

# The Role of Faith in Development: An Obstacle or an Element?

by Niamh Brennan

## *Abstract*

*This paper attempts to examine the role of faith in development. It begins by re-examining the concept of development and how even with increased economic development there remains huge disparities between rich and poor, environmental destruction and a sense of meaninglessness for many people. It traces how this has led to a recognition that spirituality and faith must be accounted for in development projects and interventions. It then presents faith as an element of development highlighting how it influences people's everyday decisions and suggesting no development intervention can be successful without taking faith into account. It then goes on to present faith as an obstacle to development, showing how religion can be divisive and how development interventions can be used as a bribe with the real aim being to proselytise. Due to the fact that the development discourse has been exceptionally noticeable for its lack of analysis of religion and faith and acknowledging the influence that these yield, this paper concludes with a call for an exploration of the role of faith in development.*

## **Introduction**

In this paper I will review the relevant literature relating to the topic of faith in development. I will begin first by revisiting the development debate, followed by an exploration hitherto of the role of faith in development. The purpose of this paper is to explore a topic which has remained relatively unexplored in the development debate. Given the increasing reference to faith and God in politics it is clear that faith and spirituality are beginning to play a more prominent and public role in people's lives. This paper seeks to show how important it is to explore and understand the role of faith in development, and also, to call us once again to examine what it is we mean when we talk about development.

## **The Development Debate**

Since the concept of development was accidentally introduced by President Truman in 1949, it has been consistently debated so that until this time there is no simple, singular definition as to its meaning (Rist, 1997). Likewise, the terms 'developing' and 'underdeveloped' are equally contentious. In its formative stages 'development' was thought of in purely economic terms where progress was synonymous with economic growth and industrialisation and where those from 'developed' countries set out to pull others from their 'underdevelopment' by changing traditional practices and values in an effort to increase economic efficiency (So, 1990).

Over time the goal of development evolved to include not only economic factors but quality of life which cannot be measured in purely economic terms. The United Nations Development Programme describes development as: "*a process of enlarging people's choices. This is achieved by expanding human capabilities and functioning. At all levels of development the three essential capabilities for human development are for people to lead long and healthy lives; to be knowledgeable; and to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living*" ( UNDP 1998).

Among its indicators for development are literacy, access to clean water and health care, infant mortality rate, the political participation of women, life span, pollution, consumption and environmental waste (ibid.).

A greater emphasis was also placed on who has the 'right' to identify needs for the poor and so began a turn away from the traditional top-down approach and a drive towards grass-roots approaches with popularised concepts such as 'participation' and 'empowerment' becoming both the process and the objective of development agencies (Rahman, 1993, Pieterse, 2001, Kiely, 1999, Rist, 1997).

Despite the continued debate around the question of what it ultimately means to develop, there has been a significant lack of improved circumstances in some countries thought of to be 'developing' as to posit the question as to the merits of 'development' at all (Sachs, 2001, Rahnama, 2001, Escobar, 2001). Some academics, among them Sachs and Esteva have called for an end to 'development' seeing it as a glossed over form of colonisation bringing Westernisation to all the countries it seeks to help and serving to cause and compound the problems it seeks to alleviate (Sachs, 2001).

Part of the reason that the concept of development is so contested is down to the fact that it has not been successful with development initiatives and development interventions failing time after time (Rahnama, 1997, Sachs 2001). Due to this, academics and development practitioners are still trying to find the answer to the question of what it actually is to develop, and in our desire to develop what is it we do or should aspire to.

As a result of so-called 'development', in particular industrialisation, the earth has borne the cost with the destruction of its forests, poisoning of the air and seas, depletion of its natural resources, elimination of wetlands and desertification of its once fruitful areas (Sachs, 2001). Berry (1988, p.164) writes: "*While at an early period we were aware of our dependence on the integral functioning of surrounding communities, this awareness faded as we learned, through our scientific and technological skills to manipulate the community functioning to our own advantage. This manipulation has brought about a disruption of the entire complex of life systems...A degradation of the natural world has taken place*".

