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Who's Afraid of Religion? Tensions between 'Mission' and 'Development' in the Norwegian Mission Society

Ingie Hovland

Introduction

There has been a recent surge in interest in the topic 'faiths and development' in the United Kingdom, at universities and research institutes as well as in the UK Department for International Development (DFID). This interest throws up a series of new questions within development studies and related disciplines: from the perspective of development studies it raises questions about how donors and faith-based organizations (FBOs) can most constructively engage with each other; from the perspective of social anthropology it raises questions about the very different ways that diverse groups relate to that common human experience known as 'faith', and, specifically, how the grand twentieth-century project of development may have more intimate connections to faith and religion than it acknowledges.

More broadly, it feeds into the ongoing debate on 'secularization' within anthropology and other disciplines. Traditionally, 'secularism' was taken to mean the gradual decline of religion in post-Enlightenment societies. The Enlightenment, it was assumed, had exposed the folly of all 'irrational' elements of human life, such as magic and religion, and instead promoted notions of rationality and a belief in technical progress. It was assumed that (irrational) religion and (rational) progress were directly opposed to each other. This conceptualization of secularism has, however, recently been challenged by scholars who argue it presents an ideological myth rather than social reality. Asad (2003), for example,

examines the rise of ‘secular’ thought and life throughout the period of modernity, and describes the complexity of this process. In finding it to be deeply rooted and intertwined in religious formations, he argues that the secular is not simply an ‘opposite’ to religion, or even to the ‘rational’; it is, rather, a multi-layered category with a complex history. Meyer and Pels (2003) have similarly examined ‘secular’ modern societies, and present thoughtful descriptions of instances where ‘secular’ modernity seems to embrace, use, respond to and even depend on ‘magical’ elements of life. They too conclude that magic and secular modernity are not ‘opposites’. Magic is a part of modernity in many ways, even constitutive ones.

Davie (2002) has compared the rise of modernity in Western Europe with other regions in the world. She demonstrates how Western European processes of secularization and de-Christianization accompanying modernization have not occurred elsewhere. The formation of the secular in Europe is, then, a rather particular case. In other regions of the world, including in North America, secular modernity is coupled with religion in different formations – and in some regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, it is not at all experienced as strange that an increase in modern social structures and experiences can be coupled with an *increase* in religious formations (cf. Chabal and Daloz 1999 on the mutually constitutive bonds between religion and politics in several contemporary African political systems). In sum, the recent debate in this field has made scholars rethink the relationship between secularism and religion, and has given us far more complex descriptions of actual historical and contemporary experiences of how religion, magic, ‘secularism’ and modernity are entwined and respond to each other, rather than being clearly separate or directly opposed phenomena, despite the Enlightenment’s strong desire for this to be true.

This chapter will engage with these broad questions around faith and secularism, and their implications for development, through an examination of an issue that became hotly debated within the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS) around 2003-2004. NMS is a Norwegian Protestant (Lutheran) non-governmental organization (NGO) that carries out both active religious mission work (i.e. evangelization) as well as ‘secular’ development projects. During this period, the question of the relationship between these two streams of work – evangelization and ‘development’ – created tensions within the organization and informed debates outside it.

Within NMS, policy staff at the NMS head office in Stavanger, Norway, sought to keep a clear separation between two work programmes for a range of reasons. First, they had just guided the organization through a restructuring process that focused on three new work programmes (evangelization, development and capacity building), and they wished to encourage organizational loyalty towards these three distinct programmes. Second, they wished to signal to the outside world that they had a functional and thought-through organizational structure, and identified clearly defined work programmes as a means of achieving this. Lastly, having received funding from the Norwegian government’s bilateral aid organization, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), NMS needed to be able to demonstrate how NORAD funds were being spent on development work and *not* on mission. They therefore required separate budget lines for these two types of work. During the research period NMS policy staff discussed why and how a clean separation between ‘evangelization’ and ‘development’ should be maintained, and all field staff – known as ‘missionaries’ in NMS – were duly instructed from the head office on how to maintain a separation between ‘religious evangelizing’ activity and ‘development’ activity, to prevent a mix-up between the two.

