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# **Negotiating religion in everyday life: A critical exploration of the relationship between religion, choices and behaviour**

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## *Summary*

One of the characteristics most often associated with religion is that it is a discrete source of value that shapes people's attitudes and behaviour. In some cases, these values may be negative such as submission or violence; in other cases, religion is seen to promote positive values such as charity and social justice. In recent years, the international development community has reawakened an interest in religion, and has directly embraced the assumption that religion is foundational of people's values, seeking how best to tap into the potential positive values while mitigating against the more negative values. This paper critically explores the assumptions behind this approach. It argues that there is no straightforward relationship between belonging to a religion and the values which inform one's actions and decisions. Drawing on fieldwork research from India, the paper shows that it is impossible to disentangle religion from its interaction with the social, economic and political contexts in which it is lived. The paper concludes by deriving some implications of this for the way the international development community engages with religion.

*The various spheres of the world stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other (Weber 1946:147)*

## **Introduction**

After decades of neglect, religion has become a central topical issue in development studies. While modernization theory predicted the demise of religion with the advent of modernity and 'development', religion remains a significant aspect of people's lives in developing countries. Development studies has to engage with this important reality (Clarke 2007; Clarke et al. 2008; Deneulin and Rakodi 2011; Deneulin with Bano 2009; Tyndale 2006). This increasing engagement with religion in development studies is not limited to research.<sup>2</sup> Because of the central place that religion occupies in the lives of people who live in impoverished circumstances, religion has increasingly become an important entry point for poverty reduction interventions, and for social and political mobilization geared towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (Marshall and Van Saanen 2007).

Religion is seen as giving meaning to what people do and aspire. It constitutes therefore an important resource that development agencies can tap into in order to raise people's aspirations (Appadurai 2004) and mobilize action to reduce poverty. Secular-based

development organizations are increasingly appealing to religion as a resource for poverty reduction – ‘secular-based’ is here contrasted with ‘faith-based organizations’ which explicitly derive their activities from religious teachings (Clarke et al., 2007, 6).<sup>3</sup> UNAIDS for example has a special partnership programme to address HIV/AIDS by mobilizing faith communities and religious leaders. As it explains:

Seventy percent of the world’s people identify themselves as members of a faith community. Communities of faith play a very significant role in influencing people’s behaviour and attitudes, and in providing care and support for AIDS [...] Religious communities, mosques, temples, churches, hospitals and clinics have reached out to provide support to those living with and affected by HIV. Their leadership has great influence in the lives of many people, and leaders speaking out responsibly about AIDS can make a powerful impact at both community and international level. The response of the religious community can also be negative however. People living with HIV have been stigmatized by religious leaders and communities of faith.<sup>4</sup>

This engagement between secular organizations and faith communities usually takes the form of financial transfers to the faith communities to finance poverty reduction and ‘MDG’ activities. For example, many faith communities run schools and hospitals as part of their commitment to care for the sick and vulnerable. Partnership programmes between secular and faith-based organizations are intended to support a more efficient engagement with MDG priorities and targets. The engagement however is not only reduced to financial transfers, it can also take the form of leadership programmes, such as secular organizations engaging faith leaders to speak on matters of poverty reduction and the environment in international conferences and events. The moral authority that religious leaders command can act as a catalyst to motivate people to take more action against poverty reduction and towards environmental sustainability. Finally, the engagement may also take the form of mutual learning. For example, the recent interest in FBOs and religion more generally both reflects and contributes to an increasing recognition by secular organizations that religion is not a pre-modern relic but an important dimension of what matters to people.

The World Bank has also a special programme of partnership with faith communities, as part of a dedicated unit on ‘Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics’, which concentrates on producing research on whether and how religion makes a difference, mainly to service delivery. The Millennium Development Goals, and the inescapable presence of religion in poor people’s lives, feature as a prominent reason for such engagement. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) similarly has a special engagement with faith communities. As it explains, with words that parallel those of UNAIDS:

Faith and religion play a vital role in the lives and cultures of most people throughout the world. Indeed, about 70 per cent of people identify themselves as members of a religious or spiritual community. Religious values and practices are often deeply entwined in the fabric of daily lives, and the leaders of churches,

mosques, temples and other religious communities play a powerful role in shaping attitudes, opinions and behaviour. [...] Too often the strengths (efficacy, commitment, knowledge, networks and influence) and experiences of FBOs are overlooked by development planners. [...] Toward this end, it has worked closely within communities and with local agents of change, including religious leaders.<sup>5</sup>

The UNFPA has even produced ‘guidelines for engaging faith-based organisations as cultural agents of change’ to that effect. In the UK, one of the most publicized examples of this use of religion for development has been the Tony Blair Faiths Foundation which has focused especially on tackling malaria by mobilizing faith communities in Africa.<sup>6</sup>

