



Religions and Development Research Programme

Religions and development in India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania: inspirational or inhibiting?

Introduction

In development policy and practice, religion tends to be either neglected or taken as a given. Where its relevance is recognized, it may be regarded as either an obstacle or the solution. Religious people and institutions react in different ways to development debates and policies: some are uninterested, some have close connections with politics and government, and others are critical of the whole paradigm or particular policies. Neglect is inappropriate when most people in developing countries claim to be religious, religious organizations play active roles in politics and society, and religion motivates many supporters of development assistance.

Religion has both positive and problematic implications for the achievement of development objectives. It may be implicated in conflict or oppose desired social changes, but it may also be an important source of ethics and humanitarian motivations, and in many societies is associated with some of the most developed social organizations.

Neither 'development' nor 'religion' can be taken as self-evident – both need to be conceptualized, defined and understood not just from the outside but also through eyes of those involved. Concepts of development as economic growth and the individual accumulation of wealth sit uneasily with religious ideas about the purpose of human life and a good society – contemporary ideas about multidimensional human



*Badshahi mosque, Lahore, Pakistan
Photo by Carole Rakodi*

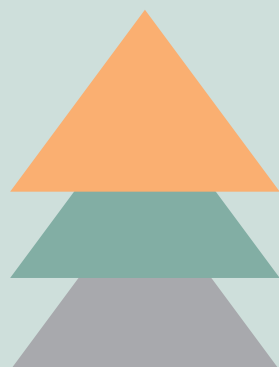
development have greater resonance with religious people and institutions.

It is clear from the research undertaken in the Religions and Development (RaD) programme that religion has spiritual, moral and practical dimensions, both for individual devotees and for religious organizations. However, what is labelled 'religion' in different faith traditions is so different that great care is needed to

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Implications of research undertaken during the RaD research programme include:

- *Religion is relevant to development, although its implications may be positive or problematic: it may be implicated in conflict or oppose desired social changes, but it may also be an important source of values and in many societies is associated with some of the most developed social organizations.*
- *Ideas, individuals and organizations associated with religion and development vary between places, change over time and influence each other through social interaction and political processes.*
- *Development actors need*
 - *a deeper understanding of religious values and beliefs, because some may reinforce inequality rather than being consistent with development objectives*
 - *to assess the characteristics and supposed advantages of religious organizations on a case by case basis, to inform their choice of partners.*



understand not just formal religious teaching about beliefs and moral principles but also lived religion as manifest in people's day-to-day lives and socio-political processes.

In addition, 'development' and 'religion' are not separate spheres: many people are engaged in both and development actors have always interacted with religious individuals and organizations.

The programme sought to improve understanding of social and political aspects of the relationships between religion, society and development practice. It addressed three broad questions through a series of research projects undertaken in one or more of its four focus countries: India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania.

The links between religions and development have been neglected in social science research, so that existing studies, proven methodologies and experienced researchers are scarce. In addition, systematic data are limited and religion raises sensitive issues. Because of the limited availability of quantitative data and the nature of the questions to be addressed, qualitative methods designed to capture the understandings and interpretations of those involved were considered most appropriate.

Much of the research was therefore case-study based, focusing on selected localities, faith traditions and organizations. This limits the scope for generalizing from the findings of an individual project to a country or religion as a whole or undertaking rigorous cross-country or cross-religion comparisons. Nevertheless, the findings contribute to improved understanding not only of local contexts but also of broader issues.



*Hindu temple, India
Photo by Sarah White*

Summary of the RaD findings

The conclusions and some associated implications for policy and practice are grouped below in accordance with the three over-arching questions.

Religious beliefs: how relevant are they to development?

For most people in developing countries, development and religion are not separate domains – individuals are part of many political, social and religious orders and these are intertwined. 'Development' can refer to modern cultural practices, new technologies, a national vision or the formal 'development sector', as well as people's own aspirations and strategies to improve their lives and livelihoods. 'Religion' does not have a particular relationship with 'development' - rather ideas about development and ideas derived from religion about the nature of reality and right social ordering influence each other.

Everyday lived 'religion' is not a discrete set of doctrines and practices – although it includes specific beliefs and practices, it is primarily the source of an underlying moral order that informs people's ideas about the right way to live and good social relationships. Rapid change resulting from development interventions or wider social and economic trends, such as global influences or increased consumerism, challenge and may undermine this order.

In addition, religion is pragmatic, permeating everyday concerns; it is thought to influence the physical world in which people live and is called upon to assist in solving problems, satisfying needs, and explaining misfortune and good fortune. For many, especially the disadvantaged, religion and spirituality seem to be coping mechanisms; rather than their individual spiritual journeys, their priority is to achieve dignified and prosperous lives.

