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Rethinking development and peacebuilding in non-secular contexts: A postsecular alternative in Mindanao?

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Rethinking development and peacebuilding in non-secular contexts: a postsecular alternative in Mindanao

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to positively engage with the religious character of many development contexts through an exploration of my own field work in Mindanao. Through problematising a secular development industry and building on the momentum of the religious turn some scholars have identified, I share my initial explorations of how a postsecular framing might offer an alternative approach to development and peacebuilding. Through a deconstructive framing of the religious-secular binary I analyse the practices of one small NGO and suggest that a practice of ‘journeying with’ – Muslims and Christians on the shared philosophical/theological project to nourish each other’s faiths – can contribute to material and spiritual benefit, and the conditions to enable this.

KEYWORDS

Development; religion; postsecular; Mindanao; Caputo

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The culture of the wretched of the earth is deeply religious. To be in solidarity with them requires not only an acknowledgement of what they are up against but also an appreciation of how they cope with their situation. This appreciation does not require that one be religious; but if one is religious, one has wider access into their life-world
Cornel West¹

While religion is an important dimension in the lives of many people across the globe, until recently it has tended to be ignored or marginalised by international development research, policy and practice

Tomalin²

INTRODUCTION

The fields of development and religion have arguably never been comfortable partners. International development scholars, policy makers and practitioners have engaged in successive models of development from modernisation theory to current thinking around liberal peace and security, which have actively marginalised the religious. And yet the contexts of much development work are inherently religious. Conversely, the conflating of security and development³ combined with the work of the ‘war on terror’ to integrate religion into foreign policy⁴, has fostered a greater attention onto ‘fragile’ states and the rise of extremism, which in one of its forms perceives to draw strength from a certain type of religion. In this paper I suggest that the predominantly secular development community needs to find a way to work with religious communities authentically and better than it is now, where in contemporary mainstream development discourses religion ranges from a barrier to development and/or peace to permissible only in its liberal (western) form. In this paper I draw on the resources of

philosophy and theology in an attempt to explore a new approach for development practitioners and scholars that exceeds the current secular-religion dichotomy. Using a postsecular framing I explore a development practice witnessed during ethnographic research in Mindanao, asking if it may present a way of engaging authentically with religion, and on religion's own terms, while simultaneously upholding a non-reified idea of religion watchful against authoritarian manifestations which may lead to violence. I then reflect on how a post-secular framing can be helpful in a post-development approach to bring about both discursive and material change.

RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT

The development project is arguably based on a hegemonic idea of progress and informed by European Enlightenment thinking. It is no surprise therefore to find that it is fiercely secular. For many decades the development industry has assumed that as developing societies modernise religion will become less significant. Here, religion is not only sidelined, but its diminished significance is deemed desirable, as according to Stiglitz, Nobel Prize winner and former chief economist at the World Bank, the task of development is the 'fundamental transformation of society, including a change in preferences and attitudes, an acceptance of change and an abandonment of many traditional ways of thinking'⁵. Such 'traditional ways of thinking' and 'preferences and attitudes' would include religion. This reflects the common thinking, captured by Eade, that the local and traditional 'are even now seen as a brake on development, while the international development agencies and their national counterparts regard themselves as culturally neutral – if not superior'⁶. These assumptions found in modernisation theory are no less prevalent since the theory's fall in popularity, and now similar assumptions are upheld in the contemporary discourses that merge security and development together to advocate liberal peace. Within this field secular/ism, the West, democracy and modernity are hyponyms of each other – they share the same semantic field and we cannot talk

about one without evoking the other. Here, in keeping with De Sousa Santos' critique of Western science, we find a normative script that continues to frame development as technocratic solutions based on the Western values of free markets, individualism and secularism against 'the ignorant, the residual, the inferior, the local and the non-productive'⁷ strengthening the postdevelopment call for alternative approaches to development.

However, just as in other disciplines, development literature and practice has also been experiencing something of a resurgence of religion. Accompanying a secular development stance, a growing body of scholarship and practice appears to be embracing religion. According to Clarke there has been a recent shift of development practice and scholarship now engaging the 'religious' that it once side-lined⁸.

The new religion and development agenda is arguably the coming together of many different trends: 1. a rise in the religious right in the US (but not exclusively) increasing funding to Faith Based Organisations (FBO); 2. a shift in development approaches towards a more interpretivist approach which provides space to consider different ideas of what development means, including religious ideas; and 3. the rise of the NGO and civil society as a means of delivering development projects, which have resulted in bottom-up approaches that typically retain the faith of the communities from which they emerge⁹. To this we can add the increased interest in religion, particularly Islam, after the co-ordinated 9/11 attacks¹⁰.

This recent religious colouring of parts of the development industry warrants further investigation, however is not the aim of this paper. A preliminary and brief review would however suggest that it does not describe mainstream development discourse, which is still

dictated by secular interests. Furthermore, the extent of an authentic engagement with religion in this turn is questionable. According to Tomalin¹¹, who draws on the works of Clarke¹² and Deneulin and Bano¹³, the types of organisations sanctioned and partnered by the traditional development industry organisations tend to be engaging with a certain type of liberal faith. The passive natures of religion evident in these manifestations of liberal faith seek to consolidate rather than to challenge a secular agenda – they can be considered the secularisation of religion. Also, the rise in funding for FBO from the religious right could be misleading as many (but certainly not all) are Christian¹⁴. Furthermore, centre-right advocates often link these typically civil society organisations to ideas like social capital and the big society, which correspond to the neo-liberal ideal of the small state, bringing (liberal) economic development drivers through the back door of interpretivist approaches.

