

RELIGIOUS LITERACY IN DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN RELIEF

Katherine Marshall

A parable shared among very different cultures and religious traditions conveys a vital message: Differing perspectives can blind us to understanding what is truly important and appreciating it. Blind men feel an elephant's different parts and dispute their conflicting interpretations of what they "see." There are apt parallels today, as people passionately committed to international development or to a religious calling focus on their differences and therefore fail to engage. The Sufi poet Rumi offers an important and practical insight. His version of the story puts his elephant into a darkened shed, and the arguing observers can see perfectly well. His solution to contradictions and confusion is to shine a candle in hopes of illuminating the whole, allowing a clear common vision to emerge. Better light (read knowledge) and new pairs of eyes or ears (read insight) offer gifts of enlightening new perspectives.

This chapter traces my personal journey of learning about the remarkably diverse field of religiously inspired development work and, in the process, revisiting ideas and places from earlier professional vantage points. An abrupt professional change in the year 2000 launched an unexpected new, 20-year journey: A mission to bridge both the hopes and hostilities surrounding religious engagement—and implicitly, "religious literacy"—in development work, starting in the World Bank (Marshall 2013). This journey has offered me the opportunity to revisit ideas, places, models, and approaches gained over a lengthy professional career working in different world regions. My efforts to bridge worlds of development and religion came unexpectedly, confronting me and colleagues with often unexpected tensions and opportunities. The journey has stretched my perspectives in many directions, both personal and professional and it illuminates how I understand religious engagement and what literacy around this topic involves.

Tensions between development and religious actors often arise when individuals or institutions, like the legendary blind men confronting the elephant, focus so much on differences or on specific parts that they are blind and deaf to shared, underlying purposes. These include working to secure better lives, especially for people who suffer and are marginalized. The "preferential option for the poor" that is a central principle of Catholic Social Teaching (Vatican 2005) is not far from the World Bank's motto: "Our dream is a world free of poverty." Human dignity and a "common humanity" are noble and widely shared ideals that convey important insights and draw on roots in different philosophies and religious traditions. The framework of the Sustainable Development Goals approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 also

But there are also many differences, often larger than the rhetoric of shared values and common humanity might suggest. These include significant differences both in ideologies and theologies as well as in the lived realities which color people's models and approaches. A central challenge for literacy in the professional world of international development is to ensure that differences do not drive disputes or indifference, but are seen as opportunities to view issues in a new light. For international development work and approaches of different institutions, non-religious or religious, this can help to identify better paths towards action. Two cryptic pieces of wisdom from my family color my personal approach to confronting diversity and difference. My grandmother's advice: "A gingerbread, he went to Rome, a gingerbread, he came home" was an admonition to go into a new situation without stubbornly sticking to established habits and understandings. She was urging us to be curious and open to change, looking always for new understandings. That ingrained character trait has stood me in good stead on my journeys. My mother admonished me with great conviction on more than one occasion: "Each to his own taste, said the old woman as she kissed the cow." Puzzling over what on earth she meant, I slowly recognized it as an ode of sorts to diverse tastes and visions, contributing to my own sense of wonder at the range of human experience. Keeping in mind the challenges of common human aspirations and real differences is a critical part of the development enterprise that has great significance in bridging divides, including those that have separated religious and non-religious perspectives.

What follows are glimpses of insights gained in working to build bridges between religious and development communities, which turn above all on mutual literacies. I have had the rare opportunity in my career as an international development specialist to see places, issues, and ideas through very different lenses, sometimes in a bewildering living kaleidoscope, and sometimes by revisiting a place or topic in a different role, at a different time, with new questions, demands, and insights. Contending with diversity and difference have been a hallmark of my life and career, as I came to both with a hankering for multidisciplinary approaches and insatiable curiosity. I started work at the World Bank in 1971, driven by fascination with cultures, anguish at the suffering I witnessed, and hope inspired by changes that I saw. As a "pioneer" woman in men's worlds, clashing (as well as congenial) perspectives around differing worldviews were always part of the mix. The development journey I lived demanded a constant willingness to change and awareness of diversity that could at first sight seem deeply unfamiliar and unappealing. This combination of motivation and experience was a central feature of my professional journey, spent in widely different assignments within the World Bank. And it colored the ways in which I approached my assignment to engage with religious communities.

An uneasy topic: Controversy flares about religious dialogue at the World Bank

I was a World Bank official working broadly on operational development challenges in different countries when the World Bank's then president, James D. Wolfensohn, drafted me to work on his personal venture—one that many saw at the time as audacious, even foolhardy. It was to engage the world's religious communities in a dialogue that might bring sparring visions about development paths into harmony. I felt unqualified for this temporary assignment, having left behind formal religious studies after a required college sophomore course. But Jim Wolfensohn, with impressive collaborators in the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Aga Khan, senior Vatican officials, and others, was uninterested in the answer "no" and off we went. To condense a long story, what had seemed to many an interesting if somewhat marginal activity for the World Bank

erupted in sharp controversy, as the representatives of most of the World Bank's 184 member governments raised serious objections to the dialogue project. Thus began a series of learning experiences, not only about the remarkable world of religious institutions but also on the sharply different ways in which people from different religious and cultural backgrounds understood their own roles, the goals of development, and the very ethics of different forks in the road.

