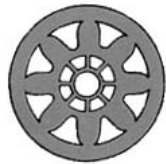


# Why are faiths and development related?

Wendy Tyndale



The Baha'i Faith



Buddhism



Christianity



Hinduism



Islam

It is only comparatively recently that western-based aid agencies have begun to show an interest in the relationship between faith and 'development'. The reasons for this vary. Some agencies are concerned that terrorist groups are recruiting members from under-privileged Muslim communities. Others realise that even development as a strictly economic process needs to take into account the values and beliefs of the people whose countries are supposed to be being 'developed'. But probably the majority of development agencies are primarily interested in working with faith-based organisations as an effective way of reaching some of the materially poorest people in the world.

## Faith-based organisations

Not all faith-based organisations, of course, do 'good' development work. There are all too many examples of religious groups and movements that use aid programmes to dominate and manipulate the poor, to proselytise and to create dependence. But there are many others that are carrying out practical programmes very similar to those of secular development organisations that are intended to help the most marginalised people in different countries to claim their rights. Their activities include building up organisations to strengthen civil society, strengthening the rights of women, and supporting income-generating programmes for those who have no means to a livelihood. Many run schools and educational programmes. Indeed religious organisations often provide more health and

education services than the state does.

However, if secular aid agencies see faith-based organisations merely as possible agents to carry out their own development agenda, they will soon encounter serious problems, above all because spiritually inspired people who are living and working in true solidarity with impoverished communities will almost certainly have a very different vision from theirs of what 'development' is about. For such faith-based groups 'development' is not only concerned with economic or even cultural, environmental, political and social change. Development essentially involves the 'inner transformation' of the individual as well.

## In all religious traditions

The process is a dialectic one. Through serving others and working together for the common good we develop deeper spiritual insights which in turn help us to realise that all human beings are inter-connected as the members of one body or belong to the same family.

It is only this vision - to be found in some form in all religious and spiritual traditions - that can make it possible for us to change the way in which we presently relate to each other and thus to overcome the devastating divisions between rich and poor, men and women, powerful and powerless that cause such misery for the majority of the people in our world.

In this sense development benefits those who are working with the materially poor just as much as the poor themselves. For many faith-based organisations there is no hierarchical

division between the 'beneficiaries' and the 'experts'. Their development programmes are very often led by the people of the communities themselves - a process made possible by building up an atmosphere of trust and by valuing the contribution of each individual.

If aid agencies want to work successfully with faith-based organisations it is vital for them to understand the nature of religion and above all the energising, life-giving spirituality that is at the heart of all religious traditions. If they restrict their knowledge of religion to its institutional or socio-political dimensions they will fail to perceive the essential influence of religious motivation on the work of faith-based groups, many of which are inspired by a desire to return to the essential spirit or original 'fire' of their faith. This means that often they are to be found working not only on the margins of society but also on the margins of their own religious institutions, which they may perceive as being too close to worldly and economic power.

It is not easy to absorb into current development theory and practice the kind of trust that leads to qualities such as those of detachment or 'letting go' or the profound notion of the possibility of renewal that is found in the teachings of all religions. But merely to become aware of the importance of the notion of the sacred in the lives of most people in the world would set us on the path towards a re-evaluation of what development should really be about.

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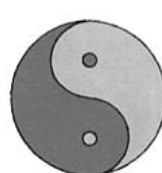
Judaism



Shinto



Sikhism



Taoism



Zoroastrianism



Jainism

