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Faith plays a key role in global development

by Ian Linden



Opinion

The following is a speech given by Ian Linden, the director of policy of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, at the second of four seminars on faith and globalization. The initiative is a collaboration with the Fondazione per la Sussidiarietà, LUISS Guido Carli University in Rome, University of Bologna, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan and Ca' Foscari University in Venice to analyze the importance of religion in the interconnected world of the 21st century.

Read the first segment here.

It seems a long time since Jim Wolfensohn, then head of the World Bank, declared in 1999 that international development programs that ignored the importance of religion were doomed to failure. Religion for most of the world provided the core software of life's interpretative keys. If you hadn't figured that out, you might not have noticed that standard-issue development discourse often elicited polite incomprehension from its supposed beneficiaries. A lot of money went down the drain, assuming there was a drain, as a result.

Tony Blair's *Commission on Africa* involved 17 African leaders and delivered its report in 2005. It was the first such international commission to include a chapter on culture and religion as integral dimensions of development. In 2008, he followed this up in his Faith Foundation program, *Faiths Act*, aimed at realizing the potential of the faith communities in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Meanwhile, developmental interventions were becoming seen in international relations theory as an important element of interstate relations and an important component of the growth of a global NGO community.

Meanwhile, the bank had created a World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD). It was to a great extent crying in the wilderness -- and in danger of being banished there as beyond the bank's mandate. Engagement with the serious work of the faith communities, some of it very new and innovative as in their reaction to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, was glacially slow in practice even if positive in public utterances. It was hard to avoid the conclusion that the "international development lobby" was, on the whole, not only secular in instincts but, at times, saw itself in some kind of binary opposition with all things religious.

Faith communities and leaders sometimes proved their own worst enemies. There was sometimes an initial reluctance to go through the rigors of external evaluation, collect data and results. Accountability for money was often kept close to the Episcopal breast. Local imams and sheiks could seem more interested in building mosques than in providing Muslims clean water. In some rural areas in the Middle East, nobody quite believed that Islamic Relief was a genuine Muslim agency when they set about providing the latter.



Work for development was treated as a diversion from "true" religion,

even branded as "involvement in politics." And one of the marks of religious commitment seemed to be a strong distrust of anything to do with the government. Government wanted lots of information and compliance with government policies but nothing ever seemed to come back.

The idea that government and faith community might work hand-in-hand in development and nation-building floundered on mutually negative assumptions: that government was corrupt and overbearing, that for the faith communities, development was instrumental in proselytism, and that they had pots of hidden money from who knew where?

These were less than half-truths in most cases. But faith leaders and government leaders rarely had the opportunity to meet in relaxed social contexts to share their worst suspicions in a secure environment. Only a small number of Churches were involved in proselytism. In many cases, corrupt government ministers did get sacked, sooner rather than later. There were no big pots of money.

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A conversation along these lines took place at a joint Tony Blair Faith Foundation Conference with Yale University, with invited religious leaders and Ministers of Health from Africa, around collaboration against malaria.

Two years later, the Ministry of Health in Sierra Leone and all the country's faith leaders -- none of whom had been at the Yale meeting -- were working together in a national malaria prevention campaign. These were not intractable problems. There could be a close and effective collaboration. The common suspicions are not necessarily the wrong questions, but they are certainly not deal-breakers.

More interesting are deeper questions about what the faith communities might bring to the thinking and practice of the development community now that the latter has moved away from approaches, at times, appropriate for a secular Spanish Inquisition and is ready to listen and discuss. The seminar in Bologna, jointly organized by the Faith Foundation, the Fondazione per la Sussidiarietà and the University of Bologna, is involving leading Christian and Muslim proponents and asking what are the unique contributions of the world religions to the theory and practice of development.

Bologna's Professor Stefano Zamagni is well-placed, as a close adviser to Pope Benedict XVI for the writing of *Caritas in Veritate*, to articulate the church's latest thinking and reflect on developments since Pope Paul VI's remarkable 1967 *Populorum Progressio*. Atallah Fitzgibbon as chief policy adviser at Islamic Relief has been in the position to chart the evolution of Muslim thinking about international development and the problems it has encountered. Giuliano Poletti brings his long experience in the cooperative movement, a practical expression of concepts of solidarity and mutual trust, key principles in Catholic social teaching. The seminar is introduced by the university's rector, Professor Ivano Dionigi.

The way in which the local, national and international institutions of faith communities interact in a globalized and interconnected world makes the intervention by religious leaders, their communities and their organizations both internationally and nationally significant. These interventions will not be successful unless they go with the grain and idiom of religious belief and practice, more often than not at the heart of a culture.

One thing is clear: The world religions share a deep concern for charity, compassion and justice -- though each give these fundamental concepts a slightly different flavor. The rich diversity of Indian *sanathana dharma*, (literally "eternal religion" lumped together as "Hinduism" for imperial political convenience) situates poverty and compassion in relation to a background narrative of rebirth. Islam and Judaism derive these themes partly from a strong legal tradition, whereas Christianity is rooted in the teaching and ministry of Jesus. In each poverty is given meaning as either subject or object of spirituality. It would be surprising if development as the eradication of poverty and the expansion of human capabilities did not gain strength from a closer encounter with the world religions.

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