

Religion and Religious NGOs

Religion has often been excluded from academic studies on NGOs and their goals (Fountain 2013, Bush 2007, Lunn 2009). Even the idea of an NGO itself being a religious organization has been shunned by researchers leaving a gap in the literature of faith based organizations (Lunn 2009, 937). The recent realization that a holistic approach to development and aid may be more effective has driven these organizations to reconsider their strategies (Cordier 2009, 674). Many communities rely on religion as a source of leadership which can be leveraged by NGOs seeking to resolve conflicts (Gamarra 2000, 271). By including religion into the strategies and operations of an NGO, an NGO can potentially better serve the areas they are involved with (Lunn 2009, 939). This is not the first time NGOs have integrated with another type of organization. Humanitarian organizations have realized the added benefit of working with human rights advocacy groups albeit differences in organizational structure and target goals (Nelson and Dorsey 2009, 2016). The purpose of this literature review is to first identify the ways religions can be expressed by an NGO and second to understand how these expressions affect an NGO's ability to reach its goals.

The first step of understanding religion and NGOs is to define what a religious NGO or a faith based NGO might look like. Most of the literature reviewed discussed the gap in academia of religion in terms of development. The task of defining a faith based organization is made difficult because of an academic history of delegating religion to be a "development taboo" (Fountain 2013, 10). This trend began with the period of modernism in which economic success was associated with secularization (Lunn 2009, 939). Religion itself is often misunderstood and used interchangeably with related terms like faith (Lunn 2009, 937). There are two ways to approach religion in academia, as a substantivists or a functionalist (Fountain 2013, 11).

Substantivists strive to find a commonality in all religions which can lead to a constrictive definition of religion that excludes the acknowledgement of the integration of religious and non-religious elements of life (Fountain 2013, 12). Functionalist approach religion for its actual use in life (Fountain 2013, 11). Defining religion itself is important to the process of identifying religious NGOs because the more identifiable a religion is, the more it is seen as manageable (Fountain 2013, 12). Some have called for the complete separation of faith based organizations and NGOs entirely (Lunn 2009, 942). This stems from the existence of charitable aid from religious organizations long before the modern concept of development, for example, in the form of Christian missions (Lunn 2009, 943). Although these differences in categorization might seem marginal, they are important in analyzing whether faith based organizations have the tools to assist in development projects. The demand for this kind of research only grows with the greater publicity of religious NGOs.

Recently, academia has seen an influx in the study of religion in development instigated by the “new welfare regime” and a growing number of faith based organizations in Western countries (Lunn 2009, 941). Globalization, urbanization, and the development of communication technology all contributed social changes that created an opportunity for religions to adjust their identity from traditional values and perceptions (Cordier 2009, 674). Events like the Jubilee 2000 gave religious organizations the platform to showcase their potential in development goals, causing organizations like banks to reconsider their lack of religious policies (Lunn 2009, 942). The use of religion can often mean less efforts need to be made to change actual behavior or policy if there is a cultural match (Busby 2007, 266). Christianity is already a large part of American life therefore when this campaign to relieve foreign debt was framed in a way using Biblical imagery, it was easier for the general public to get onboard (Busby 2007, 266). This is

also an alternative for people who might not trust the government or who have embraced post-industrial values (Ahmed and Potter 2006, 21). During the 1970s, religious NGOs called out the secular government for their failure to achieve development goals contributing to the popularity of faith based organizations (Cordier 2009, 674). The shift in perception of religious NGOs stems from the growing realization of the complexity of development (Fountain 2013, 16). Lunn goes so far to say that the inclusion of religion in development is necessary in order for organizations to be “viable and successful in coming decades” (Lunn 2009, 937). There are many elements of a religious NGO to consider. It is important to first understand the reasoning of why religious NGOs are excluded from many development discussions.

Some scholars believe that religion has been unjustly marginalized because of a misunderstanding but some scholars will point toward the history of religion as a reason why religion should not be included in any development studies (Lunn 2009, 948). Religion during the European colonial era was used as a strategy to “correct” those who were “uncivilized” (Lunn 2009, 945). During the 20th century, Western countries continued to divide the public and private spheres of their lives, with religion existing within the private sphere (Lunn 2009, 940). Scholars followed this trend and Western scholars became less inclined to study the intersection of religion with anything deemed to exist within the public sphere (Lunn 2009, 940). A divide began to form as Western scholars looked down on Eastern scholars that chose to incorporate religion into studies involving the public sphere (Lunn 2009, 940). Because of the domination of Western thought in academia, civil society is often framed to highlight the individual rather than addressing traditional forms of association, especially in places like Africa where there are religions other than Christianity (Kleibl and Munck 2016, 204). Too often is the Western norm of civil society forced onto African countries leading to an exclusion of “uncivilized” elements,

including local religions (Kleibl and Munck 2016, 206). In a field that is already obsessed with classification, this trend in academia is already skewing the world's perception religion and its overlaps with all parts of life (Bush 2007, 1646).