It has also been written that in order for 'true' development to take place we must move from a human-centric to a bio-centric norm of progress and to acknowledge our role as opposed to our rule, within the functioning of the planet we live on. Development must take into account not simply the sustainability of the earth and its resources but recognise that the human is only a small part of something huge and acknowledge that although the human has achieved sophisticated and elaborate cultural forms that "basic physical as well as psychic nourishment and support come from the natural world" (Berry, 1999, p).

Connected to this is the growing belief, and what this paper seeks to emphasize, that unless development and development interventions take account of the spirituality and faith of the community they are working with and within that no real development can take place as spirituality plays such a significant part within the lives of individuals and the lives of communities. According to Ver Beek "For most people of the 'South' spirituality is integral to their understanding of the world and their place in it, and so is central to the decisions they make about their own and their communities' development" (2000, p.31). Tyndale suggests that "the belief that there can be no true development

without spiritual advancement is, in one form or another, still the belief of the majority of people in the world today” (2000, p.9) while the Director of the Church and Society program of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches says that “if development does not have to do with confidence, making choices, and values, then I don’t know what development is (In Bornstein, 2002, p.10). Development, thus presented becomes more holistic, mixing physical and spiritual in an effort to determine what our deepest desire or aspiration is. This element of spirituality and its expression leads us to the next section where I shall examine the role that faith plays in development.

## **Faith**

Before we can talk about faith it is important to try to come to some understanding as to what it is and to illustrate briefly its relation with religion and spirituality.

Hull (1999) writes of the spiritual as something which lifts the human beyond the biological, and deals with transcendence. In imagination and dreams we transcend time and space, in speech we transcend the limits of our body, and in religion we transcend our humanity (ibid.) Simpson and Chile (2004, p.320) write how ‘spirituality places us in a context of time that is larger than that for which we live and provides the connections that exist between individuals within the collective’.

Spirituality then gives us a meaningful place in the universe and connects us to that which went before us and that which will succeed us. In this manner one’s spirituality is a connection with ‘the bigger picture’, ‘God’, or the ‘Ultimate Transcendence’ which nothing else may transcend<sup>1</sup>(WFDD, 2001, Clarke, 2005, Berry1999, Berry and Swimme,1992). It is “one’s experienced relationship with the sacred; and that wisdom or knowledge which derives from such experience” (Heelas, 2002, p.358).

Religion, on the other hand, is very much God-centred involving “the ‘official’ as regulated and transmitted by religious authorities; that which is enshrined in tradition” (Heelas, 2002, p.358).

Faith then is the response to both the spiritual and the religious, although in varying degrees. Spirituality incorporates faith, but faith incorporates religion. One may have faith without religion but not religion without faith, unless at a superficial level. Hull (1999, p.8) makes this point when he writes ‘Religion is the instrument; spirituality is the goal; faith is the attitude of trust that the instrument will lead to the goal’.

Clarke (2005) again echoes this point. He writes of how faith is a more ‘amorphous’ category which extends beyond the major or established religions. He says “ it includes political philosophies with religious elements.....modern sects or movements ...and traditional or indigenous belief systems...which blend elements of mainstream religion with local and traditional beliefs and practices”(2005, p.11). Faith thus explained is a lot more fluid than religion, crossing official and academic boundaries with the subjective person as its starting point but like spirituality is grounded in the Divine. Therefore for this paper the word ‘faith’ will be used synonymously with ‘spirituality’ in that they both deal with one’s own personal experience and relationship with the Divine.

## **THE ROLE OF FAITH IN DEVELOPMENT**

### **Historical Background**

Faith and religion have not been absent in the development field. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “ FBOs ( Faith-Based Organisations) complemented the

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<sup>1</sup> It has also been argued that there are forms of spirituality which do not relate to the Divine but transcend the biological all the same

colonial state in the provision of health and education services in developing countries, running schools, universities, vocational training centres, hospitals, health care and care homes” ( Clarke, 2005, p.5).

The years from 1945 to 1980 however were decades of ‘unquestioned state supremacy’ where FBOs played a lesser, more obscure role in the development process and where aid generally flowed from government to government (ibid.).