Coinciding with this internal discussion, external critics of NMS claimed that the distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘development’ meant nothing in practice and that the result of NMS’ work was a dangerous convergence of mission and development. For example, NMS was attacked in the media for using NORAD funding to pay the salaries of religious missionaries overseas. In short, NMS was felt to be a significant and provocative threat to the ‘secular’ basis of the Norwegian development project, because of the perceived collapse of the boundary between mission and development – which NMS in turn was quick to deny.

This chapter will explore this tangled issue more closely by first turning to the historical background of NMS and how the relationship between religious mission and development has changed over the past 160 years of the organization’s history. It will then turn to a brief sketch of the secular context in Norway in which Norwegian development aid has been embedded, and which NMS continuously positions itself in relation to. This will set the stage for introducing the criticisms that were lobbied against NMS, and how NMS responded to these – as well as the tensions that these criticisms uncovered within NMS’ own organizational structure. In conclusion, it will suggest that it is important for FBOs in development to become better at dealing with faith, and to be able to engage with donors in a clear way on this issue; but it is equally important for ‘secular’ development organizations to become better at dealing with the interconnections between religion, secularization, modernity and development, rather than blindly assuming that development, as a ‘secular’ project, is opposed to religion.

Religion and development in NMS

NMS has around 70 staff at their head office in Stavanger, Norway, and around 100 missionaries based in 12 countries around the world, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia. NMS exclusively recruits staff who profess a personal Christian faith and who are willing to be loyal to the organization’s overarching purpose of ‘spreading the gospel’, as they put it in interviews with me. For NMS this encompasses a belief that Christianity is the only true faith, and to try to convert non-Christians to the same belief. NMS has an annual budget of around 190 million Norwegian kroner (NOK, around £16.5 million), distributed across their three work programmes: (1) Church and Christian evangelization work – where the aim of conversion is strongest; (2) development work – mostly carried out through micro-level projects dealing with, for example, health, agriculture, education or water; and (3) capacity development – undertaken mostly in collaboration with NMS’ local partner churches. NMS policy emphasizes that their work is ‘holistic’, in the sense that they try to take into account both the material and the spiritual dimensions of people’s lives. This is reflected in their work, which seeks to link faith as well as health, education, livelihoods and gender issues.

This ‘holistic’ policy dates back to the foundation of NMS in 1842. Religious mission and development have always been undertaken side by side by NMS missionaries and historically have not been separated into different ‘work programmes’ within the organization (such division is a recent trend). Although there has always been debate within NMS about which ‘types’ of work should take priority, this ongoing and unresolved debate around priorities and resources has never detracted from the broad range of work that has been carried out in practice.

NMS' first missionaries, sent to Zululand (in what is now South Africa) after NMS was established in 1842, are hard to compartmentalize in terms of their function (see e.g. Jørgensen 1990, Myklebust 1980, Nome 1943-1949). H. P. S. Schreuder had completed a degree in theology at the University of Christiania and was ordained as a pastor. He also had basic training as a medical doctor and treated those who sought his assistance, whether Christian or not (including the Zulu king on his arrival). In addition, he was a self-trained carpenter, and coordinated the building of several churches in Zululand that are still standing today. He also enjoyed crafting objects, and had acquired sufficient knowledge of linguistic principles to be able to write and publish the first Zulu grammar and reading book (Schreuder 1848, 1850). Nor was he alone in undertaking multiple tasks. Add to this the skills he acquired in political negotiation, Zulu folklore and horse-riding, and it becomes increasingly clear that for him, and his first missionary colleagues, their missionary existence was part and parcel of the life that they built among the Zulus. In practice, there was no separation between their religious mission and the other aspects of their life and work.