In practice, this can provoke conflict. A large portion of the literature reviewed framed religion as being the instigator or the solution to conflict. NGOs in Mozambique with goals to encourage democracy failed to address social issues like poverty leading to a decrease in quality of life for many (Kleibl and Munck 2016, 208). This is in large part due to the exclusion of local problem solving mechanism, like witchcraft (Kleibl and Munck 2016, 209). When framed in terms of a solution, witchcraft in Mozambique is used to identify and work through problems identified by locals, especially when local law enforcement provided no assistance to any outsider conflict (Kleibl and Munck 2016, 210). In this case study, religion can be seen to make drastic and often violent changes to social structures and thus should be considered in the operations of any development organization (Kleibl and Munck 2016, 210). The colonial view on power and rule are no longer able to oppose the strengthening local representative models (Kleible and Munck 2016, 212). Following 2001, increased uncertainty and fear led to greater efforts to incorporate security into development organizations (Cordier 2009, 665). This meant that development policies began to focus on the creation of a civil society, the encouragement to privatize, and the maintenance of overall good governance (Cordier 2009, 667). All of these goals were intended to create an environment for certain values to take shape, specifically American values of democracy and freedom (Cordier 2009, 667).

But what happens when the Western way of thinking does not work? The next theme addressed by the literature reviewed is an analysis of the comparative advantages of religious organizations. Religious leaders are in a unique position to not only guide their communities

spiritually but also monitor the overall wellbeing of their following (Fountain 2013, 16). In most religions, there are usually themes of peace and conflict resolution which can additionally motivate community members (Fountain 2013, 16). Issues like poverty or natural disasters are not new and thus most religious texts address these issues in some way (Lunn 2009, 944). Secular messages tend to be less powerful in situations like conflicts when people turn to their faith to cope (Bock 1997, 23). The simple act of collaboration from different religious organizations like the Catholic Relief Services and the International Islamic Relief Organization can serve as a powerful symbol in and of itself (Bock 1997, 23). Religious institutions understand the demand for hope in the form of faith (Gamarra 2000, 276). In Peru, there was an influx of Evangelical church movements during wartimes that used the Bible to relate to locals dealing with exile (Gamrra 2000, 282). This became an issue when conflict was resolved and local traditions tried to make a comeback (Gamarra 2000, 283). Evangelical Christian Churches now had to compete to keep their membership (Gamarra 2000, 283). Most of the literature represented lacked a long term perspective on the use of religion in development. But the Peruvian case study shows a potential downfall and the need for greater research.

The analysis up till this point has really focused on the potential for religion among the recipients of development programs or aid. But the literature also discusses potential ways that religion can help with the operations of faith based organizations. Through religious teachings, followers usually hold the value of charity and compassion which can be practiced in the form of development aid (Lunn 2009, 945). Within an organization, religion can help employees feel closer to their cause and thus more motivated to work harder (Petersen 2012, 149). There are varying degrees in which an organization can integrate religion into their operations (Petersen 2012, 149). Following 9.11, many Islamic organizations chose to distance themselves from

being seen as purely religious due to the decrease in trust of Muslim and overall uncertainties over international security (Petersen 2012, 142). But according to Petersen, organizations that adhered more strictly to religious guidelines were able to deliver more individualized aid (Petersen 2012, 152). This analysis of Islamic organizations demonstrates the integration of religion into all aspects of life including day to day practice to matters of international security. Critics of this idea argue that this moral code does not necessarily translate into practical development strategy (Lunn 2009, 945).

