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Leah SELINGER

The Forgotten Factor: The Uneasy Relationship between Religion and Development

Religion has been ignored and sidelined in international development theory and strategy, supported by the discourse of social theory during the development era. The dominance of modernization and secularization theories has been key to this marginalization, but if, as recently asserted, we are to recognize the impact and influence of culture on development strategy, we must account for the specific role of religion in this. This article argues that religion is a defining force within culture, and asks if in a postmodern era, where religion seems to be impacting on all areas of society, religion can be addressed; and if so, how this should be managed. By exploring the roots of development and its historical avoidance of religion, the article seeks to determine a course of action that encourages the social significance of religion to be recognized and handled in a constructive manner.

Key words: development · international development · post-development · post-modern · religion · sociology of religion

Durant la décennie du développement, la religion a été ignorée tant par les théoriciens que par les agents du développement international. Ils étaient encouragés en ce sens par le discours sociologique de l'époque qui était dominé par les théories de la modernité et de la sécularisation. Ce n'est que récemment que celui-ci a fait valoir l'importance et l'influence de la culture dans les stratégies développementalistes. Par conséquent, on a également reconsidéré le rôle spécifique qu'y tient aussi la religion. L'auteure défend le point de vue que la religion est une force particulière à l'intérieur de la culture. Elle se demande si, à l'ère postmoderne, au moment où la religion semble marquer toutes les sphères de la société, elle pourrait à nouveau être prise en compte, et si oui, comment arriver à la gérer. En retournant aux origines des théories du développement et à la négligence qu'elles manifestèrent dans le passé vis-à-vis de la religion, l'auteure tente de préciser ce qu'elles devraient faire pour reconnaître la signification sociale de la religion et la traiter de façon constructive.

Mots-clés: développement · développement international · post-développement · post-moderne · religion · la sociologie de la religion

Introduction

Economic growth has remained at the heart of international development theory, yet the failure of development strategy is strikingly obvious, with increased international debt unemployment and rising poverty rates. While historical, political and economic factors such as the 1980s debt crisis, civil wars and trade restrictions have no doubt contributed to this fact, I argue that of equal, if not more, importance in explaining the failure of development is the absence of the recognition of culture, and more specifically religion, in development theory and strategy.

The proposal to incorporate cultural factors in development is not new. Since the late 1970s there has been a growing recognition that economic development alone has not, and cannot, provide the kind of results that the international financial institutions and development agencies had predicted. Despite statements such as that made by James D. Wolfensohn, the current President of the World Bank, that “However you define culture, it is increasingly clear that those of us working in the field of sustainable development ignore it at our peril” in 1999 (WFDD, 2001), culture remains an ambiguous and peripheral construct in the development arena. The extent to which cultural recognition has been taken on and incorporated in development theory is minimal, and in the most part “culture” is seen as a side issue to economic growth; “culture” is rarely defined and explored in any great depth.

In not unpacking culture, social and political scientists have excluded a vital dimension in social theory that applies directly and importantly to development theory. Culture can thus be defined as the social, political, economic and religious systems that interact to create society. I argue that religion, as a central and definitive element of culture, has to be addressed if development is to be both successful and sustainable. As noted by Marshall (1999: 3–4):

The world of religion has been an unacknowledged and often unseen force for many development practitioners in the past . . . Yet religion is such a pervasive and vital force, that the tendency to ignore it has had important and even grave consequences in some situations.

I will explore why and how religion has been marginalized in the development discourse by the dominance of modernization theory and the centrality of economic growth, before moving on to discuss how it is now being taken into account, and discussing the pitfalls of the current position on its inclusion. I will analyse the way that development strategists and theorists have defined, used and ignored religion before seeking to answer the question of whether religion, as a social construct, can be accepted and incorporated into development strategy in a “postmodern” era.

The term “religion” can be as ambiguous as “culture”, but I will define it here to avoid confusion at a later stage. I accept Haynes’ argument that there are two ways that one can understand “religion”, first, in a spiritual sense, where one is concerned with transcendence, sacredness and ultimacy, and

second, in a material sense, where religion defines and unifies social, political or community-based groups or movements (Haynes, 2002). With relation to development, I argue that it is this second sense of religion, as a social and political construct, that has the most to offer development theories. Thus, in this article I will explore how religion in this respect has been used in the development discourse. As I shall suggest, when religion has been taken into account, it is often under its spiritual guise, and I argue that this has served to reinforce the existing situation of religion as marginal and subjective, not as a significant and defining factor in the successes of development.

Religion in Development: The Missing Paradigm?

Religion and development are rarely, if at all, included in the academic or practical literature within the development discourse, but why is this the case? Why have development studies historically avoided the issue of religion? In this first section I will discuss the dearth of material on the relationship between religion and development, analysing the way it has, and has not, been approached before moving on to why this is the case, arguing that modernization theory has had a great deal of influence in this domain. The relationship between the secularization thesis and modernization theory and the role they have had on development strategy will then be discussed, demonstrating the impact of economic theory and individualism to date.