Our aim here is not to review the success and failures of partnerships between international organizations and faith communities or organizations, but to highlight one fundamental assumption which lies at the core of such engagement and which is manifested clearly in the two above statements of UN agencies. Religion is assumed to be an important resource which guides people’s attitudes, decisions and behaviours. All religions prescribe certain forms of ‘appropriate’ behaviour and proscribe other forms of ‘inappropriate’ behaviour such as contraception in the case of Catholicism, obligation of charity donation through zakat in Islam, care for the widow, the sick and the orphan in Christianity. Many of these have direct relevance for poverty reduction agendas such as the protection of the environment, sexual behaviour, and attitudes towards the treatment of women or towards health. Religion therefore is seen as a source of values which have an impact on development outcomes. Some of these values however are considered positive and others negative. Religion for example is assumed to nurture values of compassion and care for HIV/AIDS patients. This is ‘good’ and should be promoted. However religion may also nurture values of obedience and humility, which can be ‘bad’, especially for women in patriarchal societies. With these assumptions, development interventions therefore aim to harness religion’s positive values, or mitigating its negative ones, within the overall purpose of pursuing development goals such as the MDGs. The aim of the paper is to scrutinize these assumptions in the light of empirical evidence.

We start with a critical examination of the idea that religion informs people’s behaviour. We argue that religions are not homogenous and static, that they are not abstract theories or teachings, and that they are not exogenous influences on people’s behaviours. In doing so, we highlight some elements of the complex and contradictory dynamics that exists between religion, values and behaviours. We then present findings from fieldwork in the states of Punjab and Orissa in India. The interviews seek to understand how religion is lived and experienced by people themselves in their daily lives, and demonstrate how the ‘other-

worldly' or transcendental character of religion, which is generally assumed in the social sciences,<sup>7</sup> is in fact deeply enmeshed in the practical and everyday lives of people. The 'other world' and the 'this world' therefore can not be separated. The paper concludes by identifying key implications of our analysis for the current engagement of international development organizations with religion and religious organizations.

### **Disentangling religion, values and behaviour**

A widespread understanding of religion in the social sciences is that religion is a repository of values and beliefs which unite people in worship and give rise to strong codes of behaviours and motivations among believers (Giddens 2001). In many ways this line of thinking can be traced back to Clifford Geertz's seminal argument that meaning making is the core and most essential function of religion (Geertz 1973). Religion therefore offers both descriptive values about the states of affairs (for example, 'men and women are equal') and prescriptive values about what one should do (for example, 'we should respect other human beings'). As the opening statement of UNAIDS clearly shows, the values associated with religion, whether descriptive or prescriptive, can be both positive and negative, defining what is permitted and not permitted, what is desirable and not desirable, what is 'good' or 'bad' behaviour.

However, the repository idea carries with it assumptions about the relationships between religion, values, practice and behaviour, which the social sciences have accepted without sufficient reflection. Thus it is assumed that religious truths or beliefs can be isolated and then transferred to individuals who then act on them and put them into practice. Equally, as the opening comments from UNAIDS and UNFPA indicate, the religious values that adherents may hold on to can somehow be isolated, tapped into and then manipulated to promote particular actions or behaviour. For development organisations of course, values need to be used to meet external goals such as the MDGs and hence need to be compatible with the values of the same goals.

In this kind of reasoning, religion is essentialised and treated as an object of enduring and fixed characteristics. Values meanwhile are completely abstracted and their relation to action and behaviour is simply assumed. There are two major weaknesses to this kind of approach which combined hinder our understanding of the relationship between religious values and behaviour. First, at both methodological and theoretical levels religion is treated as factually given rather than historically, socially and politically defined and reproduced. Secondly, the issue of value choice is reduced to abstract statements and fails to acknowledge, and then understand, the more complex space that exists between value statements and

people's adoption of particular values. This space, we would argue, is multifaceted, diverse and ever changing. Geertz's statement about religion being fundamentally about meaning making is therefore important but it takes us only so far in our understanding.

In what follows, we attempt to identify key elements of an alternative approach to thinking about the connections between religion, values, choices and behaviour, which has particular relevance for development.

### *Religious values and social practices*

First of all, we agree that religious-based values directly influence the choices people make in their lives. But values, such as 'equality', 'solidarity', 'compassion' and 'respect' are not abstract ideas. Without social norms and practices, values do not exist, cannot be acted upon, do not retain or offer meaning, and cannot be reproduced or otherwise. There would be no value of compassion if there were no social norms that define compassionate behaviour, or no value of solidarity if there were no social norms associated to what acting in solidarity means.

