

The role and significance of religion and spirituality in endogenous development: A learning process between SDC and NGOs⁶²

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Introduction

In October 2002 the NGO division of the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC) invited Swiss NGOs and SDC divisions to a conference with the provocative title 'Religion and Spirituality: A Development Taboo?' (after Ver Beek, 2000). The results of the conference confirmed the striking absence of religion and spirituality in the discourse about development issues.

During 2003 and 2004, workshops were held with participants from Swiss NGOs and SDC with the objective of identifying reasons for this obvious taboo and elaborating a holistic understanding of the role of religious and spiritual factors in development. The results were published in 2005 in form of a reflection and working paper (Holenstein, 2005). SDC decided to deepen the joint reflections with NGOs on how to deal with religion and spirituality in a creative way in several phases from 2003–2007.

Clarification of some basic questions and concepts

We first have to state that the term 'religion' is historically loaded with Eurocentricity. The same preliminary observation is important regarding the separation of religion and state that is the result of a particular West European and North American historical route. These facts have to be kept in mind in the discourse with partners from non-European cultural backgrounds.

A single, authoritarian definition of religion remains elusive, despite religion's status as one of the oldest human experiences. According to Gardner (2002):

In most general terms, religion is an orientation to the cosmos and to our role in it. It offers people a sense of ultimate meaning and the possibility for personal transformation and celebration of life. To this end it uses a range of resources, including worldviews, symbols, rituals, ethical norms, traditions and (sometimes) institutional structures. Religion also offers a means of experiencing a sustaining creative force, whether a creator deity, an awe-inspiring presence in nature, or simply the source of life.

It can be helpful for development practitioners to distinguish between 'religion' and 'spirituality'. The former can be understood as an institutionalized set of beliefs

⁶² The responsibility for the content of this chapter lies with the author.

and practices administered by a hierarchy and – in the case of the abrahamit religions, also based on holy books as written sources. ‘Spirituality’ describes the individual experience and spiritual life.

Religion and spirituality are part of the traditions and cultural values that shape the lives of the people. In the African context, for example:

Religion means performing or doing something: consulting a diviner, offering a sacrifice, making magic and dancing a funeral. Indigenous African religions often also are a means to an end. They aim at health, fertility, rain protection, and harmony in relation. Religion is thus part of a survival strategy and serves practical ends, immediate or remote, social or individual.

We therefore have chosen a comprehensive concept of culture for our reflection process, which gives ample space for traditional worldviews, including cosmivision: ‘Culture embraces the totality of all the creative solutions that a group of people find in order to adapt to their natural and social environment – but also to do justice to the requirements and needs of the soul’. For actors in development programmes it is important to be aware of the essential contribution to cultural achievements made by religion and spirituality:

- in providing metaphysical meaning and expectations of well-being (ways of believing);
- in shaping individual and collective behaviour, that is to say way of life, mode of production and every day culture (ways of life);
- in developing social and political values for cohesion in communities and society.

In the context of our reflexions on endogenous development it is highly recommendable to keep in mind some findings of the *The Human Development Report 2004* (UNDP, 2004):

Culture is not a frozen set of values and practices. It is constantly recreated as people question, adapt and redefine their values and practices to changing realities and exchanges of ideas... Cultural liberty is the capability of people to live and be what they choose... ‘Culture’, ‘tradition’ and ‘authenticity’ are not the same as ‘cultural liberty’. They are not acceptable reasons for allowing practices that deny individuals equality of opportunity and violate their human rights – such as denying women equal rights to education.

For a better understanding of the role of religion and spirituality in development programmes it can be helpful to distinguish religious institutions and their doctrine from the spiritual experiences and practices of the beneficiaries in a given programme. Popular beliefs often escape control by religious institutions. Traditional spirituality can have a strong impact on decisions about how and by whom a sick child should be treated, when and how fields should be tilled and how social action is to be planned.

Why are religion and spirituality a development taboo?

Considering the importance of religious factors in development, we have to make efforts to find out what could be the reasons behind the taboo. The following points might give some hints – without being exhaustive. They need careful consideration as

they prevent actors in development from dealing in a creative way with the ambivalence of religion and spirituality.

The secular order with the separation of religion and state is often confused with secularization processes. It has to be stressed that the secular order that is anchored in western constitutions allows religious freedom and therefore the cohabitation of different faith communities. It is a misunderstanding and a disastrous taboo that governmental agencies and secular NGOs and their staff should therefore avoid dealing with religious issues.

Staff members of western development agencies have been socialized in a secularized environment where religion is considered as a private affair and a taboo in professional activities (Berger, 1999).