The absence of literature concerning religion and development is noted by Ver Beek, who argues that the subject of religion is consciously avoided by the development discourse, despite its prevalence and importance in the vast majority of developing countries. Ver Beek's search for articles detailing the relationship between development and religion and/or spirituality turned up no references in three major development journals between 1982 and 1998. In asking a number of development agencies for their policy on religion, he also found that they tried to avoid the subject in an official capacity (Ver Beek, 2002). While Ver Beek's study was limited and in no way provides conclusive evidence, my own research, using electronic databases and searching the web pages of the United Nations, the UK Government Department for International Development (DFID) and the World Bank, found similar results, with very few articles addressing both topics. While there is a slowly growing awareness of the significance of religion, those articles that are concerned with the relationship between religion and development often avoid involving religion in the construction and critique of development strategy.

The limited literature available demonstrates the different ways in which the development community chooses to view religion. First, religion is regarded as an institutional structure to be used to further the aims of a project; second, religion is noted as an element of "culture", often impeding development; in its third guise, religion is regarded as personal motivation, a force that development can harness to support its ideological aims; and finally, religion and development are often combined in the belief that

development cannot exist without a spiritual dimension, that is, economic development will not succeed if people are not spiritually developed.

Rarely is religion (as a practical and social institution) associated with development as a positive factor in the implementation process of practice or strategies, and even less often is it referred to with regard to helping to construct development theory. Ver Beek offers us a number of reasons for the historical avoidance of religion in the majority of development literature. These include the fear of imposing an outsider perspective, an apprehension of creating conflict, a lack of precedent for addressing the issue, and finally social science's dissociation from the "spiritual", reinforced by the Western dichotomization of sacred and secular, dominant in political and sociological thought (Ver Beek, 2002). Marshall supports Ver Beek's and my own observations of the lack of literature available on this area, stating "the world of religion has been an unacknowledged and often unseen force for many development practitioners in the past". She endorses the reasons proposed by Ver Beek, and argues further that the deeply engrained tradition of the separation of state and religion, based on the association of religion with the spiritual and the state with the material, has institutionalized the divide between religion and development (Marshall, 1999: 1–5).

The Roots and Impact of Modernization

Within the social sciences, religion has had a marginal status since the 1920s, when sociology moved away from its originally strong interest in religion (as characterized by Marx, Weber and Durkheim), accepting the thesis that religion was increasingly less significant sociologically. The idea underpinning this institutional and academic marginalization of religion is that of modernization theory; highly influential in the social sciences, including the development school, and focused on economic growth as the defining factor in "development". Herbert (2003: 8) argues that religion has often been "ignored or explained away" by mainstream social science as there is an assumption in the West (not just among academics, but among the population as a whole) that religion is no longer required in a developed and "modern" society.

Herbert (2003) and Heelas (1998) both observe how the changing structures of day-to-day life, with increased urbanization, the division of time between work and home life, and the separation of the church from the state, were instrumental in the construction of modernity. Thus, the modernization paradigm was deeply related to the economic development of society and the way it sought to work as a liberal democracy; culture, social structures and religion were marginal to the economic growth of the nation.

However, in the early 20th century both Max Weber and Emile Durkheim sought to place religion within this framework of rationalism and argued that religious change was central to economic development and thus could not be completely discarded. Instead it should be present in a marginal capacity to the other dimensions of society, as a private motivating force for the

individual (Towler, 1974). This idea is explored in Weber's seminal text, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5/1930), in which he presents the thesis that Protestantism (and most significantly Calvinism within this) inspired a "spirit of capitalism" unseen in other religious traditions which "stand in the way" of the development of rational capitalism (Weber, 1904–5/1930; Hamilton, 2000).

Weber does not argue that capitalism arose from the Protestant ethic, or that a non-Protestant culture would be unable to adopt these values, but rather that the Protestant religious tradition supported and promoted the economic system, creating the success of the capitalist system through its qualities of individualism and entrepreneurship. Weber concludes by arguing that religion would be usurped by the forces of capitalism as a driving force for society (Weber, 1904–5/1930). His thesis has, unsurprisingly, been widely criticized on the grounds that it is dismissive of other religious traditions and that it had little academic grounding, leading to misinterpretations and mistakes. Yet as Hamilton (2000) states, "it is just as difficult to demolish Weber's thesis as it is to substantiate it".

Weber's thesis is very much inherent in the arguments made by Herbert (2003) and Heelas (1998) (among others) who note how religion was beginning to become marginalized, as an individualistic ideology, which supported the emerging capitalist society. They argue that in the urban, "modern" setting religion was slowly being separated from the other spheres of society, no longer functioning as a binding force between groups. In short, society became secular. Falk (1988) argues that while "the separation of religion and politics was almost inconceivable in premodern experience", in the modern era religion was becoming marginal. As Herbert (2003: 35) says, "modernisation is at the heart of secularisation theory: it is the deep structure leading to the long-term decline of the social significance of religion". Secularization theory and modernization therefore go hand in hand (see Dobbelaare, 1999, for an insight and references on this vast topic).