Furthermore, the new engagement with religion may actually be counter-productive. On one end of the scale religion can be reduced to its practical usage, for example a grease to oil smooth relationships between development organisations and their recipient communities in order to help to meet pre-defined, western orientated development goals, thus failing to engage with religion on its own terms and treating it in an instrumental way¹⁵. On the other end of the scale, religion can be reduced to only the ‘cultural’ – while religion certainly encompasses all of the features of Tylor’s¹⁶ definition of culture: knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws and customs, for many members of religious traditions this serves to diminish religion to something ‘worldly’.

This is, by nature of a brief introduction, a broad brush of development and religion, and it is not to say that there are not some very innovative and important projects that transcend these issues. However, while I have been encouraged by the attempt to engage with religion

emerging within the field of development, I feel that it still has some way to go. From my own post-development standpoint, the resurgence of religion in development feels like it contains the potential to create promising spaces for an authentic and productive two-way conversation with religion, but this has yet to be realised.

However, while I consider the recent shift in development literature and practice as a promising extension to development thinking, and one that warrants more investigation, I am also cautious of finding an answer to the issues of secularism through merely bringing religion ‘back in’ (to development). This is because I see religion as an inseparable part of the secularism discourse, as I will go on to explain in the next section. For me, to limit addressing the problems of secularism through the sanctioning of faith-based development NGOs and the co-opting of religious leaders as development partners, while of some value, neglects to address the issues created through the discursive work of the secular-religion dichotomy.

SECULARISM AND RELIGION

Secularism and religion are often set up against each other, as if they were oppositional terms, however this hides their intrinsic interconnectedness and shared trajectories. There is no simple choice between secularism or religion, as some commentators like to imagine, often branding critiques of secularism as ‘pro’ religion. Instead of understanding things as secular or religious it is important to recognise that there are integral to each other, that, as Asad asserts, ‘although religion is regarded as alien to the secular, the latter is also seen to have generated religion’¹⁷. The existence of something called religion is such a powerful idea that it is often seen as natural and obvious, however there is nothing natural about religion. A growing number of scholars are now interrogating the seemingly neutral construction of distinct ‘world religions’ with universalised collections of beliefs and practices, with Wilfred Cantwell Smith¹⁸ problematising the reification of religion as early as 1962, and contemporary scholars from

across the Humanities and social sciences such as Asad¹⁹ (anthropology) and Thomas²⁰ (International Relations) contributing to the critique of the world religions paradigm.

Dubuisson argues that ‘Just like the notion itself, the most general questions concerning religion, its nature and definition, its origins or expressions, were born in the West. From there, they were transferred, much later at the cost of daring generalisations, to all other cultures, however remotely prehistoric or exotic’²¹. This is not to say that the West is unique in the conceptualisation of gods or spirits, which inform ethical and moral beliefs, ritual and social norms, but instead Dubuisson is claiming that the West is unique in its invention of an autonomous singular complex called ‘religion’. Dubuisson makes the case that through the practice of Western Christian apologetics the naming and defining of Christianity as a universalised set of beliefs, practices and ethics saw the birth of the religious phenomenon. From this Western Christian concept, a definitive collection of beliefs which make up a religion was abstracted and universalised to compare and categorise other beliefs and practices as ‘religions’. The lack of correlation between Western Christian constellations of belief did not detract from the seductive power of the idea of ‘religion’ and its imposition.

Asad²² employs a genealogical method to trace the origins of religion, for which there is no transhistorical definition. Locating the invention of religion in its current form as a Western and post-reformation (Christian) concept, it is tied up in definitions of the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ and there can be no separation of the two realms. From the genealogical approach adopted by Asad, the idea of secularism as a passive concept is undone, and instead we can see that it is not neutral but has positive attributes that have been constructed. Secularism, therefore, is not a neutral or simple concept, and has many different meanings to different actors with

different agendas, from acting as the protector of people of all faiths and none through the preservation of public space as neutral, to varying degrees of anti-religious and atheistic sentiment. As Calhoun et al reminds us:

Although secularism is often defined negatively – as what is left after religion fades – it is not in itself neutral. Secularism should be seen as a presence. It is something, and it is therefore in need of elaboration and understanding. Whether it is seen as an ideology, a worldview, a stance toward religion, a constitutional framework, or simply an aspect of some other project – of science or a particular philosophical system – secularism is, rather than merely the absence of religion, something we need to think through.²³

The fashioning of the religious and the secular and the separating off of the two, usually to mean the partitioning off of religion in public spaces (legislative, governance, etc.), Asad²⁴ argues, performs the political function of disciplining religions and bringing them under the control of the nation-state. By defining religion in opposition to the secular it is individualised and privatised, and consequently any manifestation of religion that does not restrain itself to its private sphere can be defined as a problem and legitimately sanctioned. Asad applies this account to explain how the West thinks about Islam, which is considered as problematic and threatening because of Western held prejudices about what religion is and should be.

Furthermore, the secular-religious (non)partition imposed on many religions has also been internalised and, arguably, distorted how they understand themselves. The phenomenon of fundamentalism, prevalent in all ‘world religions’ could arguably be related to secularism – where the distinction between ‘objective reason’ and religious belief has created on one side of

the coin the liberal project which promotes tolerance and multiculturalism (of secular compliant communities), while fundamentalism forms the other side. The ‘objective reason’ and rationalism that distinguishes the secular from the religious elevates the key secular value of instrumental rationality. As Appleby argues

“‘fundamentalism’ is a thoroughly modern phenomenon: these would-be defenders of the traditional religion approach the scriptures and traditions as an architect reads a blueprint or an engineer scans his toolkit... they grow impatient and angry with mere traditionalists , who insist on disciplining themselves to the tradition as an organic, mysterious, nonlinear, irreducible, lifegiving whole’²⁵.