For those working in the fields of development and humanitarian relief, it is sometimes jarring to appreciate that beneath the shared commitments to common humanity, working to improve lives, and navigating the numbing jargon of the fields, there can be complex differ-

ences in interpretations of reality by those most closely involved. These include notably many religious communities which view themselves as the forerunners of development through their work with education and health and social protection for vulnerable communities. How these differences are addressed often shapes both the caliber of relationships that are so vital to the challenge of development, and how effective we (collectively) are in finding ways to translate ideas and ideals into practice.

Jim Wolfensohn and Archbishop George Carey (now Lord Carey of Clifton), in launching a “world faiths development dialogue” in 1998, presented a narrative that still today reflects the basic rationale for development/faith engagement: The two communities, overall and fundamentally, share a deep concern for poor communities, with a focus on paths towards human development (especially health and education). What, then, was there to oppose? As Wolfensohn’s director for the effort, understanding the concerns and arguments that left member government representatives uneasy was my first task. Many topics that surfaced during discussions in 2000–2001 have recurred repeatedly, albeit in different forms. They fall essentially into four categories: Politics, priority, patriarchy, and preconceived views or simple lack of knowledge about “religion.” Some might label these categories as features of a secular worldview, though, to be clear, neither then nor now do I view them in this way. Nonetheless, the topics that shaped similarly hesitant approaches from religious institutions often came in different forms and orders of priority, that were elucidated in various dialogues including with the World Council of Churches (WCC—see below).

Although religious topics, as such, had rarely figured explicitly on agendas during the World Bank’s first five decades, most of the executive directors (representing constituencies of member governments) and many senior staff held quite strong and generally negative opinions on whether religious dimensions should be brought explicitly into the World Bank’s broad strategic framework. The ways in which the arguments were framed were often unfamiliar to me, and the process opened up new appreciations for the history and present concerns around, especially, relationships between states and religious communities. The idea of formally engaging religious institutions came up against a foundational principle for the World Bank, which was to avoid political entanglements. In essence, many saw religious issues and institutions as essentially political, their motivations turning on influence, power, and numbers of followers. Questions around political relationships were especially a concern in some regions and for several countries—France, for example, and the United States, albeit in complex ways—which had long histories of defining boundaries between religious and secular worlds. A heightened awareness at the time about religious dimensions of bitter conflicts in several world regions (starting with the Middle East) accentuated the concerns.

Concerns were also framed in terms of priorities. This was a time when “mission creep” was much discussed, as the World Bank and definitions of development more generally moved constantly into new fields of activity. Some recognized that processes of modernization were far more complex than many had been led by theories and training to recognize, with many if not all topics intricately interlinked. Others, however, saw the World Bank’s leaders overstepping

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its core mission by venturing into relationships with religious institutions. The overtures to religions struck some as a classic instance of taking on a topic that, perhaps, belonged somewhere else.

But beyond these two issues were some deeply held perceptions about what religion represented in contemporary society. Positions taken by religious leaders on women’s rights and reproductive health topped the list of concerns, that boiled down to a sense that religious communities did not share essential concerns about human rights, that their motivations in fact differed from those of a development institution like the World Bank. At a simplistic level many religious institutions were seen as standing against, not for, change and modernization. This gave rise to some quite vehement views that engaging with religious institutions could pose serious risks, that it could be dangerous.

The lengthy discussions that centered on the World Bank’s governing board produced a fragile compromise with the bank’s executive directors in early 2001: Wolfensohn would proceed cautiously with a dialogue-linked program. The compromise was partial and uneasy in

many respects but opened a path to learning and to building new relationships and partnerships. The work undertaken by the World Bank since then has been strikingly dependent on individual leadership. The overall faith initiative lost momentum after Wolfensohn departed in 2005, though some subsequent presidents, notably Jim Yong Kim (2012–2019) who launched a “Moral Imperative” to engage religious communities, have given the topic some attention and support. At the time of writing a faith office continues its work and a working group has a mandate to explore the World Bank’s Research Agenda.