Implicit in the various discussions surrounding secularization is the argument put forward by Esposito and Watson (2000: 17–18), that modernity has challenged the idea of religion, pushing it away from the public sphere into the private arena: "Modernity basically has often represented so much confidence in man's powers, theoretical and applied, that any reference to the transcendent or spiritual was felt to be redundant", thus serving to change dramatically the way the state responded to and perceived religion. The secularization thesis has thus fed into the general discourse of social and political science, and can go a long way towards explaining the absence of literature that deals with religion as an integral part of development strategy. However, the theory of secularization is one that is ethnocentric, Western and widely discounted as a valuable or accurate tool with which to make sense of social movements in late modernity. The fact that religion remains a highly prevalent factor in a globalized and "modern" world serves to disprove the theory as it stands.

Development Theory and Modernization

I will turn to the perceived global resurgence of religion, and the way it has been understood, below, but how has modernization influenced international development to date? While development can be traced back to the days of the empire, and the influence of Christian mission in the colonial countries, development theory, as an academic discipline, did not emerge until much later and has since gone through many guises in its evolution. Rooted in the colonial era and a belief in the primacy of industrialization in the 19th century, it encompassed classical economic theories that saw economic growth as essential to development. By the 1980s, however, with the rise of neo-liberal economic policy, globalization, the minimalization of the state and the growth of the corporate sector, it was clear that the significance of economic growth still maintained a pivotal role in development theory. These factors caused an impasse in the development paradigm during this decade as theorists came to realize that, despite the various movements within the school, modernization theory had stayed the course.

Weber's Protestant ethic denotes religion as a private and personal matter that can assist economic change in a way that benefits the individual and their place in society, and this theory is still very much in evidence today. The concept fits neatly into the modernization paradigm, placing religion outside the public sphere and supporting the centrality of economic development. These factors have made room for the individualistic ethic that is necessary to ensure that a liberal market economy is able to succeed. This in turn has directly influenced international development theory and strategy, which has retained modernization theory as the dominant ideology, supported by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the vast majority of other international development agencies. This lasting dominance of modernization theory has been seen in recent years with the advent of structural adjustment programmes and the more recent Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, which adhere to a strict interpretation of the Washington Consensus. Thus, modernization, the centrality of economics and the consequential marginality of religion have persisted. Nonetheless, I will explore the argument that we are presently seeing a religious resurgence taking place in the new millennium, and that development, along with other social sciences, must respond to this in what could be considered a "postmodern" era.

Into the Postmodern: Making Space for Religion

Modernization theory has had a significant impact on development strategy, supported by the individualistic "Protestant ethic", a belief in the dominance of capitalism and economic growth and the subsequent marginalization of religion. However, I now seek to account for the perceived religious resurgence that has been taking place since the 1980s around the globe, asking if we are approaching a postmodern era, and if so, should religion then be accounted for as a social force, central to the development of humanity?

By exploring the different ways in which religion has manifested itself, in both the public and academic arenas, I will argue that there is a need for a shift in the way that religion is understood in order to apply it to development theory and strategy.

The idea that we are heading towards, or are even already in, a postmodern era emerged in the early 1990s. However, the term is both ambiguous and not widely accepted as applicable in the contemporary age. Flanagan (1996) argues that the concept “postmodern” “denotes a mood of ending, of privatisation and of removal from traditions, an opportunity expressed in globalisation and technology, but also a denial, a feeling of excess and emptiness that nullifies the gift of commodification”, suggesting that there has been a shift from modernity to a new era, while Heelas argues that there is no single authority of “truth”; only a kind of “mix and match” ethic where people are able to transcend institutional boundaries in order to find what ‘works for them’ in a rational yet random fashion combining symbols and frameworks (Heelas, 1998). The idea that in a postmodern era religion would therefore have a greater part to play in society would appear to have a degree of salience. Yet this has not meant that religion has automatically taken a more prominent place in social theory. As Beckford (1996: 30) argues, “relatively few accounts of postmodernity and its variants [i.e. high modernity or new modernity] have paid much attention to religion”. Since Beckford wrote this, however, religion has taken an increasingly prominent role in the global political arena, as Thomas, writing in 2000, argues: “the Western culture of modernity and the institutions of international society embedded in it are being challenged by the global resurgence of religion and cultural pluralism in international relations” (2000b: 815–816).

Religion in the News

Haynes argues that since the early 1990s there has been a perceived “unsecularisation” of the global community. The end of the Cold War and a new global era have served to inspire increased interaction between religion and politics, often serving to reduce the church/state dichotomy inherent in modernism. Haynes notes how in the post-communist countries, Russia, India and the US, the rise of religious tensions or religious nationalism has been seen. In addition, he highlights the rise of Islamism since the Iranian revolution in 1979, now spreading across the globe from Somalia to Nigeria to Indonesia (Haynes, 2002). In the new millennium we have already seen two key conflicts demonstrating the escalating tension between extremist Islam and the West. Ebaugh (2002) noted that “in the months following [September 11th], a relatively unknown religious minority in the United States—Muslims—and the practice of Islam become the focus of news, media, books, panel discussions, classes, sermons and mosque open houses”. The recent war in Iraq, where Islam and its different factions have been considered in relation to the redevelopment of the country, has provoked public

discussion about religion in countries all over the world, not just those with majority Islamic populations.

