Bringing Religion into Development: Revisiting the Key Conceptual Issues

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Abstract: Attempts to break away from the domination of economistic and modernizing perspectives have paved way for more socially and culturally meaningful development practices. Many of the academics and practitioners have started to look for the ways in which ethical frameworks, moral orders, belief systems, spiritual underpinnings, or religious practices pertinent to local peoples' lives can be taken more perceptively on board while policies, programmes and interventions are conceptualized, designed, operationalized, or evaluated. The main aim of this write-up is to explain the relationship between religion and development in its historical context, and it also attempts to show how the Western-secular bias has created ground for inadequate and misleading appreciation religion's role in the life of people of the developing countries. We first explore the ways in which mainstream development narrative has treated religion in most part of its history: as a phenomenon to be ignored or unaccounted for. Then we briefly examine the contemporary contexts which pave way to bring this understanding to the fore that religion could play a substantial role in the process of development. If development is conceptualized as responsible, ethical and shared way of living, there would be greater scope for religion to become relevant and influential.

Keywords: Religion, Development, Secularism, Liberalism, Faith-based organization, spirituality

1. Introduction

In recent decades political and intellectual landscapes at both national and international levels have changed significantly. In keeping with the changes thus unfolding, the meaning, purpose, and process of international development have come under much scrutiny and revision. In such a context, one question – among others – has elicited significant attention: should religion be brought more actively into international development? Or should the ways in which religion is viewed and understood be revisited and amended in the context of development interventions undertaken in developing countries? Attempts to break away from the domination of economistic and modernizing perspectives have paved way toward the search for more socially and culturally meaningful development practices. Many of the academics and practitioners have started to look for the ways in which ethical frameworks, moral orders, belief systems, spiritual underpinnings or religious practices pertinent to local peoples' lives can be taken more perceptively on board while policies, programmes and interventions are conceptualized, designed, operationalized or evaluated. However, while we need to acknowledge the significance of such 'renewed' interests and efforts to account for the

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religious beliefs and practices, it won't be just to claim that recognizing the connection between social change and religion is a totally uncharted issue.

The dominant discourses of international development that have been prominent in recent decades have basically been a post-World War II global-social-engineering project premised upon 'Western' modernity. One central tenet of these discourses has been strong advocacy for 'secularization' of public life. Consequently, it was not surprising that 'religion' was viewed basically as irrelevant or less significant aspect of peoples' lives in the context of economic and social transformation efforts. Development practitioners have mostly remained silent about the role that religions and belief systems play in the process of social changes even though there were some significant classic works, such as Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), that critically highlighted the role of religion in the formation of 'modern civilization'.

Thus, the historical 'disassociation' between religion and development might be explained in terms of the political and ideological foundations of international development practices. In the same vein, it also true that contemporary turn toward recognition of religion as a significant constituent of people's life is derived from the revised understandings and approaches that feature development discourses in recent time. To bring religion into development, we will argue, is no longer a mere contemplation. It has already got recognition that the role that religions and belief systems play in people's everyday life needs to be weighed in, explored and appreciated. The practical shape or form that this relationship takes is mostly dependent on how development itself is redefined or reconceptualized in particular context or within the practice regime. However, why religion has been mostly ignored by development actors and why it is gaining much recognition in recent time are the issues that can be better understood if we situate them in the context of broader global politics that has shaped international development understandings and practices over the decades.

2. The aim of the write-up

The main aim of this write-up is to explain the relationship between religion and development in its historical context, and it also attempts to show how the Western-Secular bias has created ground for inadequate and misleading appreciation religion's role in the life of people of the developing countries. We also assume that examination of the relationship from both historical and contemporary perspectives enable us to shed light on how religion can more meaningfully be brought into development. We first explore the ways in which mainstream development narrative has treated religion in most part of its history: as a phenomenon to be ignored or unaccounted for. Then we briefly examine the contemporary contexts which pave way to bring this understanding to the fore that religion could play a substantial role in the process of development. We will argue that religion is already featuring in development discourses, even though the key questions as regards the ways in which this intersection or 'coming together' might become more relevant and meaningful remain unresolved. Much depends on how development itself is progressively understood, redefined, or practiced; if development is conceptualized as responsible, ethical and shared way of living, there would be greater scope for religion to become relevant and influential. It is also important that a more grounded, unprejudiced and compassionate understanding about the role of religion in our lives should be taken into account while formulating the theories and practices of international development.