Here we see how liberalism and fundamentalism are both born of an enlightenment reading of the worlds they inhabit, which demote the non-scientific (mystic, philosophical, ethical etc.) in preference of instrumentalism and rationality – including to the literal reading of sacred texts which are turned into how-to-guides. As Appleby reminds us ‘fundamentalists, like other religious and secular thinkers, are engaged in negotiating the boundaries between the interpenetration of the religious and the secular’²⁶ and that ‘going beyond the extant literature of fundamentalism, one would argue in this vein that the fundamentalist dance with secularity is neither merely a reaction against the secularizing trends of the age nor even an awkward mimesis of the secular enemy’²⁷

MINDANAO: A NON-SECULAR CONTEXT

I now turn to my research context of Mindanao. My research took place over 2009-2010, where I was hosted by a Christian NGO called Malikha Bridge (pseudonym) and conducted a multi-sited ethnography, participating in their organisation and, separately, in the daily lives of Muslim communities where they worked. Adopting a poststructural ethnographic approach,

drawing on the works of Clifford²⁸ and Lather²⁹, my research does not claim to be systematic or representative, but instead offers metaphor and partial truths in an attempt to evoke. However, it should be noted that metaphor here does not mean merely illustrative in this case. It is more a recognition that ethnography cannot provide a transparent representation of a said 'original' and to hold the process of mediation in sharp focus. The aim of my research was to explore practices of translating peace and local peace knowledges³⁰.

The problematic categorisation of western religion/secularism onto non-western societies and the daring generalisations it accomplishes³¹ are apparent in my research context of Mindanao. This context is also, like many developing contexts, typically non-secular. Like the Asian contexts explored by Madsen³² Mindanao, and the Philippines overall, also does not neatly fit into the categorisation of 'secular'. Applying Madsen's measure of sizing up countries against Taylor's³³ three meanings of secularism, we can see that Mindanao does not easily 'measure up', where spiritual and religious affiliations infiltrate much of what would be considered the public sphere; the institutionalisation of religious practices makes a simple association of individual action to a given individual belief more difficult; and atheism is still a challenging idea.

In this overtly religious context, the site of a long-running, protracted armed conflict framed around religion and where local understandings of peace were equally framed by religion, a variety of donor and development agencies work in, on and around the conflict. These include both Muslim and Christian missionaries, supported by global networks of churches and mosques typically donating to evangelism by development; the usual international

development agencies such as USAID, Oxfam and UNICEF; and small local NGOs supported by state and international donors emerging from a burgeoning civil society sector.

A POSTSECULAR RESPONSE

A postsecular approach works to address the issues created through the discursive work of the secular-religion dichotomy, evoking Lefort's warning 'that any society which forgets its religious basis is labouring under the illusion of pure self-immanence'³⁴. However, as Calhoun et al³⁵ argue, the severing of the religious from society is just what we have done in the contemporary academy. In the field of International Relations 'the peace of Westphalia gave the field... a presumption of the adequacy of "secular" understanding. That this was rooted in a mythic understanding, rather than a clear historical appreciation of the relationship of states to religion in and after 1648, didn't reduce its power'³⁶. Furthermore, the enlightenment myth of differentiating between pure reason and religion arguably informed the more recent separation of the social sciences from the humanities, with social sciences in pursuit of scientific 'objectivity' and its accompanied status. However, the prominence of religion in the social, from shaping our values, to influencing our laws, to informing our art and architecture, to even the very notion of secularism itself, makes this break untenable, as we are now more widely beginning to realise in our current 'resurgence of religion'. Now, therefore, the humanities, with its knowledge of religion and philosophy, appear to offer social science an important theoretical resource as we think about development and conflict.

The postsecular, like the secular, has different understandings and meanings ascribed to in by different actors³⁷. I will, therefore, outline my understanding and use of the term postsecular. For me, the use of the prefix 'post' suggests something of the deconstructive/reconstructive, and so works to undermine the certainty in strong, and consequently inherently violent,

discourses. In what follows, this undermining of certainty will be a particular focus of the possible postsecular approach of ‘journeying with’. The eroding of strong truths and the challenging of certainty that the deconstructive tendency opens up means that, as according to Derrida, ‘at the same time that it starts something new, it also continues something, is true to the memory of its past, to a heritage’³⁸. A postsecular approach therefore, should not simply be cast as ‘anti-secular’ or ‘pro-religion’ but instead, like justice, will ‘reinvent it in the reaffirmation and the new and free confirmation of its principle’³⁹ reimagining a future that goes beyond the limitations of these current understandings. Of particular influence in my understanding and use of postsecularism is the work of Caputo⁴⁰.

Caputo uses Derrida’s philosophy to open up the future to the ‘to come’ of the event. In *The Weakness of God* Caputo engages with the messianic, vocative and promissory language of Derrida’s work and combines it with the resources of theology to explore the idea of an impossible religion⁴¹. Drawing on *différance* Caputo emphasises the space between the signifier, or the name of God, and the event God. Through stressing the impossibility of containing God in the present Caputo opens up the name of God to translation, facilitating the becoming of, citing Derrida, the ‘absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart’⁴². By denying God the prestige of language, history and culture Caputo orientates uncertainty in weakness, however this weakness is not to be viewed negatively but through resisting the presence of language it upholds an irreducibility that opens it up to the promise of the future.