The necessary embodiment of values into social norms and practices has two implications for development and the way the relationship between religion, values and behaviour is commonly assumed in development interventions that engage with faith communities. First, societies have different social norms about how particular values are embodied. The values supposedly inherent to Islam or Christianity will be embodied in sometimes radically different social norms. For example, the value of women's dignity will be expressed in different social practices for a poor Muslim community in rural Pakistan or an educated and middle-class Muslim community in Egypt. Second, the social norms which embody religious values change as societies change. How the value of women's dignity is understood and expressed in social norms has changed over the last centuries, and rapidly so over the last decades. Within the Christian tradition for example, the Anglican Church has recently concluded that women had equal rights to men to become priests, something unthinkable fifty years ago. The Roman Catholic Church still believes that women's dignity is not a matter of full gender equality.

Thus, there is no straightforward link between individual or social practice and official religious doctrine. Christianity may uphold the value of equality of all human beings at its core, but the way that value is lived and expressed in social practices varies greatly across societies and time. This underlines a key part of our overall argument that religious values and behaviours are inherently social and always embedded in wider contexts. Implicit in this statement is an important critique of the view, widely held in social sciences, that religion is

ultimately about personal beliefs,<sup>8</sup> and adopting religious values and behaviours is primarily a cognitive function.

### *Sanction, social norms and habitus*

Another central feature of the influence of religion on people's values, behaviours and actions is that religion needs coercion, through law and power, to make individuals act according to religious precepts. All religions contain sanctions if people do not behave according to what the religion prescribes (fear of hell, damnation), and rely on what Asad (1993, 35) calls 'the disciplinary activities of social institutions (family, school, city, church) and of human bodies (fasting, prayer, obedience, penance)'.

Religion is thus not a value system on its own. The values of compassion, respect, humility, solidarity and care which are generally associated with religious traditions need an institutional apparatus, power and discipline in order to be endorsed and acted upon by the believing community. For example, Islam (like many other religions) emphasises the value of self-discipline, with the practice of fasting as way of exercising it. Yet in order to be a religious value, fasting and restraint of desires requires an institutional apparatus, sanctions, and strong embodiment in social norms. The association between religious values and social norms can sometimes be such that they are barely distinguishable, with people engaging in practices without endorsing the religious value which the practice embodies. The month of Ramadan in predominantly Muslim countries is a striking example of this. Even non-Muslims have to fast because of the strong social norm regarding fasting during the month of Ramadan. For many, there is no escape from fasting, at least publicly, even if they do not wish to engage in the practice. Sometimes, this can also be the case for worship. For in some countries, there is no escape from attendance at Friday prayers because of the strong social norms about religious worship and the fear of sanctions if one fails to attend the mosque. Is fasting or Friday mosque attendance thus an expression of religious fervour or the following of a social norm from which there is no escape?

In addition to social norms, people engage in certain religious social practices because of *habitus* rather than a conscious and reflected decision to undertake certain actions. For many Muslims who fast during Ramadan, the practice of fasting may not be a conscious voluntary decision, out of free will, to exercise self-control, but is something that they simply do because societies are so structured. Instead of having 'value-based behaviour', we are faced more with 'behaviour-based value'. People do not engage in fasting because of the

value of self-discipline, but by engaging in the practice of fasting, they come to endorse the value of self-restraint.

### *Multiple values and choice*

For the purposes of illustration and argument we have kept the previous two points to rather broad observations. While we maintain that values and meanings are important to people's lives because they *inter alia* influence individual behaviour and are constitutive of how people interact, it is important to remember that people have multiple values from which to choose and that there are many 'non-religious values' that also influence the way people relate to each other. Religious values therefore rarely stand alone in people's lives and in many cases, they may compete with or overlap with values derived outside a religious framework.

This raises immediate challenges about how we conceptualise the way people identify, distinguish and then possibly embrace specific values, including religious ones, in life. In short how do people 'choose' values and decide how to behave and act? All too often we have assumed a response to this, relying quite strongly on the idea that values are somehow a matter of subjective appraisal and, more often than not, supported by secular-liberal judgements about choice and freedom (Mahmood 2005). Recent and emerging debates concerning morality and ethics in social life warn against the dangers of this assumption and offer important insights into our discussion of values (Robbins 2009; Zigon 2009). Although arriving at quite different frameworks and using different language, both Robbins and Zigon argue that social life is marked by two different but co-existing orders of morality. The first is more routine, generic and stable, and essentially refers to established social norms and expectations. The second refers to more explicit moments in which moral choices are articulated through conscious, reflective decisions. Both orders stand in relation to each other; and their coexistence reinforces the idea that moral or value choices are indeed part of everyday life, and also serves as reminder that the capacity to choose is more a cultural than a cognitive function. Making choices about values are therefore fundamentally 'constructed out of the role given to choice in various cultures and in various domains within specific cultures' (Robbins, 2007, 295).