3. Western secularism and modernity: Religion takes back seat

During last seven decades the mainstream narratives have conceived development as part of the wider shift toward 'modernity': development means a process of 'modernization' in which main goal is to reshape and reformulate things in the frame of the 'modern' Europe. The implication of this has been that at the heart of 'development' thinking remained those conceptions and ideologies that basically were emanated from the enlightenment rationalism of the West. Europe-centric secularism, that is, the prominence of the belief that religion must be separated from the public affairs was one of the core doctrines. Political leaders and policy makers conceived development as a process that would basically mean 'modernization' of the society: depending upon urbanization and industrialization and becoming effective as both ideology and newer way of life. It was expected that modernization would provide the individuals with the platform to scratch and abandon old beliefs and relations and construct new ones. Thus, until recently, it was the consensus that secularisation and modernisation would inexorably displace religion from people's concerns.

In social scientific tradition the separation of religion from the public domain could be traced back far earlier. Religion has had a marginal status since the 1920s as modern sociology moved away from its originally strong interest in religion (as characterized by Marx, Weber and Durkheim), accepting the thesis that religion was becoming less significant sociologically. The idea underpinning this institutional and academic marginalization of religion is thus related with overall advancement of modern social thinking and in particular development school's much focus upon economic growth as its defining factor. 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. The consequence was that "in much international development work, religion has been a marginal if not ignored topic" (Marshal 1999). As modernization paradigm was deeply related to the economic development of society and sought to do away with the conventional ways of life, religion was relegated into a matter of marginal concern.

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''; this meant that there happened a radical change in the ways in which the state and society responded to and perceived religion.

4. Western liberalism: Approaching religion in reductionist and ethnocentric ways[3]

The western assumptions that underpin western liberal thoughts have contributed heavily toward non-appreciation of religion's role in people's life. However, the basic tenets of liberalism have come to be challenged in different ways in the contemporary world. The magnitude of this challenge is more visible in the context of developing countries;

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[3] This section draws heavily from Uddin (2017)

however, the challenges that these assumptions face in 'home', that is, in Western contexts are also important to be acknowledged. In fact, it could be argued that the dilemmas, ambivalence, or shortcomings that liberal political philosophy experiences vis-à-vis religion in developing world are interconnected with the deep-seated philosophical limitations that it has to confront almost everywhere, irrespective of any country context. The forms of uneasiness and conundrum of liberal democracy in relation to religion in the developing world reveals the fact that the universalistic discourses and propositions that it adheres to are in effect not capable to account for divergent social, cultural and political realities and multiple ways of lives (Uddin 2017).

The force and magnitude with which religion has come to the fore in recent decades in developing country contexts have caused major dilemmas and discomfort on part of liberal democracy's apparent pervasive campaign (Moser 1991). Liberal political philosophy is now involved in a real awkward relationship with religion and associated emergences. With resurgence and revitalization of religion it is thought that all the aspects of people's lives – personal or political – are coming under new 'enchantment' of religion and faith. With the beginning of Twenty First century, it appeared as though the politics of religion and 'the politics of cultural differences' have become high in everyone's intellectual agenda (Spencer 2007). The emerging influence of religion in the global order has gone this far that intellectuals even have come to claim, though erroneously, that the fate of the world is 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington 1996). It is true that, as Esposito and Watson (2000) have noted, 'challenge' do not necessarily mean 'rejection' or 'threat'. But we need to accept that liberal democracy is experiencing a big setback; it now is forced to recognize the importance of religion to the extent that it never did in the past.

