Faith in Civil Society
Religious Actors as Drivers of Change
Faith in Civil Society
Religious Actors as Drivers of Change
Let us begin with an image. It is from the very first lecture of development studies that I participated in. Day one on the course: As the lecturer tries to describe development, two lists of words appear. First comes a list of words describing the underdeveloped:

- Village
- Farmer/peasant
- Subsistence farming
- Traditional values
- Collective values
- Religion

And a list of words describing the developed:

- Urbanisation
- Industrial worker
- Division of labour
- Modernity
- Individual values
- Rationality

The one side was gaining – and the other, by necessity, had to diminish and disappear into the shadows of history. I think many of us have had the same view of religion as something of the past, something that will disappear into the abyss or at least into the private sector of life, just as it has in Western Europe over the past fifty years. No wonder there is a complicated relation between religion and development.

Let us take a look at another image: a discussion on gender issues 30 years ago. The discussion was followed by personal remarks, private references, and even giggles. There was at the time incapability to separate one’s immediate personal experiences from the topic. Today we can talk
about gender issues in a professional manner, without references to our personal experiences of doing the dishes, or the level of gender equality in our own families. But when it comes to religion, we are still at the same level as we were concerning gender 30 years ago. It gets too personal, it gets too close. We are not able to encounter it without bringing our entire backpack of personal experiences, fears, sublimated religious memories, traditions. What we need is a professional approach to religion.

Tom Kristiansen, Norwegian news anchor, described 20 years ago how the secular Norwegian aid worker in Sub-Saharan Africa was a complete UFO in a world where everything was religion, and how words were missing to describe the reality of the ever-present religion he/she met. This is still the situation.

Effectiveness is frequently a topic when development aid is discussed. Lack of knowledge, or lack of words to describe reality, will always have an impact on effect. This volume and several others like it in the past few years are a sign that religion is now given the importance it deserves in the development discussion. But there is still a lack of knowledge; there is prejudice and misinformation about the role of religion in development.

This notwithstanding, church people now enthusiastically sense a dawning interest in the relationship between religion and development. I perceive a certain pride and joy in faith-based organisations over this awakened interest, and I think this is right and justified. There has been a recurrent saying in government agencies and other back donors: “You do a good job, too bad you have to be religious” or “And we really do think that you have a hidden agenda.” Let us hope that those times are gone, and that back donors and secular development organisations will be able to see the faith based organisations as many of them are: professional, grounded, sustainable, and deeply rooted in civil society, both here and in developing countries.

There are problems, though. Sometimes back donors jump to the conclusion that Western faith-based organisations could function as megaphones for Western values into more conservative societies in the South. I hear the words ‘added value’ as if organisations like my own were mere instruments of a Western agenda. I do think that faith-based organisations have a special possibility to meet and engage with other
Everyday religion and change

people of faith, even people of other faiths than our own. We have access to arenas closed to others; we have deep and old bonds with churches in the global South. But we do not necessarily share values with them, even though we share faith. Values and faith are not the same. We cannot expect that believers in the South are going to adapt to Western values as a natural evolution, from conservative to liberal. Even if the church in the North has had the privilege of setting the agenda for the largest part of the last century, this does not mean that it is so now, nor that it will be so in the future. Increasing debate and disagreement between churches in the North and in the South are surely to come. It is a long time since the North had the mandate or, for that matter, the will to dictate.

On the other hand, there is also the misconception that religious communities are rigid and impossible to change. We often describe religious bodies and leaders as a hindrance to a rights-based approach, as a stumbling-block to values we would like to see gaining ground. This is not necessarily so. Some of the most challenging social ideas are now shaped within religious communities in the South, many of them by feminist theologians from all world religions. Dynamic discussions are taking place in the religious arena, all over the place.

My point is that the changes we will see in developing countries – when it comes to human rights, equality, improvements as regards reproductive health, or any other issue that is sensitive among religious persons – will come, largely, as a change within the faith communities, not from the outside. Change will come through processes among believers. Respectful understanding and communication with those forums are necessary to understand the development processes taking place. We need knowledge about religious people.

It is being said that religion is back, but I would say that it was never gone. It was never out of sight. Maybe media in Europe has rediscovered religion, but the religion they have rediscovered is an extreme version: the religion of American presidential candidates competing for votes from conservative people; or Islamist reactions to globalisation and rather aggressive Western culture and commercialism, a political version of religion shared by a small fraction of the world’s Muslims. That is the
religion that seems to be back, but I would argue that this is a rather marginal religion.

There is another kind, a kind that was never gone: millions of people every Sunday morning, sometimes before sunrise, putting their best clothes on, wandering off to a small chapel or a large cathedral, or Friday afternoon going to the mosque, or stopping at the roadside shrine in some Asian county. The billions of prayers whispered every moment, all the time. Billions of people in a lowly way, turning to something outside of themselves, to find structure, meaning, hope, and comfort in lifting their eyes above the immediate needs of the day. This is religion as a source of hope in a fragmented world, a deep sense that there is justice beyond the injustices of the world, the sense of belonging and respect for creation and the neighbour, that runs like a thread through all religions of the world.

I wonder if anyone could ever calculate the market value of that hope and wholeness. What impact on development does this input from ‘the spiritual’ world have? It is very likely impossible to assess, or put into any log-frame or project application, this input from faith to development. Yet, it is maybe the largest contribution of all from religion to development – as well as the most important driver of change.

Author affiliation

Diakonia, Sweden