This awareness of religion is, however, not just something we can see with reference to Islamic states. The US, one of (if not the) most “modern” states today, is also widely considered to be one of the most religious states in the contemporary world (Warner, 1993) and the current Bush administration is supported primarily by the new Christian Right. This conservative Protestant coalition has been gradually influencing government policy in the US since the 1970s. Kohut et al. (2000) argue that although the constitutional barrier between church and state in the US remains intact, the boundary between religion and politics has becoming increasingly blurred since the Carter administration. Two recent examples of this have been the Bush Faith-Based Initiative in 2002 and the withdrawal in the same year of all international aid to agencies that either support or provide abortion services.

A Reaction to Secularization

Thomas argues that “the Western culture of modernity and the institutions of international society embedded in it are being challenged by the global resurgence of religion and cultural pluralism in international relations” (Thomas, 2000b: 815–816). If this is the case, and religion is making a significant impact on the development of societies in the 21st century, why is this so? Dawson (1998) notes how the “perspective that still dominates most of sociology, especially sociological reflections on the place of religion in a post-modern and globalised world” is one that sees new forms of religion as the creation of secularization, a response indicating a need for spiritual reassurance. Yet to what extent can we attribute the resurgence to a reaction to secularization? Jurgensmeyer regards the rise of religion as a central part of identity formation and a reaction to secularism and the modern era. He argues that a “new cold war” is emerging in the postmodern era between secular forces and “culture-based politics”. This has been ignited by “the rise of new economic forces, a crumbling of old empires and the discrediting of communism, but also by a resurgence of parochial identities based on ethnic and religious alliances”. In agreement with the points made above, Juergensmeyer argues that secularism as a Western construct has been affiliated to a Protestant belief system that seeks to “separate the religious and temporal spheres”. He thus argues that when the secular, modernist movement encounters other cultures a conflict will occur, as secularization has failed to accommodate religion, a force, he says, which is “not easily placated” (Juergensmeyer, 1993: 1–2).

This view is shared by Thomas, who says that “the global resurgence of religion is a response to the widespread crisis in secular materialism in both the Western industrialised countries and in the third world” (Thomas, 2000a: 38). Thomas explains this remark by arguing that there have been different reasons for the religious resurgence in the global North and South. He argues that in the industrialized North secular liberalism has forced its own crisis of secularism, using the idea that civil society would be eroded in

the modern era, and a new form of moral behavioural codes would be provided by a rational belief system. However, Thomas argues that this has not happened, and in fact religious traditions are ultimately necessary to provide a source of morality especially in the postmodern era. Therefore society is beginning to reject the modernist idea of secularism, doing so in parallel with the growing disillusionment of the liberal state and its economic policies (Thomas, 2000a).

However, it is not just in the industrialized world that we are seeing the longevity and reconstruction of religion. Thomas argues that in developing countries the failure of development and the consequent disillusionment with neo-liberal economic policies have resulted in “dissatisfaction with the project of the postcolonial secular state and [have led to a] conflict between religious nationalism and secular nationalism . . . in the 1990s” (Thomas, 2000a: 49). Thomas suggests that the resurgence of religion has become part of the search for ‘roots’ identity for those in the post-colonial states, as they reject the modernization paradigm as an external force and seek an “authentic” alternative to the failed policies of the West. In a second article also published in 2000, Thomas reiterates these ideas and argues that religion has become politicized by the “crisis of modernity” and its failure to produce development. Interestingly the three Southern countries he highlights as embracing modernization early in the 20th century (Egypt, India and Indonesia) are all facing the rise of religious nationalism today.

But is this “religious resurgence” simply a reaction to secularization and the modern state? Lyon proposes that we ask, if secularization was just an idea that applied only to modernism, does it not therefore require reassessment in this “post”-modern age? He argues that, while postmodernity does provide us with a real opportunity to reassess the secularization thesis that accompanied modernism, we must not simply swap the critique of religion for a critique of the secular. Lyon emphasizes that the re-entrance of religion into the construction of society must be evaluated as more than simply a reaction to modernization (Lyon, 1996). How then should we understand what appears to be a new era for religion?

The Resurgence of Religion

Recent events indicate that religion is certainly a factor to be considered in any study or policy concerning social development in the coming years. Ebaugh (2002) argues that there are four theoretical areas that have in fact brought religion back into the social science discourse, namely, social movements, civic culture, globalization and rational choice theory.

Social Movements

Dawson (1998) recognizes the importance of social movements in two forms, new religious movements and new age spiritualities. She notes how these have grown in size and significance over the past 30 years, allowing for a “pronounced religious individualism”, a pragmatic attitude and holistic

world views among their adherents. This move away from institutional religion has mirrored the development of society from a rigid structure in the modern era, where religion remained a private matter, to a more flexible option, better suited to the postmodern subject.

Civic Culture

This in turn has fed the re-emergence of a civic culture that recognizes religion, and Hervieu-Léger (2003) argues that it is a response to the need for greater social cohesion in the individualistic late modern age. By creating new forms of community (such as online groups and cultural networks), new religious movements are allowing people to reaffirm their own beliefs and seek approval and validity from their peers in order to “stabilize” their belief system. This idea can be proved by those countries that have experienced the paradigm of “development”. In Latin America and parts of Africa, religion has become more influential, not only on a political level but as a way to make sense of the post-developed world people have found themselves in.

