A group met on November 29, 2012 at Georgetown University in Washington, DC to review the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs’s six-year research and policy program on religion and global development. The discussion focused on work undertaken in the context of the Henry R. Luce Foundation supported project and on associated World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) activities. Katherine Marshall moderated the discussion, which formed part of an ongoing Luce supported interim assessment grant. Participants included scholars of religion, development, and human rights, journalists and media specialists, and faith-linked practitioners. The goal was a frank assessment of where we have come and options ahead.

**Framing the discussion**

The relevant work completed to date has involved a series of six regional reviews of the activities and roles of faith-inspired organizations, eight sector-by-sector reviews, and WFDD’s intensive work on faith-inspired work in Cambodia. Several activities are on-going with support from the Luce Foundation interim grant, and in partnership with several organizations, notably research on women, religion, and peace, energy access, and immunization. The discussion focused on several illustrative outputs that were circulated to participants in advance:

- a. The "capstone report" that summarizes the six year Henry R. Luce supported research program covering regional and sector-by-sector work by faith-inspired organizations
- b. A meeting report on the November 2011 conference that concluded that Luce program
- c. Two "model" policy briefs (a focus for the interim grant) that distill and communicate main findings
- d. The WFDD report on Buddhism in Cambodia, potentially an example of a practical, “faith literacy” document that could bolster staff training and preparation.
- e. A teaching case study on female genital cutting (linking rights, culture, religion, gender issues, and action to promote social change).
- f. Summaries of interviews on women, religion, and peace, highlighting the raw material resulting from research.

Against the underlying goals of enhancing the program’s contributions to knowledge and teaching and achieving greater policy impact, the discussion centered on four central questions and challenges that were put to the group:

- What emerges as the priority research agenda in the still quite raw field of global development and religion?
- What have we learned about the virtues and perils of “mapping” work of different kinds as a gauge of impact and a potentially practical vehicle to improve coordination of various faith-inspired initiatives in the framework of global development?
- How far does work to date suggest the need for research that is more sharply focused by region and country? If so, how might that best be launched and financed?
- Likewise, what lessons emerge from the sector-focused work, including ongoing studies on topics like energy access and immunization?
Actual and potential vehicles to achieve these objectives include: (a) focused and often private consultation events, to explore issues frankly (future efforts focused on sensitive issues around roles of women and religion come to mind; (b) conferences and presentations of ideas; (c) teaching materials, including case studies; (d) publications by the Berkley Center and WFDD; (e) academic publications (articles and books); and (f) participation in broader efforts (for example the Elders child marriage initiative).

A central challenge is the lack of knowledge and often raw skepticism about religion’s roles among secular institutions. “Faith literacy” contributions and possible delivery of training (e.g. in the Foreign Service Institute, the UN Staff Training College) are also potentially significant as goals and outputs.

Several leading issues emerging from prior work offer potential both for analysis and policy impact. These include:

- Concerns about the practice and impact of proselytizing and evangelizing where it is linked to development and humanitarian work. A review is underway.
- Religion’s roles in conflict situations and poorly performing states loom large but systematic analysis is paltry.
- Gender issues come from all directions and suggest the need for in-depth analysis and dialogue.
- Aid harmonization and coordination with respect to faith-inspired organizations present major challenges, the more so because the coordination efforts of official development agencies rarely take these efforts into account.
- Networking is a common desire but clarity as to what would bring more and more effective networking is lacking. Examples of topics on which arguments are made to strengthen networks include fighting corruption, reducing maternal mortality, and addressing specific obstacles to MDG implementation.

Practical questions include:

- What is missing in the current research? What are real priorities? Who is interested and how will they use the results?
- How can we take the knowledge that we have now and translate it into something that policy makers can better understand and act on?
- How can and should we communicate our knowledge more effectively over a wider base? How can it contribute to the educational mission of the university?
- What countries and regions are priorities?
- What are the specific issues and sectors that need more work?
- What are the ways to communicate, both within academia and with operational institutions that reflect contemporary directions?
- How can stronger links with other Luce Foundation programs be pursued?

**Topics and questions highlighted during discussion:**

A central response from the group was that the triple focus emerging from prior work was not only appropriate but essential: research, education, and policy outreach. The discussion focused both on how to define priorities and work towards more focus, and on the formats for presenting materials and communication strategies.

**Research agendas**
The joint initiative with the Tony Blair Faith Foundation to review in-depth the “state of knowledge” about religion and health in Africa was cited as best practice. It combined an intellectual framework, response to critical operational questions (how to engage religious experience and actors more effectively on global health challenges), thorough and professional research, and effective communication. Even so the messages stand to be communicated more crisply and with more focus on avenues towards results.

The current program was seen as pursuing too wide a range of issues; one result is the plethora of information on the website and in publications. Navigating is frankly difficult. One option is to direct more focus to country specific research and policy analysis.