'Liberal' political philosophy – that is, including its core ideas and practices – is idiosyncratic to the historical developments of Europe and America (Marquand and Nettler 2000); this idiosyncrasy has given shape and form to the ideas and institutes. This has historically showed feverish inclination toward secularism: separation of religion from domestic and international politics has been one of its main political projects. Liberalism has searched for a cosmopolitan ethic which was originally rooted in the enlightenment rationalism of the West (Scott 2000).

Because of such doctrinal enchantment toward secularism, liberal democratic philosophy has failed, and continues to fail, to understand the public character of religion (Asad 1999: 178). That failure becomes most apparent in the contexts of developing world, and, in consequence, liberalism faces multifaceted shocks at the centre of which is the question as to how to respond to inescapably dominant presence of religion in people's everyday life.

In the contexts of developing countries key liberal assumptions have proven to be problematic in different ways. The received historical interpretation that private world of religion must be separated from the public domain of politics is relentlessly posed under question in the societies of Asia and Africa. In fact, the imagined strict separation between the religious and the secular is belied in the historical record even in the western context [a very good exploration into this issue is made by the articles collected in van der Veer and Lehmann (1999)].

The intermixture of religion and politics produces a sheer perplexing situation for liberal democracy's underlying principles. As a result, there has been renewed interest among scholars to unravel the connection between religion and politics; and there has also been a widespread sense that 'the Enlightenment's view of the place of religion in modern life needs to be revised' (Asad 1999: 178). The claim of the secularization theory that religion would become increasingly marginalized or privatized with the advancement of modernity is now severely under trial especially in the developing world with the emergence of religious movements and the phenomenon of political Islam in particular (ibid.).

Another aspect as regards liberalism's inadequacy is that 'individual' is at the centrepiece of liberal conception of democracy: all versions of liberalisms are individualistic. The basic proposition is that individual is the focus of moral theory and social, economic and political institutions. Liberalism places importance upon the intrinsic and ultimate value of everyone. Individual is prioritized over society (Ramsay 1997: 4). The pre-eminence of individual subject in liberal philosophy has been subject to continuous critique, as Spencer (2007: 9) puts it,

> "(t)he universal subject of post-Enlightenment political theory, we have been repeatedly told in recent years, is not universal at all – 'he' is gendered, white, European, heterosexual – and the appeal of universalism conceals the way in which marks of culture, race, gender, class, all work to exclude certain people from power." (Spencer 2007: 9).

However, despite all the criticisms, liberal political philosophy has not able to go beyond individualistic understandings. This pre-eminence of 'individual' gives way to another key problem that Gould (1998: 91) has identified as the lack of a 'coherent ontology' at liberalism's philosophical foundation. Gould has characterized this as 'social ontology'. This is what Charles Taylor has criticized as 'atomistic ontology of liberalism' (Thomas 2000). Ontology refers to a conception of the nature of the entities and relations that constitute social life. This lack of adequate social ontology means that liberalism fails to have proper conceptualization of the nature of the individual or person and the social relations that exist among them. Because of this failure of conception this philosophy also lacks an adequate and proper conception of the realities that are constituted by such social relations, institutions and their processes. In place of any 'social ontology', the theory of liberal political democracy is presupposed by 'abstract individualism' – what Charles Taylor would call 'atomistic ontology': each individual is understood as an independent ego, seeking to satisfy its own interests or to pursue its happiness. This abstraction 'does not account for the differences among individuals that constitute them as the distinctive beings as they are' (Gould 1998: 94).

Another important feature of liberalism, which Taylor feels to be quite inadequate is its insistence on 'neutral political concern'. According to him such a politics of neutral concern has to be abandoned for what he calls 'politics of common good' (C. Taylor 1986). For him since liberal politics does not pursue a politics of common good it fails to involve civic participation. Hence, participation has lesser meaning in liberal regimes because of its disconnection from the collective pursuit of shared ends. 'The lack of participation is an effect of the loss of a politics of the common good' (Kymlicka 1991: 85). In developing world where pursuing of 'common good' has traditionally been one of

the defining features of societal life, liberal democracy finds itself at odds with its lack of any theory for accounting 'common good'.