The remainder of this paper explores primary data from Indian and attempts to develop a non-prescriptive account of the way religion figures in people's understanding of their wellbeing.

## **Religion in everyday experience: Findings from India**



The findings presented in this paper draw on research carried out by the Religions in Development Programme (RaD) in two India states: Orissa and Punjab. The decision to carry out research in these two states was influenced by the previous contacts and experience of our research collaborators in India. Besides these pragmatic considerations, the advantage of working in these two states was that they offered locations with very different development experiences and histories. Punjab is widely seen as a development success. Its Human Development Indicators are among the best in India, and its average per capita income is second only to Maharashtra. Orissa instead ranks eleventh if we use Human Development Indicators, and almost 50% of its population live below the poverty line. Within each state, we then selected one rural and one urban site. This again was an important conceptual choice. We could have selected for example more respondents from a greater number of sites. Our decision to focus on fewer sites arose from our conviction that religion is a phenomenon experienced in context or lived in communities, and not simply a matter of personal belief. In making our final choice of sites, we considered a number of factors including size (we needed communities with enough households from which to select a sample of 300 households for our survey) and diversity (of religions, caste and economic status).

The research had two main objectives. Methodologically, it attempted to build on previous wellbeing research carried out between 2002 and 2007 in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand (White 2010)<sup>9</sup>. Although this programme covered a wide range of life dimensions including resources, assets and quality of life, it did not take specific account of religion in its design. We were therefore keen to return to Bangladesh with a new wellbeing framework which explicitly figured in religion because there we had found that people frequently used religious references when speaking about matters that were important in their lives (Devine and White 2009). Following our work in Bangladesh, we moved to India to develop and test the same framework in a different religious context. Substantially, the research in both Bangladesh and India aimed to explore in what ways religion figured in people's sense of wellbeing and how this changes over time.

The research in India consisted of three main components: community profiles, a short survey administered to 1,200 households (i.e 300 in each of the four sites with a 50/50 split of male and female respondents and a range of caste and religious backgrounds<sup>10</sup>) and 38 in-depth interviews. In both Orissa and Punjab, respondents were equally selected from the rural and urban sites and again we purposively attempted to capture diversity in terms of religious adherence, class and gender.

In this section, we look specifically at the 38 in-depth interviews which included an initial set of questions on what people considered important for their wellbeing, and a further set of questions which sought to explore how religion figured in people's consideration of wellbeing. In taking this approach, we set out purposively to develop a more 'bottom up' approach to the study of religion capable of capturing everyday experiences and reflections. There is of course a significant and rich literature on religion in India and our contribution is a modest but important first step which tries to capture inductively the relation between religion, values and people's everyday quest for wellbeing. In developing our approach, we felt that the study of religion, and specifically religious values, carries many of the risks Bourdieu (1984) identified in investigations established to understand working class experience. Often, Bourdieu warned, intellectuals deploy perceptions and appreciations 'which are not those that the members of the working class themselves use' (1984, 373). What he argued instead for was a clearer focus on the *habitus*, normally associated with the position of being working class, in other words an informed description that captures daily practices, sensibilities and articulations. In seeking to understand the connections between religion, values and people's actions, we wanted to avoid abstractions and analytically hone in on the way religion figures in people's everyday practices and thoughts. This more inductive approach carried its own challenges. In interviews for example, people talked almost interchangeably about 'religion', 'god' and the 'gods'. Here then we simply use the terms as they were presented to us in interviews. Another option would have been to try and clarify with respondents the possible difference between god, gods and religions. Our sense however was that this was not a worthwhile enterprise because we were more committed to letting respondents talk in ways that made sense to them.

All the in-depth interviews were carried out by a local senior researcher and this ensured greater consistency across interviews while respecting their unstructured ambition. Interviews were transcribed and analysed for their content using open and focused coding. In analysing the data we were significantly helped by face-to-face exchanges with the local senior researcher. These exchanges were invaluable because they helped incorporate perception and observation into the textual recordings, and also gave us an opportunity to probe recurrent patterns or themes. Taken together this allowed us to assign higher evidentiary value to particular findings. In the analysis below, we identify the three most important areas where discussions on religion and values were articulated.

### *Practical benefits and daily concerns*

The most striking message that comes from our data is the extent to which respondents associate religion with practical and everyday life situations. The ongoing significance of religion is therefore tied not to some doctrinal or theological argument but to a deeper and more *practiced* sense in which religious forces are considered to directly influence or transform the physical world in which we live. The narrow association of religion with theology or doctrine sits clumsily with the experience of our respondents who quite clearly related religion with a more mundane concern for real life issues and key life cycle events.

