

Foreword: Religion and development – towards authentic mutual understanding and creative partnerships

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The challenge of ending poverty today grips many leaders and institutions in the international community. For the first time in human history, it is an achievable dream that every human being can have a genuine chance to live a decent life. Many contemporary changes, above all in technology, medical science, universal education, economic organisation and sheer human creativity, have turned upside down the harsh historic reality that poverty was then and evermore a fact of life: ‘the poor shall be always with us’. That is simply no longer true, and societies in many corners of the world have showed that balanced and sustainable societies are possible and that seemingly hopeless situations can, with will and resources, be turned around in an extraordinarily short time. Several notorious ‘basket cases’ of the early days of my own professional career (Singapore and Ireland, for example) are now held up as models of success. Modernity is accompanied by a host of problems that we need to address, but we should never lose from sight the exciting promise and potential of more dignified and more fulfilled life for billions across the world.

But the very promise of the dream of a world free of poverty puts into ever more stark relief the gulf between what might be and the reality that over a billion people are still trapped in poverty, that preventable disease kills millions of children and adults, and that a good education and a good job are simply not available in many places. Inequality is if anything growing and it is unmistakably ‘in your face’ as images of wealth and poverty circulate through media and the internet. It takes faith in the goodness of human kind and our capacity to mobilise resources and will to address problems that we know can be solved to believe that a far better world lies ahead.

If there is one lesson of the first decade of the 21st century, it is that bridging the gaps that separate rhetoric and promises from hard reality calls for new and different kinds of partnerships. The silo worlds that separated public from private, profit from non-profit and business from bureaucrats need to change.

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And among the most important, but also the most challenging, partnerships that cry out for action are those that link development and faith institutions.

Clifford Geertz, one of anthropology's gurus, commented astutely:

Of all the dimensions of the uncertain revolution now underway in the new states of Asia and Africa, surely the most difficult to grasp is the religious . . . It is not only very difficult to discover the ways in which the shapes of religious experience are changing, or if they are changing at all; it is not even clear what sorts of things one ought to look at in order to find out. (Geertz 1968, p. 1)

Geertz' insight on the sheer complexity of religion helps to explain an anomaly in the recent history of international development: that until recently religion barely received a mention in the written records or, even more significant, in the operational history of projects, policies and reflections about international development. One reason is the sheer complexity of the topic of religion. Religions are highly complex and, for many, religion is a notoriously sensitive subject, raising many nervous flags in societies where relationships between state and religion are delicately balanced or contested.

Yet in truth there is enormous common ground between the worlds of development and religion. After all, the deepest traditions that are the foundations of both charity and human rights are to be found in the world's religions. Education and health practice and knowledge trace their histories to religious institutions. It was religious institutions and beliefs that were the safety nets for orphans and widows, in monasteries and temples across the world. And in the post-World War II period, countless organisations inspired in different ways by religious faith have worked across a spectrum that goes from humanitarian relief and care of the world's neediest to bold efforts that look to transformation and building the 'better worlds' that we believe are possible. The Jubilee 2000 campaign, which mobilised millions of people against heavy poor country debt, was inspired and led by religious institutions. What it showed more than any similar campaign was the capacity to mobilise citizens for a just cause, and that it is possible to reframe an arcane technical conversation in ethical, commonsense terms and language and by doing so achieve results that many held were impossible.

There are many reasons for the notable gaps in communication, respect, cooperation and partnership between the worlds of religion and development. While much of the language that development institutions and religious organisations and leaders use about poverty and social justice are strikingly similar (as Matthew Clarke points out), there are also important differences. These differences are amplified by the extraordinary complexity of approach and organisation on all sides: development is complicated and contested, and religion, as Geertz points out, is among life's more challenging topics to grapple with. Prejudices, fear, misunderstandings and simple lack of knowledge have

kept many actors in the different institutions apart. These barriers and prejudices hold on all sides: the unacceptable practice of enticing victims of catastrophe with promises of help if they convert may in practice occur quite rarely but examples appear almost daily in the press; and the image of development work as driven by crude desires to expand markets and consumption is also a travesty. The good news is that in important ways there is an emerging consensus among thoughtful advocates for change that community-based approaches that balance respect for cultures with individual rights are the way to start.

Many development and faith institutions, inspired by the calls to partnership and the obvious need to pool knowledge and resources, are exploring new links, sometimes with wholehearted enthusiasm, more often a bit gingerly and with some fits and starts. The major development institutions, multilateral and bilateral, many parts of the United Nations, and non-profit and for-profit entities, are far more open today to working with and learning from faith institutions. And most faith institutions appreciate that the development world is as varied as can be and tend to question less the motivations of their potential partners. Particularly at the strategic level of senior leadership in development institutions, there is a new recognition that the neglect of matters religious is unwise and can be counterproductive. And at the working level, where people are engaged in communities, the obvious force of religious belief and institutions and its central role in people's daily lives makes it obvious that understanding what is happening and working in tandem makes eminent sense.

What is still missing is solid knowledge and understanding, in the first instance about the worlds of religion. This applies both to the development world but also among and even within religious traditions. An expanding body of studies, research and ample web documentation is becoming available, but the fields of both faith and development can be extraordinarily hard to navigate. Many practitioners have patchy understandings of even the most basic facts.

Thus Matthew Clarke's book is an important contribution to the much-needed effort to provide a foundation of what might be termed 'faith literacy'. He makes a good case that understanding, appreciating and reaching out to faith partners is an essential part of 'good' development, development that is grounded in community participation and looks to sustainability over the long term. What is needed is an authentic understanding, going well beyond the superficial and reflecting respect and appreciation, of history and of how religions vary and change. And he is persuasive in arguing against the temptation to take an 'instrumental' approach, wherein religion might be expected simply to serve the goals of development, for example by implementing information campaigns to fight malaria or to advocate for changes in agricultural practices. Yet he also grasps clearly that religion is no holy grail. He highlights some of the problematic topics that bedevil faith development engagement, notably the

unbalanced roles of men and women and rather murky approaches (on all sides) to the thorny modern dimensions of social inequality.

Clarke's book is indeed what he terms an 'appreciative', sympathetic introduction to the roles that religion plays in development, one that looks more to the good in religious traditions and institutions than to the all too well-known dark sides. He argues forcefully that religion is an integral part of societies and worldviews, and thus must be integral to reflections about what development means and the kinds of support and push it should receive. He takes five major world religions, introducing their history and major beliefs in a thoughtful and challenging manner. And he illustrates their approaches to development through an example of a significant faith-based organisation. These five stories are clearly framed and illustrate well the depth and diversity of their work. This treatment will help different development partners to come sensibly to terms with the diverse roles of faith-based development organisations, which can be strikingly similar yet also at times quite different from their secular non-governmental organisation counterparts in approach and ethos.

Matthew Clarke uses the analogy of a dance, or more properly, a set of different dances, as the ideal towards which faith and development institutions might aspire. The dances involve a common venture, and above all a common vision of a more just world. Partnership and appreciation of one's partner is of the essence. There is a common music, a common journey or venture. But the steps can vary, as can the rhythms. And, above all, each partner can learn from the other. Together they have the chance to achieve what each individual, dancing alone, cannot.