Throughout the history of NMS, this tendency to engage with people on both 'spiritual' and 'development' matters at the same time, as two sides of the same coin, continued until very recently. But the precise balance between the two has been subject to long-standing debate within the organization, as various debates and arguments in the pages of the organization's magazine, *Misjonstidende*, attest. Some missionaries have felt that 'secular' development work detracted from the aim of religious conversions, while others argued that if health, agriculture and education were not considered priorities, then they would never be able to show people the love of God in practice. The debates have also focused on the blend of staff needed to improve engagement with local communities. Whilst some called for more pastors, others suggested those with more practical skills were required, such as experts on cattle. However, it is only in the recent period that debates have focused on whether 'secular' activities should be seen as 'separate' from more explicitly church work.

This new debate emerged in the 1990s with the publication by NMS of a policy document (Kristensen, Sandsmark and Aano 1995). It was felt necessary in this document to clarify that 'secular' work was never used as bait for religious conversion. It was seen as important to clearly distinguish NMS from other mission agencies who were perceived to be using the promise of food and medicines as leverage for religious conversions. NMS has always opposed such a strategy as a result of its Lutheran roots which criticises such an approach. Lutheran understandings of conversion suggest that anyone who converts because of exterior, material desires, has not undergone a genuine conversion. Thus, any conversion that occurs because material good have been used as 'bait' will be perceived as resulting in a 'nominal' (rather than a sincere and genuine) believer, which in effect often amounts to a non-believer. The process of baiting is also regarded as a mockery of the seriousness and depth of sincerity that religious conversion entails within NMS. One missionary noted in the research that he had once been planning the distribution of some project materials together with a local member of staff in Madagascar. When the local staff member indicated that they might use these materials to gain converts, the missionary replied 'We don't want any "rice Christians"!' (a term used to refer to people who called themselves Christian because they were offered food, often rice, in return for conversion). However, despite this aversion to using material goods as bait for religious conversion, NMS had previously never explicitly condemned such an approach in any policy document. By the mid-1990s, it became apparent that it was, indeed, necessary to

make this position clear to rule out misunderstandings over the relationship between religion and development in NMS.

By the 1990s NMS found itself in a thoroughly secularized Norway. During the century and a half following NMS' establishment, secularization in Norway had taken place in a similar pattern to that elsewhere in Western Europe. In this regard, Norway is part of the 'exceptional' countries in the world that have produced a type of modernity that sees itself as opposed to religion (Davie 2002). However, the secularization process was complex, as Asad (2003) has pointed out. Whilst folk traditions involving the church are still decidedly alive – for example, most couples who decide to get married, still get married in church – the church itself has been subject to changing attitudes and beliefs. Many members of the Lutheran Church of Norway today, for example, are open to a religious dimension of life, yet sceptical to any religious mission activity (Jørgensen 1995); many Norwegians are open to the idea of spiritual experiences, but shy away from the idea that there is only one religious truth. NMS has increasingly been confronted (in some cases aggressively) with these changing attitudes, as will be explored in the following section.

The legitimacy of FBOs in a secular society

In 2004, NMS and other religious mission organizations in Norway became caught up in a hostile debate in the Norwegian media over the legitimacy of faith-based development NGOs (for contributions to the debate, see e.g., *Dagens Næringsliv* 07.02.04; Magnus, Reinlund and Persen 2004; and Tvedt 2004; Bolle and Meland 2003). There was a highly critical TV documentary and several newspaper commentaries over the question of whether Norwegian faith-based NGOs – specifically, the Norwegian Christian mission organizations – should receive funding from the Norwegian government's aid budget. Eighteen Christian mission and development organizations in Norway have come together under the umbrella organization Norwegian Missions in Development (*Bistandsnemnda*), and as a group receive around 140 million NOK each year (around £12 million) from NORAD, around 1 per cent of NORAD's total aid budget, which complements the organizations' own fundraising networks.