In recent years, religion and faith have resumed a more prominent, if still minor, place in development discourse and policy. Clarke (2005) documents how two significant consequences of structural adjustment resulted in the proliferation of FBOs. This was 1) reduced state spending, which created gaps in service provisions and which FBOs attempted to fill and 2) the privatisation of service provision functions, which created opportunities for FBOs to work as government sub-contractors. Clarke writes “in ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries alike, FBOs expanded or proliferated in direct response to the rise of economic neo-liberalism as the faithful responded to growing material poverty, economic inequality and social exclusion” (2005, p.7).

### **Faith as an Element of Development**

There have been a number of documents written on the importance of incorporating faith into development and for recognising faith as a given element of development if development is to succeed. In 2001 the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) published a paper entitled “Cultures, Spirituality and Development” to be used for religion and public policy at the United Nations (UN).

Like Sachs and other post-developmentalists, this paper writes how the traditional view of development as economic improvement has “contributed to the destruction of many societies and community structures” (WFDD, 2001, p.3) as it has imposed the cultural norms and values of the development institutions and agencies upon the communities where they have been at work. It goes on to say that “no programmes can bring positive and lasting results unless it is well anchored in the cultural norms and values of the affected society” (ibid.) and that aspirations, beliefs and spirituality “needed to be recognised as a pre-requisite for the success of development programmes” (ibid.).

The WFDD regard spirituality as a necessary pre-requisite to development because until now greater efficiency, science and technology have ultimately failed to bring an end to hunger, malnutrition and poverty (however we conceive it) and we are left with “widening disparities between the rich and the poor, social injustices, environmental destruction and a creeping depression and sense of meaninglessness [which] are all products of our age” (WFDD, 2001, p.6). Development programmes, they write, which are material in goal, will always fail as “they will be resisted by people who find life’s meaning in awareness of their innermost spiritual being, which for some signifies the spark of the divine” (WFDD,2001, p.16). The interesting thing about this document by the WFDD is that it is representative of a number of different faiths such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism inter alia, thus it does not give supremacy to any one religion or faith but attempts to draw from them all, finding what is common among them.

According to Mary Lean, not only is faith an element of development but “development that is grounded in faith has two outstanding advantages. It builds on a community’s deepest sense of identity and belonging and it carries within it the seeds of individual empowerment” (Lean in Harper and Clancy, 1999, p.77).

We may again see how the question of faith and spirituality is slowly being introduced into the development discourse when we review the literature produced by the World Bank. In 1998, the then president of the World Bank, James D. Wolfensohn, set up with Lord Carey of Canterbury the WFDD which is mentioned above. This began the dialogue between the World Bank and the Churches of Africa.

This would seem to indicate that the World Bank, former bastion of modernisation, holds that there is a place for faith in development. Tsele in Belshaw and Calderisi (2002, p.209) writes that it is only “by introducing faith-inspired motives into development” that development can become successful and authentic. He states that with faith based motives for development, development becomes both “a collaborative venture and a process” (p.212) where it is irrelevant whether we “enjoy the fruits of development labor [sic], since the reward is both in the act and in the end” (ibid).

Thus the concept of development changes from a reaction to people’s poverty, to a response to one’s own faith and beliefs. According to Tsele “development is a work of faith and love that is undertaken without the assurance that we will live to see and enjoy its fruits” (ibid). Beautifully generous but true?

Tiongco and White (1997) are more emphatic when they write “the fundamental point here is that theology and development are together. Our basic beliefs and attitudes are not split up into boxes with different labels. We cannot separate out the ‘religious bits’ from the others” (p.2). They then go on to say that “all development policies are inevitably built on a particular world-view. This may or may not include reference to God, but it will always go beyond what is simply observable to make statements about how the world is and should be” (ibid.)

Ver Beek (2000, p.36) writes that “the failure to reflect with people on the role of spirituality in their lives robs them of the opportunity to determine their own values and priorities, and is therefore, anti-developmental”. He argues this is so as spirituality influences people’s everyday decisions and their development-related decisions such as “who should treat their sick child, when and how they will plant their fields, and whether or not to participate in risky but potentially beneficial social action” (Ver Beek, 2000, p.31). In this way, Ver Beek states that regardless of whether or not we acknowledge it as so, spirituality remains the driving force of most people’s lives and influences how we live and the decisions we make and so failure to incorporate it into development programmes and interventions will result in “faulty scholarship and less effective interventions”(2000,p.36).