This is in effect a paramount dilemma for liberal democracy as to how to motivate and organize people for participation while in theory it constantly refers to 'individualistic' achievements. Whereas experiences show that 'individuals' have been living their lives in shared ways, liberal doctrine's persistent attachment toward individualistic thinking and policy can cause serious alienation. When this happens, men must turn away from liberal discourses and practices. Sometimes they turn to religiosity; and liberal democratic practices thus become rather counter-productive.

The other significant consequence of the assumptions of liberal democracy is that it fails to account for critical issues such as 'identity' which have become so important across the globe, though in different senses (UNDP 2004). There have been growing demands for people's inclusion in society, for respect of their ethnicity, religion and language. Francis Fukayama (2006: 6) notes that 'modern identity politics springs from a hole in the political theory underlying modern liberal democracy'. For him this hole is related to the degree of political deference that liberal societies owe groups rather than individuals. 'The line of modern political theory that begins in some sense with Machiavelli and continues through Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the American Founding Fathers, understands the issue of political freedom as one that pits the state against individuals rather than groups.' From this observation what we can draw on for our understanding as regards liberal democracy's ambivalence with identity politics and issues of collective movements is that its assumptions are not well-equipped to address the complex of interplay of religion, ethnicity and nationalism that often takes place in different parts of world, particularly in developing countries.

Liberal political theory thus fails to explain and account for 'identity', 'plurality', 'multiculturalism' etc., which have emerged as pertinent issues in contemporary contexts. One of the key causes for such failure is that these complex phenomena cannot be understood in isolation from the larger question as to how these societies organize themselves. In understanding the organization of these societies, one has to recognize the central importance of religion – ironically, making such recognition contradicts the basic assumptions of both liberalism and modernity.

Liberal political philosophy also fails to adequately account for 'culture' – every culture is a system of meaning through which people make sense of themselves and their identity. This system of meaning and interpretation is again significantly informed by the religious values, beliefs, practices and rituals. This we can relate with what Charles Taylor has criticized as modern theories failure to 'provide a basis for men's identification with their society' (Taylor 1984: 191). This is in extension to this failure that liberal theories and practices are faced with challenges of cultural and religious pluralism. Although this challenge is most often articulated in the debate over 'multiculturalism' in North American or European countries, it is really a global issue: 'how can liberal democracy be constructed in polities embedded in non-Western cultural and religious traditions rather than the enlightenment rationalism of the west?' (Thomas 2000).

What is important to note is that liberal democracy's inadequacies do not necessarily imply that 'religion' and 'democracy' are entirely incompatible (Esposito and Voll 1996).

Democracy has always been a contested philosophy – we need to continue this contestation and go beyond any monolithic narrative. Adherence to a monolithic explanation causes failure to accommodate achievements of different civilizations. 'Indeed, the very idea of democracy, in the form of participatory public reasoning, has appeared in different civilizations at different periods in world history.' (Sen 2004: 21). We have not reached a phase of human history where we can declare 'the end of history' (Fukayama 1992) or can celebrate the triumphant achievement of any political philosophy. The assumptions of liberal political philosophy might require significant overhauling; the contents of these assumptions need to be subject to continuous examination and re-examination. Human endeavour cannot cease searching for understandings and practices that would be accommodative to religious and cultural pluralism greater than ever before.

5.   Recent changes: Beyond modernization and secularization

Growing evidence from developing world has shown in recent decades that belief in modernization was misleading and attempts to modernize society have rather worked as root cause of crisis in many countries, particularly in African context. The associating belief that 'secularization' would characterize society in the process of change had also been proven to be unrealistic. Confidence that the growth and spread of urbanisation, westernized education, economic development, scientific rationality, and social mobility would combine to diminish significantly the socio-political position of religion was not well founded. Furthermore, unwelcome symptoms of modernisation (such as breakdown of moral behaviour, perceived over-liberalisation in education and social habits) have served to galvanise popular religious reactions which connect to the perceived failure of governments to push through their programmes of social improvement. The fact is that the received historical interpretation about private world of religion being separated from the public domain was relentlessly posed under question in the context of developing countries (Asad, 1999). Even in the Western context the imagined strict separation between the religious and the secular is belied in the historical record (van deer Veer and Lehaman 1999). The claim of the secularization theory that with the advancement of modernity religion would become increasingly marginalized or privatized is now severely under question especially in the developing world with the emergence of religious movements and the phenomenon of political Islam in particular.