Alongside images and stories of peace are justifications for violence and conflict in all religions (Bercovitch 2008, 177). This conflict is usually what justifies the marginalization of religion in discussions of development (Bercovitch 2008, 177). In Nigeria, faith based organizations are left out of the “secular social order” (Obadare 2007, 8). Obadare goes as far to criticize the development movements in Nigeria as the privileged leveraging donors to produce very little results (Obadare 2007, 14). In this situation, the author is recognizing that the proper tools to achieve NGO goals are not being fully utilized (Obadare 2007, 14). Simply by looking at the statistics that over 90% of Nigerians are followers of God and practice religion regularly, it appears that there would be a cultural fit for the already established religious organizations of Nigeria (Obadare 2007, 4). This case highlights the organizational obstacles that a faith based organization must overcome to achieve its goals. Besides the lack of representation in academia, there is also still an exclusion from centers of power (Petersen 2012, 150). Secular actors must first understand there is a continuum of religious organizations and by viewing all faith based organizations as a single group fails to see the degrees of influence religion can have on development (Petersen 2012, 153).

The literature also attempts to analyze the consequences of not taking into consideration religion in development. Religion is a powerful tool that can provide a vehicle for social cohesion which can be especially powerful in a time of conflict (Lunn 2009, 943). While this is beneficial in some cases, there is potential for greater conflict if not addressed properly (Cordier 2009, 675). Muslim populations were previously seen as “too disunited” to provide any effective aid (Cordier 2009, 675). This changed when development actors realized that by not identifying with these groups, they could potentially cause more damage as in the case of the bombing of the UN compound in Baghdad in 2003 (Cordier 2009, 675). By not gaining enough trust and legitimacy and attempting to make too many changes too quickly, development aid workers created an environment of tension which eventually led to violence (Cordier 2009, 675). As much as the cohesion of religion can help the goals of development, it can also be a source of conflict if not properly addressed (Cordier 2009, 675). But there is an alternative, where both religious organizations and governments can benefit (Obadare 2007, 12). Political leaders in Nigeria who sought the spiritual guidance of both Christian and Muslim leaders saw increased support during their regime due to the legitimacy of their policy through a “greater power” (Obadare 2007, 12).

This case serves as an example of the reaches of religion. Faith based organizations belong to a larger network which can mean greater access to resources and hard to reach communities (Lunn 2009, 944). While some development NGOs have to balance the operational nature of their organization with specific goals, religious NGOs have the added benefit of being based on a strong value foundation (Lunn 2009, 944). In the case of Jubilee 2000, many of the supporters identified with the cause because they were familiar with the biblical imagery used (Busby 2007, 266). Donors can also more easily identify and understand causes when they are

associated with values already a part of the cultural norm (Busby 2007, 267). Organizations like the Catholic Relief Services have branches all over the world and have significant power in relationships with other development or aid organizations (Bercovitch 2008, 186). The Catholic Relief Services is comparable to the size and scope of well-known development NGOs like USAID and CARE (Bercovitch 2008, 186). This network spans from religious leaders who can influence political leaders to grassroots congregations that can reach a lot of people with little effort (Bercovitch 2008, 188). It is common for local religious groups to collaborate with larger religious institutions or sister religious groups (Bercovitch 2008, 188). Additionally, religious NGOs are not bound by their religious guidelines and can instead use their access to put together programs that are not necessarily religious services (Bervitch 2008, 188).

Most of the authors of this literature review agreed of the positive impacts incorporating religion both in actions and organizations can have on development. But one of the key point made was the amount of access religious organizations have especially in areas of conflict. Actors like the UN, World Bank, and the IMF have turned to religious leaders to better understand opportunities of development in the areas they serve (Lunn 2009, 942). After realizing the holistic nature of development, many financial institutions are innovating their approach (Lunn 2009, 942). Regardless of what area these organizations work in, there are boundaries, both imaginary and physical (Goodhand et al. 2009, 2). Boundaries exist in all parts of society to help people better define their surroundings and also create a sense of belonging (Goodhand et al. 2009, 2). These boundaries can have serious consequences when it comes to both the creation and resolution of conflict (Goodhand et al. 2009, 3). In some cases, these boundaries are more physical than others and can prevent the flow of not only the flow of people but also ideas (Goodhand et al. 2009, 3). Religious leaders are often the exception to these

boundaries and are usually free to travel across boundaries (Goodhand et al. 2009, 9). For example, in Sri Lanka tensions caused an enforced public shut down but religious leaders were able to navigate the boundaries to have a necessary meeting with other local leaders to resolve these tensions (Goodhand et al. 2009, 9). The ability for religious leaders to navigate freely shows the perceived neutrality and trust given to these members for society (Goodhand et al. 2009, 9).

