**Panel: Religion and Politics: Development Implications**

**Framing comments: Katherine Marshall, July 9, 2015**

An early mentor in my journey on faith and development blurted out, after a heartwarming interfaith event, that religion is not ethereal (I think the word he used was squishy) but raw, robust, and edgy. That’s an important reason why religion matters and why it is often so controversial. This morning’s panel focuses on issues that go to the heart of the operational challenges and controversies involved in sharpening the focus in policy circles on religious institutions, communities, beliefs, and practices. The conference’s shortest session, it highlights questions hinted at yesterday and the day before, especially the legal barriers, perceptions, misunderstandings, and tensions that can stand in the way of more productive and creative partnerships to support development, at all levels from community to global.

The backdrop is diversity: each country frames relationships between secular authorities and religious institutions and leaders in different ways. Until we explore and probe these country situations progress towards the broader alliances and quality development that we all seek will be slow and cumbersome. Norms and specific approaches are defined in constitutions and laws but also in daily practice and tacit assumptions, for example conferring privileges or restrictions to various groups, provisions for education managed by religious bodies, or the circumstances in which practicing faith or proselytizing can (or cannot) occur. These laws and norms are relevant for many dimensions of development work and need to be understood if we are to benefit from the assets that religious communities bring to development work.

Four broad themes frame our discussion:

1. Wise development and security leaders are urgently, even desperately, seeking better answers to the crucial but complex question of religious roles in conflict and in the stubborn situations of extreme poverty and failing governance. Development is fundamentally about hope and security. So how can engagement with religious institutions and communities build hope for a better future and counter anger, extremism, and violence? Our discussions at this conference and in work on religion, development, and peacebuilding, for better or for worse, are part of this broader discussion.
2. Tensions around understandings of human rights. Many, myself included, see human rights as a deeply unifying and inspirational foundation for what we do. But their meaning and application are often controversial, sparking in some situations a real backlash that calls fundamental principles of human rights into question. Issues around religious freedom and gender roles, including reproductive health, come up time and time again in reflections across the world on religious roles in virtually any dimension of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and development strategies.
3. Behind the inspirational call for a preferential option for the poor are fundamental questions about how does that translates into practice? How far do we agree or disagree on what it takes to exercise the option, and to end poverty? There is an urgent need for careful and thoughtful discussion.
4. The perceived divide between “secular” and “religious” calls for more probing and systematic exploration. In some circles the term “secular” has negative connotations, an opposition to religious. Elsewhere, however, it is a term used with pride as a central, positive value. Similar oppositions and emotional reactions apply when the terms religious or faith are invoked. How can we move beyond simplistic, binary debates towards agreement (or even agreement to disagree)?

The discussion here draws on extensive discussions and research that we can barely scratch today My journey on this topic began with fierce controversy, as virtually all World Bank member countries raised doubts about engaging with religious leaders even in dialogue. The journey (and learning) has continued through 15 years of discussions, research, and writing that is focused now at Georgetown University’s Berkley Center and the World Faiths Development Dialogue, the NGO born of the initiative of Jim Wolfensohn (as World Bank President) and Lord Carey, then Archbishop of Canterbury. Our persistent, core questions are: what does religion have to do with every development issue, why does that matter, and what does it suggest for policy? The results of our dialogue, research, and events are available on our websites (<http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/programs/religion-and-global-development> and <http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/wfdd>). I especially commend the hundreds of written interviews, including many with people here, that offer a host of insights and provocative questions.

This panel includes some of the leading actors on these issues, a group renowned for their courage, marked by one of the key faith assets: determination to speak truth to power. We are all looking at concrete ways to understand and respect the sensitivities around state-religion relationships while helping to maximize positive engagement. They will explore positive and negative dimensions that center on ways in which politics around religion intersects with development practice.

**Ambassador David Saperstein** assumed his position as Ambassador for international religious freedom in the US State Department in January. He has long been an activist on social justice issues and is one of the United States’ most respected religious leaders. He spent many years leading the Religious Action Committee and has served on many boards, including the World Faiths Development Dialogue. He is a veteran of several of the World Bank meetings with faith leaders in the past and is a persuasive and passionate advocate for such encounters, which he describes as transformational. David will address the question of how and why religious freedom is relevant for development work, and how that might apply in practice. What might be obstacles, especially linked to law and constitutions? In short, should religious freedom be part of discussions on development?

**Susan Hayward is** Director of Religion and Peacebuilding at the US Institute of Peace, and an ordained minister of the UCC. She has extensive experience with religious peacebuilding, especially in Burma/Myanmar, Colombia, Sri Lanka, and Iraq. She is a keen observer and scholar as well as an active practitioner. She brings to her work on religion in conflict and peacebuilding. a keen interest in gender issues and questions of justice. She will discuss religious peacebuilding and overlaps and discontinuities with development.

**Scott Appleby** is the Dean of Notre Dame's Keough School of Global Affairs. Formerly head of the Kroc Institute of Peace Studies there, he is truly a guru on issues of religion and public affairs and has headed many task forces. Among his publications are a monumental study of fundamentalism. He is part of the Catholic Peacebuilding Network. I have asked him to reflect on

religious and secular norms and on the “root causes” of fundamentalism, the challenges it presents, and issues around contending modernities.

**Siddharth Chatterjee** is currently theUNFPA representative for Kenya. He has a long career with different parts of the United Nations system and the International Red Cross. He has long years working on fragile states. In Kenya he is deeply engaged in a challenging effort to address maternal health that has offered him many insights into religious attitudes and knowledge including interfaith approaches, political engagement, and the roles of religion in fragile states.

**Ruth Messinger** has been the President of American Jewish World Service since 1998. Before that, her career was centered in politics in New York. She is a remarkably courageous leader, deeply committed to community engagement. She was part of a pioneering conference at Georgetown in March (the publication is on the website) that addressed the knotty issues around proselytism in relation to development. She will reflect on that and on concerns we share about backlash against human rights, on the significance of women's roles, and the significance of tensions around the rights of LGBT people in so many countries.