



Editorial

Clearing the Path for Collective Compassion

WENDY HARCOURT

The development community's broad commitment to social justice and social transformation to achieve a better world has traditionally excluded a belief in God, deities or spirituality, of any religious form, be it organized, community-based or individually held. In the dominant development discussion, fundamental human concerns, such as the functioning of the family, women's inequality, economic poverty, children's rights, violence in all forms, rural livelihoods, people's health and well-being are problems to be observed, assessed, understood and solved. Religion in this equation is ignored.

From the articles published here we see that religious belief, faith and hope cannot be marginalized so easily. Indeed, underneath it all, the development discourse, even in its modern guise, expresses a strong ideological belief that works against pure economic principles of the market economy and in some ways is very close to a faith-based commitment to greater good, equality and a better life for all.

At the core of this edition of the journal is this apparent paradox: the denial of religion at the heart of a modern development, yet at the same time its strong value claims for greater good that many religious organizations share. As many of the articles reveal quite candidly, the development community on the ground is often quite closely linked to faith-based communities. They not only share the same goals, but they are often one and the same community, even if development workers may not always wear upfront their individual religious affiliations.

But more disquietingly, at an international level we are now living a world where the contradictions in the development discourse are becoming all too apparent. Despite what development claims to be – secular, technical and economically driven with a social conscience – what it actually does is influenced all too often by the lobbying, funding and pressure of fundamentalist and conservative religious positions. Deeply embedded in development policy are

conservative religious beliefs around the family, women's choice, poverty and health. The conservatism of the Vatican, the USA and some Islamic religious hierarchies is no secret, nor is their unashamed lobbying in human rights debates, repressing many in the name of religion. When faced by these groups, the development establishment's position is at best ambiguous.

One message contained in the journal is that we need to look carefully at the claims of secular and religious approaches to social justice in order to appreciate the potential synergies and apparent contradictions within development policy and practice today. We need to look at the way in which religious and secular leaders within the development arena, despite their different language, are in fact working from very similar positions of power. They operate from economically and politically informed positions that suit well the wealthy elite with strong patriarchal and class biases – no matter what national allegiance or religious position. When dealing with poverty, human rights, inequalities, gender and social injustice we have to be more on our guard about the powerful alliances being made.

Another message is that if development workers put to one side the strong prejudice against faith-based belief, an honest religious conviction in spirituality and the common good of humanity can help strengthen the vision that informs development. Many progressive organizations are a force for development. The articles from interfaith or various faiths (Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, eco-spirituality and others) grapple precisely with this vision and how to confront and change poverty, women's oppression and injustice of all kinds. They take a very different approach from those who preach at the top of the religious hierarchies and are often in strong disagreement with the power games played out at the top. Their work can be very critical of the hierarchies and as a result is being done outside the religious institutional establishment. It is clear that these development workers work from the heart and from an inspiration and love of the people with whom they work daily.

Personally, I found this an eye-opening issue – the vision, honesty and deep commitment of the

writers convey their joy and hope in humanity – despite the many distressing situations they are dealing with, from horrendous poverty and violence to the breakdown of community culture and health. The articles offer a great deal of wisdom: from the overviews of the issues, to the particular lessons from Buddhism, the struggle of women living in Muslim communities, to the examples of Christian faith-based groups working with communities living in poverty and conflict. The stories reveal how the writers have chosen personal paths that unselfishly aim to meet community needs. Yet at the same time, there is no given easy path prescribed by scriptures or holy books and the articles strongly underline how individual and community lives are dominated by an increasingly difficult and unfair macro-environment.

What I found particularly fascinating, somewhat contrary to what I expected, is how women's roles are a focus of many of the articles. Far from the invisibility in most religious and, dare I say, economic development writings, the discussion on women and gender is vibrant on several levels: in terms of the recognition of what women are expected to endure, the leadership women provide and in terms of the increasing backlash against women's rights by the religious and development leadership. From the need to challenge state and religious policy on novice nuns in Thai Buddhism to the admiration for the leadership of women in Mexico's poorest Christian communities, the articles continually refer to women's major contribution to their community and the need for far greater respect, choice and a place for women in decision-making. The continual reference to women's position seems to be in striking contrast to the absence of gender-aware policy and female leaders in most of the world's religious organizations, mirrored in the gender blindness and absence of women in most national government and international financial and multilateral institutions.

When first deciding to take on this issue I thought it would be a difficult edition to put together, as I falsely assumed that the development community shies away from religious and ethical issues. Instead I found that development is

embedded in many of the same issues as religious communities. It is of crucial importance that we stop pretending that development is exclusively secular, merely tolerating religious organizations in partnership while carefully dissociating any major development policy or document from any faith or belief. Instead it seems more realistic and true to understand the important role religion plays in most people's lives in very practical social, economic and political ways. Religion, whether understood as individually chosen or as part of a historical or cultural inheritance, even in so-called secular societies such as the USA and Europe, informs many aspects of people's lives and therefore development practice. We cannot afford to assume that there is a clear separation of secular and religious beliefs in the pursuit of human good. It seems particularly important not to be afraid to look at the intersection of religion and development in the light of September 11 and the 'war on terrorism' and all that implies for the vast majority

of the world living in poverty, and need we underline, those elites who live in a world of endless, and often meaningless consumerism.

As David Loy states we are living a world that lacks 'collective compassion' and the 'collective will' to deal adequately with the fact that the people who have the most say about what happens to the earth's resources 'do not care enough to help the world's destitute.' He, along with many of the other writers, asks that we overcome our indifference to the poor's plight and as a direct result both religious and development institutions understand and challenge the damaging impact of global capitalism. And as Wendy Tyndale's argues in her article, instead of market values, prejudice and a blind faith in economics and progress, 'a genuine combination of scientific and technological know-how along with spiritual insights about the meaning of human life, as well as grassroots experience of what actually works in practice' should illuminate the way ahead.

development is abstracted in *Academic Search*, *Cab Abstracts*, *Communication Abstracts*, *Environmental Abstracts*, *GEOBASE*, *Geo Abstracts: Human Geography*, *HRI Reporter*, *International Development Abstracts*, *International Labour Documentation*, *International Political Science Abstracts*, *Social Services Abstracts*, *Sociofile and Sociological Abstracts*; and is indexed in *Business Source*, *CSA Political Science & Government*, *Econlit*, *Environmental Abstracts*, *Environmental Sciences & Population Management*, *Human Population & Environment*, *International Bibliography of the Social Sciences*, *Journal of Economic Literature*, *MasterFILE fullNET*, *OCLC Public Affairs Information Service*.