The next years (until 2005 when Wolfensohn’s World Bank term ended) saw substantial work led by the World Bank. It included ambitious gatherings of development and religious leaders (in Canterbury, Dublin, and Accra, the latter later, in 2009) that some described as transformational. An autonomous NGO, the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), was established with, initially, formal relationships with the World Bank. It was established as a UK Charity, based in Birmingham, UK, but was later reconstituted (in 2005) as an American 501(c)

(3) organization. With the turn of the millennium in 2000, a World Bank team was part of a remarkable religious “Millennium Summit” linked to the United Nations’ celebration of the event. WFDD was involved in World Bank reflections on poverty, notably through contributing to the 2000/2001 World Development Report that focused on the topic. Pilot efforts were launched in three countries: Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Guatemala. A series of partnerships took shape with widely varied groups, for example around health programs, on environmental action, and, with the lay Catholic Community of Sant’Egidio, on both peacebuilding and HIV/AIDS. In the aftermath of the Jubilee 2000 efforts to address poor country debt, consultations on government Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers involved religious communities at country level. The effort opened doors for a number of institutions, development and religious, to pursue a process of growing relationships.

The events of September 11, 2001 marked a fundamental shift, and they shone a bright if negative spotlight on religious roles in global affairs and their potential links to violence. In the immediate aftermath, there was some aura of “I told you so” in Wolfensohn’s dialogue on the topic, but there was also a heightened sense that engaging with religious matters was risky and perhaps even dangerous.

The tensions involved in the dialogue about religious engagement went well beyond concerns about religion, reflecting broader geopolitical and personality issues of the time, for example, the World Bank’s engagement in the Middle East and Wolfensohn’s tendency to embark on bold and unconventional new ventures. But it is fair to say that something of a pall of unease has persisted, notwithstanding significant World Bank initiatives to build on the development-religion

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dialogue that have included launching the “moral imperative” to advocate for poverty alleviation in 2015, a 2016 “evidence summit” to highlight significant religious contributions to development, and, most recently, a review focused on World Bank research to explore ways to take religion better into account. While the World Bank experience was distinctive, the issues that emerged and the underlying differences of view echo in discussions on other venues and institutions.

Religious unease about development institutions: Dialogue with the World Council of Churches

The early 2000s saw a continuation of tensions that had altered development institutions and thinking in many ways in the prior decade, prying open long habits of secrecy and discretion and calling into question often implicitly accepted assumptions about what was right, practically and ethically, and what worked best. The tensions involved both governments and civil society organizations. Among the vocal critics at the time was the World Council of Churches (WCC), which essentially threw down a gauntlet to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in 2001, with an invitation to an encounter. Somewhat to the WCC’s surprise, the invitation was taken up, at least to launch a process of dialogue. The three-year process began as the WCC paused to prepare their internal “briefing,” which took the telling title “Lead us not

into Temptation” (WCC 2001), followed by successive meetings, and culminating in an encounter in Geneva with senior leadership from the IMF, the World Bank, and the WCC in 2005. The results? Certainly not agreement or even a new mutual understanding. But the process brought mutual concerns closer to the surface, and leaders from different (religious) perspectives into a conversation that they otherwise would not have had.

The WCC dialogue highlighted in ways that drove home to me critiques that I had heard earlier in operational discussions in a more masked form. These included a perception that the tempting allure of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) was “the attraction by the flow of money they control and the power invested in them” that set “traps and temptations that are to be faced in so many discussions and debates about the role and character of the IFIs in global economy and politics.” The WCC call was to “renounce a new ‘religion’ that focused on the central role of the market mechanisms and economic growth, ... strengthened under the strong influence of the neo-liberal economic model.”

The prescriptions based on the neo-liberal ideology became rules and norms not just in the world of economics, but also in politics and even the life of societies in disregard of the diversity of cultures and different conditions of local economies. The rules and norms of the neo-liberal ideology perfectly serve the needs and interest of corporate business and finance and demand the transfer of power from the state to the private sector in general. ... an ideology that legitimises the transfer of power to the so called “market forces” and the major actors in the economy. Privatisation, liberalisation and de-regulation are keywords of neo-liberalism. Transnational corporations and financial institutions in particular, taken as the iron law of economics, assume religious status, justifying massive exclusion and sacrifice of human lives and nature in the name of economic growth through privatisation and the liberalised and de-regulated market. Analysing this situation, a number of theologians called the core of the neo-liberal worldview the “religion of the market.” They were met with strong resistance. Anybody criticising the “new religion of the market” is heavily attacked for an “unrealistic” and utterly “outdated”

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approach. An environment hostile to critique developed, tempting everybody to follow the flow and swim with the mainstream.

(WCC 2001)

A complex challenge here was to appreciate how far the views expressed so vehemently at WCC, from its Geneva headquarters, were in some sense representative of “religious” thought worldwide (including among Christian denominations not represented by the WCC and even within the WCC orbit). The views were clearly influential (echoed in different world regions), but a knowledgeable colleague in a private conversation called the WCC’s claim to “represent” 500 million people “risible.” The views expressed were, to put it mildly, not unanimously held among religious institutions, though they did represent an important current of thought and perception. Two important lessons for me from the experience were a richer appreciation for the nature and intensity of angry and suspicious attitudes that were held about development institutions, but also the extraordinary complexity of even this slice (WCC) of one among many religious traditions: Protestant and Orthodox Christianity (that excluded most evangelical denominations and the Catholic Church).

