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Religion and Faith-based Organisations in Africa: the forgotten actors

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BARBARA BOMPANI, SEP 27 2011

There are many different kinds of faith and since the 18th century the West has placed its faith in modernity and modernisation, with its allied interpretations of how societies should develop and how progress should be established. The history of the West is a history of disenchantment (as Max Weber would say) and liberation from religion and religious authorities and their influence on public, political and economic spaces. This meant allowing religion to exist only in the private and personal sphere while dismantling its power in society and through its institutions.

Modernity in 20th century Western Europe came to be seen as progress from a deeply religious, irrational and non-bureaucratic world, to a modern world in which material advancement was achieved through 'sound' bureaucratic structures which led to secularisation and the loss of the spiritual. And while the Enlightenment was fighting to rid itself of God in the public sphere, academic studies started to give less weight to the study of religion as a lens to understand reality and the contemporary. International development, which emerged at the end of World War II in part to make order out of chaos, ignored faith while favouring 'enlightened rationality'. 'Unreasonable faith' had no place within development narratives that revolved around rational and linear progress. This is largely due to a mix of fear and suspicion on the part of secular institutions and secular people concerned that religion was the source of conflict and a brake to rationality. Development studies, as an emerging discipline, therefore did not pay much attention to the role of religion in society and the role that religious organisations could play in the life of people.

There is an irony in this in that Development (with a capital D) exhibits many of the traits in religion it seeks to critique. Development in fact becomes a sort of faith *per se* (Crush, 1995); a very well defined system of beliefs with its own ethics, trajectories, rituals, leaders and rewards and holy places. Secular development draws from systems of beliefs (like progress and growth) and defers to the existence of holy authorities and sacred spaces (like the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank and its presidency). Even within development discourses we often deal with principles like capital, debt and social structures that are invisible realities and intangible entities. As a faith of its own, built around its own belief systems, it is perhaps easy to see why development obstructed other forms of religion. They did not fit!

For decades, faith in development stated that if people followed a certain path, the Western path of modernisation and secularisation, this would lead to economic growth and to wealth for less developed countries. At the end of colonisation in the 50s and in the 60s, Africa was supposed to shape its newly independent states and societies around the Western model. Literature from the 1960s and 1970s that dealt with religion in the continent, that still dominates in various circles, gives a sense that there was little left to study, and little need to do so, as Africa was inevitably going to follow a Western path of modernisation. So powerful was this discourse that more recent analyses highlighting the enduring reality of religion have simply been portrayed as a negation, or a deviation, from a so-called Western normality (Mbembe, 2001). If religion is relevant in the public arena in Africa, then this must be a deviation from the correct secular path (and many European sociologists still think so). But if this is the case, how do we explain the USA, a developed nation-state that has not lost all sense of the spiritual? Or the increasing role that religion plays in public life due to migration and globalisation in Europe? How many deviations from the so-called normality must we acknowledge before challenging our own idea of normality?

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For those undertaking research and development work in Africa it is impossible not to observe a reality contrasting predictions of a pre-defined vision of modernity. Religion-driven charitable contributions have been and remain a critical source of welfare and religious organisations remain the most significant non-state providers of basic social services to the poor in Africa. Faith-based organisations (FBOs) expanded or proliferated as a result of economic neo-liberalism as the faithful responded to growing poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

Instead of decreasing, religion is taking an increasingly central role in African political and developmental life (Deneulin and Bano, 2009; Haar and Ellis, 2006). Religious organisations do development for their ethos; notions of social justice, charity and service are critical to the work of religious groups, but also (and most of all) because of the lack of action and capability of the state. In Africa, and elsewhere, religious organisations have often had to pick up the slack precipitated by these failures of development and shortcomings of the state due to their inherent ability to connect to local contexts, communities and their beliefs. According to a World Bank report, 50 per cent of health and education services in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2000 were provided by faith-based organisations (World Bank, 2008). The evangelical development agency World Vision had an effective aid budget of \$1.25 billion in 2002 (World Vision International, 2003). The World Bank noted that in Benin the Church represents “the most prominent and effective protection network” (Kliksberg, 2003). In Southern Africa the Church is equally prominent, in Malawi in the 1970s it was claimed that the annual budget of the *Christian Service Committee of the Churches of Malawi*, a key ecumenical organisation, was 1.5 times the size of the state’s entire development budget (World Faiths Development Dialogue, 2003). Until very recently in South Africa, the Catholic Church was providing more anti-retroviral treatment for people suffering from HIV than the state. In agriculture, too, the Church plays an important role not only in terms of agricultural extension but also in terms of influencing policy. The South African Catholic Bishops Conference has on several occasions discussed and released policy papers and statements on the positives and negatives of biotechnology in alleviating hunger and poverty in Africa.

