involve ‘partnerships’ with faith communities need to engage with religious doctrines and interpretations. Polarized debates between critics and advocates of religion are unhelpful and insufficient. Nevertheless, differences in understanding of human wellbeing, contestation over the relative priority of individual rights and entitlements and the broader human good, and arguments over whether improved welfare can best be achieved through individual choice and competition or mutual responsibility mean that debate between the development establishment and religious organizations is necessary.

For development studies to fulfil its potential by providing analysis of social phenomena for the sake of improving people’s lives, it is important to adopt an interpretivist method of analysis. This can portray the religious values and beliefs held by adherents, as well as the meaning of rituals in which they participate and symbols they use, through their eyes as far as possible. Social scientists working in development studies should strive not to interpose their own religious and cultural assumptions between themselves and their subjects, but recognize that ultimately, observation is always filtered by the observer’s own lenses. Judging whether the religious values and practices on which they report are innocuous with respect to development objectives can potentially make a positive contribution to the achievement of such objectives, but the reality that the specification of development objectives is itself influenced, often implicitly, by the cultural assumptions of domestic and international development actors (and social scientists) external to the groups under study, is not to be forgotten.

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<sup>1</sup> Development studies emerged in the 1940s and 1950s as an autonomous interdisciplinary field of study concerned with national development in the so-called Third World, implying a normative concern with “emancipation from inequality and poverty...[and] the contextual study of different types of societies in different phases of development” (Hettne, 2008, p. 11).

<sup>2</sup> See [www.rad.bham.ac.uk](http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk)

<sup>3</sup> A term allegedly coined by the US (International Crisis Group, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> In the Western industrialized world, it is the renewed interest in spirituality and the decline of institutional religion that have been the major objects of sociological study (Davie, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> The Pew Forum survey in 19 Sub-Saharan African countries in 2008/9 asked respondents about a series of beliefs and practices associated with traditional religion. If eleven of the characteristic traditional beliefs, such as the protective power of sacrifices to spirits or the ancestors and sacred objects, and the ability of certain people to cast malevolent spells, are combined into a single indicator, the median proportion of respondents showing a high level of belief is 25% (20% of Christians, 26% of Muslims)(Pew Forum, 2010, p. 34).

<sup>6</sup> Pentecostals are Christians who belong to Pentecostal denominations and churches, such as the Assemblies of God. Charismatics are other Christians, including Catholics and mainline Protestants, who emphasize the ‘gifts of the Holy Spirit’, such as speaking in tongues and divine healing, and believe that God plays a direct, active role in everyday life (Pew Forum, 2006, p. 1).

<sup>7</sup> [www.pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=301](http://www.pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=301)

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<sup>8</sup> A distinction may also be made between ‘religious organisation’ (the organizational arrangements of (parts of) an institutionalized faith tradition) and a ‘faith-based organisation’ as a more or less autonomous and professionalized organization resembling any other non-government organization.

<sup>9</sup> Estimates of the nature and relative contribution of state and non-state providers are approximate because of limitations on data availability, inconsistencies in the data between providers and countries, and the non-comparability of services. In addition, because of the varying and complex relationships between governments and religious organizations, significance cannot be wholly captured by data on contribution to total provision. For example, the Berkley Center (2008), in its attempt to ‘map’ development work by FBOs in the Muslim world, does not try to quantitatively assess the scale of their contribution compared to governments.

<sup>10</sup> See [www.growthcommission.org](http://www.growthcommission.org)

<sup>11</sup> Although this explanation is criticized as one dimensional by other analysts, who refer also, for example, to the scale and nature of immigration to the US.

<sup>12</sup> These reviews can be downloaded from [www.rad.bham.ac.uk](http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk).

<sup>13</sup> Started in 1981 as the European Values Survey, the World Value Surveys includes more than 80 countries, containing more than 85% of the world’s population. Representative samples of adults (at least 1,000 in the most recent waves) are surveyed by local teams using a mostly common questionnaire, with the resultant data stored centrally and publicly available from [www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org). Theoretical development based on analyses of the changing cross-national patterns of value change, especially by Inglehart and colleagues, has influenced the recent development of the surveys.

<sup>14</sup> Critiques of the epistemological basis and methodological tools of positivist social science research are by no means new. Some regard them as being of little value in the study of human society, adopting instead interpretivist approaches based on grounded theory, while others believe that all approaches to social science research have both strengths and weaknesses and that the way forward is to use them appropriately and often in combination.