Laurent and Mary (2001) argue that in Africa religiosity has not been denied by the modern era; rather, religion has been re-engaged in the form of new religious movements and a synchronization of previously disparate forms of religion. Gifford (2003) notes how Africa’s “new Christianity” is marked by the emergence of numerous churches, adapting the faith to suit the attitude and atmosphere created by the development era. Gifford argues that “these churches are about *this* life, not noticeably about an after-life”, and in a culture of development and aid workers, is this not inevitable? Latin American new religious movements also echo this process of identity formation and an embracement of a new form of religion that understands the culture of the day (see Parker Gumucio, 2002). Religion, rather than disappearing as may have been expected, is working alongside development, taking its ideas, structure and concepts and thriving in this new world.

Globalization

Globalization, Ebaugh’s third theoretical shift, has made religion easier to access, in its many new and old forms, argues Beyer (1990: 2): “the global system corrodes inherited or constructed cultural and personal identities; yet also encourages the creation and revitalization of particular identities as a way of gaining control over systematic power”. This idea supports the postmodern view of religion as a new and changeable force, responding to the needs of the individual, as a private, personal way to understand their society. Although the need to recreate community in the modern or post-modern world has also been associated with the rise of religious traditionalism, or ‘fundamentalism’, Haynes claims that this religious extremism is only one of the ways in which globalization has contributed to the religious resurgence; arguing that it “is a period of wider religious reinterpretation, where popular religion challenges religious organisations”. In fact, he argues that the international resurgence of religion is a result of globalization and the

ability to see the impact of religion on politics and society on a global scale. Thus what we are seeing is not actually a religious resurgence, because religion never went away. It is simply now, in the postmodern era, that religion has the opportunity to link itself to the political and impact on people's lives once again (Haynes, 1997).

The idea which underpins Haynes's thesis is that religion is not only a central part of identity formation in the postmodern era, but a means by which to "pursue personal objectives" and enter the political sphere as part of a larger group (Haynes, 2002). Haynes thus agrees with Hervieu-Léger, that religion provides a way for people to unite in the individualistic late modern era. Religion no longer acts as a source of communal, financial and moral stability, but is about the creation of identity, a factor that favours the principles of modernization. Thus religion has been able to fit neatly into the postmodern identity construction discourse.

Rational Choice Theory

Ebaugh's final element is the contentious "rational choice theory"; i.e. people actively choosing to take on religion as a central part of their individual and collective identity (Ebaugh, 2002). This idea is reflected in the concept of the "new voluntarism" in the US, as defined by Warner. He argues that because of the institutional division between church and state in the US, religion(s) have been able to thrive as part of the "subcultures of [society's] many constituents". Since modern America's inception, religious groups and organizations have therefore been required to secure congregations in the face of religious pluralism, treating the discourse as a marketplace and resulting in an overtly religious society (Warner, 1993). Yet this example is a highly culturally relative one and we cannot effectively use these ideas to understand the significance of religion in the vast majority of developing countries.

Religious Identity as Individual

These four different elements, which highlight the prevalence of religion in the contemporary era, also maintain its position as an individualistic and private element of identity. The need to construct society is inherently based on a personal need, and the idea that one can choose a religious identity, while possibly "postmodern", is also fundamentally individualistic and follows the Weberian, ethnocentric outlook discussed previously. This is demonstrated well by a project entitled *Religion, Political Economy and Society* which was established at Harvard University's Weatherhead Centre for International Affairs in 2001 to examine the relationship between religion and economic development, very much based on a Weberian outlook, and supporting many of Warner's claims.¹ Yet this study appears to suffer too from the same ethnocentric outlook; using factors such as a belief in heaven to gauge religious impact on economic growth, it attempts to quantify qualitative data, and in doing so fails to take into account different belief systems around the world (Barro and McCleary, 2002; *The Connection*,

2002²). The importance of communal belief is marginalized and instead the focus is on the individual.

These arguments have focused heavily on the construction of individual identities, but in order to fully understand the place of religion we must attempt to put it back in society. I will discuss the importance of recognizing religion as a part of culture, and as significant to economic development, asking if we can move away from an individualist understanding of religion and towards a more open, relative view of it that recognizes the potential impact on development strategy.

Religion Matters: Getting it Right

The prevalence and acceptance of modernism and secularization that have marginalized religion from society have been noted above, and in turn have, to a certain extent, characterized the preceding discussion, focusing it on individual identity formation. However, by assessing the relationship between religion (as an element of culture) and social and economic development, I will argue that social theory needs to progress from the current view of religion as something private, and make it a public issue instead. In exploring the way in which these ideas have been adopted by the post-development movement and examining the World Faiths Development Dialogue, a forum initiated by the World Bank in 1998 to facilitate dialogue between the world religions and development practitioners, I will determine how these ideas are being expressed in practice.

In the past few years the academic community has started to recognize the significance of religion. Yet to what extent does this new recognition in texts provide a positive outlook on religion, and how can its existence feed into development theory? In one of the recent texts that starts to unpack “culture”, Grondona (2000) advocates a kind of neo-Protestant ethic, arguing that development will only be sustainable if a culture has a value system that favours economic growth. Grondona believes that economic development is a cultural process and argues that society chooses whether it develops or not through the cultural constructions present. He regards the development cycle as vulnerable in those cultures that do not possess “intrinsic” economic values, as people will stop working for economic success once it has been achieved. Unsurprisingly he supports Weber’s ideas about religion and notes that those societies which favour the individual over the collective, encourage heresy (as the “questioning mind invokes development”) and value the virtues of punctuality and efficiency over those of love, courage and justice are far more favourable to sustainable development. While Grondona is recognizing religion, he is also encouraging the view that religion must be marginal to society, thus ignoring the issues discussed in the previous section that highlight the prevalence of religion around the world in the late modern era.