For Caputo:

to this end without end, and end out of sight, we run a line to Derrida, when he says, in speaking of the “promise” that is inscribed in language, that this is what is called God in theology. For Derrida, the event of the promise, the call of what is “to come”, is

inscribed in the name of God, but not only there, for Derrida could say whatever he has to say without the benefit of this name, because this name is endlessly translatable into other names, like justice or the gift, all of which hold out the promise of something to come⁴³.

Here the name of God should not be understood as a proper noun, whose borders are to be policed rigorously but an open-ended promise in the processes of translation.

In the remainder of this paper I explore how the notion of ‘journeying with’ encountered in my field work in Mindanao is premised on such a weak understanding of ‘god’ and raises a praxis of doubt and uncertainty which might provide a postsecular practice to address some of the development dilemmas around conflict, development and religion.

A postsecular approach to development in Mindanao

In this section I will draw on the previous thumbnail introduction to the conceptual issues around secularism to illustrate how a postsecular approach can inform a (post)development practice, with specific reference to the practice of journeying with in Mindanao.

It is important to stress at this point that while I am using the term ‘postsecular’ to describe and frame my understanding of what follows, this is my own reading of the situation, and does not necessarily reflect the perspective of my research participants. However, in e-mail conversation with the director of Malikha Bridge, he told me that he personally did not object to my poststructural readings. Some of the Malikha Bridge’s members have revealed an affiliation with poststructuralism and postmodern theology to me, including the work of Derrida and

Caputo, however other members did not directly relate to this terminology, and neither did the Muslim communities where the NGO worked. Furthermore, it is not my intention to suggest that Mindanao is postsecular. Just as the term 'secular' is problematic when exported to non-western contexts, I acknowledge the limitations of the term postsecular and therefore use it metaphorically in relation to my research context, a small space created by Malikha Bridge.

In Mindanao I was hosted by a Christian NGO called Malikha Bridge that partnered with Muslim communities in Mindanao to, together, work on development projects. During the time of my data collection the NGO identified as a (protestant) missionary organisation within a wider international umbrella missionary organisation, and were a small team of ten which included both non-Filipino and Filipino members and partnered with teams of volunteers across five Muslim communities (these numbers fluctuate). (After my period of field research Malikha Bridge abandoned the missionary identity, having 'trouble' reconciling their approach to their umbrella missionary organisation. The organisation is still strongly rooted in a Christian identity, and retains her Christian character, however diverges from missionary organisations in that it does not compel its members to 'convert'. While Malikha Bridge did actively resisted and subvert the pressure to convert while I was with them this shift represents the tangible movement of their journey and the opening of a 'theological playground'). The endeavour to partner together was not only orientated around community development projects, but also through the notion of journeying with, a phrase Malikha Bridge used to describe the shared philosophical/theological project for partners (Muslim and Christian) to nourish each other's faiths.

The communities were deeply political, religious and ideological in a context of contestational politics amidst at the time of my field trip an armed conflict. This was clearly acknowledged by Malikha Bridge who specifically sought to challenge structural and cultural violence and actively advocate on their behalf. Recognition of religious identity beyond the comfort of passive liberal religious traditions but in recognition of its political and ideological components, and the deliberate practice to stimulate and nourish faith through the notion of journeying with, go far beyond a secular development approach and the passive faiths tolerated in many FBOs. And yet the journeying with fostered a two-way conversation premised on learning from the other that disturbed and weakened any entrenched, reified and strong notion of religion, Islam or Christianity. The practice of journeying with both seriously engages with religion on its terms while simultaneously resisting reified and strong religious discourses, and it is in these two characteristics that I locate the practice of journeying with as possibly postsecular.

From a development perspective, this postsecular practice achieves four important roles: 1. it challenges the normative development discourse; 2. it broadens the role of faith beyond instrumental and narrow definitions; 3. it challenges the reification of religion that can fuel conflict; 4. it produces positive discursive and material change in the development of communities.

Challenging the normative development discourse

As Jones and Petersen point out in their review of the recent work on religion and development, there is a problematic way that normative development discourses assume that ‘there is something called *secular* development which is *distant* from the *religious idiom*’⁴⁴. Here mainstream development is seen as concerned with economic growth measured in material benefits and GDP per capita, while religious development projects offer alternative, sometimes

radical, aspirations. The dichotomy created by this perception that religiously informed development focus on traditions and indigenous values, while mainstream development focuses on material outcomes is problematized by a postsecular approach. That religions have a rich heritage in the development of scientific knowledge, e.g. the Islamic/scientific method developed in the Islamic golden age between the 8th-16th centuries and the Pontifical Academy of Sciences established Pope Pius XI in 1936, seems lost in this traditional v modern partition.

In Mindanao the process of journeying with is based on a relational ethic between different groups and communities, most noticeably Christian and Muslim. The aim to build reciprocal relationships has required an exploration of what this might mean in their context, where traditionally there is a deep rooted suspicion of the other. Journeying with has required the deliberate practice of respect for each other's culture and religion and carefully listening to other perspectives and experiences in order to learn from them. From religious perspectives within the different communities it became clear that in a non-secular context a 'Godly' person extends not only to what in the west we might consider the soul or 'spiritual' element of humanity, but to the whole person including their dignity and physical and material welfare. Here the postsecular frame combines the presumed secular and the presumed religious concerns. The outcome has been the development of inter-related practices that would be traditionally seen as either traditional development projects; cultural affirmation and advocacy; or peacebuilding/peace education.

