

Foreword

Scott M. Thomas

There is now a growing literature bringing the concerns of culture and religion into our understanding of international relations, international development and international security. Where is one to begin reading, and what does one expect to find in this reading? Also, where can one go for the kind of critical engagement with this literature that encourages us to step back and ask some of the larger, harder, questions – such as, while it might be easy to recognize why the study of culture and religion were marginalized in international relations, it is particularly more troublesome to ask, given the almost inherent religiosity of the global South, why culture and religion were marginalized for so long in the study of international development? What, therefore, is the purpose of bringing religion into our understanding of international development, and who is to do it, what is the agenda, who controls it and who benefits from doing this? What does it mean to talk about religious or ‘faith-based’ actors, and what do they bring that secular actors do not bring to the practice of international development; or is this even the right question to ask? This book by John Rees provocatively asks these kind of questions in an engaging way, but also in a way that directly tries to link theoretical debates to a very specific and very important case study – the rise and fall of the World Bank’s partnerships with religious actors, and its participation in the World Faiths Development Dialogue, as the largest multilateral development institution in international development.

The book begins by setting out a ‘dynamics of religion model’ – how sacred and secular elements are combined, how ideological differences separate religious actors, which maps out the terrain of the current debates, discourses and key scholars who have contributed to bringing religion into the study of international relations and international development. The book uses this model to evaluate the often conflicting values, goals and assumptions behind the secular and religious organizations that have become indented with the ‘religious turn’ in international relations and international development. It is then from the case study of the World Bank that the book examines many of these crucial, critical, questions,

and in this way, now amidst all the concerns of policy-makers and politicians regarding religion, failed states, nation-building and terrorism, offers a much needed critical evaluation of the way religion has come into international development.

The crucial point of departure for this book is the way the dynamics of religion model is used to evaluate the World Bank's partnerships with religious actors as a type of engagement with religion from within the mainstream global development agenda. This enables the book to critically evaluate the World Bank in relation to some of the other well-known approaches to religion and development, such as the *Fes Colloquium*, the World Council of Churches and the Community of Sant'Egidio. It does so in a way that shows up the limitations that more formal relations between the World Bank and religious actors can place on enabling religious actors to contest some of the dominant ideas and practices in international development.

The problem is that the World Bank and Western donor governments are interested in religious actors at the delivery level of policy, and this can limit, or more likely exclude, the religious substance of development – core religious voices, perspectives and resources. Governments, quite understandably, aren't interested in engaging with religious organizations that are more interested in speaking truth to power, than in becoming part of the global development agenda of Western donor governments. On the other hand, this important book shows what can be done when secular organizations increasingly recognize the religiosity of the people of the global South, and their understanding of the role of religion in their own lives and in their interpretation of wellbeing and development.

Scott M. Thomas lectures in international relations and the politics of developing countries at the University of Bath, and is a research fellow in the Centre for Christianity and Interreligious Dialogue, Heythrop College, University of London. He is the author of *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations* (Palgrave, 2005).