This prompted some provocative questions in the media debate: can organizations that officially aim to carry out Christian mission activity, that is, to convert people, be asked to implement development projects funded by government aid money? And if so, under what conditions? NORAD funds some of the development work of Norwegian Christian faith-based NGOs, but this is done on the clear premise that this funding should only go to *development* work and not to religious evangelization or *mission*; the Norwegian government does not wish to use the aid budget to fund religious conversion activity. This distinction between 'development' and 'mission' is clearly marked by the perception of 'faith' that has come to the fore in post-Enlightenment secularized societies such as Norway (cf. the debates around whether secular modernity is really as opposed to religion as it claims, Asad 2003; Meyer and Pels 2003), it is certainly not tenable in many other societies around the world, where modernity goes hand in hand with religious convictions, experiences and arguments (Davie 2002). The NORAD request for separation between 'development' and 'mission' seems to be based on the Western European assumption that development is a secular project; and, moreover, that secularization is 'separate' from religion. Given the tenuous nature of these assumptions, it comes as no surprise that it is far easier to draw the line between development and mission in theory than in practice,

and during the media debate, the question was raised as to whether it was, indeed, possible to make the distinction at all, as NORAD claimed.

Norway's most vociferous development studies academic, Terje Tvedt, contributed to the debate by stating in a newspaper comment that the development/mission distinction did not hold in practice:

What would the Storting [Norwegian Parliament] say if the Indonesian or Saudi Arabian state funded fundamentalist Muslim organizations that did charity work among street children in Oslo, but primarily were concerned with Islamizing all of Norwegian society? ... The Norwegian faith communities have invested in local church development [abroad,] based on their own understanding of the Bible, and with support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs they have managed to establish a series of what we in development jargon call 'local partners'. These are often churches that carry out mission work ... The parliamentary papers on aid and foreign policy have maintained that the state only supports development work. They clearly emphasize that the state does not support evangelizing activity abroad. Undoubtedly, secularly oriented politicians have believed in this formal distinction between development and evangelizing, but it goes against the mission commission and does not take the mission project seriously (and regardless of will, it is an almost impossible distinction to maintain in practice). (Tvedt 2004, my translation)

In effect, Tvedt was saying publicly that government money was being misspent when it was assigned to the development work of Norwegian mission organizations, because they were lying when they said that they kept a distinction between their development work and their evangelizing work. Several of the mission organizations and other faith-based NGOs, including NMS, were exasperated by this attack, and felt a strong need to reply to it and to point out why they thought it was both erroneous as well as largely missing the point. In fact, the General Secretary of NMS, Kjetil Aano, was sufficiently provoked to write a reply entitled 'The fear of religion', which was sent to the same newspaper the following week (Aano 2004). I want to pick up on one of the points he made in this reply.

The fear of religion

Aano suggested that this debate should not be reduced to scepticism of religion per se, but should rather be centred on an informed discussion around the role of value-based development work: 'much of what the mission organizations represent actually constitutes an added value in relation to aid through the government apparatus – and the two sides complement each other. Engagement and popular support on both sides is one such added value' (Aano 2004, my translation). Value-based development is not only carried out by faith-based organizations, he went on to say, but also by labour movements, organizations working on physical integrity (such as sports or disability movements), or development organizations that base their work on an explicitly humanitarian ethos. NORAD, for example, today acknowledges that development is never 'neutral'. The argument over the role of value-based development therefore fits well in the Norwegian context at the moment: it is possible to argue that the question is not whether development should be based on values, because it always is anyway, but rather *which* values it should be based

on, and how these values should shape implementation. NMS argued that the fact that they are value based does not make them any less legitimate as an NGO. On the contrary, it means that they are willing to acknowledge the basis for their work. It even means, Aano indicated, that having an explicit basis is exactly what can give them a niche within the larger development project, and that this is the added value that they can bring.

At the same time, NMS reiterated its division of activity, justifying its continued receipt of NORAD funds. They used the NORAD funds for purely *developmental* projects which benefit local communities regardless of their religious beliefs and which do not include any Christian conversion activity. The *conversion* activities and *development* activities, NMS argued, were kept in clearly separate work programmes and on strictly separate budgets.