In the same volume, Inglehart (2000) suffers from the same unwavering confidence in Weber. This belief underpins his argument that, while development may well signal a move away from traditional practices and beliefs, the

value systems of the originating culture, be it Protestant, Islamic or Confucian, will persist (as advocated in the Weberian tradition). Inglehart builds on Huntington's argument (1993) that the world is "divided into eight or nine major civilizations", noting that the cultural values inherent in these civilizations were largely shaped by religious traditions (Inglehart, 2000). Inglehart's work is in the same vein as that carried out by Barro and the *Religion, Political Economy and Society* Project at Harvard using data from the World Values Surveys to relate economic development to religiosity. In constructing 'cultural maps' he implies that for a nation to be economically developed it should reject traditional values (including religious beliefs) and "survivalist" tendencies, while arguing that religious heritage is central to a nation's potential for development. Inglehart concludes that "religious traditions seem to have had an enduring impact on . . . contemporary value systems", yet also highlights communism, colonial ties and colonization as additional factors in the creation of cultural values (Inglehart, 2000: 81–86). Interestingly, Lawrence Harrison argues that these other factors could also be linked to religion, once again supporting the Weberian thesis. He asserts that those states colonized by countries whose cultures were sympathetic to the Protestant ethic (e.g. India) have developed better economically than those colonized by Catholic countries (e.g. Latin America) (*The Connection*, 2002).

This recognition of religion as a significant element in social identity construction is to be welcomed, but it remains rooted in the Western tradition which regards religion as a personal force, inspiring individuals to make decisions based on historical faith, not on the role of religion in its social capacity. Thomas (2000b: 815–816) takes up this point, and calls for religion to be taken seriously and to be re-understood as a social factor in the post-modern age: "We risk misunderstanding the global resurgence of religion if we apply a modern concept of religion to non-Western societies". He further argues that the Western notion of religion is based on the rise of modernity, where religion (as equivalent to community) was privatized in order to facilitate the creation of the nation state: "Many, if not most, non-Western societies and communities have still not entirely made, or are struggling to make [the] transition" from religion as communal to religion as individualistic. Thomas is thus calling for a "social understanding of religion" in social theory. This would facilitate a move on from the rejection of religion as getting in the way of "helping the poor or promoting development", and towards an understanding of the recognition of the positives religion has to offer (Thomas, 2000b: 823–824, 841).

A Social Understanding of Religion

Thomas' arguments are, however, not new; they were made by Karl Polanyi in his book *The Great Transformation* in 1944. Polanyi's work critiques the ideal of market liberalism as it emerged from the neo-liberal ideologies of the 1920s. Yet its publishing date, at an intense period in the capitalist versus communist debate, meant that the text had little room for impact

and was largely ignored until the end of the cold war (Block, 2001). Polanyi sought to expose the myth of the self-regulating economy, arguing that government intervention would always be necessary as market liberalism could never fulfil society's demands (Polanyi, 2001; Stiglitz, 2001). Behind these arguments is Polanyi's central thesis that the idea that the economy can right itself solely through the market forces of supply and demand is an abstract concept, an unachievable utopia. He argues that the economy is embedded in society, subordinate to political, social and religious relations which provide support networks that will ultimately prevent market liberalism from working. Polanyi proposed that people's need to prevent themselves from economic shocks will mean that the ups and downs associated with a liberal economy would not be tolerated (Block, 2001). This in turn is based on Polanyi's distinction between real commodities (items that can be produced for sale) and fictitious commodities (such as land, labour and money). Polanyi argues that we cannot treat these two categories in the same way, first, for moral reasons and, second, because the state must always be involved in the regulation of fictitious commodities, thus making the disembedded economy impossible (Block, 2001; Polanyi, 2001).

Polanyi argued in 1944 that if we were to continue pushing for the unachievable liberal economy, two things could happen: we would see either social disintegration, possibly manifested as conflicts, or further embeddedness as a reactionary process (Block, 2001), and it would appear that both elements have been proved to a certain extent. Stiglitz argues that the poor and disadvantaged have been left unsupported by the rapid transformation in society since the coming of the industrial age; "rapid transformation destroys old coping mechanisms, old safety nets, while it creates a new set of demands, before new coping mechanisms are developed". Thus, he argues, in contemporary society we are seeing the demise of social capital, citing Russia as a key example of this process (Stiglitz, 2001: xi). The second of Polanyi's predictions can also be seen around the world today, and Block proposes the example of global activists who oppose globalization, the IMF and the WTO among other examples of global market forces (Block, 2001). Ultimately Polanyi recognized that economic development cannot take place in a vacuum, and must relate to the society in which it acts. In the majority of developing countries this is vital to the success of any development policy. Social capital, cultural relativism and social structures, which will govern the impact of economic policy, as we have seen above, are intrinsically related to world views and thus religion is central to any progression in development theory.