### **Faith as an obstacle to Development**

To some degree we are already familiar with the arguments as to why faith and religion are an obstacle to development. Historically, as mentioned earlier, development was first brought by missionaries who sought to improve the ‘natives’ of the countries they visited with evangelisation through education (Heelas, 1998). The atrocities committed in pursuit of this goal have left bitter connotations associated with the word ‘missionary’ and ‘evangelisation’ which most people react against. It is now not just outdated to evangelise but politically incorrect to. However there are other reasons why development was once and largely still is today secularised.

Marshall (2005) lists three reasons why faith and religion may be an obstacle to development. The first of these is that religion is divisive, the second that “religious politics can be complex and often ferocious” (Marshall, 2005, p.6) and thirdly that “religion is dangerous” when some religions are working towards a fundamentally different agenda “driven by tradition and immutable theological approaches” (ibid). Ver Beek (2000, p.40) also recognises this very real and dark element to faith. This is illustrated when he writes: *“The continuing conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and the Balkans are daily reminders of how the manipulation of spiritual and religious themes and symbols can kindle distrust and hatred. The attempts by individuals and groups throughout history to impose their spiritual beliefs or standards on others have resulted in cruel conflicts. One apparently safe response is to avoid the sensitive topic”*.

In this quote Ver Beek has succinctly outlined the main reasons why development has been secularised. Violence, dogmatism, and evangelisation are all contrary to the idea of development which ideally promotes peaceful societies and an endogenous development (Rahman 1993). Smith (2002, p.167) echoes the thoughts of Ver Beek when he writes: *“Firstly, one can observe a growing significance of religion in a diverse and plural global society where communities of identity are increasingly important and the dangers of international conflict defined in religious terms are increasingly evident.”*

Because spirituality and faith deal with what people hold to be most sacred, gives people an identity and a way of interpreting the world (Bates and Plog, 1990) it is not a surprising reality that people become passionate about it. It is, put simply, their truth.

Another very valid reason why some see faith as an obstacle to development is due to the concern that “the work of faith institutions, however effective, is primarily motivated by a desire to gain converts or to serve a limited segment of the community” (Marshall, 2005, p.7). As a result of this development actors have been reluctant to be associated with faith groups seeing them as evangelising and proselytising as well as excluding some members of the community. Those who convert for the benefit of material gain have become known as ‘rice Christians’ (Drury, 2006). Ver Beek (2000, p.39) writes “many examples exist of religious organisations that have used ‘development’ programmes in an attempt to manipulate and impose their perspective on their ‘beneficiaries’”.

Bornstein again echoes this reality when she writes: *“As economic development combines with the religious transformation of cultures, it is a process that entails, and enables, spiritual conversion. Bradshaw emphasizes that development projects are interpreted according to what he calls world-views. Clearly, processes of development are intended to change belief systems and practices, whether in relation to God or technological improvement”* (2002, p.9).

In this way the development intervention becomes bribery with the real aim being to gain converts and spread a particular belief system where it previously had not existed, while in the process extinguishing those that did.

An interesting argument put forward by the theologian, Richard Niebuhr, in his fivefold typology of the relation of faith and development, as to why development and faith should be separated is that “faith has no bearing on the tasks of development, indeed the aims and processes of development are eschewed as distractions from the real Christian

business of growth in spiritual purity” (Plant, 2005, p 6). This is particularly interesting as it brings us back to the question of motives and the role that values and beliefs play in our everyday lives. What Niebuhr is saying is in direct contrast to what Ver Beek says about how spirituality influences all aspects of our lives and every decision we make. This indicates that people view the role of spirituality differently.

Pinglé offers a strong argument as to why religion has been and can be an obstacle to development. She describes how religion can challenge the state’s agenda, undermine universal principles advocated by international organisations and offer people an identity at variance with the national identity. Pinglé (2005, p.7) writes “religious movements and identities can, and do appear to, make it difficult for states and the international community to pursue their development agenda especially with regard to gender equity, minority rights, rights of vulnerable groups, wealth redistribution, democracy, and participation”.