Working at a country level, differing perceptions of economic and social conditions had often been difficult to understand, seemingly in many cases diverging from what data suggested was the reality, for example poor management of state budgets and of state owned enterprises. There were often very different narratives about the causes of poverty. The sharp criticisms that emerged in the WCC dialogue also reflected very different narratives that centered in large measure on relative power and the money controlled by different institutions: The development institutions were about empire, controlling what was seen as their excessive power and resources. Anger was also linked to the perceived driving role of economists and economics: At each session WCC representatives said, with something mixing pride and fear, as they

introduced themselves: “I am not an economist.” Their clear assumption that development thinking was driven solely by measures of economic growth and money was frustrating to the IMF World Bank teams who, granted, were mostly economists, because they could argue that it was decades since GDP growth had served as a sole or primary indicator of progress.

But apart from jarring dissonance around the language and “science” of economics, what emerged was an echoing focus on “neo-liberalism.” What, asked the IMF/World Bank teams, was meant by that term? Neoliberalism was not part of the self-understood ideology or discourse, which instead was seen as pragmatic and country adapted. But the debates of the 1990s (of which I had been part) on economic crises and the reform packages (termed “structural adjustment”) to address them had left deep scars that included a perception of callousness towards social consequences of policy measures and disrespect for the state. Shared concerns about corruption led down diverging paths, one pointing towards the bribees and the other the bribers. As discussion returned often to governance and power (the injustices of the weighted voting structure of the multilateral development banks) frustration grew since these were matters that lay in the hands of governments, and in the dialogue process in which we were engaged there was no real way to advance discussion.

So where, working directly with the WCC, a body that claimed to represent some 500 million Christians, did the religious dimension come in, apart from language and symbols? At the time, my growing understandings (and the basis on which we had “sold” the dialogue process within the World Bank and the IMF) centered on the networks of communities that the WCC could draw on and their active roles in health care and other services. We (at the World Bank and IMF) hoped to draw on WCC networks to gain a deeper understanding about how poor communities functioned. I and others had been much marked by the extensive Voices of the

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Poor studies (Narayan 2000) that had highlighted the importance that poor communities gave to their religious beliefs and leaders, as well as greater trust than was measured for governments, military, NGOs, and other groups. We hoped for new insights into ways to better reach poor communities. We found instead far more focus on what seemed like politicized views where there was little scope for agreement or progress.

A clear insight was that there needed to be far better communication about situations and objectives for development institutions and strategies if they were to bridge divides. Though it was not articulated in that way at the time, gaps in literacies were apparent, both World Bank/IMF lack of familiarity with the institutions and language of their religious counterparts, and, among the WCC teams, lack of understanding and acceptance of many widely used concepts within development circles. These gaps in literacy made it difficult to have a productive dialogue about what were intrinsically complex issues. What emerged time and time again were sharply different understandings of why people were poor, even when a specific time and place was the focus, for example northern Ghana. There were large gaps in language, in listening and hearing, and in learning together. The WCC dialogue, events like the annual multifaith Prayer for Peace organized by the Community of Sant’Egidio, and various academic events, for example at the Institute for Social Studies in the Hague and the University of Birmingham, helped me to appreciate in far greater depth the *perceptions* about how development institutions thought and worked that drove much of the anger and protests from religious actors about that work.

Refocusing on ethics

During the long discussions at World Bank headquarters in 2000–2002 about the religion initiative, it was clear that religion as religion made many country representatives uneasy. And it was very clear then, as it is still today, that it was unthinkable that funding would be directed to religious entities specifically because they are religious. The opposite, however, was also true: That there was and should be no specific prohibition of funding going to institutions that have a religious character. But, in those complex times, when development models were coming in for sharp critiques, the idea that the engagement and dialogue centered on ethics elicited somewhat more support than ones focused on religion per se. At that time, understandings of what ethics meant, as it was linked to development, centered mainly on governance and accountability, that is, corruption above all. But the ethical issues that emerged from the

discussions with religious actors were different. They involved above all the difficult choices that had to be made among differing interests and options where often the best path could not be fully ascertained much less determined. It was on these issues that dialogue about differing interpretations needed to center, as much as on the “evidence” for robust success or on more abstract principles on which there was little real disagreement.