Yet despite Polanyi's arguments and their contemporary relevance, there have been very few occasions when his thesis has been taken into account; "Economic science and economic historians have come to recognise the validity of Polanyi's key contentions. But public policy—particularly as reflected in the Washington consensus doctrines concerning how the developing world and the economies in transition should make *their* great transformations—seems all too often not to have done so" (Stiglitz, 2001; italics in original). However, Thomas perceives that in international policy we will begin to see religion having a more significant effect, with the rise of populist

politics and a more assertive voice being created in developing countries (Thomas, 2000b). This is supported by Douglas Johnston, the President of the recently established International Centre for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD). Johnston examines the role that religion can play in international diplomacy but his arguments can be directly applied to the construction of development strategy. While he agrees with the argument above that “civilizations” are often rooted in religion and that it plays an important part in conflicts around the world, he also challenges this as an absolute, arguing that cultural and religious identities can be overcome by politics and by increased globalization. Johnston is therefore proposing an increased recognition of religion in government and agency policy, but wants this to occur with respect to, and in the context of, political situations, placing the religious back in society. He argues that a failure to do so in the past has “rendered the West ineffective both in dealing with religious differences and in combating demagogues who adeptly manipulate religious labels to their own purposes” (Johnston, 2001: para. 7).

Johnston asserts that this failure of the West to recognize religion has put it at a disadvantage in its ability to respond to the growing religious and political tensions around the world today. He gives the example of Iran, noting how the US neglected the “religious dynamics underlying the 1979 Iranian revolution”, rejecting early CIA advice to examine the religious situation as “sociology”, and therefore a time-wasting exercise (2001: paras 18–19). He uses his article to make five points addressing the relationship between religion/culture and economic globalization, all of which he argues should be addressed in international relations and diplomacy (and, I argue, development strategy). First, he argues that any international policy must be aware of the role of religion in creating the international order, that is, how world-views are central to the way nations and peoples interact with each other. Second, there must be recognition that even international religions can be (and mostly are) culturally relative, so that while some central elements of a religious tradition may be evident, others will be highly specific to the local community.

Third, Johnston calls for, as I have above, a re-assessment of the “modern”, and a recognition that not all nations have made the same historical transition from the traditional, and that in fact the process is often not linear. His fourth point highlights both the positive and negative aspects of the use of technology and communications in developing and developed countries. Johnston argues that while the increased use of information technology can unite different groups, and those within communities (i.e. diasporas), it can also serve to accentuate socio-economic differences. He also asks us to be aware of the speed of information delivery, arguing that “sound byte” culture often provides inadequate information; as he states, “communications have become faster, but understanding takes time”. Finally, he argues that religion should be regarded not only as a divisive force, but as one that can ultimately help and unite people, and that “the world can no longer afford to overlook the significant contribution that religious and spiritual factors can bring to resolving conflict” (Johnston, 2001: paras 43–45).

Post-development: A Step Forward?

Thomas (2000a) agrees with Johnston, and argues that liberalism needs to recognize the importance of religion in a multicultural, international society. There is a need to see it as constructive, not restrictive, perhaps providing an ethical dimension to liberalism and capitalism. These ideas have recently been recognized by development theorists through the post-development movement that emerged in the 1990s. This stemmed from the impasse of the preceding decade and sought to reject the development paradigm outright on the grounds that it had not succeeded in its aims, and in many cases had exacerbated problems of poverty and inequality. Despite the universal desire to discard development by the various theorists involved in the movement, there have been a number of different approaches to this policy. Academics have taken environmentalist standpoints, for example, or chosen to focus on Foucault's principle of discourse, on which a significant amount of post-development theory rests.

However, it is the work of Esteva that has the most to offer us in this context as he follows in part the work of Polanyi. Esteva argues that the post-development movement needs to reject economic principles as the foundation of any development, focusing instead on grassroots movements that are based on local traditions, culture and resources, an argument developed in his book with Prakash, and termed "grassroots postmodernism". In this later text he sustains the idea of a "post-economic" society, in addition challenging the ideas of universality and globalization (Esteva, 1993; Esteva and Prakash, 1998). While this is a positive move towards progressing development strategy away from the centrality of economic growth and taking account of social factors such as religion, we must not forget that post-development seeks to reject development altogether. In practice this is not a feasible option, however, and there have been a number of critical studies of the post-development paradigm, generally concluding, "if the post-development school cannot provide a clear model of how social change can be effected, what it can usefully contribute is an increased awareness of the social context of discourse formation" (Storey, 2000: 44). Thus, culture, and the way religion has fed into it, are highly significant for successful development to take place, and while it is by no means wrong to see religion as a spiritual force, in the context of development strategy and in seeking to influence its agencies we must focus on the social and structural side to religion.