It gradually becomes clear that there is a certain tension for NMS here. On the one hand, they wish to work in an integrated way, ('holistic', as they say), which takes people's material *and* spiritual life dimensions into account – and this forms part of their value base, or faith base. Arguably, this value base is what enables them to add value to the development project as a whole, since it clarifies their position and suggests a niche that they can fill – for example, in civil society work with local churches, or in HIV/AIDS work in Christian youth groups, or in gender projects among church women groups, to name just a few examples from the work NMS is currently engaged in. On the other hand, NMS has to split off this value base and draw up a separation between the explicitly 'religious' part of their work and the so-called pure 'development' part of their work as a condition for administering funding from NORAD. This means, for example, that the gender project among church women groups was classified as 'religious', and was thus kept separate from NORAD-funded projects. Despite the fact that this type of project was a direct result of NMS' value base, that this value base and these types of projects were arguably what they could claim to be their added value, they could only do so when they were speaking to NORAD in abstract terms. When it came to discussions about funding they had to leave it out. In this was they are splitting the very integrated value base that could be their niche in the broader picture of NORAD funding policy – and they are splitting it in response to NORAD policy. One could say that NORAD throws them into a somewhat schizophrenic mode here.

Let me return at this point to the title that the NMS General Secretary chose for his reply: 'The fear of religion'. In many ways, he has identified the critical problem. In the development field – and NORAD is not alone here – there often seems to be a vague, undefined fear of religion. Religion is split off. It is not trusted. It is frequently ignored, and sometimes it even seems as if people pretend it is not there at all. In many ways it has become a taboo (Ver Beek 2000). Paradoxically, whilst there is this scepticism of religion and religious mission, development itself has a mission – or even is a mission – in the way that it is conceptualized and practiced. Development also has a grand utopian vision that needs to be taken largely on faith. (For a tongue-in-cheek analysis of the missionary zeal of the World Bank, for example, see Mihevc 1995.) The extensive and imposing 'secular' development project that has taken such hold during the last half of the twentieth century has grown its own creeds, visions and prophecies. As 'secular' development strives to forget about its own religious forms, then, it is easy to turn around and attack the organizations that most visibly manifest the very forms it is trying to hide, namely the faith-based NGOs.

This anxiety about religion – amongst those outside the faith-based community – means that organizations like NMS find themselves in the ironic position of having to

acknowledge their value base and *split it off* at the same time. But what does the broader development mission gain by such a split? All that NORAD gains, for example, is the opportunity to fund an additional number of standard ‘secular’ development projects that are by all means passable but very rarely innovative. Some of the most interesting work in NMS is now not funded by NORAD, since it integrates both the ‘religious’ and ‘development’ realms of people’s lives, and the potential synergy effect between religion and development is in theory lost to the bilaterally funded projects – thanks to the fear of religion.

But those in the development funding world are not the only ones who are afraid of religion. In many cases, the FBOs themselves are strikingly anxious of religion too.

The fear of religion (part ii)

In his reply ‘The fear of religion’, Aano also pointed out that we need an informed debate about *the role of religion* in development processes – and in political and social processes more broadly:

the question of the increasing role of religion as a conflict factor...is an important discussion. But precisely because religion is so important, it also has great potential as an agent of peace and reconciliation ... This is an area that we as Christian organizations know. And we can clearly get much better at developing and using this potential. But precisely as religious organizations who know the worth, depth and significance of religion, we are able to play an important role as a central actor in such work. (Aano 2004, my translation)

In other words, it is imperative today to engage with the question of when and under what circumstances religion incites violence, and what FBOs can do to minimize this risk and to draw on the reconciliatory dimensions of religion instead.

Like any organization, NMS has the potential both to exacerbate religious difference and to engage with it. NMS’ religious projects are exemplary ‘success stories’ when they are done well. As mentioned already, this can be the case, for example, in gender projects with church women groups; while I was doing research on NMS, the NMS missionaries in Ethiopia worked with their partner church (the Lutheran Mekane Yesus Church) to identify the position and role of women within the church, and I was told about subsequent church leadership meetings where the ‘Women’s Secretary’ of the church was able to query the (minimal) size of her budget, and where women were able to come together to raise the issue of female genital mutilation as a serious concern to them in a clear challenge to some (male) leaders’ tacit endorsement of this practice. This is briefly mentioned here to highlight the fact that NMS does indeed negotiate the religion–development interface with integrity and thoughtfulness in projects such as this one. However, at this religion–development interface, tensions and problems arise for NMS staff. The tensions that occur are important entry points into understanding how to come to grips with the role of religion and religious difference, when faith and development come together.

