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World Development Vol. xx, pp. xxx–xxx, 2016
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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2016.08.016

Positioning Missionaries in Development Studies, Policy, and Practice

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Summary. — This article diagnoses major causes of the uncomfortable relationship between missionaries and development scholars and practitioners, and it proposes new ways to clarify the relationship through shared reflection on sacred influences that shape global development. In the past fifteen years the turn to religion in development studies has altered how development scholars and practitioners perceive religious actors, opening up possibilities for renewed partnership. Yet the turn to religion in development has mostly disregarded missionaries. This oversight is partly due to the complicated historical relationship between Western Christian missionaries and development workers. Although missionaries have long participated in the work of development, present-day missionaries remain associated with coercive proselytization, or they are overlooked in literature on religion and development.

In order to understand the challenges of positioning missionaries in development, I review 48 sources which create, apply, or critique typologies of faith-based organizations (FBOs). FBO typologies of the past fifteen years have broken new ground in exploring the links between beliefs and practices of religious actors doing development work. Yet these typologies struggle to position missionaries due to (1) simplistic categorization of FBOs, (2) unhelpful scales of religiosity, and (3) a basis in outdated assumptions of separate spheres of religious and secular actors, and separate worlds of religion and development. Based on shared critiques of FBO typologies, I propose a new framework for positioning missionaries. The framework provides a shared space to explore how all development actors, both religious and secular, are shaped by the interaction between sacred and material influences. The framework offers a way to move beyond circular arguments about comparative advantage of religious or secular approaches toward an appreciation of the complementarity of different approaches to development. The article concludes with a shared critique of missionaries and development workers who impose their beliefs and values on others.
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Key words — religion, faith-based organizations, typologies, postsecular, missionaries, sociology of the sacred

1. INTRODUCTION

In their review of religion and development in 2011, Deneulin and Rakodi track the increasing engagement with religion in development studies, policy, and practice. They call for research that can "engage with religious doctrines and interpretation", and they suggest discovering how the "transcendent and sacred dimensions can be reflected in development studies" (Deneulin & Rakodi, 2011, p. 52). The difficulty to reflect the sacred in development studies is exemplified by the struggle to position missionaries in the typologies of religious organizations working in development. Although the findings of this article could relate more broadly to missionaries of all faiths and beliefs, the focus is primarily on Christian missionaries due to their historical relationship with contemporary secular development actors. Missionaries and development workers operate in the same space and face similar challenges, a fact which can no longer be overlooked in the contemporary turn to religion in development (Tomalin, 2012). Based on a robust critique of typologies of faith-based organizations (FBOs), I propose a framework for positioning missionaries by analyzing how all development actors, both religious and secular, incorporate their beliefs and values into their practices of development.

The article is divided into five sections. Section 1 narrates the shift in development studies from viewing religion as malevolent and irrelevant to an ambivalent force in global development. Section 2 diagnoses why missionaries as religious actors have largely remained in the malevolent and irrelevant categories, and argues that they should be placed firmly in the ambivalent category. Section 3 presents results of a review of typologies of faith-based organizations, questioning their usefulness in locating religious actors and missionaries, and critiquing their underlying assumptions. Based on the learning from these critiques, Section 4 proposes an analytical framework that positions religious and secular actors including missionaries according to how they integrate beliefs and values into their practice of development. Section 5 summarizes major arguments, suggests avenues for further research, and envisions a shared critique of proselytization by missionaries and development actors.

The past 15 years have seen a remarkable shift in the position of religion in development studies, policy, and practice. Whether the cause is a resurgence of religion in individual identity and practice (Deneulin & Rakodi, 2011, pp. 46–47) or in the public sphere (Berger, 1999) or a turn to religion, the world has changed, scholarly perceptions have changed, or both. Although a majority of scholars have turned to religion, there are notable dissidents in religious studies (Wiebe, 2014) and development studies (Davis & Robinson, 2012; De Kadt, 2009; Flanigan, 2010). Others have described in detail the story of this shift (see Deneulin & Rakodi, 2011; Jones & Petersen, 2011 for thorough overviews), so rather than repeat the story I summarize its narrative as religious actors move from malevolent and irrelevant to ambivalent.

* The research work has been made possible by a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council administered by the White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities and the University of Leeds. I am grateful to helpful feedback on this article from Melanie Prideaux, Emma Tomalin, Diana Batchelor, Kathryn Kraft, and Simon Batchelor, and for the insights offered by the anonymous referees. Final revision accepted: August 14, 2016.

Please cite this article in press as: Smith, J. D. Positioning Missionaries in Development Studies, Policy, and Practice, *World Development* (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2016.08.016

The concept of religion as malevolent arose largely from the Enlightenment, which constructed categories of rational, progressive, neutral, and virtuous secularism set against irrational, traditional, partisan and violent religion (Candland, 2000, pp. 129–130; Fountain, 2013, p. 20; King, 2013, p. 149; Rakodi, 2011a; Selinger, 2004, pp. 534–535). Depicting religion as irrelevant reached its height in the mid-20th century, with the belief in modernism and secularism as the path toward economic development rendering religion largely irrelevant to development studies, policy, and practice (Selinger, 2004, pp. 526–527). The 21st century has been a time of "ambiguity, plurality, struggle and uncertainty", in transition between the certainty of the past and the uncertainty of the future (Beyer, 2013, p. 666). The key to understanding the current phase is the word "post", not the myriad terms that follow such as postsecular, postmodern, and post-development. Secularism, modernity, and development are not finished, but these concepts no longer explain the world, and they are not impervious to critique (Moxham, 2014).

