

The Lab, the Temple and the Market: Reflections on the Role of Science and Religion in Development



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[Photo: Doi Suthep temple in Thailand.]

As we enter a new millennium, the world faces some formidable challenges. Despite major advances in scientific knowledge during the past half century, which have greatly increased our ability to improve the human condition, age-old problems persist and new ones are emerging. Today, more people than ever before live in extreme poverty, while nations pursue economic growth in a way that is destructive to the global environment — and hence, to the well-being of both current and future generations.

Based on the uneven record of poverty alleviation efforts to date, many people who work for international development agencies have concluded that there is something missing in current development models, which tend to focus only on the application of scientific and technological solutions to the problems of the poor. In 1994, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) asked [Dr William Ryan, S.J.](#), an economist and Director of the Jesuit Project on Ethics in Politics, to interview IDRC staff and, subsequently, a diverse group of people working on development issues in the South about what they feel is lacking in Western approaches to development.

Inadequate paradigm

With the help of IDRC and the Jesuits, Dr Ryan travelled for four months and interviewed 188 people ranging from indigenous people to academics and government decision makers. The consensus was that the current development paradigm is inadequate, because it is either too economic or it does not factor in 'culture', he says. "Everybody said, we don't know how you should do it, but religious values are important and somehow have to be taken into account."

Dr Ryan's findings, contained in the IDRC publication, [*Culture, Spirituality, and Economic Development*](#), inspired a broader dialogue on science, religion, and development (SRD), which the Centre launched following a 1995 conference in Val Morin, Québec. "Simply put, the SRD project gave an opportunity to investigate what faith and science have to offer one another in the 50-year-

old endeavour called development," notes IDRC Project Officer, [Sharon Harper](#). At Val Morin, "the participants told us that this is an extremely important question to be asking."

Core group

In response, IDRC established an SRD core group of four members, all of whom are scientists and belong to a religious faith. They include: Dr Promilla Kapur, a sociologist, practising Hindu, and Director of the Integrated Human Development Services Foundation, based in Delhi; Dr Gregory Baum, a Roman Catholic expert on liberation theology and Professor of Religious Studies at McGill University in Montreal; Dr Azizan Baharuddin, a practising Muslim, and Associate Professor in the Department of Science and Technology Studies at the University of Malaya; and Dr Farzam Arbab, a member of the International House of Justice of the Baha'i Faith and founder of the Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC), a development non-governmental organization in Colombia.

According to Harper, IDRC purposefully chose people who would be comfortable discussing their faith. "We wanted to explore how religious belief changes a person, how a scientist approaches the world when they also have the lens of faith," she explains. "So, in a sense, the SRD project is about showing scientists that there is nothing to fear from faith, and showing people of faith that there is nothing to fear from science. The core group members are people who deal very well in both worlds without compromising either aspect of themselves."

Religious values

"The Science, Religion and Development project has never suggested that we should abandon the scientific method, or its way of looking at the world," stresses Harper. "It is just suggesting that there are other factors and other values that need to be considered and incorporated — values such as justice, compassion, humility, and a commitment to non-violence, which religion has always addressed as integral aspects of all human endeavour."

"One of the difficulties we've had in talking to people, particularly inside of development agencies such as IDRC, is that when you discuss religion or spirituality, a lot of people think: 'church'? — i.e. 'religion' in the sense of an organized institution," comments Pierre Beemans, IDRC's Vice-President of Corporate Services. "And then you get [reactions based on] everything from the Spanish Inquisition, to why aren't women ordained to the Roman Catholic priesthood, to the fatwa on Salman Rushdie," he says.

Motivating people

"But when you're talking about sustainable development and the environmental threats that the world is facing, if the world is going to survive as a viable bio-community, we have to change the way we relate to the environment, the way we relate to nature," says Beemans. "Ordinary people in the North and South have got to consume and live differently. An important element in motivating human change is what people believe is right and wrong: Why am I here? What is life all about? What is at the beginning? What's at the end? and What's good and what's bad?"

Such questions are "rooted in an ethical, moral, spiritual and a religious system. I don't think we're going to have sustainable development unless we can integrate into our development model and development thinking and development approaches those values and belief systems that will lead people to change."

Worldviews

"There is another more practical reason," he adds. "We're living an age when everything is changing: borders, countries, economies, lifestyles, male-female relationships, the environment, cities and rural areas, consumer patterns, and popular world culture. That kind of change leaves people insecure. A lot of people, when faced with that kind of insecurity, look for some sort of certainty. Sometimes they turn to a religion and 'fundamentalize' it. In other cases, they turn to nationalism, or ethnic identity, or economic systems and they 'religify' them — they turn them into religions. If we're going to be talking about change in development, we should understand something about those worldviews, those belief systems, and how they affect people."

So far, the SRD dialogue has resulted in one publication, *The Lab, the Temple, and the Market: Reflections at the Intersection of Science, Religion, and Development*, a selection of personal essays by core group members, which will be released later this year. In it, the authors discuss such matters as the moral foundations of their faiths; myths and misconceptions about religion held by scientists; how religion can contribute to development goals; and the World Bank's recent dialogue with leaders from nine of the world's major faiths, which gave the [World Faiths and Development Dialogue](#) an opportunity to provide input into the World Development Report 2000-2001 on Human Poverty.

Common threads

"The purpose of our endeavour was not to reach a consensus or a set of uniform views on the nature of science, religion or development," writes Dr Arbab. "However, a number of features turned out to be common to the way each participant thought about certain fundamental issues... None of us wished to deal with religion as a mere instrument, either as a philosophical tool or as a social actor that happens to be useful for the furtherance of material development. We were not interested in aligning religion with consumerism, scientism, or political power."

"Whatever the validity of our specific arguments may be, we can hope that we conveyed at least one basic message: The various religious traditions of the world have guided humanity throughout its history under a diversity of conditions and today can offer it a wealth of spiritual insights that it sorely needs. The diversity need not be a cause of conflict and contention, as opinion adverse to religion automatically assume," Dr Arbab concludes.

John Eberlee is the Managing Editor of IDRC Reports Online. (Photo: A. Israngkura)

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Sidebar: [Continuing the Science, Religion, and Development Dialogue](#)

Sidebar: [Excerpts from *The Lab, the Temple, and the Market: Reflections at the Intersection of Science, Religion, and Development*](#)

[Culture, Spirituality, and Economic Development: Opening a Dialogue](#), by William Ryan

[Francisco Sagasti on: 'The Emerging Fractured Global Order'](#), by John Eberlee

[Science, Religion, and Development Web Site](#)