The objective to build relationships makes Malikha Bridge a beautifully difficult NGO to categorise. Their commitment to 'peace' and 'forgiveness' affiliates them with the peace-building NGOs of Mindanao, while their Christian nature and the interfaith dialogue their work facilitates position them as missionaries. Furthermore, their

understanding of peace and ‘Godly transformation’ informs a holistic perspective where both ‘Godly’ and ‘peace’ have something to do with the dignity and welfare of the person, including their right to a livelihood, resulting in development-orientated practices and making them look like a development NGO”⁴⁵

As these different aspects inform and connect each other in multiple ways and layers the dichotomy between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’; mainstream development and indigenous concerns; secular and religious is eroded, as is a silo approach to the development aim to increase social wellbeing. Instead of positioning Muslim communities of Mindanao as inferior, residual, non-productive and ignorant localities, as De Sousa Santos argues are created through the technocratic solutions such as those found in western scientific and development discourses⁴⁶, here we find the productive combination of indigenous and cultural values and wisdom with material and technical interventions to meet the needs of the whole person/community in an enriching way.

The role of faith beyond the instrumental

The practice of journeying with is the intentional partnership across diverse groups in the shared philosophical/theological project to nourish each other’s faiths (Muslim and Christian). Because faith/religion in a non-secular context encompasses more than in Western traditions, for example something that is deemed secular in the West will be considered a variation of the spiritual, the shared theological project is indiscriminate from the community development projects that it yields and through which further exploration is orientated around.

Malikha Bridge anticipate that ‘As we hope the communities we serve are transformed by our obedience to the message of the Gospel, we want to be transformed by the manner in which

the local community responds to the same Godly message' (Website). This statement reveals a commitment to nurturing a vibrant faith without seeking to define what faith should look like, establishing a two-way conversation between themselves (as Christians) and the Communities they engage with (Muslims) to nourish each other's faiths – to journey with.

A non-entrenched/weak religious tradition can be glimpsed in some of the more mystic traditions such as the Via Negativa and Sufism. However, for those of us more familiar with dogmatic religion, doubt or uncertainty may seem like a quite alien component of religion. However, the certainty we find in strong varieties of religion are arguably the consequences of modernity, where the scriptures are read with a secular value of instrumental rationality, skipping over the more organic, mysterious, nonlinear, irreducible, traditions⁴⁷. Doubt and uncertainty is an important part of faith, and these principles found in the mystic traditions are being revisited in recent work on postmodern theology. The recent resurgence and modification of this mystic tradition is captured in pop lit books for Christians on the emerging church such as *How (not to speak of God)* by Rollins. Here we find a theology which gives up on making objective statements about God and instead raises doubt as a religious virtue, where 'revelation, far from being the opposite of concealment, has concealment built into its very heart'⁴⁸, undermining the idea that we can 'know' God. And so a picture starts to build-up of faith that destabilises fixed and concrete truths.

Malika Bridge provided a space for doubt, which is interpreted as an opening, which is important to the idea of journeying with. Through resisting the reification of religion, but instead dwelling in its weakness Malikha Bridge are enabled to journeying with their Muslim fiends - if every member of Malikha Bridge 'knew' everything it would not be possible for

them to journey with their partners in Muslim communities, they would instead be leading, silencing, bringing them around to their way of thinking, instead of translation there would be colonisation, and visa versa. Here we see the continuation of what Nancy⁴⁹ identifies as the longest-standing and deepest Christian traditions – the act of self-surpassing. And it is this religious heritage and intentional theological project that enriches the wellbeing of the partners in a holistic way, not to draw them into particular development projects/paradigms but in the radical hope found at the core of development aspirations, echoing McKinnon’s proclamation that ‘development is a project of hope’⁵⁰.

Two of the NGO workers shared how this small community of like-minded thinkers (their Christian NGO team) had helped them to examine their faith more and how they are still struggling and learning and questioning. It is important to note here that Malikha Bridge is not a homogenous team, that there were wide variations on faith and doubt. However, I still contend that relative to the strong Christianity traditionally associated with protestant missionary organisations their faith might be, rather than an exclusive ‘cannon of truth’ that silences alternatives, that from which is born an uncertain, promissory compelling that celebrates a fluidity and helps to translate peace. And while I wish to uphold the heterogeneity of the group I do feel that I catch glimpses of such a type of faith: a glance at a couple of bookshelves reveal the well-worn covers of a Rollins’ book in one household, and several copies of books by Caputo in another. In a class that Malikha Bridge’s director leads at the Catholic college he teaches the students that God is just a symbol, a further sighting. Another Malikha Bridge member’s continued searching and questioning reveals glimpses of a faith that, although not informed by academic study and reading of philosophy, instinctively journeys. Even the most theologically convinced team members displayed glimpses of glimpses of

uncertainty. One of the more convinced members of Malikha Bridge tells me about her faith in terms of ‘believing in things hoped for’, deliberately rousing Hebrews 11:1: ‘Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see’, but then she goes on, rather unusually for this well-worn quote, to invert the logic, to emphasise the ‘hoped for’ over the ‘sure of’, her theological conservatism a little out of joint, siding her with Nietzsche’s philosophers of the perhaps⁵¹.

A praxis of ‘faith as uncertainty’ or of doubt, is the key to enabling Malikha Bridge to ‘journeying with’ with their Muslim fiends. This praxis shows a good resemblance to the work of Caputo on *Religion without Religion* and *The Weakness of God*. For Caputo ‘Derrida is not thinking in Greco-ontological terms of a paradigm shift in understanding, but of as more Jewish, more Levinasian theo-political alterity that shatters understanding, that underlies the saliency of the incomprehensible, something we confess we do not understand’⁵². In Malikha Bridge’s stories it appears that religion plays an important role in destabilising concrete and fixed accounts.