During my research on NMS I conducted formal interviews with many of the organization’s staff. In one of these interviews, a particular side of the tension caused by the programmatic split between ‘religion’ and ‘development’ emerged – despite the fact

that it was not supposed to. I had asked the interviewee what the term ‘missionary’ meant to him. He answered that while the term ‘missionary’ might primarily be associated with someone who works to ‘get more Christians’, this does not necessarily hold in all situations. He explained what he meant by using the example of one of NMS’ development projects which is partly funded by NORAD. The project combines education, health, livelihoods and community work. The Norwegian NMS staff on this project are called ‘missionaries’, but because of the NORAD funding, their objective is *not* to convert people to Christianity, but instead to contribute to improved education opportunities, improved health opportunities, and more democratic structures for local decision-making in the project villages.

The interviewee’s next comment as he was describing this particular project to me, however, was: ‘Of course, they [the project staff] still hold Christian devotions in the villages’. At the moment of saying this, realizing perhaps that such revelations were not appropriate since the project – as he himself had just informed me – was not supposed to include active Christian evangelizing activity, he quickly backtracked. He stated first that: ‘Well, they [the Christian devotions] don’t show up in the NORAD budgets’, (perhaps not such a wise choice of words either). But he then found a better tack, and started to explain to me how he pictured the role of Christian evangelizing in development. He was very careful, clearly not wishing to appear disrespectful of other religions, while at the same time also clearly wanting to communicate to me that he felt people who hold, for example, African traditional beliefs would on the whole gain a much better life if they converted to the beliefs and norms of Christianity instead. In his opinion, Christianity would enable them to make use of health care in a better way, gain more education, improved job prospects, and, most importantly, a different mindset – in short, ‘development’. In extension of this logic, therefore, he felt that it was in fact directly counterproductive to run development projects without also changing people’s (traditional) religious beliefs to (Christian) beliefs that were more amenable to a host of modern social processes and progress.

Now, let me first make it clear that I do not think that all NMS development project staff carry out Christian evangelizing activity in this way when they are aware that they are not supposed to, or that all NMS staff would support this breach of their own organizational policy. But I do think this case illustrates well the difficult tension that many NMS staff find themselves caught up in when their development work is supposed to be split off from their religious work. At the most fundamental level, they may not recognize their own God within this split framework, and if they feel they cannot carry out a ‘split-up’ development project with any integrity, then it becomes difficult for them to buy into the organizational separation between ‘religion’ and ‘development’.

Or consider a second case: the example of an NMS health clinic partly funded by NORAD. The work at this clinic is officially supposed to be clearly separate from attempts at religious conversion, and people of all faiths are supposed to be able to use the clinic freely. In practice, however, the NMS staff at the clinic find it difficult to maintain this policy. For example, clinic staff come together to pray to the Christian God – not just in private, but in the middle of the clinic itself, once a day, in a very visible way. Anyone inside or outside the clinic is welcome to join in. To the staff, this seems very natural; after all, this is where they are carrying out their work. Conversely, I was told by one of the missionaries that if visitors to the clinic start chanting so-called traditional religious incantations for the patients they are accompanying, then they are told in no uncertain

terms by clinic staff that this cannot be done in the clinic; they either have to stop the religious incantation, or leave.

Thus, while NMS' official organizational policy and NORAD reports and all budgets indicate that the clinic is not dominated by any one faith but is open to all, it is in practice a Christian space. Again, the missionaries see the Christian God as being 'pro-development', and thus the best God for the clinic, while the other gods, spirits or ancestors who are evoked are perceived to be potentially undermining, as they do not always seem to support the 'secular' aims of the clinic regarding the need for diagnosis, vaccination, medication, nutrition, check-ups and so on. And, quite understandably, as long as NMS project staff hold this view, they are anxious about other religions, and act accordingly. In this way, the staff at the clinic attempt to maintain their own sense of meaning and integrity. At the same time, of course, they are completely subverting the official organizational policy of NMS that has been so carefully constructed in Stavanger and presented as a sign of legitimacy to NORAD in order to gain funding for the clinic.