The wellbeing that most people seek is essentially social, not purely individual: it is focussed on the family and community. Religion contributes by providing comfort in times of trouble, a way of making sense of life, and a community that gives support and a sense of identity.

Both religion and ideas about right social ordering are highly gendered: like society more broadly, all the religious traditions are patriarchal and may resist the changes needed to achieve greater equality, especially between men and women. In practice, however, it is difficult to separate religious from cultural justifications for social structures and practices that may be oppressive.

Generalizations about faith traditions must be approached with care. Not only do religions differ from each other, there are differences within every faith tradition between sects or denominations, which are in turn influenced by national and local history and culture. In addition, within each there is a spectrum of theological and social views from fundamentalist and conservative to liberal, as well as formal and mystical/experiential strands, such as Sufism in Islam or charismatic Christianity. These differences all affect adherents' views of the world. Furthermore, class-

related factors such as poverty/wealth or level of education may influence individuals' or groups' understanding and interpretation of religion.

In development studies and policy, it is commonly assumed that religion is

- a form of social identity
- a provider of community and social welfare and
- a source of values and authority.

However, research in Bangladesh and India found that many people's religious identity is less fixed than sometimes imagined; religious institutions are generally less important than family and friends as a source of help and support; and the links between religion, values and behaviour are far from straightforward.

First, **identity** is important to people's wellbeing and religious affiliation may contribute to a person or group's sense of identity. However, being borne into a faith tradition is not the same as active engagement. People tend to assemble their beliefs and practices from a variety of sources, they may convert from one religion to another, and religious boundaries are often blurred. Identity may be associated with privilege or disadvantage as well as wellbeing. And as well as religion, inequality is related to other dimensions of social difference, including class, caste, ethnicity and gender, especially for minorities. Thus apparent inequalities between religious groups may be better explained by other factors. While religion is important in people's lives, as a source of dignity and self worth, and as a marker of identity, its importance should not be exaggerated.

Some **implications** of these findings include:

- *Development actors need to guard against projecting their own or their tradition's assumptions about what religion is and to recognize that religion is understood in many different ways. They need to understand religious traditions in their social and historical contexts and be cautious about seeking to use religion for development ends.*
- *Apparent associations between religion and differences in wellbeing should be treated with care: while religion may enhance wellbeing, it can also, alongside other dimensions of social difference, exacerbate disadvantage.*

Second, **belonging** to a local congregation, a larger tradition and specific organizations can provide adherents with spiritual, psychological and practical support. However, religious organizations' contribution to creating a sense of community, providing welfare and challenging injustice varies, depending on religious doctrine, history and the extent to which governments (or other organizations) fulfil similar roles.

In Islam and the Indic religions, a long philanthropic tradition continues today, with various types of religiously inspired organization providing charity and welfare. However, FBOs may not be important sources of social assistance, especially where the state performs these functions. In much of Africa, because of past missionary activity, the churches continue to play important roles in the provision of education, health and other services, despite the state-led model of development adopted after independence.



*The Sikh Golden Temple, Amritsar, India
Photo by Carole Rakodi*

Whether religious organizations accept and reinforce the socio-economic status quo or challenge it varies within and between religious traditions. Their values and actions are always highly gendered, although perceptions of whether and how this benefits or disadvantages men and women differ. Respect for religious leaders varies: it seems to be widespread in Nigeria and Tanzania, but more selective in South Asia.

Some **implications** of the research that examined local people's perceptions of religious organizations include:

- *Terms used in development policy and practice may be interpreted by religious actors in ways that are not compatible with development.*
- *Some religious leaders and organizations may support challenges to oppressive social structures. Development actors should explore the potential for working with them, but need to assess the purposes and activities of religious organizations with care and be aware of the divisive potential of religious identity.*

Third, religious adherents supposedly live in accordance with the **values**, teachings and edicts of the religion they follow. In practice,

- religion is an important basis for the moral code of a society, but is only one source of values and may not be the most important one.
- values are operationalized through social norms and practices which vary between places and over time.
- there is no automatic link between religion and values or between values and behaviour.

For example, it is sometimes hoped that religious organizations and leaders might provide channels for communicating messages about honesty and integrity, thereby contributing to anti-corruption initiatives. In practice, the research revealed scepticism about their role because incentives to participate in corrupt practices tend to outweigh moral principles, many religious leaders and organizations are thought to be implicated, and families are more important channels for inculcating ethics than religion. In addition, religious leaders may use anti-corruption messages as weapons in inter-religious conflict, and not all religious traditions have widely accepted doctrines or organizational arrangements suitable for deriving and disseminating messages.