In recent years gradually it has become clear that time was ripe to look back and reflect on what has been achieved by long illusions with secularizing attempts. It has been observed that serious reflection on what Haynes (1995) has called 'the revenge of society' in Africa's context might bring forth new understanding and new insight. He argues, '(O)ne of the most resilient ideas about societal development after World War II – that the nations would inevitably secularise as they modernised – was misplaced' (p 736). Loss of religious faith and secularisation converged with the idea that technological development and the application of science would result in long term human progress by overcoming persistent social problems such as poverty, environmental degradation, hunger, and disease. What became clear over the decades was that technological development and other aspects of modernisation left many people with a feeling of loss rather than achievement, and instead of erasing deep social malaises, the technological

progress has brought about wider and increasing social inequality. In such a context, society's 'revenge against the state' was heavily religion-orientated.

Apart from the failure of modernization doctrines and proven limitations of secularization perspectives, recent global scenario has experienced several other significant changes which are interrelated at some levels and have forced the global imagination inevitably to look back to the issues relating religion, belief and ethics. A strong urge has been clearly felt that deliberation and contemplation was needed about what significance religions are likely to hold for the overall wellbeing of humanity as a whole – for local and international politics, for collective senses of identities, for international relations or for defining lives of people around the world. The end of cold war and following reconfiguration of global order was one of the influential historical shifts that brought this question to the fore: what would be defining factors in the 'new' global power relations. The enquires that followed the new configuration were later compounded by the events of September 11, 2001. This was at one end, in global political scenario, that religion came to get recognition as having far-reaching bearing upon the questions of international relations, national security or emerging patterns of terrorism. On the other end, significant changes were taking place within development discourse itself – the failure of development mechanism to combat widespread poverty, hunger, diseases and inequality was posing the very premises of development under scrutiny; greater attention was being drawn toward 'the social' and 'the cultural' – religion was coming up in the way as a significant constituent of 'social' and 'cultural'.

In recent years development itself and its basic premises have come into significant revisions. From various perspectives there have been initiatives to redefine the ends and means of development and make it people-centric. One major focus in all these critiques is to challenge much pre-occupation with economic growth and income achievements. Attentions have been drawn to the inadequacy of illusion with material affluence. Though in reality much concern remains with economic indicators, significant awareness has come to the fore with respect to the importance of the 'human' aspect of the process – ideas like 'sustainability', 'wellbeing' or 'freedom' have cast significant doubt about the linear economistic and individualistic narrative that dominated thus far. Experiences from developing countries have shown that people in practice live shared life and their situation needs to be understood in terms of the relations and networks through which they pursue their livelihood and well-being. It is though this recognition of 'social' and 'shared life' that religion, faith, spirituality, or belief systems have come to get further attention. It is being emphasized that world-views and belief systems of the community play significant role in organizing its ideas and actions (Johnston, 2001).

6. 'Postmodern' scenarios: Toward recognizing the role of religion

In the process of this transformation, one important understanding has gained prominence that 'culture' has significant position in people's lives, and it should be accounted for in development programmes. Though it is still unclear as to what should be the role of culture or how culture should be conceptualized, it has now seen a change in its position. Whereas in modernization theories culture was basically seen as 'hindrance' or 'obstruction', it is now being accepted that culture can aspire too (Appadurai, 2004).