Thus, the issues turned very much on processes for making choices and engaging those involved, at different levels, as well as on the nature of partnerships. Through discussions about what religious engagement might bring to development in enriched understanding, it began to emerge that the partnerships could and should focus on building shared objectives and probing areas of difference. Ending poverty met little dispute, though consensus on other topics like population growth was another matter. An uneasy discourse emerged during engagements about what many termed “instrumentalization”—basically a sense that development institutions wished to “use” religious bodies to carry out pre-cooked policies, as well as unresolved and often unspoken questions about financing. But engaging in discussion within a frame of appreciating better how different actors understood both diagnosis and prescriptions opened better paths towards engagement. Process, engagement, and relationships mattered.

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Few discussions about religious engagement escaped lengthy questioning about definitions. No single definition or definitions satisfied all comers, even in English, much less in other languages. Did “religion” mean organized bodies like the Catholic Church, or was it really about “lived religion”? How were religion, faith, and spirituality similar or different? Where did values and human rights come in? And how was religion related to culture, and culture to religion? Harking back to the tensions around politics, was religion “politicized,” or politics “religionized”? Different disciplines have distinct traditions and debates around definitions of religion and secularism. The extraordinary diversity of religious traditions obviously complicated the discussion and was often poorly appreciated, even within religious communities themselves.

A first step towards religious literacy was to dispel common preconceptions that often tended to view religion with rather monotone understandings, as a “sector” with common features. There was and is nothing resembling a monolithic religious view or structure. The dynamism of religious institutions, traditions, and beliefs is a striking feature of today’s fast-changing, globalized world, with marked changes taking place within every community, many linked to the momentous changes that are a central feature of modernization and thus development. The notion of a “religious sector” or understandings that segmented religious from secular, people of faith from others, distorted the complex interconnections and gradations. As a wise observer noted, everyone has faith: The pertinent question is: Faith in what?

A major part of my journey in working to build bridges between different understandings and approaches of the institutions involved was the challenge of reliving or rediscovering institutions, places, and events I had lived with in the past. It forced a constant grappling with the tensions between a worldview that saw clear segmentations: Religion versus secular, Christian versus Muslim, evangelical versus atheist. My increasingly nuanced appreciation of the situation as I worked with widely varied religious partners encountered dueling perceptions in many situations. This went well beyond challenges I faced within, especially, a development institution context. There, I was expected constantly to answer tough questions about evidence and results: What were rates of return on faith-linked activities and how did they compare to others? What quantitative research demonstrated differences in the quality of health care and education? What was the measurable benefit of investments in partnerships and relationships? Instead, encounters focused increasingly on more fundamental issues about what development meant, the nature of desired societies and economies, and how to get there.

After a baptism of fiery criticism within the World Bank, my learning adventure led me down many paths. In engaging in repeated discussions about the blurred boundaries I increasingly encountered, three people’s approaches proved especially helpful in defining where gaps in understanding lay and in suggesting ways to bridge them.

Denis Goulet was an iconoclastic Catholic whose focus was on broad notions of ethics of development that I was finding a useful foundation for our bridge-building approach. I met and interacted with him in various meetings and with some of his admirers: Goulet inspired a num-

ber of followers over the years (Omer, Appleby, and Little 2015; Wilber and Dutt 2010). He left the memorable image of development actors as “one-eyed giants,” who came to poor countries with science but little appreciation for the roots of cultures, meeting communities where science was largely alien. His analogy was in fact from Laurens Van Der Post who saw the “white man” bringing with him

the characteristic split and blindness which were at once his strength, his torment, and his ruin. ... The one-eyed giant had science without wisdom, and he broke in upon ancient civilizations which (like the medieval West) had wisdom without science: wisdom which transcends and unites, wisdom which dwells in body and soul together and

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which, more by means of myth, or rite, of contemplation, than by scientific experiment, opens the door to a life in which the individual is not lost in the cosmos and in society but found in them. Wisdom which makes all life sacred and meaningful ... even that which later ages came to call secular and profane.

(Goulet 1980)

Goulet linked the complex issues of culture to the complexities of lived religion in useful ways that also highlighted the part played by institutions of religion. He also pointed to aspects of religious approaches that institutional and instrumental approaches often ignored: The spiritual quest that in fact is a clear part of the human condition.

A second approach was less personal, more intellectual: I had met and been inspired while at the World Bank by Chris Argyris (1976) and his notion of “dueling ladders of inference,” and found the discipline of focusing on the approach useful even in facing what seemed intractable differences (for example firmly held views that a woman’s roles in society should focus on care of her husband or that female genital cutting was necessary). Argyris’ “ladders” trace an idea or argument back to the vast pools of observations of realities, up through a selection of data points, to their grouping, then fitting with explanations, and finally conclusions and positions. The insight here is that in approaching different views and those who hold them, often firmly, it is important to explore in depth their ladder of inference and thus the ways in which their narratives are constructed. Dueling narratives are a fundamental issue in many development debates including those that involve people whose worldviews are shaped in important ways by religious teachings and beliefs. Again, finding ways to appreciate how the ladders may be shaped, both one’s own and others, is a central competence needed to find areas where there are common elements and also to identify significant differences.

