



Religions and Development Research Programme

Whither morality? 'Finding God' in the fight against corruption

Heather Marquette

There are growing calls for religion to be used in the fight against corruption, based on the assumption that religious people are more concerned with ethics than the non-religious, despite the fact that many of the most corrupt countries in the world also rank highly in terms of religiosity. However, the new 'myth' about the relationship between religion and corruption is based on assumptions that are not borne out through evidence.

A review of several studies of the statistical relationships between religion and corruption concludes that the evidence for a causal relationship between religion (or type of religion) and either higher or lower levels of corruption is in no way convincing.

The methodologies that have been employed thus far are insufficient for proving – one way or another – a causal relationship.

- This literature is largely quantitative, with a dearth of empirical, fieldwork-based evidence.
- The results are often contradictory, depending upon which dataset has been used, which raises important methodological issues.
- The literature is tentative at best, offering comparisons between various datasets and pointing towards possible explanations, sometimes rooted in theory, sometimes not.
- The data used are often flawed, making the explanations that are advanced problematic.
- The data are aggregated at the country level; they do not reveal intra-country variations and cannot tell us anything about how individuals' attitudes towards corruption are formed; the impact of religious (and other socio-cultural influences) on attitude formation, or the ways that individuals condemn or justify corrupt behaviour using the language of religion.

There is, therefore, considerable doubt about whether research is likely to be able to prove a direct causal relationship between religion and corruption – either positive or negative – and it certainly cannot with the methodologies employed so far.

Instead, pluralistic approaches that privilege qualitative methodologies involving country and individual level empirical research are needed. These would see both corruption and religion as lived experiences, through which morality is constructed and evolves. Such research would enable morality to be (re)injected into the *discourse* on corruption. Care needs to be taken in doing so:

- While religious leaders often urge their followers to desist from corrupt behaviour, some religious leaders and organizations are allegedly corrupt.
- The common distinction between public and private morality that informs Western discourse may not apply (or may apply in different ways) to attitudes and behaviour in developing countries.

Nevertheless, in many parts of the world, religion maintains a stronger hold on people's values, attitudes and behaviour than democratic institutions, and as such, it remains an important potential source of power. Therefore, although care needs to be taken in engaging religious teachings and actors in anti-corruption discourses and initiatives, doing so can help to shape both academic and policy debates in a more relevant and significant way than the research available to date.

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