As much as it may be convenient to ignore the religious nature of Malikha Bridge, to side-step it as an issue of group identity rather than group practice, or to reduce it to a pragmatic means of delivering development projects, the religious nature of the group is the catalyst for the journey. Malikha Bridge ‘journey with’ their Muslim brothers and sisters in faith, toward a peaceful future that none of them can define or reduce to the present. Malikha Bridge’s vision statement talks about ‘Godly transformations’ but there is no clearly defined set of objectives that define what this means, it is an open-ended idea of what God and Godly means. At a meeting introducing Malikha Bridge to new contacts a Muslim partner shares a story about

Malikha Bridge members helping a teenager off drugs and back to regular attendance at his local Mosque as an example of what ‘Godly transformation’ means. This story speaks of the multiplicity of God and faith – the boy is not encouraged to convert or attend church as one might expect from a ‘Christian missionary’ - and of its on-going nature, the boy is encouraged to attend mosque regularly to further his journey. The multiplicity and open-endedness of a journey is not smothered or denied by faith, but it is celebrated by it.

Challenging the reification of religion

As a Christian NGO Malikha Bridge did not shy away from a positioning as missionaries during my field work, however their understanding of religion also undermines a traditional understanding of the term ‘missionary’ as they claimed not to have an objective for conversion, leading to their eventual transition away from this identity altogether. Through the notion of journeying with, and learning from local Muslim communities in order to nourish their own faiths, they instead challenge the reification of religion.

As discussed in the previous section the role of a non-entrenched/weak religion is important to enable this philosophical project. This allows for the acknowledgment of the debt of shared predecessors’ (prophets, scholars and theologians) influence and wisdom, particularly in this case of partnering across Muslim and Christians in shaping the Abrahamic faiths. While for those adhering to a strong, reified view of Christianity or Islam this would be dismissed as syncretism, such a criticism is born out of a world religions paradigm that insists on the production of world religions which can be categorised, defined, measured and compared. This perception has already been problematised in the introductory sections of this paper, and a postsecular view questions such a conceptualisation that constructs religious boundaries and prevents the adoption of different spiritual customs and practices across ‘religions’.

However, it is important here to also underscore an important dilemma in weakening religion – that the weakening of a reified religion should not lead to its complete expiration. The challenging of the reification of religion is not to undermine religious practices in a multicultural melting pot. As Asad argues with Muslims in Europe, Enlightenment claims to universality work to disseminate the ‘idea that people’s historical experience is inessential to them, that it can be shed at will’ instead ‘Muslims, as members of the abstract category “humans,” can be assimilated or (as some recent theorists have put it) “translated” into a global (“European”) civilization once they have divested themselves of what many of them regard (mistakenly) as essential to themselves’⁵³. A lesson from this example is that for the authentic weakening of entrenched discourses to enable journeying with, that weakening should not be mistaken for de-essentialising. This reminds us that the deconstructive urge of postsecularism retains within it the preserve of a heritage, that Derrida reminds us we must ‘reinvent it [in this case a religion, not justice] in the *reaffirmation* and the new and free confirmation of *its principle*’⁵⁴. Conversely, also this underscores an important dilemma in weakening religion as this de-essentialising of Islam in this European example came arguably from a weakening of Christianity. In this paper I argue for the benefits of a postsecular disturbance of entrenched discourses and the weakening of religion as a (post)development practice. To do this we must guard against the innovative reproduction of old determinants in the creative space. And here lies the peril of a weakening practice, because some types of weakening gather strength. For example, in Vattimo’s weak thought we find a theory which undermines the authoritarianism and dogma of Christianity through the ‘emptying’ (kenosis) of God. However, this weakness simultaneously privileges Christianity in that while it weakens Christianity through the ‘transcription’ (saeculum) of Judaeo-Christian values into history, its ideals and values no

longer belong to a religious group, but are universal ‘secular’ values⁵⁵ – so that the weakening of Christianity (secularism) become its strength (universality). Here secular ideas such as representational democracy and individual human rights are no longer a unilateral, Judeo-Christian values, but are universalized as natural, global values. In this example we see the process of taking the essence of Christianity and universalising it. Conversely, this also works to de-essentialise all other religions.

If journeying with can be understood as a postsecular practice then Muslims and Christians, respectively, will learn from each other while retaining something of the essence of their religion, albeit in a new way. What emerges when you relate this to the work of Malikha Bridge is the emergence of a mixed picture: Muslim partners are reading the bible and Malikha bridge is facilitating bible translations; Muslims are attending biblical and theological studies; and some have developed a faith in Isa al Masih (Jesus Christ) and do ‘dawah’(dialogue about this) among their communities. However, all this is done from the perspective of Islam: Jesus is referenced only from sources permissible in Islam; the Christian notion of a ‘relationship’ with God is entirely stripped out as this is a foreign concept in Islam; the Bible is translated as part of the Kitab, which includes the Taurat (Torah), Zabur (Wisdom of the prophets), Injil (the Gospels) and the Qur ’an; while all of these activities are organised completely under local Islamic leadership. Conversely some of the Christians in Malikha Bridge have incorporated lessons from their Muslim friends. While some Muslim partners now consider the words of Jesus more carefully, a member of Malikha Bridge in interview with me questioned the importance of Jesus in her Christian faith. Furthermore, some of the men in Malikha Bridge go to Mosque with their Muslim brothers on Friday and pray Muslim prayers together. However, the two-way learning does not seem balanced with Muslim communities appearing

to hybridise more, and only time will tell if this is an authentic, two-way journey. However, what may be very relevant here is the journey Malikha Bridge has made away from their identity as missionaries, which would indicate that this is a two-way relationship, and that their shift is a response to their relationship with their Muslim friends which made their position as missionaries untenable in light of the growing mutuality and reciprocity.

