



***Religion, Religious Organisations and Development – Scrutinising religious perceptions and organisations.* Carol Rakodi, ed. Routledge, 2013**

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This book is part of a series of Development in Practice books, and is actually a collection of separately authored papers that were previously published in a double issue of the journal *Development in Practice*. The editor, who is emeritus professor at Birmingham (UK) University's Department of International Development, has written a helpful introduction where she outlines the approach taken by the various authors and summarises the contributions of each. She is careful to say that any statements about the relationships between religion and development, of course, reflect the authors' own positions and worldviews. In development studies and practice in particular, she says, religion is either neglected or taken as a given. When it is considered, it tends to be seen either as an obstacle to the achievement of development aims or as a missing ingredient, which if effectively harnessed will increase the effectiveness of development efforts. She acknowledges that, "religion has not declined in importance in most countries of the South," and that Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) involved in development have increased in number and visibility. She also states:

A number of other factors contribute to the often inappropriate and unhelpful ways in which Western development actors' new interest in religion was expressed, including their failure to recognise that their own worldview is shaped by Christianity . . .

(and) the tendency of much writing to seek to demonstrate that . . . religious values and beliefs and religious organisations can play positive roles in development thinking, changing attitudes and behaviour, and achieving development objectives.

The research presented in this book, "tries to avoid these various pitfalls." However it is clear throughout that the authors of the various papers and the editor herself frequently fail to see that their supposed "neutrality" is a worldview in itself that colours the way they interpret their data.

The papers are grouped into four main themes considering different aspects of the interaction of religion and development. The first theme is, "**Religion, well-being and inequality.**" It includes studies from India, Kenya and Pakistan, considering how Hindus, Pentecostal Christians, and Muslims interpret their religious beliefs and explore the implication of those interpretations for ideas about identity, well-being, right social ordering, and the transmission of values and education. One interesting conclusion from the Kenyan study is that engagement with the "prosperity Gospel" advocated by some American missionaries, "is almost impossible to achieve in the context of Kibera (a massive slum settlement in Nairobi), where residents are concerned above all with survival." The editor comments that these studies demonstrate:

that people often engage in religious practices and adhere to apparently religious norms because these are part of the fabric of society . . . as a result the idea that it is possible to tap into religious values and beliefs to influence attitudes and behaviour . . . has to be critically assessed.

This sounds suspiciously like a challenge to the claims of religion from someone who is uncomfortable with them.

The second theme is, “**NGOs in development: are religious organisations distinctive?**” These begin with a US based author suggesting that to approach this question properly requires the *analysis* of a religion-based NGO’s activity rather than the *demonstration* of it. The following three papers look at faith based NGOs in Nigeria, Tanzania, and Pakistan. In Nigeria it proved relatively easy for the researchers to compare FBOs with secular NGOs, as many of both are involved with HIV/AIDS related activities in particular. The author concludes that FBOs are more commonly associated with wide reach, a high degree of legitimacy, and moral authority, but that the way faith is manifested in them is highly dependent on their context (e.g., Christian and secular organisations find it hard to operate in Muslim-dominated states). The paper from Tanzania warns of the need to consider how funding and externally driven agendas contribute to the strengths and weaknesses of both NGOs and FBOs. The Pakistan study comments on the difficulty of assessing the distinctive influence of religion in a country where 90% of the population are Muslim, and the need to distinguish between those organisations that see development activities as a way to bolster the faith of Muslims and convert others, and those that link aid to justice and involvement in militancy.

The third theme is, “**Religious organisations: Influencing, responding to or resisting social change?**” The first paper examines the interaction of religious organisations with the state in Asia- Pacific countries, concluding that some FBOs are active in all and some play positive roles

in meeting welfare and development needs, but some are not active or ineffective and contribute to ethnic/social division and tension. The second study from Tanzania and Nigeria is a review of a number of pilot projects looking at how religious organisations gathered data on the outcome of government poverty reduction policies, concluding that there was no evidence that they were better placed than others to do this. The final paper examined how the women’s movement in Nigeria interacted with religious ideas and groups during two campaigns for reform. This showed that the nature of the content proposed was key to acceptability or not by Christian and Muslim groups, and that attitudes varied between and within faith groupings.

The final set of research papers considers, “**Religious service providers and the poor: motivations and methods.**” Two of these focus on the health sector and one on education. The first of the set questions the statement that FBOs contribute between 30% and 70% of healthcare provision in sub-Saharan Africa, which they say dates back to the 1960’s. They say that evidence is lacking to substantiate the reality of this claim; however, this is surely a questionable statement as the contribution of FBOs was well-documented in a WHO report in 2006.¹ The second focuses specifically on Christian health services, seeking to assess whether the decline in their traditional funding sources has compromised their avowed intention of serving the poor. Based on information from 13 countries, the authors confirm that there has been a real decline in funding and that the providers concerned are responding to this by charging user fees and working more closely with governments so they can access health sector budgets. However, the real decline in funding has reduced the capacity of some Christian FBOs to provide free services in remote rural areas and amongst poor urban neighbourhoods. The final paper looks at religious education providers (Christian, Hindu, and Muslim) in two cities in India, concluding that their teaching, whilst encouraging philanthropy to the “poor other,” did not challenge

the underlying causes of inequality or seek to empower the poor recipients of their charity.

The book ends with, “**Practical notes: FBOs putting religion into practice.**” These are not research papers but are written by authors who believe that the organisations and programmes they describe are achieving better development *because of* their religious backgrounds. There are contributions from three (Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian) authors describing how the faith underpinnings of the projects they outline have contributed to their effectiveness. The editor concludes:

the complexity of the social phenomena being considered, their inter-relatedness and the multi-faceted nature of the links between them preclude . . . overarching conclusions. Nevertheless the papers . . . demonstrate that it is possible and illuminating to subject religious perceptions and organisations to respectful but objective scrutiny.

Those reading this book in the hope of seeking clear evidence of the benefits of Christian (or indeed any other) faith on development will be largely disappointed. The papers, even when written by Christians, are all careful to adhere to the “objective” secular agenda presumably required by the journal. This reviewer couldn’t help wondering

whether this rigorous editorial stance was in part determined by the needs of academic acceptability within the development sector literature, and reflecting that this is in fact a faith position as much as any specifically Christian or other major worldview. The papers vary in their clarity and fluency, but generally, as might be expected from a collection of this nature, they are mostly not easy reading and of probably limited interest outside the academic development studies community. Nevertheless, there are some significant and useful conclusions, a few of which I have attempted to summarise above. It is, however, unlikely that this book will be very useful to any Christian groups working globally in health sector development, and its cost will surely be a significant discouragement to prospective purchasers.

Reference

1. African Religious Health Assets Program. Appreciating Assets: The Contribution of Religion to Universal Access in Africa: Mapping, Understanding, Translating and Engaging Religious Health Assets in Zambia and Lesotho In support of Universal Access to HIV/AIDS Treatment, Care and Prevention. Geneva: 2006. [cited 2014 Sept 30] Available from: http://www.arhap.uct.ac.za/pub_WHO2006.php

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