While taking culture on board, attempts are now being made to account for religion as a component of culture. As he was assessing the position of religion from a different perspective, Haynes (1997) observed three dimensions of changes in case of relationship between religion and politics: (i) the postmodern condition stimulates a turning to religion under certain circumstances; (ii) secularisation continues in much of the industrialised West but not in many parts of the Third World; (iii) in the Third World, secular political ideologies such as socialism and liberal democracy are not necessarily regarded as the most useful for the pursuance of group goals; instead, religion, perhaps allied with nationalism, ethnicity or communalism, often functions as a mobilising oppositional ideology. What Haynes observed in case of politics might hold to be true in case of development too.

Now the question remains as to how the relationship between religion and development is being shaped or should be shaped in this 'postmodern' or 'late modern' situation? One big challenge is overcoming the reluctance or indifference in relation to religion which have featured development literature so far. While exploring the dynamism of the development process or its interaction with other aspects of the society, analysts and experts have paid very little attention about what the possible religion could play in the way. For finding out a real working relationship between development and religion, first requirement is to break the silence. So far development literature has explored very little about the role of religion or spirituality in the development process, and there have been little or no guidance to development practitioners as to how to address spiritual issues. The absence of literature concerning religion and development is noted by Ver Beek (2000), 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 several development agencies for their policy on religion, he also found that they tried to avoid the subject in an official capacity (Ver Beek, 2002).

Besides exploring the role of religion in development in conceptual way, another significant enquiry could be to analytically draw on the experiences of those projects in which the two have already come into interaction (Alkire, 2006). For this purpose, what is needed first is the recognition that religion was always present in people's lives, it never receded from shaping people's values and aspirations – particularly in developing contexts. There are without doubt a lot of cases where religious practices and beliefs seemingly have played negative role. Such findings should not lead to abandonment of focus on religion – these should rather lead to constructive conversation with religious practices in their contexts (Ahmed, 1999; Rafi and Choudhury 2000). Rather than taking the practices in the face value as absolute 'obstacle', it might be helpful to try to make sense of substantive logics that give rise to these practices. Such engagement – devoid of any prejudice or predisposition – can shed light toward better understanding between the stakeholders involved.

Religion's role in shaping identity might show that religion can play role in forging true 'multiculturalism'. Social scientists must take the responsibility to analytically differentiate between 'religious fundamentalism' and 'popular religion'. The complex politico-economic web that informs religious extremism must be explored in detail so

that a real understanding about its causes might come to the fore and ways can be found out to address them. It is also important to account for already taken initiatives for bridging the gap such as the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD). The aim of WFDD has been to engage a wide-ranging international and national dialogue among faith and development institutions, with the effort to combat world poverty the central focus. The experience illustrates both opportunities and pitfalls (Marshal 1999). However, the initiative has highlighted the importance of this dialogue for the work of development institutions, faith organizations and academia as they address the wide array of topics around the globalization themes of world poverty, inequality and social justice. It has brought to the fore ethical and pragmatic dilemmas for practitioners in quite diverse fields.

7. Conclusion

Recent attempts by the academics to search for 'ethics', 'morality', or 'spiritual anchorage' within development itself is likely to open significant avenue for dialogue between belief systems and development practices (Goulet, 1997; Salemink, Harskamp, and Giri, 2004; Ufford and Giri, 2003). Analyses taken in this vein try to make the argument that ethical dimensions of development practices need to be given more attention. Inclination toward the ideas such as 'responsible development' or 'moral status of development practice' opens the possibility that in coming days the development practitioners will engage more enthusiastically with issues related to subjective wellbeing and will not remain narrowly concerned to material advancement.

Since much awareness as regards the importance of the 'human' aspect of the development process has come to the fore in contemporary time, and since the ideas such as 'sustainability', 'wellbeing', 'relationality' or 'freedom' have highlighted how the people in practice live life in shared way with ethical and moral underpinnings, materialistic explanations are no more taken to be adequate. The recognition of 'social' and 'shared life' paves way for religion, faith, spirituality, or belief systems to get further attention. It is now being emphasized that world-views and belief systems of the community play significant role in organizing its ideas, actions and practices (Johnston, 2001). It can perhaps be claimed that the changed scenario and widened perspectives bear the potential to set the future course for some meaningful interaction between religion and development.

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