Through challenging the reification of religion in Mindanao journeying with has an important part to play in peacebuilding in the conflict affected areas. While it would be overly simplistic to cast the Mindanao conflict as solely a religious conflict the conflict is couched in religious terms and religion is an important aspect. In other contexts, we have seen how reified religious ideals have led to violence and conflict as sectarian groups aim to purge what they perceive as syncretic influences from their one, true religion. Through the weakening of religion, the threat of difference is diminished and diversity accepted. Furthermore, the space allowed for doubt challenges the modernist 'toolkit' approach arguably fuelling violent fundamentalism (not the same thing as fundamentalism) and re-evokes organic, mysterious, and irreducible disciplines of faith. As the 'war on terror' has refocused foreign policy on to religion, and consequently aid and development budgets, journeying with offers a postsecular alternative to engaging with religion beyond the arguably failing and alienating practices of the securitisation of aid policies.

Discursive and material change

The final aspect that I have identified in facilitating the postsecular act of journeying with is material change. This is not just a discursive exercise, journeying with is also concerned with material change. Faith, as it is practiced here, is not just the catalyst or motivation by which to deliver a 'solution', faith is the work itself (rousing James 2 v 17). The lack of a separation between the secular and religious informs a view where everything is a variation of the spiritual.

This informs a holistic perspective where the dignity and welfare of a person is intrinsically related to the idea of ‘Godly’, undermining a false separation between the ‘religious’ and ‘worldly’ or material. It is not ‘Godly’ to live in poverty, the degradation of discrimination does not reflect the image of God each person was created in. In the secular/religious (non)partition the ‘Godly’ is something celestial and other worldly, however in postsecularism these are not separate realms Bloch’s exploration of the work of religion in the utopian function is insightful here. As Moylan explains, Bloch traced the historical movement of God from an astral and removed deity to one engaged in the plight of the world and humanity⁵⁶. This is particularly illustrated in Christianity where the early God of Abraham is remote, by the time of Moses God establishes a contract with his people, and then later through Jesus comes to dwell with us. In the figure of Jesus Bloch sees the liberation of the religious space where the heavenly is now worldly, where religion is no longer about the heavens but about humanity itself: ‘the glory of God becomes that of the redeemed community and of its place’⁵⁷.

Liberation theology appropriated Bloch’s *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* to find an alternative path between secular Marxism and Bloch’s open-ended future and the hope it contains. Green posits that his work provided the “constructive and creative reappropriation of the kernel of religious experience itself”⁵⁸, and this can be seen in the theological utopias that were influenced by Bloch where the *Novuum* or *front* of religion – the most forward animated time – is a meta-religious realm where hope is preserved yet connected to the Real-Possible. As Moylan points out “For secular theology... Bloch helps to locate the space represented by the figure of God at the horizon of the future that challenges the secular society not to be content with the false promises of its apparently fulfilling present”⁵⁹. The bringing together of religious hope and

human emancipation in liberation theology is arguably an example of the “transcendent without transcendence”⁶⁰.

I introduce Bloch cautiously. His theory of concrete utopia and materialist foundation make an obscure companion to the discursive understanding of postsecularism found in the perspectives of Derrida and Caputo. Also, while I see a resonance between postsecularism and the approaches of Malikha Bridge in some of their bookshelves and in our conversations, obvious connections to Bloch appear absent. Furthermore, while Malikha Bridge possess an uncertain faith they still identify very strongly as Christians and would reject the messianic atheism that Bloch’s mapping of the increasing humanization of religion leads. However, as Levitas reminds us ‘with no other writer is the rejection of form as a defining characteristic of utopia as consistent and explicit as it is with Bloch’⁶¹, while Moylan warns us to “resist all efforts to contain its potentially unbound hope in any hypostatized definition”⁶². It is in the openness and undecidability found in Bloch’s work on utopia that I choose to find crossover with the uncertainty and irreducibility of Derrida. Furthermore, Bloch’s privileging of the religious space for its utopian function has found ‘its deepest and most persistent influence in those religious circles which sought to confront situation of suffering and political struggle in Latin America and in other Third World locations such as South Africa, South Korea, and the Philippines’⁶³. Here the connection to Bloch that appeared absent before becomes a little more apparent, in that liberation theology resonates with an approach that sees the challenging of social injustice and inequitable political structures as an integral part of faith.

Malikha Bridge Partner with their communities not only on their philosophical/theological project to nourish each other’s faiths, but also in community development projects, both of them inextricably tied together. Through these projects which include, for example, the

construction of preschools, water projects and communal toilets⁶⁴, Malikha Bridge work towards addressing the material needs of the communities.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have explored how one NGO in Mindanao has created a space where faith is taken seriously on its own terms and is respected in public discourses. However, this space simultaneously undermines and deconstructs a reified and strong notion of religion that polices boundaries of the religion or the public space. It is in the coming together of these characteristics that I glimpse a possibility of the postsecular. What appears to be important in the particular practice of this NGO is the doubt characteristic of mystic traditions, renewed in a contemporary setting. In their praxis of doubt and uncertainty Malikha Bridge we find have found an approach that neither reifies religion nor relegates it to the private sphere. Instead it challenges the notion that there are separate religious and rational components of a person, or religious and worldly concerns. It also celebrates faith and ‘gets involved’ with it on its own terms, actively rousing and evoking its character, while simultaneously it protects people of faith from entrenched and strong reified notions of religion that erode the potential messianic ‘to come’ through a violence of closure. These practices offer important lessons for the development community and scholars, and so some way to answering Jones and Petersen’s⁶⁵ critique that much of the work on religion and development in Instrumental, narrow and normative. It does this through broadening faith beyond an instrumental and narrow understanding and remit; challenging normative development discourses, weakening religion, but not secularising it and retaining its heritage but in a new way; and creating positive discursive and material change in the development of communities.