A colleague whose provocative intellectual journeys offer important bridges for development actors, for example on attacking corruption, is Robert Klitgaard. Klitgaard has long worked to bridge understandings shaped by his training in economics and a constant focus on culture. Klitgaard’s *The Culture and Development Manifesto* (2021) takes his experience, reading, and teaching to a new level. He grapples with the ironic reality that though everyone agrees that culture must be taken into account in development, few have meaningful approaches to doing so. The notion that we have explored together is what he calls “poisonous texts.” These may take the form of a written text but, looking deeper, often represent an approach or dogma that makes it impossible to engage constructively with a partner or person. Examples include tense relationships in the past between World Bank teams (that I was leading) and governments in Senegal and Gambia. In both cases, our deliberate efforts to understand and address the tensions took the form of week-long meetings and, at least to a degree, helped to lance the major tensions and to trace paths towards respectful partnerships (Marshall 1997). Klitgaard’s solutions are sensible and feasible: Step back, take a broader look, for example with a comparative analysis or focusing on a situation or case that has been successful, then agree to work together towards solutions. In both the Senegal and Gambia cases, this process involved first a willingness to appreciate how each party saw the other, then stepping back from annoyances and active disputes to focus on shared goals for the future.

Beyond explorations, towards engagement

My professional journey had taken me to West Africa, including Senegal, during a tumultuous period of economic tribulations during the 1990s that culminated in the CFA (*Communauté Financière Africaine*) franc devaluation in 1994, which affected 14 countries. After many years, I

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returned to Senegal in 2010 with a very different focus, working to answer basic questions as part of an academic/policy project to “map” the roles of religious actors, of faith, in development (Herzog and Mui 2016). This project has involved working with very different actors and issues over several years.

The two worlds I was coming to know (development partner, academic focus on religious institutions) overlapped in only a handful of ways. While country director for Senegal I caught glimmers of my colleagues’ religious commitments, but then an uproar broke out that involved a powerful Sufi religious community, the Mourides. In 1991, without warning at least to the donor community, the Mouride leader mobilized followers to cut down an entire protected forest (Mbegue) in a matter of days. The incident caught everyone, government included, off guard, as there were firm agreements on protecting forests. An informal political agreement had in fact allowed the Mouride confrérie to convert a somewhat scrubby savanna forest into land suitable for peanut cultivation. This was an eye opener on a little discussed aspect of politics and governance (Herzog and Mui 2016, Box 2). Another lively concern centered on children from *daaras*, Muslim religious schools, begging in the streets, which was seen as a serious human rights challenge. Multiple initiatives to address these problems have met little success (to this day). Apart from that, religious matters rarely entered the perspectives.

My return in the late 2010s as part of WFDD revealed a very different world, and thus a rapid learning experience. Many former colleagues were still involved in the government and some NGOs, but broadly it involved the discovery of new circles and approaches to a country I thought I knew well. I had a head start as I had worked with several Senegalese religious leaders in different settings and thus had significant windows into their approaches. And despite the transformation of the city of Dakar (it was vastly larger and busier) in over two decades, much about Senegal, including approaches to problems, was familiar. The mapping exercise was based on extensive interviews and overall highlighted the major challenges facing Senegal’s education system. The roles of Senegal’s Sufi communities in governance, deeply part of the country’s history, were undergoing changes. There was a growing awareness that the informal, largely political relationships between religious communities and the government were far from optimal and that opportunities to learn from each other and work in partnership were missed.

WFDD’s research work led to an operational involvement in a very different area, linked to a nine-country program focused on family planning, the Ouagadougou Partnership. The Sahel countries have the world’s highest population growth rates, and analyses of prospects for the different countries highlight the vital importance of achieving what is called the demographic dividend, meaning that fertility rates are reduced so that for a period a higher proportion of the population is engaged in production. Accompanying the high fertility rates, high rates of maternal and child mortality in the region cause great suffering. An international group of funders, public (USAID, UNFPA, and others) and private (Gates and Hewlett Foundations and others) has supported the Ouagadougou Partnership. However, while the approach builds on constituencies (women, youth, mayors, private sector) supporting national family planning programs, the engagement of religious actors was at a bare minimum—indeed religious actors were seen by many (not without reason) as part of the problem, in their support for high fertility or simply their indifference.

