

Religious Engagement in Development Work: Impressions and Indications

JLI Reading Group

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The Paper's Background

- October 2020 USAID “Evidence Summit”, Part of Research committee
- Extensive review of materials and trends, 4 person group
- My World Bank link, journey
- WFDD and Georgetown’s Berkley Center work and roles:
<https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/topics/religion-and-development>
- <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/wfdd>



Engaging on religion

- **My background: Drafted for a temporary assignment in 1999, a storm of controversy**
- **Much negative, some positive in the initial responses**
- **My involvement deepened over the years**
- **Basic argument: ancient and modern religious involvement, central in human development (education, health, social protection) and every SDG target**



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Six main points

1. Engaging religious actors is an essential part of understanding development (seeing, hearing)
2. This is a relatively new focus, complex and contentious. Understanding why is important
3. No mean task: 84% of the world's people, complex, dynamic, overlapping
4. Three interrelated concepts are worth exploring: Engagement, Freedom of Religion or Belief (human rights), and religious literacy
5. Fragility is a particular challenge.
6. COVID-19 experience both highlights and alters



Problems to wrestle with

- Engagement vs FoRB
- Neoliberalism?
- Proselytism
- Inter, Intra religious dialogue and cooperation
- Diversity, context
- Part of problem, part of solution

- Polarization, religious nationalism, extremism and hate speech, incitement to violence



Why difficult?

- **Opposition:**
- **Divisive: Political dimensions**
- **Dangerous: Specific disagreements on ends and means**
- **“Defunct” = not important, priority**
- **Emotional: Strong views on religion. Irrelevant: what matters is the people being helped**

- **Data especially difficult**



And religious views of development actors?

- Empire
- Effects
- Unethical
- Economics
- Enigma

- =Dangerous



Complexity

- **Data: 84% figure on religious affiliation. 83% in countries that violate religious freedom**
- **Dynamism**
- **Complexity: witness the Catholic Church**
- **Very different state/religion relationships**
- **Lived religion, theology. Spirituality**
- **Interesting role of dialogue; “culture of encounter”**



Academic work and practice

- Multiple disciplines (13+)
- Sharp increase from 1990
- Evidence debates persist
- Faith DNA?
- Qualitative versus quantitative (RCTs)
- Lopsided



Main themes (also pointing towards future research)

- Getting a grip on size and significance
- Bias vs. objectivity
- “Proving” the worth of faith work
- Identifying distinctive features for “faith”
- Debates on language
- And “Instrumentalization”



Evolution of Development thinking and action over the decades

- Civil society roles
- Dominance of private sector finance
- Fallacies of “third world”, North and South, Rich and Poor
- Participation and empowerment
- Governance issues galore
- Gender to center
- Inequalities
- Humanitarian/development overlap
- Climate change
- Results focus, accountability
- Multiple modernities?



3 Aspects of approaching religion, controversies

- Engagement
- Religious freedom
- Religious literacy



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Fragile states, Peacebuilding

- Growing field of peacebuilding
- The “missing state”
- Governance issues: IACC
- Community of Sant’Egidio, Mozambique, Balkans, South Sudan, CAR
- Especially relevant



COVID-19: Tracking faith response

6 categories:

- Gatherings
- Practice (funerals, spiritual support)
- Support: food, mental health, etc etc (social protection)
- Scapegoating, prejudice
- Conflict roles
- Looking ahead/rebuilding

Challenges and changes in religion state relationships



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”Ideals” and conclusions

- Religious communities need to be at the table, for example in the COVID discussions. Which tables?
- The need for cooperation, solidarity, and lived values has never been greater, to build back better, fairer, greener
- Need to be prepared to address questions around human rights, human dignity, human responsibilities
- What kinds of process can assure the seat at the table and the content of the prophetic voice?