This paper has explored a practice that touches on many current 'development' issues and debates: peacebuilding, security, material change (development), the political (Lefort), grassroots engagement and the religious turn. While this paper has been largely theoretical it has applied its ideas to practice, and in this hopes to evoke potential lessons and insight for development practitioners to adopt a new approach to the spiritual that replaces the need to silence, regulate, convert, colonise, or define oneself against the other.

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Note on Contributor

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Notes

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- ¹ West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, cited in Mendieta and Vanantwerpen *The Power of religion in the public sphere*: 10
- ² Tomalin, *Religions and Development*
- ³ Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars*; and Novelli 'The New Geopolitics of Educational Aid'
- ⁴ Jones and Peterson, 'Instrumental, Narrow, Normative'
- ⁵ Stiglitz, 'Information and the Change in the Paradigm in Economics': 529
- ⁶ Eade, *Development and culture*: ix, cited in Tomalin *Religions and Development*: 1.
- ⁷ De Sousa Santos, *The World Social Forum*: 239
- ⁸ Clarke, 'Faith matters: Faith-based organisations'
- ⁹ compiled from Tomalin, *Religions and Development*
- ¹⁰ Jones and Petersen, 'Instrumental, Narrow, Normative'
- ¹¹ Tomalin, *Religions and Development*
- ¹² Clarke, *Faith based organisations and International development*
- ¹³ Deneulin and Bano, *Religion in Development*
- ¹⁴ Jones and Peterson, 'Instrumental, Narrow, Normative'
- ¹⁵ Tomalin, *Religions and Development*; and Jones and Petersen, 'Instrumental, Narrow, Normative'
- ¹⁶ Tylor, *Religion in primitive culture*
- ¹⁷ Asad, *Formations of the secular*: 193
- ¹⁸ Smith, *The meaning and end of religion* cited in Tomalin, *Religions and Development*: 67
- ¹⁹ Asad, *Formations of the secular*
- ²⁰ Thomas, *The global resurgence of religion*
- ²¹ Dubusison, *The western construction of religion*: 9
- ²² Asad, *Formations of the secular*

- ²³ Calhoun et al, Rethinking secularism: 5
- ²⁴ Asad, Formations of the secular
- ²⁵ Appleby, 'Rethinking Fundamentalism in a secular age': 213
- ²⁶ Ibid: 239
- ²⁷ Ibid: 244
- ²⁸ Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Allegory'
- ²⁹ Lather, Getting Lost
- ³⁰ Horner, 'Peace as an event, peace as utopia'
- ³¹ Dubuisson, The western construction of religion
- ³² Madsen, 'Secularism, religious change and social conflict in Asia'
- ³³ Taylor, A Secular Age
- ³⁴ Lefort, 'The permanence of the Theological-political, cited in Harbermas "'The political"'':
16
- ³⁵ Calhoun et al, Rethinking secularism
- ³⁶ Ibid: 4
- ³⁷ For a more extensive overview of secularization theories see Cannell, 'The anthropology of
secularism'
- ³⁸ Derrida and Caputo, Deconstruction in a Nutshell: 6
- ³⁹ Derrida, 'Force of Law': 23
- ⁴⁰ Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*; and Caputo, *The weakness of
God*
- ⁴¹ Caputo, The weakness of God
- ⁴² Derrida, Specters of Marx: 81
- ⁴³ Caputo, The weakness of God: 93).
- ⁴⁴ Jones and Petersen, 'Instrumental, Narrow, Normative': 1299 emphasis in original text.

- ⁴⁶ De Sousa Santos, *The World Social Forum*: 239
- ⁴⁷ Appleby, 'Rethinking Fundamentalism in a secular age'
- ⁴⁸ Rollins, How (not) to Speak of God: 16
- ⁴⁹ Nancy, Dis-enclosure
- ⁵⁰ McKinnon, 'Postdevelopment, Professionalism, and the Politics of Participation': 772.
- ⁵¹ Such as described by Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*
- ⁵² Ibid 74.
- ⁵³ Asad, Formations of the secular: 169.
- ⁵⁴ Derrida, *Force of Law*: 23, emphasis added
- ⁵⁵ Vattimo, After Christianity
- ⁵⁶ Moylan, 'Bloch against Bloch'
- ⁵⁷ Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*: 1,274, cited in Moylan, 'Bloch against Bloch': 98).
- ⁵⁸ Green, 'Blochs revision of atheism': 128
- ⁵⁹ Moylan, 'Bloch against Bloch': 101.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid 146
- ⁶¹ Levitas, The Concept of Utopia: 101
- ⁶² Moylan, 'Bloch against Bloch': 115
- ⁶³ ibid: 102.
- ⁶⁴ Horner, 'Networking resources, owning productivity'
- ⁶⁵ Jones and Petersen, 'Instrumental, Narrow, Normative'

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