While it seems that most social science theories support the inclusion of religion in development, there is still an opportunity to grow religious influence. Many authors brought up the inclusion of religion in conflict that might contribute to the advancement of development in a more sustainable way. The presence of religious leaders in the local communities usually means a greater degree of trust (Lunn 2009, 942). Faith based mediators have the advantage of having an unofficial status which can make them more approachable in conflict mediation (Bercovitch 2008, 185). In order for faith based mediation to work, there needs to be a sense of trust on both sides (Bercovitch 2008, 185). This legitimacy is derived from the understanding of all parties involved that the mediator does not have vested interest in either side (Bercovitch 2008, 186). Certain religious mediators can have additional cultural knowledge that might assist them in developing a peace strategy that satisfies everyone involved (Bercovitch 2008, 187). This is particularly important in situations dealing with indigenous populations (Bercovitch 2008, 187). There is already a lack of trust among people that have historically been oppressed and using religious language that might be more familiar to them may encourage greater involvement (Bercovitch 2008, 187).

The actual content of religion is also important to consider. Because of the symbolism and values associated with religion, religious mediators have the additional advantage of moral

leverage (Bercovitch 2008, 188). Participants might be less inclined to act violently or irrationally if there is a chance that there is a “greater power” involved (Bercovitch 2008, 188). Although many authors laud religious NGOs for their ability to cross boundaries, Fountain acknowledges that faith based organizations can potentially hold a bias which prevents them from being a neutral actor in areas with conflict (Fountain 2013, 19). In the past, religious organizations have been accused of using their access to target vulnerable populations to “legitimize evangelism and conversion” (Lunn 2009, 944). Like any institution, religion also must act with their survival in mind which could mean attempts to increase membership in vulnerable populations (Gamarra 2000 271). The strongest evidence towards the lack of neutrality of Western development organizations is the increase in act of violence towards aid workers (Cordier 2009, 677). Those who are politically affiliated or associated in any other way to the Western world can be deemed as a “traitor” and thus retaliated against (Cordier 2009, 677). But Cordier sees this not as a reason why religion hinders progress, but as a reason why religion should be taken into greater consideration when approaching areas where divides like this exist (Cordier 2009, 677). This can be brought about by greater discussion and more research (Cordier 2009, 678).

This still leaves uncertainty over how specifically these organizations can enact positive change in development. As addressed by many scholars, there is major potential for this areas of development but also the need for greater research to understand potential long term consequences. Considering how prevalent religion can be in our daily lives, it is interesting to consider that some of the largest NGOs, including USAID and CARE, do not have organizational policy dealing with religion or spirituality (Lunn 2009, 941). The speed at which humanity is innovating will only bring these issue closer to the forefront of development

discussions. Social change is inevitable and these changes can often lead to conflict and delays in development progress (Cordier 2009, 679). Religion is not usually associated with change and is often time criticized for its adherence to tradition (Cordier 2009, 679). Rather than conflicting with social change, religion can help people associate new developments with already understood religious norms (Cordier 2009, 679). Resolving conflict does not necessarily mean the end of conflict (Bercovitch 2009, 190). Following the signing of an agreement, it is up to the conflicting parties to implement what is discussed (Bercovitch 2009, 190). Having a religious leader act as a mediator gives the parties involved a greater framework of implementing what is discussed than if it was just left to them without any additional support (Bercovitch 2009, 190). Simply perceiving a religious mediator's motivation stemming from a greater cause might be enough of a push to inspire the actual practice of what was discussed in a mediation session (Bercovitch 2009, 190). Religion can in a way continue to fuel peace by creating opportunities for dialogue and this sustainable change (Bercovitch 2009, 199).

It is most likely that the goals for development NGOs are to create positive change in whatever area they are working in. The changing world has made it difficult for organizations that are still relying on techniques that are outdated (Bush 2007, 1659). But in order for innovation to happen, more research needs to be done on the potentials of different mechanisms and systems that can be leveraged to achieve larger goals. While there seems to be a growing interest, there are some things that must be taken into consideration when analyzing the current body of literature. Many of the literature reviewed seemed to focus on major religions like Christianity and Islam. Religion is nuanced and there is still a need to study smaller religions (Bush 2007, 1645). The most potential could lie in these local religions because of their unique ability to not only access but also implement development policy more efficiently. There also

still seems to be a Western bias in some of the literature through the use of language like “third world country”. It is also important to understand that while many of the literature reviewed spoke about the critiques of including religious elements into development goals, there was still an overwhelming positive perception of faith based organizations. Because it is an area of study that is still growing, there is likely not enough research done on long term effects which in some cases could be negative. Regardless, religion is a new frontier for NGOs to achieve what previously could not be done.

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