WFDD worked with the Hewlett Foundation, Sheikh Saliou Mbacké (a Mouride leader with extensive international interreligious experience), and the Ministry of Health to prepare and launch an alliance that brought together Senegal’s major religious communities (mostly Muslim but also Catholic and Lutheran; Senegal’s population is roughly 94% Muslim and 4% Christian) in support of the country’s family planning program. The effort began with what at the time I viewed with some skepticism—successive visits to the major religious leaders to

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explore the topic of child spacing. It also involved visits to countries (notably Morocco) that had engaged religious actors in successful family planning programs. In fact, both sets of visits in retrospect were transformational and also served the important role of building relationships within the religious leader group and with the WFDD team. Six years into the program, it has met remarkable success, adding new dimensions to the broader national program (for example engaging religious women through community structures). The direct impact of religious leadership and communications (radio, television, social media, workshops) is, in the teams' view, not measurable in quantitative terms. Among the full team, skills of engagement, evaluation, and negotiation have increased. The government and other specialists have little doubt that the engagement is helping to inform men and women, and cuts down on false information as well as dangerous narratives advanced by some groups, that family planning amounts to a Western plot to limit the size of the Muslim population. These skills and insights are yielding important benefits during the Covid-19 emergencies.

The experience in Senegal represents a rare grouping of assets: Knowledge of the country's development history and challenges; research to establish solid information about the religious landscape and its engagement in different development sectors; and the opportunity to address the operational challenges of program management through the family planning program. The process has allowed the WFDD team to learn more about the diverse communities and offered opportunities to probe attitudes towards, for example, gender relations, early childhood development, and intergroup relationships. The Senegal institutions learned the language and concepts behind development programs, including nuts and bolts like accounting, examination of trade-offs, and the benefits that can come from meaningful monitoring and evaluation of a program. The effort is building evidence, of which probably the most valuable is detailed probing of the different views expressed in interviews and focus group discussions with religious leaders. These have helped to pinpoint the ways in which family relationships as well as religious beliefs shape decisions on childbearing and care during pregnancy and delivery, as well as the misconceptions that lead many women to fear family planning techniques.

Behind the Senegal venture there are two classic challenges that need to be addressed, that are common to many development situations. The first challenge is a continuing concern about what many term "instrumentalization"—the sense by religious actors that they are being essentially used by governments and financing partners to carry out previously defined programs. Even today, CRSD (the Senegalese organization responsible for the family planning program) has pivoted swiftly to support the Senegal government's remarkably successful Covid-19 health measures, but in private comments I hear grumbles about lack of full respect and participation in basic design. The second challenge is the uncertainty about long-term sustainable financing. The question remains how an interreligious body should properly be financed, as reliance on external partners is appropriate for startup and pilot phases but not for continuing activities.

Bridging religions, cultures, and worldviews

In the efforts to find approaches to the complex religious environments in different world regions, and globally, interreligious institutions play important roles. The challenge of navigating different religious communities, large and small, and addressing concerns of development institutions about possible favoritism means that working with interreligious bodies is attractive. Workable bodies can offer platforms that can be inclusive and also creative if they escape established rules and traditional hierarchies. More important, the mission of the interreligious community tends to focus primarily on peacebuilding and on addressing social cohesion challenges. Building constructive relationships with the interreligious bodies also can be helpful in

seeking constructive platforms. However, while the function and origin of most interreligious (and intrareligious) platforms is relationships among religious traditions, the challenges of bridging different worlds are often more pressing and more demanding. This certainly applies in many development situations.

An example was during the 2014–2015 West Africa Ebola crisis where, rather late in the crisis, the issue of dignified burials emerged as a critical factor in Ebola transmission. Public health mandated cremations and strictly regulated burials met strong resistance that extended to riots and digging up buried bodies to give them proper rites. Working with religious communities to develop an effective protocol was a game changer (Marshall 2016). However, the interreligious institutions were not sufficiently strong to assure a broader strategic engagement, and there were few established relationships with governments to allow for the continued dialogue and relationships that were needed. Many lessons that should have been learned from the roles that religious institutions played in the crisis were only partially reflected in broader efforts to learn from the crisis, including those that emerged starkly during the Covid-19 pandemic (Robinson, Wilkinson, Marshall 2020).

An unexpected but invaluable learning journey in interreligious worlds began (for me) with an invitation to take part in a new venture linked to the Fes Festival of Global Sacred Music, in Fes, Morocco, in 2002. The music festival was the brainchild of a Moroccan Sufi anthropologist, Faouzi Skali, following the first Gulf War. He saw sacred music as a unique way to reach people of different cultures and to bring them to understand each other and to heal pain and conflict. But his vision went well beyond the music, to dialogue. The idea was to have, alongside the music festival, a daily encounter between people from different and often opposing communities who, inspired by the music and ambience, would move beyond set positions and create pathways towards peace, respect, and understanding. The Fes Forum was born, and I worked with Faouzi Skali for some ten years, as co-moderator. To a remarkable degree, the hypothesis proved to be a valid one. People, many holding very senior positions, found that, in the very different setting of a meeting in a lovely palace garden, with a backdrop of diverse music and other art forms, new ideas could be tested and sharpened.