One of the crucial factors in this picture is the way the NMS staff relate to their own faith. As mentioned earlier, they have to be willing to be loyal to the aim of converting non-Christians to Christianity in order to be employed by NMS. People who apply to NMS are, therefore, often people who see the aim of witnessing about their Christian faith as one of the underlying reasons not only for their job, but for their whole life. And this in turn means that even though the organization might retain its organizational integrity in relation to NORAD by stating in official policy that evangelization and development work is separate, this is, in certain situations, a difficult distinction to make in the minds and practices of many of its staff. In certain situations, in fact, individual members of staff – like the staff at the clinic – may quickly find their own ways of adapting and destabilizing the official NMS policy, so that they can maintain their own individual integrity and be true to their own relationship to their faith; the very relationship to their faith that made them apply for a job in NMS in the first place.

In sum, then, the theoretical separation between 'religious' activity and 'development' activity in NMS causes particular tensions for the organization as a whole as well as for individual members of staff. For the organization as a whole, this separation forces a certain split between their value base on the one hand, including the value this can bring to the broader development project, and on the other hand, the basis on which they apply for government funding. Moreover, it splits off NORAD-funded projects from some of the more innovative projects that are happening at the religion–development interface. For individual members of staff, the split can be experienced as a requirement that in certain situations threatens to undermine both the development work that they are involved in as well as their personal integrity.

In conclusion: who's afraid of religion?

In conclusion, let me return to the question in the title of this chapter: Who's afraid of religion? In different ways, we all seem to be somewhat afraid of religion, both outside and inside faith-based organizations. More specifically, we are afraid of *other people's* religion: those in development funding circles are often anxious about the religion of the missionaries, and those in Christian missionary circles are often anxious about the religion of the non-Christians. How can we deal with this?

First, it is important to deal explicitly with these issues. We must explicitly include religion to a far greater extent as part of the field of development studies – because so often it is a very important dimension of life for so many of the people concerned, both among staff and so-called ‘beneficiaries’. At the same time we should be aware of the tensions and dilemmas that the explicit handling of religion creates, both for development policy in funding agencies, and for staff in the very organizations that should in theory be best equipped to deal with this topic, namely staff in faith-based NGOs.

Second, it might be advantageous for bilateral organizations to find more constructive funding mechanisms to channel funds to faith-based NGOs rather than making these funds conditional on a supposedly clean *separation* between church work and development work. This separation does not seem to stand much chance of being anything more than an exceptionally theoretical exercise in any case. In addition, it can make faith-based NGOs lean slightly towards a schizophrenic nature in their negotiations with funding agencies.

And third, returning to some of the false pretences of development ‘secularism’, we must challenge the assumption that secularism is inherently separate from or opposed to religious thought and practice. Given the broader academic debate around the complex formations of ‘secularism’, including the intertwined relationships of secularism, modernity and religion, it is pertinent to ask what implications this will have for the development project. More work may be needed on how best to acknowledge the actual role of religion in social processes that have ‘secular’ development aims, and on how faith-based NGOs might best be included in the broad landscape of aid policy. It seems appropriate to ask whether these organizations can take on some of the important role of including religion in development without further deepening religious divisions and potential conflict; and whether they can take seriously the religious dimension of people’s lives and integrate this into development work even in those cases where people’s religion is different from the faith of their own staff. Is it possible to enable faith-based NGO staff to deal with faith differently than in the example from the clinic above? Is it possible for them to explicitly include the question of God *in* development without assuming that there is only one possible God, whether secular or religious, *of* development?

Open discussion around these questions might equip FBOs to become even better at dealing with faith, and it might equip ‘secular’ development organizations to become even better at dealing with the fact that development is not necessarily a ‘secular’ activity, in the traditional sense, at all. Which in turn might alleviate some anxiety all around.

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