Implications of the research into links between values, religious organizations and behaviour include:

- *Religious values and beliefs may encourage altruism, mutual respect and integrity, but may also reinforce the status quo, inequality and injustice, so dialogue between religious and development actors is vital.*
- *It is preferable for religious organizations and leaders to tackle issues like corruption collectively, to avoid exacerbating inter-religious competition and conflict.*
- *Religious organizations' ability to play a positive role in fighting corruption is directly related to their own perceived/demonstrated ethical behaviour.*



*Images of the Buddha and B. R. Ambedkar at Manushi, Pune, India
Photo by Tamsin Bradley*



*Roman Catholic Cathedral in mainly Muslim Zanzibar, Tanzania
Photo by Carole Rakodi*

What are the links between religion, politics and governance?

The links between religion, politics and governance have deep historical roots, are complex, and are almost always contentious. Improved understanding of the links is important for attempts to improve governance. The research considered the roles played by selected religious organizations in politics, the preparation and review of policy, campaigning for legislative change and inter-religious conflict and its aftermath.

Some **implications** of the findings related to the links between religion, politics and policy making include:

- *Democracy can facilitate the entry or renewed involvement of religious actors in politics. This may enable some disadvantaged groups to increase their political influence and religious interests to integrate religion into law and policy. However, some religious visions of society and development can be exclusionary and anti-developmental.*
- *Democracy and secular constitutional arrangements provide safeguards against political actors who mobilize religion to further their own interests.*
- *Political economy and governance analyses should include analysis of the relationships between religion, politics and governance.*
- *On the basis of current evidence, it seems unlikely that regimes controlled by religious political parties will institute better governance or enhance the achievement of human development objectives. However, further studies are needed of the developmental outcomes of regimes in which religion is integrated into the state, such as the northern Nigerian states that have adopted Sharia law.*

- *Measures to improve interaction between religious groups and ensure their proportional representation are needed, to counter the increased conflict between religious actors that may accompany political actors' mobilization of religious identity for political purposes.*
- *There is potential for religious organizations working together to contribute positively to policy consultation and review processes, in particular representing the experiences and priorities of poor people and remote communities to governments. For this potential to be realized, sustained capacity building efforts, financial support and partnerships with other civil society organizations are needed.*

Studies of social movements' engagement with religion during the course of campaigns for social and legal change have implications for the achievement of greater social equality, the campaign strategies adopted by social movements and the provision of external support for civil society development.

The research demonstrates that women's and Dalit movements have engaged with religious ideas and organizations in different ways, with different outcomes. It shows that political influence, legal/policy change and religious mobilization are necessary but not sufficient to overcome prejudice and discrimination. Renewed attempts to achieve legal reform, sustained attention to implementation of new laws, and ongoing investment in organizational activities are also needed.



*Religious goods for sale, India
Photo by Avinash Kumar*

- *Social movements, including the women's movement, would do well to work alongside religious organizations that support their aims, because of their organizational capacity, moral authority and ability to mobilize grassroots support for legal and social change.*
- *Religious organizations are often rigid and resistant to change, but it may be possible to enlist their support for selected legal and social changes and to enable disadvantaged groups, including women, to influence change from within faith traditions.*

Studies of the roles played by religion and religious organizations in violent inter- and intra-religious conflict in urban areas identified implications for those seeking to restore order, provide relief, support victims to rebuild their lives and prevent further violence. In the contexts studied, religious organizations played a positive role in providing immediate relief and assistance to victims, usually members of their own community, but their roles in long term reconstruction or preventing further conflict had been limited. The **implications** of the findings include:

- *Victims' first priorities are security and access to justice, which are seen as prerequisites for rebuilding their lives, holding perpetrators to account and preventing future violence.*
- *Neutral, well-trained security forces, competent government and democratic politics are vital to peace building and reconstruction; although non-governmental organizations can make important contributions, they cannot replace the state.*
- *Further research is needed to identify and tackle the constraints on religious and secular organizations' ability to contribute to long term reconstruction and improved inter-religious relations following violent conflict.*

What roles do religious organizations play in development and service provision?

Religious organizations take a variety of forms and are often not clearly distinguishable from secular organizations, the founders, members and employees of which may be motivated by religion. In countries where most people claim adherence to one of the major world religions, religious attitudes influence virtually all institutional settings. There has recently been renewed interest in the role played by religious organizations in development because of their perceived advantages, including closeness to poor people. However, little systematic information is available on the scale, nature and effectiveness of their activities. The research undertaken during this programme started to fill some of the gaps, although much remains to be done.