For those respondents who affirmed that religion played a positive role in their wellbeing, the vast majority illustrated this by pointing to some practical life experience in which they either face a challenge or hold an aspiration or identify a need. The scope and extent of these challenges and aspirations are vast and range from key life cycle events such as fertility and the death of loved ones; to shocks such as unemployment or illness; to what might appear as slightly more mundane concerns such as finding lost items or dietary commitments. Religion therefore is seen primarily in very pragmatic (and usually positive) terms and is intimately linked to daily life concerns and needs.

Respondents made direct connections between their everyday concerns and the power of the gods. It is the latter which ultimately provide the foundational explanation of why things in life turn out the way they do. If resolutions to particular challenges or concerns are considered positive, respondents quickly attribute these to God and use them as ‘proof’ of God’s existence and benevolence. Even when outcomes are not considered satisfactory, they are somehow traced back to God. Thus for one respondent (FS,30),<sup>11</sup> the death of her husband after a prolonged bout of illness affirmed the validity of religion because the illness had allowed him to focus on what was really important in life, i.e. holding the name of God on his lips. Only on two occasions (FH, 37 and FH, 14) did less positive outcomes lead respondents to actually question the use of religion and abandon God.

The relationship between religious practices and the pursuit of world benefits is complex especially when it comes to understanding causality. In some cases, the gods are understood to intervene in a very direct way. So for example in cases where couples have struggled to conceive, the eventual birth of a child is seen as a consequence of God’s direct actions. In other cases, the gods are credited with intervening even when respondents accept that the primary cause of their benefit may lie elsewhere. This is often seen in cases of illness where for example, people may openly accept that treatment administered by medical

professionals such as doctors and nurses helped restore health. However even in these cases, the need to trace the recovery back to God remains equally forceful:

*I may have taken him [son] to the doctor first but the doctor also depends on God. This is a scientific age and therefore we rely on science whereas earlier everyone went to the Shiva temple if they fell ill. But now that is no longer the case. But the point is that even the treatment the doctor prescribes is dependent on God. (FH,11)*

So is illness successfully treated because of the medicine or because of God? Time and time again, our respondents remind us that the two possible explanations are supplementary rather than competing, compatible rather than exclusionary; and that in their minds at least the link between ‘scientific’ and ‘religious’ interpretations is seamless.

It is possible to group the different practical benefits which people associate with religious practice into two distinct categories: protection from harm or misfortune and seeking good fortune or favour. Of these two, it is the former which is the main focus of people religious practices and attentions. People invest in a number of practices such as daily prayers, acts of veneration, financial donations, temples service and ritual austerities in a bid to ensure harm and misfortune are kept at a safe distance. Many of respondents carry out some of these practices routinely as a preventative measure to avert any potential harm. If, as we have argued above, the power of the Gods resides in their power to directly influence affairs of this world, then what is ultimately important for people is to make sure that the influence is benevolent rather than threatening (Mines 2005). In some cases, people hedge their bets carefully and are quite happy to go beyond the limits of their own ‘religious boundaries’:

*Whatever we have today is due to His grace and beneficence. We are Hindus so worship Mata and Shiva. I also go the gurudwara. I remain close to all the gods [..]. I don't want to fall foul of any gods [..]. I burn a lamp and incense morning and evening in front of all of them (FH30)*

There are however numerous accounts of people turning to religious practices as a way of overturning or remedying specific harms or dangers that have already occurred. In these cases, the actions taken are specific rather than routine, reactive rather than preventative; and usually entail adopting new, special or simply more religious practices. The two most common harms for which people turn to the gods are ill health and addiction to alcohol, drugs or gambling.

Although the prevention of harm is the dominant category of benefits people seek from the gods, there are also cases where the focus lies on achieving good fortune. Again these relate to very practical and everyday concerns such as being blessed with children, giving birth safely, finding employment, being able to provide education to children and so forth.

While the distinction between protection from harm and seeking fortune helps us understand different kind of benefits, in reality the two categories often overlap or are closely connected. In part this reflects the idea, alluded to earlier, that the gods possess dual powers in that they can be both protective and threatening. This ambivalence generates deep-rooted and continuous uncertainty which people try to ‘control’ by effectively cajoling the gods into a specific course of action. On the other hand, our data offers numerous accounts where fortune and benefits are seen to flow from harm or ills. One of our respondents for example recounted how her husband had suffered an accident at work when his hand got caught in some machinery. She attributed the fact that the machine cut only his fingers as opposed to hand (which could have happened ‘*if God had wanted*’) to God’s benevolence and favour. In other words, if God had not been watching over her husband, the situation would have been considerably worse. The husband’s misfortune and his wife’s suggestion that this was the result of God’s behaviour articulates sentiments and questions which many Hindus, and possibly non-Hindus in India, ask themselves albeit in different ways: why do particular events occur in the way that they do? How are they connected to the world of the Gods? What, if any, influence do human actions play? What is human will? And what is divine will? These kind of questions rest on the pivotal concept of karma in Hindu life, in which the ideas of ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ are seen as interlinked, and made sense of. Although she never used the word karma in the interview, it is clear that she saw the accident not in terms of a result of an inappropriate act but as something couched in God’s benevolence. Of course one might argue that the woman is only being philosophical about the accident and making the best of the misfortune. But perhaps there is a deeper reading to be made: the ability to see benefit where harm or ill exist, tells us something very powerful about Indian society and the worldviews of its people.

