

## Vox Pops: Religion and Spirituality in Development

1. How has evolving gender discourse impacted on religion and have these developments been positive?
2. Does it matter that many people within the development sector are motivated by religious beliefs, and/or to what extent should religious beliefs and assumptions inform development practice?
3. Can interfaith dialogue help us to overcome the barriers of religious intolerance and its offspring such as discrimination and violence? If so, how? not, why not?
4. In what ways can indigenous spiritual beliefs and systems of thought be applied in a contemporary development context?
5. Is the 'Clash of Civilisations' between the Christian world and the Muslim world a myth propagated by media and political interests?

*Anna Strelecek is an Anthropology and Sociology graduate from the University of London. She is currently living and working in New Zealand.*

1. I believe that the impact gender discourse will have on religion will vary greatly depending on the religion in question. However, as gender discourse strengthens with time and as it moves outside its western boundaries, it is increasingly challenging the traditional roles of women.

2. Development practice won't get anywhere unless it regards religion as an integral part of society and ideology. Nevertheless, development practice and its practitioners risk overlooking their own religious assumptions, if they do not examine themselves through the same lens, and unless they do so, they risk imposing their religious values as norms.

3. Interfaith dialogue is potentially the most powerful tool against religious intolerance, for two main reasons; First, because intolerance is mainly caused by ignorance and, second, because unless religious leaders are involved in the dialogue, religious intolerance will always find moral justification.

4. In all the ways possible! Development becomes colonialism if it doesn't understand, promote, and include indigenous beliefs in its projects. I am not a romantic; development has to help indigenous cultures adapt as painlessly and as powerfully as possible to the current state of the world. However, it must do so with respect for their belief systems and with their preservation as a goal.

5. The media and politics are big players in this clash; however, I wish it were that simple. Intolerance is growing in general as the world becomes smaller, and fundamentalism is increasingly becoming a calling in today's uncertain climate.

*Jason Symonds is a fairly recent graduate from the University of London in Anthropology and is currently working for a central government agency in Wellington.*

1. In recent times, it seems that religions have been severely challenged by evolving gender discourse, and other discourses for that matter, and their response has often revealed a stubborn tendency towards anachronism in the name of 'tradition'.

2. Religious doctrines often call for their followers to be altruistic for altruism's sake and so a religious motivation doesn't necessarily constitute a motive ulterior to a pure humanitarianism. However, religions have a particular and unique worldview which informs believers' actions, both consciously and subconsciously, and this will impact on development.

3. Organised forms of inter-faith dialogue are often conducted by leaders who have a responsibility to their religious communities, a vested interest, and a belief in never completely accepting the validity of other religions. It is perhaps in the hands of followers rather than leaders to make interfaith dialogue constructive and meaningful.

4. Spiritual beliefs and systems of thought are inseparable from such things as culture and community; it is vital therefore that development work must seek to understand and make itself understandable to indigenous societies. These things are not static or restrictive but flexible, constructive and essential.

5. In many ways it appears to be a kind of replacement for the Cold War, which so often seemed to serve the same political and media interests. It is not a new myth but a continuation of entrenched political and cultural histories with new modes of communication and expression.

*Justin Duckworth has been working in grassroots youth and community work for the last 15 years. He has pioneered and developed different projects over this time. He is also an ordained Anglican Minister.*

1. Within Christian theology there definitely has been an influence of gender discourse. Included in these movements would be liberation theology, black theology and versions of Asian and Feminist theology. My opinion is these movements and especially gender discourse has been very helpful for theological developments in the last 40 years.

2. My understanding is everybody is motivated by their religious beliefs, some just identify them as religious and others may call them their "spirituality" or "values". All development is value laden. I am equally concerned by practitioners who have "no religious beliefs" but are influenced by strong unarticulated (therefore unaccountable) economic values.

3. Yes, at the same time I feel there probably needs to be as much energy placed on "within a faith dialogue". There is the need for different traditions to dialogue more fully with those within their traditions, especially the more fundamentalist elements. Often those involved in interfaith dialogue don't reflect the more fundamentalist views within their particular faith.

4. Indigenous beliefs are obviously incredibly important when working in development contexts with indigenous people. The challenge is for practitioners to be

truly holistic, recognising that people are complete, that you cannot attempt to work with people and ignore their profound beliefs, or equally, attempt to work with their beliefs apart from their lifestyles.

5. The media obviously inflates stereotypes and adds to [existing] tensions. But there are real tensions that will be hard to resolve. I think this is an area of concern.

3. Yes. By accepting the other person. When we get to know people and care about them we are less likely to discriminate against them. It is possible to hold one's own beliefs firmly while working with those who hold different beliefs.

4. Indigenous beliefs that emphasise the importance of community and the making of decisions by the group can lead to wider input and thus the greater likelihood of real local needs being met. Indigenous groups have often developed ways of operating that really work for them and their environment.

5. While the media and others may propagate this there are definite differences. I think the clash happens partly because for Muslims the political world and the world of faith is intertwined and they perceive this to be true of Christians. But the way [Christians] live out their faith differs often strongly from the society around them.

*Viv Ball is a writer and poet who lives on the Western Hills of Lower Hutt, where she enjoys looking out at the ever-changing Wellington Harbour.*

1. From a Christian viewpoint, gender discourse has led to greater involvement by women in leadership in Churches and Christian groups. Younger women in particular, are not so shy about putting themselves forward. I have noticed a definite change in women being confident to take "up front" and leadership roles.

2. I think that being motivated by religious beliefs is definitely a good thing. Religious beliefs should inform development practice to the extent that those involved are motivated by genuine charity towards others. It is more difficult to genuinely think of the needs of others unless there is some belief in God.

3. Yes. By accepting the other person. When we get to know people and care about them we are less likely to discriminate against them. It is possible to hold one's own beliefs firmly while working with those who hold different beliefs.

4. Indigenous beliefs that emphasise the importance of community and the making of decisions by the group can lead to wider input and thus the greater likelihood of real local needs being met. Indigenous groups have often developed ways of operating that really work for them and their environment.

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