Another argument for keeping away from cooperation with faith-based organizations are missionary activities in past and present times. It has to be acknowledged that in many cases, religious organizations have misused or still are abusing development programmes for proselytizing among their beneficiaries. The disastrous effects on endogenous cultures are obvious. According to Ver Beek (2000):

Addressing the issue of spirituality and development is not without risk. Spirituality and religion have often been sources of conflict and oppression rather than development and liberation. But just as social scientists and practitioners have recognised that gender, class, and ethnicity, while potentially conflictual, are integral components of people's identity and must be taken fully into account in development efforts, so spirituality and religion, because they are so central in the lives of people living in poverty, must also be addressed. To ignore any of these issues will not eliminate potential conflict, but only contribute to a lack of understanding, a lack of voice, and a strengthening of those who believe themselves wiser or more 'developed'.

The ambivalence of religion and spirituality

Religions, spiritual traditions and faith communities can be effective as 'angels of peace' as well as 'warmongers'. This inherent ambivalence has a lot to do with the fact that the relationship of the world religions to violence is equivocal. All great god-narratives are familiar with traditions that legitimize force in certain circumstances, claim victims in the battle for their own beliefs and demonize people of other religions. However, at the same time, there are sources that proclaim the incompatibility of violence with religion, demand sacrifices for peace and insist on respect for people of other religions. If we are to assume that, for the foreseeable future, the religions of the world will continue to be a factor in social and political conflicts, then it is high time that we strengthen the 'civilizing' side of the sacred and made it more difficult for it cynically to be taken over by political interests. What is said here about the relationship of world religions to violence can be considered generally valid for religions overall.

On the one hand, religions, or rather their followers, develop diverse forms of resistance against the abuse of power, while on the other hand, they and their institutions are themselves exposed to the temptation to misuse power. A source of danger lies in the nature of religious conviction:

- Religion is focused on the absolute and unconditional and thus it can take on totalitarian characteristics.
- Religious conviction that lays claim to absolute and exclusive validity leads almost inevitably to intolerance, proselytism, missionary zeal and the forming of sects. The different forms in which religious exclusiveness can be manifested are implicitly hostile to pluralism and democracy.
- Religion can increase aggressiveness and the willingness to use violence, by reason of the symbolic value added that is provided by the sanctification of 'profane' motivation and aims.
- Religious zeal can also be used by hierarchies within faith-based organizations to legitimize the abuse of power and the violation of human rights. Since these hierarchies are mostly male dominated, gender issues and women's human rights need to be kept under careful observation.
Power interests of any colour make use of these susceptibilities:
- Ethnic-cultural and cultural-religious differences can easily be harnessed for the domination strategies of identity politics.
- The spiritual and materiel resources of religious institutions can be abused for power interests.
- Leaders of fundamentalist movements lay claim to a single and absolutist religious interpretation at the cost of all others, and they link their interpretation to political power objectives.

Learning about potentials and risks

It would be a disastrous misunderstanding, however, to conclude that because of their potential for dangerous instrumentalization, religion and spirituality should be cut out from the discourse and practice of development cooperation. Partners in development have to recognize the potential of religious factors to make motivation, inclusiveness, participation and sustainability possible. At the same time, spiritual and materiel resources of religious communities are prone to the risk of misuse and instrumentalization from within and without. It is obvious that NGOs from the North and the South need to enhance their capacity as part of a professional approach to the potentials and risks of religious factors. Lead questions can stimulate learning processes among partners are:

- Is the organization willing to interact with people from other faith or secular communities without exerting direct or indirect pressure?
- How does the organization deal in practice with its basic religious texts and traditions with regard to gender roles? How are women represented at different hierarchical levels? What access do women have to the resources of their respective religious institutions (infrastructure, finance/budget competence, organizational resources, educational and health programmes, participation in strengthening of civil society)?

- Does the programme strengthen group solidarity exclusively inside its own faith community (bonding social capital) or does it have a socially integrating effect (bridging social capital)? That is, do others besides its own people really profit?
- How is a faith-based organization anchored in civil society? Which organizations does it cooperate with? Does it remain within the circle of its own faith family?
- Could the programme strengthen delusions of identity of an ethnic or religious type?
- Is there willingness and professional capacity to observe the effects of the programmes on the socio-cultural and socio-economic environment, for example, through the conflict mapping method? (This applies particularly to religiously heterogeneous countries and regions of political tension.)
- Is there willingness and professional capacity to observe the intentional and unintentional effects of their projects and programmes at the output, outcome and impact level?
- With regard to religiously based moral and value concepts and traditions there must be openness to further evolution in the sense of adaptation and of creative reaction to changes in the socio-cultural environment.

We conclude with a statement, written by Berger (1999), written before religion became a political fashion after 11/9: 'In assessing the role of religion (in the affairs of this world) there is no alternative to a nuanced, case-by-case approach'. About a dozen Swiss NGOs are now elaborating case studies in order to:

- observe the impact – positive and negative – of religion and spirituality in a given programme and its environment;
- describe potentials and risks;
- draw conclusions that could be of importance for their future work and for the role of religion and spirituality in their project cycle management.

It is planned to discuss and publish the results during 2007.

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