### *Relationships and social order*

One of the key findings from our data in Bangladesh (Devine and White 2009; White forthcoming) is repeated in the data from India. When people talk of what is important in their wellbeing, questions around key relationships crop up with great frequency. That relationships should figure in these discussions is not surprising since there is now considerable evidence from around the world suggesting that relationships lie at the very heart of wellbeing concerns (Devine et al 2008; White 2010). As in Bangladesh however, when our respondents talk of the relationships that matter most to them, religion becomes an important reference point against which the same relationships are assessed.

At least since the classic writings of Dumont, many commentators have puzzled over the complex relation between the collective and the individual in Indian society (Dumont 1970; Marriet 1976; Mines 1992). Although commentators disagree on the nature of the relationship, it is commonly recognised that the social and relational milieu is a fundamental part of people's identity and agency in India. It is therefore not surprising to find that in our data, respondents spent considerable time reflecting on the significance of core relationships, of which the family (kinship) and the community (caste) were by far the most dominant, with the household seen often as the bedrock for other relations and the primary source of 'a good life': *'there are three gurus in our lives: first come our parents, the second guru is karma and the third is God'* (MH, 4). Prioritising the household in this way has of course different implications for different household members. As one respondent put it *'all this [sense of order in the house and beyond] lies in the hands of the women of the household'* (FH, 6). The burden therefore of ensuring the household retains a moral standing and level of virtue and piety, lies disproportionately with mothers and the women of the household. Women are therefore expected to be the main teachers of morality and standards within the household; take responsibility for interceding to the deities on behalf of household members when they become 'errant'; and when household members do not behave 'as expected', women will then shoulder the blame.

Relationships recur frequently in discussions about religion and wellbeing because they lie at the heart of the cares and concerns of everyday life, and also reach deep into the value structure that people have. This implies a very close link or association in people's minds between everyday relations and the wider social and religious or moral order. Evidence from our data suggests that what exercises people most is the sense that customary or traditional relations are somehow breaking up and that people no longer respect existing obligations and reciprocities. As we found in Bangladesh (Camfield et al 2009; White 2010), the apparent deterioration of 'traditional' relationships is often interpreted as a sign that society is losing its way and that people have abandoned their responsibilities and ignored their priorities. One respondent captures this judgement quite dramatically:

*These days relationships are not the same anymore. This is an age when one brother refuses to recognise another brother – there is no sense of people being one's own. This is because of the Kalyug<sup>12</sup> (SM, 27).*

In this scheme, actions can move in one of two directions: if they help or create proper relations, they are accorded value and respect; if they are seen to ignore or destroy relations, they are looked on with great suspicion and distrust. On the whole, there was remarkable

consistency among respondents about how to judge these actions. Thus listening to elders and parents is considered in a positive light, thinking only about personal gain is seen as immoral; marrying within religions to be commended, mixed marriages and in some cases 'love marriages' deemed inappropriate; helping family and neighbours is morally correct, avoiding kin and neighbours in case they need help is wrong.

These judgements however are not entirely fixed and resolved and as a result, the value attached to creating and maintaining relationships comes under constant pressure and scrutiny. In most cases for example where people lament the erosion or neglect of relational values, they will point to cases where individuals are seen trying to impose or assert their own desires, ambitions or priorities. The logic of self-assertion therefore is constructed as an antithetical value to that of respecting customary relations and obligations, and those accused of being over assertive are quickly labelled greedy, lazy, selfish or individualistic. This creates a deep rooted and unresolved paradox because many of the examples of self-assertion relate to (usually modern) opportunities or decisions that are often considered desirable and good in their own right. Thus for example, adult respondents are very keen that their children are educated and yet the pursuit of education can equally be portrayed as an over assertion of selfish ambitions and a temptation to withdraw from existing relational arrangements. Equally, many respondents report that they value greater equality between men and women, and that employment and mobility of young women for example is a positive development. Indeed respect for equality is seen as a sign of following good religious values. Yet on the other hand, there are equally persistent views which link mobility of women as a sign of disorder and a denial of the proper role of women in this world. Earlier we quoted one respondent who said that the moral integrity of the household and beyond ultimately lay in the hands of the women of the household. Although in many respects this woman held quite a modern outlook, when talking about household relations she noted that it was the responsibility of women *'to serve the husband well and do all that needs to be done for him and also take care of the children well [...] a woman's happiness lies in her family being happy'* (FH,6).

