
Book Review

Heuser, Andreas & Jens Koehrsen (eds). *Does Religion Make a Difference? Religious NGOs in International Development Collaboration* (Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2020), 364pp., \$89 (pbk), ISBN: 9783848767069.

The modern age of international development is usually characterized as beginning in the post-WWII environment. However, it could be argued that religious organizations have been involved in international development far longer. European missionary agencies in the nineteenth century built and ran schools, hospitals, and economic enterprise across each developing continent and in disadvantaged regions of their own countries, and defended human rights, opposed slavery, and promoted democracy. Even before that, in the age of empire and colonialism, religious organizations were involved—for ill, yes, but also for good (Woodberry 2012).

‘Development’ is an inherently normative notion and is filled with myriad values and meanings. Nevertheless, the predominant question about religious engagement in international development is the one posed by the title of this book: ‘Does Religion make a Difference?’ Religious international development nongovernmental organizations (RINGOs) are part of the NGO-ization of development in the past few decades, a marked shift from international development centred in agencies like the World Bank or International Monetary Fund. The question of RINGO efficacy is usually framed bilaterally: are religious organizations more or less effective compared to secular organizations? This framing ignores the fact that there are many types of religious agencies, and several typologies have been developed to identify that charity-as-proselytizing or short-term youth trips building a water project are nothing like organizations matching skilled personnel to hospitals or schools across the developing world, or the ID professionals in the Vatican’s Caritas network or the Aga Khan Development Network who could just as easily be working for secular agencies.

So whether international development with some sort of religious basis is more or less effective is a complicated question—easily as difficult as the question about whether religion is helping to green the world. And while there has been plenty of writing on both topics, I am firmly of the opinion that we need much more and better empirical social science of all methodologies. There is more power in case studies where explanation proceeds from analysis of data collected by solid methods with clear research questions that can be verified or rejected and that are based in sound theory. Comparative studies are especially needed, which would go far in correcting the tendency to select on the dependent variable—that is, to look at case studies that ‘succeed’: the mosque with a dark green approach or the Buddhist agency with a track record of gender-sensitivity (probably meaning ‘in the Western-recognized sense’) in participatory development.

This book marks another step toward answering the question, but a conclusive answer remains elusive. The book consists of 17 chapters and is one of two parallel texts (Koehrsen & Heuser 2020), the latter of which I have not seen. The book is both multi-religious and geographically diverse.

The introduction by the editors and the first two chapters by Marshall and Hayes are excellent summaries of the espoused advantages and disadvantages of RINGOs and the general history of these organizations in international development. In recent decades the belief in the supremacy of secularization has become less solid in many fields, and international development is one such field. Much of the turn toward NGOs has included approaches to local participation. These overview chapters clearly point out that context matters greatly—in some places a religious agency will have a distinct benefit compared to a governmental agency or secular NGO, while this is not so in other places. While religion and culture should never be equated, agencies and organizations that pay heed to local culture tend to do much better, according to the literature. Consequently, civil society matters, and religion plays a multifaceted role in civil society everywhere.

The remaining thirteen chapters are case studies, for the most part of organizations instead of specific development projects. While most chapters focus on transnational agencies, four chapters are about local religious organizations doing development work. Geographical contexts lean heavily to Africa and Asia but make connections back to the organizational 'home' in places like Israel, England, Saudi Arabia and Thailand. By my count, Islam figures in five chapters, Christianity in seven, Hinduism and Buddhism in two, and Judaism in one. Some chapters deliberately examine organizations from two faiths or interreligious contexts.

Some case studies take up that most annoying assumption that RINGOs in international development will engage in proselytizing. Such efforts are *not* part of most RINGOs. The case study by Gez and colleagues of two Jewish development organizations show that despite Judaism's general disinterest in evangelism these agencies act as missionary to their own staff, many of whom are relatively disconnected to Judaism as a faith. Peterson's examination of two Muslim development organizations illustrates their differences on this question. One understood the faith as a way of strengthening the community of the faithful, while the other did not see faith as a defining feature of its development work. International development has mostly moved beyond merely economic development, but does community and personal development include spiritual development?

This question remains lively in other case studies. Religious values can have material effect, as in the developing dutifulness of an African Christian leading to increased entrepreneurial activity and financial benefits to the family (Öhlmann et al., and Heuser). Adi closely follows a church leader in Indonesia trying to decide if the faith should 'keep it altar' (narrowly defined religious practice) or 'alter [the] community'? Freeman concludes that the evangelical Christian organization Tearfund (one of the ten largest international development NGOs in the United Kingdom) 'approached material change and spiritual change as largely separate matters, and they focused almost exclusively on the material side of things' (p. 229).

The book's last section consists of chapters on selected elements of sustainable development: gender, education, environment, sustainable development in general, and peacebuilding. All argue again for the benefits of RINGOs. Hoffman argues that a Christian transnational organization, *because* it is religious, can better ease traditional societies toward contemporary (sic) human rights and liberal democracy. Through interviews and focus groups, Öhlmann and colleagues illustrate how the spiritual is embedded in African cosmology so transformation involves

all dimensions of the human in ways secular agencies could not do; because individual and societal transformation are linked, moral development is fundamental. Environment is the sole focus of Koehrsen's chapter, which begins as a review of Islamic environmental ethics. Concluding the need to focus more on lived practices, the chapter conducts a close reading of a number of studies that do examine Muslim eco-practices in a variety of contexts, making it an excellent overview. The chapter by Öhlmann and colleagues is the only other one where environmental concerns are brought forth.

Problematically, only five chapters collect data and describe their methods. In his chapter on the internalization of peacemaking by Muslim and Christian groups in Bosnia, Siebert's analysis is grounded on French theorist Pierre Bourdieu and 90 interviews. Similarly, Kloß's analysis of religious identity and development in Guyana by a Hindu organization based in the United States is strengthened by the attention to detail in the participant-observation and ethnographic interviewing. The chapters led by Adi, Langewiesche, and Öhlmann also describe their methods, but the other case studies are primarily descriptive. For example, without analysis of what is done on the ground, Dehn's summary of the philosophies of nine Hindu and Buddhist thinkers or organizations doesn't do much to answer the question in the title of this book.

If we went simply on this text, we would conclude religion does make a difference and is better than secular development efforts, but there are no comparative studies with secular agencies. Other weaknesses are that there are no case studies of problematic RINGOs or program ineffectiveness. The Sustainable Development Goals were scarcely mentioned in any chapters. There is no index, which is a disadvantage if one wants to look up a topic such as education or climate or gender rights. Also missing are theories of social change. Ultimately, what this text accomplishes is a thorough description of some of the ways that RINGOs operate. Most beneficially, it decidedly undermines the idea that religiously-inspired international development is a cover for proselytizing. Instead, we learn that RINGOs like these are staffed by competent professionals deeply committed to international development around the globe.

References

- Koehrsen, Jens & Andreas Heuser. 2020. *Faith Based Organizations in Development Discourses and Practices* (London: Routledge).
- Woodberry, Robert D. 2012. 'The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy', *American Political Science Review* 106(2): 244–274.

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