

European Development Days 2019

What's Religion Got to Do With It?

Act Alliance EU, Baha'i International Community, Brot fuer die Welt, EU CORD, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Pax Christi International, World Vision International



On 18th June 2019, Europe's foremost annual conference on social and economic development brought together more than 8,000 participants, among them societal leaders and non-governmental organizations, to address the issue of global inequalities. The lab-debate "What's religion got to do with it?", which took part under the 2019 edition of the EDDs (European Development Days) explored the influence of faith and faith-based actors by analyzing a wide range related to development.

The lab-debate was opened and moderated by Ms. Rachel Bayani, Representative of the Baha'i International Community. Ms Bayani talked about the role of religion in world affairs, its growing complexity and some of the wide-spread pitfalls we today associate with religion. She then went on to explain how the development thinking has evolved over the past decades. She said that there is a maturing understanding of development in the sense that it is no longer seen as a product to be delivered from those in one part of the world to the peoples in another, viewing the masses of humanity as essentially recipients of aid and training. Development should be understood as people's capacity to make decisions about their own spiritual and material progress and then to implement them. Essentially meaning that a development activity should emerge from within a community and belong to the people and institutions that are implementing the effort. And if faith and religion is what motivates the majority of people in the world, for good or bad, it is difficult to see how a development activity can belong to the people on the ground, if that essential element is not part of the equation.



Six panellists from Europe, South America, and Asia consisting of faith-based and non faith-based actors, religious authorities and policymakers provided valuable insights in a discussion that sought to move beyond simplistic conceptions of religion as either good or bad in the context of development. The discussion conveyed a more nuanced understanding, allowing for a genuine exploration of religion's potential for constructive transformation.

In the first input, the Judge Mohammad Abou Zaid, a senior judge in the Family Court of Saida in Lebanon and a judge at the Islamic Sunni Courts, described how religion or religious leaders can help to overcome a climate of mistrust between the local population in the Islamic world and the international development organizations. He emphasized the importance of acknowledging the value of religion when intervening from the outside in religious populations. If viewed as a means to enable better communication between parties, religion can, as Sheik Abou Zaid stated, become a mediator and help to overcome a lack of understanding and cooperation. It was underlined that in a spirit of true collaboration, it is crucial to be able to speak the language of the local populations, highlighting the need for religious literacy. Judge Abou Zaid further elaborated that it is essential to distinguish religion from tradition for it to fulfil its potential to transform societies, since most pitfalls of today's practice of religion are caused by a false link between religious truth and local traditional practices. In order to decouple tradition from true religion, one needs to refer back to the Holy Writings of these faiths, and draw from what forwards their understanding, and focus on what unites the populations of faith with development goals, rather than what separates.

Sister Patricia Ryan, a Maryknoll Sister (US), working in Peru for more than 30 years, in a second input, expressed her passion for indigenous peoples, particularly Aymara and Quechua peoples in Peru, whom she works with closely regarding the land rights and environmental degradation issues they are faced with. Through her years of work with them, she learned that indigenous peoples have a spiritual sense of duty when it comes to treating nature and our planet with respect and living in harmony with it, an understanding that lacks in today's industrial world. Highlighting the spirit of true collaboration Sister Ryan highlighted the fact



that other Peru-based non-profit organization DHUMA consists of a team of local people who are included in every aspect of the organization's functioning. In addition, the faith and belief of the local people that put Mother Earth (Pachamama) to the forefront, very much fuels the thinking and action behind DHUMA. Thus, Sister Pat reminded us that drawing on their outlook and perspective on nature is key and that we must, so she feels, include indigenous people in conversations about the future of our planet, ensuring thus that they do not stay in the periphery of important policy decisions.



