

A Case for Religion in Development

Michael David Harvey

Religious NGOs (RNGOs) are occasionally viewed with suspicion by secular aid theorists and practitioners. This partly explains the relative exclusion of religion from development discourse; 'For too long, the spiritual growth of people and the study and practice of development have been isolated from one another.' However, a number of significant works represent recent attempts to end the isolation. This article offers an introductory defence of religion's rightful place in development.

One or more red flags might be raised among development professionals when it comes to religion. Some do not object to the existence of RNGOs *per se*, but question whether they should receive taxpayer-funded government assistance, especially if their attention on psycho-spiritual issues detracts from more 'tangible' outcomes. Criticism of RNGOs is probably justified when they become aggressively evangelistic, using the label 'development work' merely as a cover for the primary purpose of making converts. But secularists also worry that RNGOs, if only by their presence, may (even indirectly) influence the traditional cultures and value systems.

It is possible to respond to such concerns on a number of fronts. First, it has been demonstrated that spiritual change *can* bring about tangible results. A Christian revival following a tragic 1976 earthquake in Guatemala was the catalyst for renewed economic growth, as indicated by a five-village study:

Converts spoke frequently of enjoying domestic tranquillity and [being more] optimistic...They also reported that decreased alcohol consumption freed up money for investment in better clothing, housing improvements, [etc].

In the 1930s and 1940s, a peaceful interpretation of Islamic faith was integral to the formation, among the generally-militant Pashtun people, of a non-violent army that built schools, improved sanitation, and peacefully resisted the British rule of India's Northwest Frontier.

In each case above, it was 'home-grown faith' of the people that sparked change and growth. However, on occasion outside beliefs are needed to counter destructive cultural practices. In Haiti in the 1970s, World Vision found that local midwives, to prevent evil spirits from entering a newborn, placed mud on the umbilical stump, causing high rates of tetanus. Secular explanations by development workers about hygiene 'fell on deaf ears' but subsequent teachings about God being more powerful than evil spirits finally convinced them to stop the practice.

More fundamentally, there is an increasing conviction that intangibles such as 'self-esteem' and 'self-respect' should belong to the very meaning of development. Religion is seen by RNGOs as key to improving those aspects, and at least is considered a bridge to establishing

'The vast majority [of our national colleagues and aid recipients] regard the spiritual realm as equally relevant ...To promote a secular approach ... would be an insult to them.' Indeed, former Iranian president Khatami criticised the West's notion of development, not because of its *Christian* values, but because of its *secular* values:

... the West is far from achieving true freedom. We [Muslims] want a system based on...high morality...to embark on moral and spiritual growth. This is true freedom...[but] if a people turn away from its [the West's] values...it focuses all of its vast capabilities to force them to surrender.

Thus, spirituality not only can lead to tangible development outcomes, but should be, according to some, a valid outcome in itself.

This does not mean, however, that 'religion in development' is without difficulties, dilemmas, and risks, and secular taxpayers have a right to question how their aid money is being used. Thus, RNGOs receiving government funding are (or should be) not only held to the same performance standards as secular NGOs, but are constrained by additional guidelines published by many bilateral aid agencies, such as NZAID.¹⁰ In one case I came across several years ago, a Philippine RNGO, which was receiving Voluntary Agency Support Scheme (VASS) funding through an Aotearoa New

Zealand Christian agency, decided to become much more proactively evangelistic, promoting their scheme in a way that implied Bible studies were compulsory for aid recipients. A field visit by the NZ-based agency and NZAID consultants discovered this practice, and thus VASS funding was terminated.

Many other cases and issues of the religion-development nexus, though, are more ambiguous. What exactly constitutes obtrusive proselytisation, and how should time spent on material and 'intangible' aid work be balanced? When an RNGO oversteps its bounds in a sensitive location, endangering *all* NGO work because of guilt-by-association, what should be the response of the aid community? Should an RNGO be held accountable if a convert of theirs is jailed or killed, or if religious conflict erupts? These questions require continued reflection among and between secular and religious development professionals .

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REFERENCES

- 1 Lynch, D. *Development Revealed*. September, 2003, p.1. (Available at www.asianreflection.com/developmentrevealed.shtml)
- 2 See e.g. Grey, S. 'When good people are not all they seem' *New Statesman* 24. November, 2003, p. 23.
- 3 Sherman, A. *The Soul of Development*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.13.
- 4 That is, what is now Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. Lynch, pp. 1-4
- 5 Tripp, L.. 'Gender and development from a Christian perspective: Experience from World Vision' *Gender and Development* 7(1), 1999 pp. 63-64.

6 See e.g. Narayan, D. with Patel, R., Schafft, K., Rademacher, A. & Koch-Schulte, S. *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, esp. p.31.

7 ...even if the beliefs of the RNGO and the local people are different.

8 Tripp, p. 63.

9 Khatami, M. *Islam, Dialogue and Civil Society*. Canberra: Australian National University, 2000, pp. 53-54; cf. pp.79-83.

10 NZAID. *VASS Handbook*. (Appendix 2) <http://www.nzaid.govt.nz/vass/docs/vass-handbook-part-f.pdf/>