Many of the actions or decisions that are considered self-asserting therefore imply a withdrawal from more traditional social relations and obligations. This leads to a good deal of anxiety, anger and questioning, not only about everyday social relations but also and ultimately about the deeper ordering of life: *'People's greed has taken over and once their own feelings come to the fore then anything good they hear in the gurudwara is promptly forgotten'* (MS,25)

### *Morals and rituals*

Our initial emphasis on the association between religion and everyday concerns and practical benefits needs to be balanced by an acknowledgement that for many of our respondents, religion constitutes a central moral reference point in life, which embraces this world and the next, the tangible and not so tangible. Thus religion is quite typically presented as *'a force for the good (which) makes us stay on the path of good'* (FH, 31), and that following this good path not only guides people in the here and now but will also *'prepare you for later – when He calls you to Himself'* (FM, 21). Here once again we see a strong connection between the 'transcendental' and the 'mundane', and this serves to reinforce the idea that values are experienced and reproduced always and only in relation to wider moral, social and ritual contexts. They are rarely, if ever, only cognitive acts or subjective appreciations.

It is possible to distinguish a number of areas in life where religion is experienced as a source of morality. In the majority of cases, the moral compass derived from religion is seen as important in establishing proper relations and conduct with others including family and community members. In other cases, this inspiration extends beyond what might be considered 'normal' or 'customary' networks. So for example, religion is also seen by some as a reminder to respect and serve others irrespective of caste, religion or self interest. In all these latter cases however, respondents were equally aware of the everyday conflict that exists between the normative and the reality, between what religious values might prescribe and what religious adherents do.

One of the notable aspects of discussions around religion and morality was the number of cases where following religion was directly related to the avoidance of addictive practices, especially alcohol and drugs. Where people have recovered from some form of addiction, inevitably it is because of the intervention of the gods triggered by the intercession usually of mothers, wives or daughters. Living in accordance with religious principles is also believed to bring inner feelings of peace and strength and temper unruly feelings of anger, greed and impulse. The struggle to suppress unruly emotions and secure peace is one of ongoing concern and deliberation. People are therefore privately aware of the constant need to review their own moral position in life partly because they are all too aware of the public judgement if their behaviour is deemed disorderly, reminding us again of the entanglement of religious values with social norms and sanctions highlighted in the second section. In this ongoing struggle, prayer, ritual practices and pilgrimages play a key formative and disciplinary role:



*I wake up at four in the morning and first pray. All this makes you less lazy. This gives me peace of mind and the clarity of mind to think through everything. It also ensures that I don't indulge in petty gossip, that I don't indulge in rumour mongering or bad mouthing people. I devote my time to good work. (FS, 35)*

Reflective choice, reviews of the state of one's life and intercessions to seek improvements all highlight the fact that, as much as our respondents may believe that everything is ultimately in the hands of a more powerful reality, the ability to choose and remain on the 'correct path' ultimately requires moral effort and human deliberation. God's grace may be paramount but conscious decision-making and efforts are no less important. This apparent paradox was nicely summed up by one of our respondents who affirmed early on that God is everything and anything that happens does so because of His will. Later while talking about the future prospects of his children, he repeated this same sentiment but with an important qualification: "*they will achieve what is written in their destinies. The rest is up to them*" (MM, 34). Destiny therefore is not a predetermined force but the result of people's actions, and not a predetermining force but an arena in which the prospects of a better future life can be established.<sup>13</sup> The link between action and future aspirations is echoed by another respondent "*If we want things then we have to make the effort, only then will be rewarded; you cannot just pray to God to give you everything you want*" (FH).

Given the above, it is not surprising that an apparent decline in religious practices is a major source of concern for many respondents. Prayer and ritual help train people in good values but they also strengthen moral vigilance and social norms regarding certain codes of behaviours. If this is weakened, people become exposed to disorder and society risks losing its moral compass which gives a sense of direction and meaning to people's lives. In our interviews, respondents blamed the decline of religious practices on modern day trappings, especially television and education. These trappings distract people's attention and take them down an alternative route that is ruled by negative emotions such as greed and selfishness. For this reason, the decline of religious practices is equated with the arrival of *Kalyug*.