The scale and scope of 'faith-based' development activities vary depending on the definition of faith-based organization adopted, local philanthropic traditions, and a country's colonial history, religious composition, post-independence politics and aid dependence. Although the scale of involvement by religious organizations appears to be significant, definitional and data problems mean that it is impossible to give exact estimates.

Attempts to address definitional problems by devising typologies of NGOs, including FBOs, and distinguishing between different development activities have not solved the problem: NGOs do not profess to be faith-based but many of those involved are motivated by religion; some FBOs use secular management approaches; and defining charitable, welfare, humanitarian and development activities and distinguishing between them is difficult.



*Girls' madrasa, Sitapur, India
Photo by Masooda Bano*



*Community meeting, Kano State, Nigeria
Photo by Comfort Davis*

Religious organizations are engaged in emergency relief, feeding the poor, caring for orphans, education, health, and so on. These are traditional charitable and welfare concerns but many organizations also now undertake development activities designed to improve livelihoods, support communities and address inequality and injustice. The boundaries between different organizational types are blurred and systematic information is scarce.

The range of activities and organizational arrangements varies between and within faith traditions, depending on their history, beliefs, organizational structure, size, and reach. Their relationships with government may be sensitive, affecting the contractual and regulatory arrangements that influence their activities. The funding sources on which they depend influence their choice of activities, scale of operation and management practices. The ideas that accompany flows of funds are equally important.

For example, Qur'anic teaching on Muslims' duty to give generates significant volumes of funds but interpretations of the uses to which the funds can be put tend to favour welfare activities and support for needy individuals. However, some charitable religious organizations are recasting themselves as development agents to access other funds. Some are inclusive and oriented to the poor, but many mainly benefit members of their own faith group, who are not always poor.

Some organizations that receive funds from international sources and are exposed to wider thinking prioritize long term development over short term charity, but others are supply-driven and engage in activities similar to other NGOs. The funds remitted by diaspora groups to their homelands, including to religious bodies, are often accompanied by new thinking about religious identity and service provision.

The influence, legitimacy and capacity of religious organizations may be considerable. However, their potential contribution is affected by a number of challenges. For example, many lack sufficient funds and capacity to scale up or professionalize their activities, their opposition to certain principles and practices (e.g. gender equality) may be incompatible with the policies of development partners, they may resist working with other civil society organizations, and their support for conversion or a political agenda has potential for fuelling religious tension.



*Focus group discussion with beneficiaries of People Oriented Development, Evangelical Church of West Africa, Nigeria
Photo by Comfort Davis*

The research findings have **implications** for those seeking to better understand, manage relationships with and provide support for religious organizations.

- The term FBO makes more sense in some contexts than others, but everywhere, a simple division between secular and religious organizations should be avoided. Instead, they need to be distinguished in terms of the ways in which religion manifests itself in their operations, as well as their class, gender and other characteristics, and their wider links.
- It is vital to appreciate the relationships between religion (in particular FBOs) and governments, which are often sensitive.
- Information on the faith-based sector is insufficient to test claims of supposed advantage. More assessment is needed of their activities and the quality of services they provide.
- Religious organizations may or may not have distinctive priorities, approaches or organizational forms, depending on circumstances. Their political and social agendas are often poorly understood, in part due to a lack of transparency; these may or may not be compatible with development policies.
- Decisions about whether and how to engage with FBOs must be made on a case by case basis, based on an understanding of each organization, its context, and the principles and practices it adopts.
- NGOs and FBOs are not necessarily alternative partners for development activities; joint working may be appropriate.
- Any attempt to harness remittances for development purposes must be underpinned by a sound understanding of the complex motives and dynamics that characterize transnational links.



Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital, Ballan, Punjab, India
Photo provided by Mr S. R. Heer, Dera Sant Sarwan Dass



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Further information

Carole Rakodi (2011) *Inspirational, Inhibiting, Institutionalized: Exploring the Links between Religion and Development*. Birmingham: RaD WP 66.

See also:

Jodhka, S.S. (2011) *Interactions between Religion and Development in India: Values, Organizations and Social Movements*, Birmingham: RaD WP 63.

Kirmani, N. (2011) *Interactions between Religion, the State and Civil Society in Pakistan: Some Implications for Development*, Birmingham: RaD WP 65.

Odumosu, O. and Simbine, A. (2011) *Religious Organizations, Values and Rivalry in Nigeria: Exploring the Implications for Development and Politics*, Birmingham: RaD WP 64.

<http://www.religionsanddevelopment.org/index.php?section=47>