The Forum itself no longer has the same leadership or allure, and today multiple music festivals have emerged, so the Fes festival has lost its uniqueness. But many new friendships and relationships were forged there, many lasting to this day. In the light of the Covid-19 emergency, Faouzi Skali has launched a new venture that he calls Trismegistus, named for an Egyptian God who is said to link Art, Science, and Spirit. The experience of the Fes Festival highlights the importance of looking beyond formal structures and institutions, taking especially into account the power of the arts to bring people together. Similar comments apply for other sectors, including sports, and bringing religious actors into such ventures can open new windows.

Conclusion

The international relations and development fields have long faced challenges of working in siloes, whether divided by sector (e.g., education versus water) or by institutional habit and history. The three fields of humanitarian relief, economic and social development, and conflict resolution and peacebuilding have tended to have different training approaches, institutional arrangements, financing, and so forth. The focus on fragile and conflict-prone states, seen today as the central development challenge for the next decade by many, has highlighted the need for these three communities to work far more closely together. The fact that religious communities and beliefs play such critical roles in the poorest and most fragile situations means that an ideally well-coordinated approach would engage religious communities proactively. The optimal

ingful relationships and partnerships. Efforts to move in this direction might be termed a work in progress, with very partial examples of how it might work. There are many efforts: In the Philippines, in Mindanao; in Aceh, Indonesia (Feener and Fountain 2018); in South Sudan; in Central African Republic; in Nigeria; and in Colombia. But bringing segmented approaches closer together has yet to be achieved.

The rich experiences of the past two decades, through my journey of bridge-building between the worlds of development and religion, have left me with more questions than answers. Why, for example, are so many in religious circles convinced, deeply, that poverty in the world and in their community is getting worse, while development analysts argue that remarkable progress towards ending poverty is being made? (Radelet 2015). Is it because although most are better off, the inequity of growth is so striking that it appears that those at the bottom are worse off or increasing in number? Why is the challenge of ensuring equality between men and women and among ethnic groups so difficult to achieve? Why are inequality and inequity seen so differently and what are the most likely paths towards some resolution? Why are so many monitoring efforts showing that violations of human rights and especially of religious freedom are getting worse, in all world regions? Is it true, or are we just becoming more aware?

The time when development specialists adhered to simple solutions is far behind us, though there are many who would still argue strongly for certain policy prescriptions, for example heavy investments in education or universal health coverage or small and medium enterprise.

The reality is that with so many intersections single simple solutions are misleading.

Likewise, something approaching a simplistic idea that development actors, government, and partners, can simply “add religion and stir” is foolish. Complexity and dynamism are the names of the game. The end of my exploring of the gullies, canyons, and bridges is far away still, and my own development and faith literacy are far from complete. The worlds of development and religion are infinitely complex and constantly changing, so a clear vision of the elephant is probably a

chimera. However, I suggest two important lessons learned along the way.

A first echoes a recent finding from a study in Myanmar, that relationships probably matter more than evidence in the effort to convince those making policy and thus to bring about change (Green 2020). Perhaps telling a personal story of how you reached a position—including a willingness to evolve further—might be more convincing than marshaling quantitative evidence showing a similar finding. Evidence is critically important, but there are countless questions about what kind of evidence is sought as well as how to present and distill it in meaningful ways. Relationships are the route, however, to understanding and communicating, including across the many divides of culture, discipline, language, and place. In my own journey it is the effort to gain a deeper understanding of how a colleague or leader thinks that yields the most significant results. The discipline of extended interviews, reviewing and testing understanding, is, for example, a powerful tool in probing the critical issues of motivation and differing perceptions. That adds the vital importance of listening and the task of building relationships, whether at the personal or the institutional level.

A second lesson is a reinforcement of the vital lesson that context matters, a lot, probably most of all. It should come as no surprise that engaging religious communities is complex and challenging, given their long history (millennia), dynamism, and diversity. The oft-cited figure that some 84% of the world’s population has some religious affiliation (Pew Research Center 2012; Birdsall and Beaman 2020) is a clear clue to the size and complexity. Each place, each tradition, each belief has complex roots. Efforts to seek a “faith DNA” that would characterize all religious actions are a Quijote-like quest. The evolution and divisions of major religions

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over the millennia are testimony to that. The ways of faith are infinitely complex, individual to each person but also to each institution, at a given moment. Looking to the multiple disciplines involved in approaching religious literacy, history to my mind has paramount importance. But the venture inevitably involves economy, finance, psychology, geography, cultural heritage, and, of course, politics. Taking the complexity of the challenge with humility and even good humor, however, opens doors to an infinite richness of appreciation for the human condition and, it is to be hoped, ways to contribute to its flourishing in a time when so much is possible.

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