The important work of religious actors in development started to be recognised by international donors and development agencies only recently. In fact we had to wait until the late 90s to see a sort of recognition of the work done by these forgotten actors in development, while it is only with 9/11 that proper attention has been paid to the study of religion in the social sciences more generally.

In 1998 Jim Wolfensohn, then president of the World Bank and the then-Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey founded a “World Faiths Development Dialogue Forum” to promote dialogue between religious groups, and between the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (now the Forum has been replaced by the smaller “Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics” group). This event has signed the beginning of a new phase of investigation and gave rise to a vigorous set of studies on the changes of religious values as economies develop – many of which have been able to make use of substantial new data sets on religious affiliation and beliefs. Since the end of the 1990s, development discourse and religion are no longer contrasting worlds, with the former no longer seeing the latter as an archaic, non-progressive agent of change in contraposition to modernist progressive linear idea of ‘secular’ development. There has been some recent acknowledgement of the importance of religious organisations (Clarke and Jennings 2008; Deneulin and Bano 2009; Tyndale 2007; Marshall and Van Saanen 2007, Berger 2003) in and for development, but in Africa they are still largely understudied and under-theorised. A particularly relevant aspect that deserves better investigation is the capacity of many FBOs to connect with the local and to translate ‘modernist’ complex discourses into understandable practices; “while NGOs stay until their funding runs out, religious organisations stay forever!” Another important aspect that still needs to be sufficiently investigated is the role of religious leaders in shaping development interventions. The leadership in religious organisations is important and affects the vision, regular functioning and decision-making of the organisation, especially in forms of religious expression that are not strongly hierarchical, such as Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity. It is also important to remember that FBOs form an extremely variegated world of organisations that differ in many ways.

An array of religious organisations have become obliged to deliver development (Tyndale 2006; Marshall & Van Saanen 2007). Many religious organisations that operate in developing countries are not easily defined because they constitute small and volatile realities, like churches, mosques, interfaith groups that change according to many factors, like for example the role played by the leadership and the local political context. Most of the time religious organisations (except for a few well established religious developmental organisations like for example CARITAS,

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SCIAF, CAFOD, World Vision and Islamic Relief) do not behave as secular developmental organisations and for this reason we cannot categorise them in the same way. These are not 'secular' regular development organisations. They hold their own ethos and there are moved by their own system of beliefs. Religious organisations are affected by their own history that determines their attitude and behaviour towards the public and to local systems of power. In short, religious organisations constitute a complex universe that needs to be understood in its context and in its entirety, from concrete and practical interventions in society to its theological underpinnings and systems of beliefs.

Beliefs are of particular relevance when dealing with religious organisations. Religious institutions and FBOs may not always have positive influences and the added 'complication' of worldviews that theology may introduce might not always lead people to a path of transformation and emancipation and may in fact lead to greater dependence and poverty. Religion may itself become a practical problem, introducing conflicting ideas in already divided and fragile societies.

Conflicting values can emerge with family planning methods such as contraception and abortion, HIV/AIDS prevention and messages related to sexual behaviour, morality and women's emancipation; other issues might concern sacred sites, dress codes, or tolerance of other religious groups. Islamic leaders played a central role in resistance to the polio vaccine in northern Nigeria (Yahya, 2007). Alternatively, the Bush administration's more conservative approach to development assistance threatened the successful ABC (Abstinence, Being Faithful, Condoms) campaign to prevent HIV/AIDS through the withdrawal of funding for condoms in East Africa. In Uganda, Pentecostal-charismatic churches saturate mass-media, occupy influential public roles and shape national debates about the immorality of homosexuality, influencing political decisions and threatening human rights, and in some cases people's safety.

In conclusion, modernity-inspired international development has often failed when not taking into account local context, culture and belief. From a similar perspective, Richard Dawkins (2006) has proclaimed faith as a delusion and religion as a dangerous 'mind virus' that can spread across societies. One might argue that there is a corresponding danger or delusion in a refusal to acknowledge the enduring societal role of religion or to place faith in faith. This is not necessarily to argue that faith may be right (or wrong), but simply to acknowledge religion as a fundamental social, political and development force in an African context. Failing to consider religion and religious ideas risks the failure of enduring social change. This seems a more productive and appropriate way of framing societies and people's lives, rather than suggesting secularity should supersede other forms of faith.

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