One participant suggested that it is possible even so to expand across disciplines and connect dots in unique ways while also focusing on a particular region or regions.

Outreach and audiences

A comment from a participant: “I am hearing many different audiences for your different products, but you need different approaches for each of them.” Audiences can and should be better defined. This can link to strategic partnerships with organizations that have a certain set audience. The Aid Harmonization constituency, anti-corruption movement, failing states community, women’s groups, and environment think tanks are examples. More specifically there was a concrete suggestion to focus on the failing states gaps, seeking effective networks for distributing BC/WFDD information.

Raising awareness through op-eds or articles in major news sources, or by relating policy to the public through television and radio in developing countries.

What media strategies can work best?

Academic channels are important but so are radio and television. And social media is taking on rapidly growing importance.

How can social media be more effective vehicles for communication of messages?

Ongoing work and approaches form part of the Berkley Center’s web-based outreach, that includes the main website as well as increasing communication using Facebook and Twitter (among other social media). Staff including Katherine Marshall frequently blog, notably on the Huffington Post; blogs are featured on the BC and WFDD sites. Widening and targeting distribution of reports is a current focus. A central question is how to involve both religious and mainstream media more actively.

BC Director Tom Banchoff’s goal is that the Berkley Center be the “go to” site for religion and public affairs and to that end the website includes a substantial database and much unique content. BC and WFDD have focused on bringing in the voices of practitioners both through published interviews and speaking events.

What is the most meaningful contemporary role for printed materials?

No-one questioned the importance of producing reports and the importance of quality (the high quality of reports produced to date was noted). The main practical issue is how to use them more effectively, which involves both outreach and media communication. Making good use of peer reviews, already a practice, was suggested.

What kinds of policy briefs will be more effective (the BC/WFDD team is exploring specific models with a view to a continuing series)?
There was some consensus that the policy briefs have good content and are based on strong reports, but may be too dense. Some suggested that “the policy world” attention span rarely exceeds three pages. Executive summaries and more bullet-points could add more delineation of the information. Attention needs to be grabbed right away before presenting background. Links to the longer reports should be clear so that readers are driven there.

**Teaching materials**

Work to date has centered on “faith literacy” documents (like the Cambodia Buddhism report), targeted at field practitioners, and teaching case studies and teaching materials. The usefulness of both was affirmed and underscored.

BC/WFDD aim to develop a series of well crafted case studies, in keeping with both faith literacy and Georgetown University objectives and audiences. Another ongoing activity involves materials directed towards high schools, though the religion and development program has done little in this area. Student-produced publications which often utilize the WFDD/BC interview model are an active initiative and show promise.

Online teaching materials and courses are a promising option that has been little explored to date.

There was a suggestion that it would be timely to reach out to FSI, SFS, and professors so that their religious engagement is well informed and takes issues like women and religion into consideration. There are significant obstacles still but the goal is sufficiently important that continuing effort is warranted.

**Addressing “tough issues”**

There was discussion of whether any topics are de facto or de jure “off limits”. The answer is no, and indeed the BC/WFDD approach involving “consultation” sessions and smaller events has aimed to refine and follow approaches that delve into the complexities of issues and differing perspectives. Reproductive health is an obvious example that arises inevitably where health issues like maternal mortality and HIV and AIDS are concerned, but even where controversy is not anticipated, for example on orphan care and human trafficking. On all issues the effort is to work to build common ground but also to recognize and address differences. It was made clear that the issues involve both discussions among and between faith-inspired organizations and with a wide range of secular organizations.

One participant observed: “You’ve got to get this stuff out. As you talk about development and religion, you’ve got to talk about the issues that are more acute. And it is a sharp question.”

An apt observation centered on a group perception about the dimensions of the central issue of proselytizing: “Right now secular organizations are ignoring the fact that they are engaged in some of the same activities as evangelical proselytizing groups. They are not self-conscious about the activities that they are engaged in. Academic discourse on this issue has become more open to this, but not within the coordinating organizations themselves.”

**Framing and naming the field and the issues**

A thought-provoking if inconclusive discussion centered on the difficulties in gaining real traction; in terms of attention, institutional commitment, and action about the religious dimensions of global development and humanitarian relief. Individual leadership is unduly important and programs can wither when a committed leader moves on. Further, there is still active unease or hostility to religious ideas and actors in important institutions, as well as indifference and lack of knowledge. The roots of these attitudes
(reasonable and unreasonable) need to be recognized and probed. Evidence, thoughtful arguments, and persistence are needed along the path ahead. It also makes it necessary to respond to opportunities and interest when it arises, even if that leads to a jagged path.

Conclusions and next steps

The discussion closed with a reminder of the goal to build on work we have done but also to respond to gaps and "felt needs", perhaps more purposefully than we could during the initial years.

Participants

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