Reverend Christo Greyling, Senior Director for Faith – Advocacy and External Engagement in World Vision International, approached the topic of inequalities from the angle of maternal healthcare and the Ebola crisis. He first observed that faith actors can be either “door openers” or “door closers”. Referring to his experience in Sierra Leone when it came to dealing with the Ebola crisis, he came to the realization that just dealing with this issue as a matter of health rather than one of religious rites and beliefs was ineffective. One needs to interact with populations not just rationally but also by including their

hearts and their minds, by focusing on their understanding of what the sacred texts they believe in say about the issues at stake and how their beliefs correspond to the rights or health issues at state. A good starting point is reaching a unified vision of values where we feel there is general convergence, such as the dignity of the human being and the concept of justice. Once this starting point is identified, a path can be walked upon where spirituality and health matters are correlated. Within the conversation, when the question of whether government institutions or international actors are instrumentalizing religion, Rev. Greyling called for the need to not come to religious communities and leaders with an instrumentalising approach for goals we define in development, but to see “eye to eye” with deep respect for their faith. We need to engage in “safe spaces”, where both local faith communities and leaders are approached from within based on reading their religious texts, challenge themselves and each other to dive deeper into learning. The difference between the human-rights language and values-based language was highlighted, as well as how religious literacy has the potential to strengthen the latter. Rev. Greyling finished his statement by stressing that beyond being a mere instrument, religion needs to influence the development thinking itself and incorporate it, inviting EU policy-makers to be as “faith-literate” in their policies and engagements as possible and avoid being “faith blind”.

In a fourth intervention, Shreen Abdul Saroor, a co-founder of Mannar Women’s Development Federation and Women’s Action Network, pointed out the challenges that arise from the marriage and divorce legal framework in Sri Lanka where women are left with very little to no protection at all. In attempts made to change this legislation, many difficulties are encountered with the Muslim community as the current laws result from Muslim law. Interestingly, the fact of relating the laws to obstacles observed in development policies or even with respect to economic growth has emerged as a promising avenue to make the said framework evolve in a more positive sense. Protection of the status and rights of women is increasingly seen to be instrumental to ensure also material prosperity in a country. Also, after the Easter attacks, many Muslim faith leaders have been increasingly seeking cooperation with the women leaders with whom they have been engaging with regards to the reform of the current Muslim law. Explaining the complex dynamic within Sri Lanka, Ms. Saroor called for women everywhere to not only study and learn but to lead religion.



Henriette Geiger, Director at the Directorate People and Peace in the Directorate General for Development and Cooperation at the European Commission, spoke from experience in the European Commission and quoted Peter Berger, an expert sociologist in the field of religion, confirming that « the world is getting furiously religious ». However, instead of looking at this evolution from a polemic standpoint, she stresses the spiritual dimension of this “religious global warming”, referring to yet another scholar. Rather than only seeing fanaticism, the message here is to rise beyond the antagonisms that religion today often trigger and focus on love and tolerance as two universal values, inherent to all religions. More fundamentally, when working with local populations, one needs to learn to work with what one finds within the cultures one discovers, most of them with a strong religious context. One cannot approach these populations in the name of collaboration and then simply ignore what motivates them most.

Merete Bilde followed this intervention with a sixth input. As a policy advisor at the European External Action Service, she realized that diplomacy and religion are closely intertwined. This is, in her eyes, more a necessity than an objective. It is part of becoming acquainted with a reality, speaking the cultural language of a given context, which, most often, is strongly tainted with religion. Religion is neither the problem, nor the solution, it is simply a reality. For one it is not just about religious interpretation nor religious leaders. And mostly, it is about all of us, whether we think of ourselves as religious or not. And this reality that religion represents is so much more than what the media conveys. The examples of consensus and harmony, where bridges are built and a lot of good is done, are often not reported. And this is one of the most important flaws we need to address from a diplomatic point of view.

The meeting was attended by more than 70 persons.

The lab debate was hosted by the following organizations: Act Alliance EU, Baha'i International Community, Brot fuer die Welt, EU CORD, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Pax Christi, and World Vision. They have also co-authored this report.



A recording of the lab-debate can be accessed at: <https://soundcloud.com/user-410503258/whats-religion-got-to-do-with-it#t=0:00>