What Pinglé says here is connected to the previous point on how religion can be divisive but according to Pinglé it can also work on another level than that of merely dividing faiths. Religion can separate people from their country, culture and ‘national identity’ working against what the government and other international organisations see to be beneficial for people. A classic but perhaps extreme example of this is Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) which although it predates Islam is still practised in some countries as part of Islamic law (Amnesty International, 2006). The practice of this goes against what the government believe to be good for women and is in direct contravention to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR 1948, Pinglé, 2005, Clarke, 2005).

### **Bridging the Dichotomy**

The previous two sections have illustrated that when it comes to development, the role of faith and spirituality seem to occupy an entirely warranted dichotomous position of faith as an element of development on the one hand and faith as an obstacle to development on the other hand. They have highlighted that while faith can be highly compatible with development and used as a strong motivating factor for both communities and development groups (Lean in Harper and Clancy, 1999) it can also be contradictory to development aims in that it can be used as a means to gain converts, create divisiveness and perpetuate relations of inequality (Pinglé, 2005).

But can this dichotomy be overcome? Is there space in the development discourse to allow for the discussion of the powerful tool that is faith and how best to utilise it in a positive and non-proselytising way? Or does development have to be experienced from a secular or non-secular standpoint? Perhaps we need to go back to the very beginning and re-evaluate what it is we want to achieve or gain through ‘development’. Berry and Swimme (1992) make the point that historians when dealing with world history do not deal with the whole world but only with the human and conversely, scientists focus exclusively with the physical dimensions of the cosmos and have ignored the human dimension.

In this way the humanities and the sciences have been treated as independent of each other. Berry and Swimme, however give us an alternative way to look at things, a way which is more holistic. They write: “*There is eventually only one story, the story of the universe. Every form of being is integral with this comprehensive story. Nothing is itself without everything else. Each member of the earth community has its own proper role within the entire sequence of transformations that have given shape and identity to everything that exists*” (1992, p.268).

Should we begin a discourse which takes this as its premise, the interconnectedness and interdependence of all creation? If we did, perhaps, it wouldn't just be about faith as something which is either used positively or negatively but as something which would serve to be the link between our own human experience and the scientific experience. It could also inform our sense of what development is or could be, in that no-one exists independent of anyone else which makes us all responsible for the well-being of each other. It seems to me that this only re-enforces the thinking of Sachs (2005) and echoes Ghandi's ideal Swaraj (In Rahnama,2006) that in order for real change to occur that it is not about giving more to others but taking less for ourselves. In this way, development ceases to be about 'the Other' but actively begins with each of us.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to show the evolution of the concept of development from one where it was synonymous with economic growth to a more holistic concept which entails people's well-being, physical needs and spiritual needs. It has shown how a development based on increased economic efficiency not only produces environmental degradation but also fails to fulfil people's social, cultural and perhaps most importantly, spiritual needs.

This leads us again to question what it is we aspire to when we talk about development. It has highlighted the increased importance attached to religion in the field of development and the dichotomy that exists between faith as an obstacle of development and faith as an element of development. Whether one calls for development to be secularised or says that no development can take place without taking into account people's spirituality it would seem that either way faith is a significant player in the development context.

Perhaps the question, however, is not whether faith should be regarded as an obstacle or an element of development but whether or not there can be unity in this distinction? The issue need not necessarily be about this dichotomy but the realisation that faith which ever way you look at it, is there. It exists, it influences. Perhaps, therein lies its unity. But how do we deal with faith, especially in a development context? How can it be incorporated and used as the powerful tool it is to promote a development like that echoed by the UNDP (UNDP 1998)? Are prayers before meetings and seminars enough?

As has nearly always been the case when faith is at question, will somebody have to compromise and another to dominate as more often than not, the faithful have only room for one truth? Will this lead to feelings of revenge and resentment clouding development aims and processes even more? And what of people without faith-where does this leave them? Will this lead to their exclusion as development beneficiaries just because they do not subscribe? The questions raised by the attempt to incorporate faith into development are so many that it is no surprise that the development discourse has relatively neglected it for so long, however, I feel that it is too significant a player to be ignored any longer.

Development deals with the person and with life, it is in some ways a lived philosophy. Faith also deals with the person and with life and so is also a lived philosophy. It seems to me they can no longer be perceived to be mutually exclusive.

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