However the moral universe in which our respondents live is not fixed and settled. While moral concerns certainly intensify when people feel that they are facing *Kalyug*, many of the values associated with the modern world are also very highly valued. As mentioned earlier, this is very evident in relation to education. As new values are embraced, the old values fall under the microscope; a new worldview emerges and the value structure of old is reconfigured including the relation to the gods:

*Now people are much more educated and they are more aware of what is going on. This also means that people have less time to do to the temple and gurudwara. So they just pray on their own and [...] all the scriptures say that God is within us. So how does it matter where one worships? (MS, 39).*

### **Concluding remarks**

The relationship between religion and values is not as immediate and clear cut as secular development organisations might assume. Our findings indicate that the religious and non-religious worlds are deeply inter-penetrated, to the point of being hardly distinguishable. Religious landscapes are complex and by implication, the relationship between religion, values and behaviour is equally complex. The idea then that we can single out people's values and behaviours from their religion, and then 'tap into' them is quite problematic. Evidence from India has shown that values are as much behaviour-based as behaviours are based on religious values, and that religion cannot be instrumentally insulated from the plethora of other influences on people's attitudes and behaviours that exist.

First, according to our analysis religion is an inherently pragmatic affair permeating everyday concerns and mundane aspirations: someone had an accident and injured hand, but God was there as it could have been worse; someone has not been able to recover from an illness but God was there and enabled that person to be more peaceful and enjoy loving relations during the illness; someone wants their children to do well at school, God will help them achieve this. The risk is to read into this 'pragmatism' that our respondents are materialistic or superstitious, or that they are simply instrumental about religion. Nothing could be further from the truth. In our respondents' minds the everyday and the supernatural, practical needs and transcendental hopes go hand in hand; they are complementary rather than mutually exclusive concerns.

Second, religion is about relations within the immediate social sphere and within the wider social environment. We have highlighted that religion is intrinsically linked to wider social norms and institutions. Adhering to a religion therefore is not predominantly a matter of individual preference in the minds of individual believers. On the one hand, what people value and find worthwhile doing and being are often unconsciously reproduced and people adopt religious-based values and behaviours, or follow religious practices simply because this is what people do. On the other hand, even where there are options for reflective choice which might lead to change, these are equally permeated and structured by social, political and indeed religious relations. Religion is therefore closely linked to the social stability of

relations in societies and is part of that are in life which determines what is socially permitted and not permitted.

Third, religion constructs through its rituals and social norms the moral code of a society. It offers a kind of moral compass to help people live their lives in a proper manner. However, religion is not the only force that inspires what people choose and do with their lives, and it may not be the dominant influence. As our interviews pointed out, the lives of some women were built around being obedient and loving to their husbands because this is what God commanded; in other cases women pursued other trajectories either via education or employment and again this was considered to be what God commanded. Similarly, it is important for children to follow the moral code of society and do what is right (honouring parents, respecting people, etc.), but our respondents judged it as equally important for their children to be educated and choose a life that they wish to have. It is precisely in the complex space that lies between the 'normative' (what God commands) and the 'everyday' where actual and real choices are made. Religion inhabits this space; informing both the normative and the everyday, but dominating neither.

The interest of development agencies to engage with the religious and faith dimensions of people's lives is very welcome, and long overdue. However engaging with religion is not the magic recipe which, if properly manipulated, will help make religious adherents adopt certain behaviours, decisions or actions. Religion is a constitutive part of people's lives and of how societies are organised; international development efforts need to engage more with this dimension but without seeking to extrapolate and manipulate it for externally imposed development goals.

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<sup>2</sup> Very few articles on the subject of religion have been written in Development Studies journals. Between 1982 and 1998, only five articles in *World Development* had religion as subject, while 83 dealt with the environment and 85 with gender (Ver Beek 2000). This trend has been reversed since 2001 and one is witnessing a growing interest in religion in development studies and international relations (Thomas 2005, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> The distinction between secular and faith-based is however not clear-cut as many 'secular' organizations such as Oxfam, Amnesty International or VSO were founded by people directly inspired by their faith.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.unaids.org/en/Partnerships/Civil+society/religionAndAids.asp>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.unfpa.org/culture/fbo.html>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org>.

<sup>7</sup> For a summary discussion of the genesis of the concept of 'religion' and its use in the social sciences, see chapter 3 of Deneulin with Bano (2009).

<sup>8</sup> For a critical discussion of the social sciences conception of religion as a set of private beliefs, see Thomas (2005).

<sup>9</sup> For more details of this research see [www.welldev.org.uk](http://www.welldev.org.uk)

<sup>10</sup> The religious distribution of survey respondents (1,200 households) was 56% Hindus, 24% Sikhs, 15% Muslims and 5% Christian, and the caste distribution was 55% General Castes, 16% Other Backwards Castes and 29% Scheduled Castes.

<sup>11</sup> We have classified respondents by religion, gender and interview rota number. Hence FS,30 means Female, Sikh, interview number 30. In this paper we use direct quotes from Hindus (H) and Muslims (M).

<sup>12</sup> According to Hinduism, Kalyug is the fourth and last for the eras. It is an age of darkness and evil, in which spirituality and morality are shunned.

<sup>13</sup> This theory of moral causality of course underpins the idea of *karma*.