Religion and Development in Practice: A Case Study

Limited space allows me to only briefly mention a case study. The *World Faiths Development Dialogue* (WFDD), based in the UK, stemmed from James D. Wolfensohn (President of the World Bank) and Dr George Carey (the then Archbishop of Canterbury) who agreed that "the definition and practice of desirable development must have regard to spiritual, ethical, environmental, cultural and social considerations" (WFDD, n.d.: 7). Since its inception, the WFDD has evolved from an "informal network" of faith

communities to have a minimal office that allows the organization to coordinate its aims and objectives of facilitating dialogue between religion and development (WFDD, n.d.: 7). The literature produced by the organization (almost exclusively available on its website www.wfdd.org.uk) focuses predominantly on the way that the “multilaterals engage with religions on a national and international basis”. At this level, the WFDD is involved on a participatory not organizational basis, acting as an informal network of interested parties who may or may not contribute, rather than as a defining force in the evolution of the dialogue (WFDD, n.d.).

In making statements such as “moral and spiritual education—the teaching of the values embedded in those virtues—is the vital pre-requisite for development” (WFDD, 1999), I believe that the WFDD reinforces the idea that religion is something personal and private, and that development can only truly be achieved once individuals have attained a more developed value system within themselves. Thus, while the WFDD speaks of taking account of cultural values and practices, as well as social structures, it falls back on the idea that this is an individual decision that one must take, not something that people do because of the embeddedness of culture and society. Contrary to this, however, it must be restated that religion is ultimately a communal activity, and as noted above in the case of the post-modern society, in the early sociologists’ work, the idea that religion influences cultural development and Polanyi’s concept of embeddedness, religion cannot be removed from the community and made an individualistic, private issue.

Organizations like the WFDD have an important role to play in creating a space for religion in development strategy, but their focus on religion as a private and spiritual force, supported by what appears to be a lasting Protestant ethic and a continued search for conversion, will not be taken well by the development agencies. As noted at the very start of this article, Ver Beek has reported that one of the main reasons why development agencies avoid religion is its association with the “spiritual”. Therefore by having this very idea as intrinsic to its policies, the WFDD is isolating itself from the group it seeks to impact upon.

Conclusion

In sidelining religion in development theory, forcing an individualistic and private construction of beliefs and practice, development agencies, theorists and practitioners have excluded a vital dimension of culture and social identity. As discussed, the understanding of religion that has been expanded in the development discourse has focused on its use as a spiritual or institutional force, not as a cultural and social practice that governs worldviews and can directly influence social and economic development. I argue that the result of doing this, while perhaps unintentional, has in fact harmed the development process in its masking of the important role that religion has as a practical and cultural force.

The Weberian ethic has had a continued presence in development theory and places religion firmly in the private and individual domain, serving to deny the social role of religion in which it primarily exists outside the West. I argue that the reason for this is the prevalence of the belief that economic growth is the only path to true development. By ensuring that religion is kept outside the social and economic spheres, the forces of market liberalism are able to prosper, as social capital and cultural support networks (shown above to be dominantly rooted in religious communities) are kept at bay. It still remains to be seen how development agencies and organizations will cope with this rise of religion as a significant cultural factor in development. However, the tendency to maintain the position of religion as a marginal and private affair limits the impact of the studies and initiatives tackling religion in relation to development (such as the Harvard project and the WFDD).

If we are to refer back to the work of Barro, Inglehart and their contemporaries, we can see the practical applications of this ideology. The social science discourse values quantifiable data that can in turn demonstrate “results” from development projects. Yet religion as a qualitative factor has often been ignored. The theorists noted above have attempted to develop quantitative data through the measurement of “universal” beliefs, and thus have turned to the ‘spiritual’ dimension of religion in order to find supposedly cross-cultural categories. As argued by the WFDD, doing this is no easy task (WFDD, 1999), and I argue that in fact it is a futile one, simply avoiding the real impact that religion has in many developing countries where private belief in “heaven and hell” (to use some of Barro and McCleary’s categories) is irrelevant compared to the social and economic realities of religious identity.

If development is to be effective in the future, religion must be taken account of. While the work done in the past decade is a positive step forward, it has been pushed off course by the domination of the Protestant ethic and the ethnocentric belief that religion stands in the way of economic development. Thus, I argue that all attempts so far to include religion in development strategy have simply served to reinforce the dominant Western capitalist model that maintains the marginal role of religion, ensuring a suitable environment for market forces. Religion instead has to be accounted for in relation to political, cultural, environmental and economic forces. It must be understood as a force that will not dissolve with modernization and one that will impact on the way development is received and used by communities around the world. While there is growing recognition of Polanyi’s “embeddedness”, the extent to which economic growth remains dominant denies the impact the increased awareness of religious, social, political, cultural and environmental factors can have. The post-development movement and the postmodern era have opened up the opportunity for academics and development strategists to access the religious dimension of development, and recent world events have highlighted the need to be aware of religious identity. Things may be changing, but, I argue, they are not changing enough. Until we are able to appreciate truly the role of religion in this domain, rejecting the ultimate centrality of economic growth and instead

recognizing religion as a social force that cannot be separated from the economic and political spheres, international development strategy will not succeed in creating effective sustainable development.

NOTES

¹. See www.wcfia.harvard.edu/programs/paper (accessed 6 June 2003).

². *The Connection* is a talk radio show on Boston University Radio (WBUR). “The Return of the Protestant Ethic” was a show hosted by Dick Gordon and features Robert Barro and Lawrence Harrison discussing their own work and ideas relating to religion and economic development.

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