Postsecular proponents assert that our societies are composed of the interaction between secular and religious concepts and actors, and they have rejected a false dichotomy between a secular public square and a sacred private religious life (Habermas, 2006; Taylor, 2007). Postmodern and post-development scholars note the importance of local cultures and the problems that result when assumptions of superiority lead to suppression of the other (Asad, 2015; Escobar, 1992). Modernity and development are more than neutral technical processes; they are infused with specific ideologies and assertions of power (Ager & Ager, 2011, pp. 8–9; Selinger, 2004). Religion itself is ambivalent, a powerful resource which can be mobilized for violence or for peace (Appleby, 2000; De Cordier, 2009b; Haynes, 2007; Holenstein, 2005). The "beneficiaries" of development projects may view all development actors, religious and secular, as partisan actors allied (in reality or in perception) with specific political, economic, and security agendas (De Cordier, 2009a). This contemporary age of ambivalence has created an amorphous yet common space for religious and secular actors to explore together what development is and what it should be.

2. WHY DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARS AND PRACTITIONERS STRUGGLE TO POSITION CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES

Considering the rapid change in the position of religion in development, we might expect to find missionaries in the same ambivalent category as other religious actors in development. Missionaries have a vast history of involvement in healthcare, education, and other endeavors similar to development projects (Clarke, 2015; Jennings, 2013). Instead of depicting a complex relationship between missionaries and development actors, the current literature tends to locate religious missionaries as separate from mainstream development actors, stubbornly occupying the categories of malevolent and irrelevant actors. This section diagnoses five major causes for this mystery.

One cause is the resonant archetype of the missionary as a 19th-century white European male subjugating local people (Priest, 2001). In his description of the missionary Abner Hale in *Hawaii*, Michener embraces this archetype fully. The missionary is "skinny, bad complexion, eyes ruined through too much study, sanctimonious, dirty fingernails, about six years retarded in all social graces" (Michener, 1959, p. 139, in Priest, 2001). The echoes of this archetype today position missionaries both as clueless cultural imperialists and as outdated relics of a colonial past, the very opposite of the aims and ethics of development. Examples abound of missionaries who have embodied this negative archetype (Chidester, 1996; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1986; Tinker, 1993), but the question remains why this historical depiction of a missionary retains its resonance.

In the way that the Enlightenment constructed religion as its irrational other, academics in the modern era constructed the category of missionaries as their malevolent counterpart. Van der Geest describes missionaries and anthropologists as "brothers under the skin", noting key similarities between missionaries and anthropologists of the late nineteenth century. They were both guests in foreign cultures, they both relied on detailed knowledge of language and culture gained through first-person observation, and they both interpreted local cultures according to a specific (albeit distinct) methodology (van der Geest, 1990, p. 589). At the time of the creation of the modern academy, missionaries came to represent the opposite of the ideals of academics, with the binary of anthropologists and missionaries as "conservers *vs.* converters, doubters *vs.* knowers, and listeners *vs.* preachers" (van der Geest, 1990, p. 588).

This prevailing image of the ethnocentric 19th-century Western Christian missionary is evidenced in historical studies. They are depicted as ignorant or dismissive of local customs (Meyer, 1999), allied with political powers of colonial exploitation and domination (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1986), and intolerant and sometimes openly violent toward those with differing opinions (Clendinnen, 1982; Tinker, 1993). These images resonate with journalistic coverage of today's missionaries as exploiting local people (Yeoman, 2002). Such depictions are accurate in some cases, but they were not true of all missionaries in the 19th-century, and may be less representative today. Other historical studies have demonstrated the complex relationship between Western Christian missionaries and colonialism. In some contexts, missionaries acted as agents of social change and transformation compatible with positive development outcomes (Dunch, 2002; Etherington, 1996; Sanneh, 2009; Toulouze, 2011; Woodberry, 2012). The change was often due to the unintended consequence of Bible translation and literacy (Sanneh, 2009; Woodberry, 2012), which as it became indigenized enabled anti-colonial movements and bottom-up development processes.

A second reason that Christian missionaries are viewed as malevolent is that missionary activity is conflated with coercive and insensitive proselytization. These practices are outlawed by many donor governments. In many developing countries, missionary activity is illegal and religious freedom is restricted. The conflation of religious mission and proselytization is part of good practice documents, such as The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief (1994), which as of November 2015 has been signed by 587 religious and secular organizations (International Federation of Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies, 2015). The Code states in point three that "aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint", but accepts "the right of NGHAs [Non-Governmental Humanitarian Agencies] to espouse particular political or religious opinions". What is left unclear is how an organization can espouse a belief without furthering it. An underlying problem is that (in contrast to the code which mentions political standpoints) the focus of proselytization is on religious activity, leading to the conclusion that proselytization is a problem only for religious groups rather than for all groups espousing political or religious beliefs (Fountain, 2015, p. 89).

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