

Testing Models, Shifting Paradigms

# Stalemate in Religion and Development: Causes, Implications, and Recommendations

by *Chrispin Dambula*

**T**heory on the interface of religion and development remains underdeveloped despite an almost universal consensus among scholars, researchers, and practitioners that religion is an important factor that deserves attention in the development debate.<sup>1</sup> An increasingly growing body of literature focusing on Neo-Pentecostalism consistently shores up the role of religion in development.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there is enough literature requisite to formulating theory to delineate and systematically guide future research in religion and development. However, to pin down the role of religion to advance theory in this particular interface of religion and development seems elusive.

In this paper, I explore the factors that impede progress in theory advancement in religion and development with a specific focus on Christianity. My thesis is that lack of collaboration between missiologists and development scholars is a major malady that encumbers theory advancement to explain the role of religion in development. To support my case, I will critically review studies on religion and development to reveal the disconnect between mainstream development and missiology. But I will need to begin with a cursory historical background of development studies to trace the cradle of this disconnect. I will mull over the recent turn to religion in mainstream development research and its potential for collaboration with missiologists. There is a great opportunity to advance theory development for the benefit of both development studies and missiology as a discipline.

## **Motivation**

Before plunging into my agenda in this paper, I must point out that the role of religion in development is an emerging topic of conversation in the twenty-first century. It features prominently in the agenda to end global poverty in the United Nations Sustainability Development Goals.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, considering that decades of development practice have elapsed without putting poverty in the museum, anything that has not been experimented in the fight against poverty needs to be engaged, and religion is no exception.

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Most fascinating is that from the outset of development studies, religion was ignored due to conflicting objectives. For instance, religion's emphasis on the eschatological hope for the poor in heaven—where there will be no poverty—undermined the urgent development agenda to end poverty here and now, and create a world with opportunities for all to flourish. Another reason for sidelining religion in development was the widespread secularization theory of the 1960s which hypothesized that religion would gradually disappear from the public sphere. Over the course of economic development religion would eventually become completely extinct from the earth.<sup>4</sup> However, it seems that this thesis was misinformed as religion remains very much alive today, as a factor that influences the tenor of human ways of living. Most appealing is that religion appears to be a development catalyst, evidenced by members of some religious communities in the global south experiencing upward social mobility.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the elusive role of religion is a puzzle that remains unresolved despite research efforts from both mainstream development and religious studies. Unlocking this puzzle has motivated me to write this paper.

### *Historical Origins of Development Studies*

Development studies emerged circa the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> In the initial stages, economic growth was considered synonymous with development.<sup>7</sup> However, several scholars challenged this approach, opting for a broader focus than economic growth. Denis Goulet opined that authentic development must focus on “enhancement needs” such as services that enable humans to invent, explore possibilities, and bring their capabilities to maturity as a people with dignity.<sup>8</sup> David Korten recommended a people-centered development vision that looks to justice, sustainability and inclusiveness as key dimensions of true development.<sup>9</sup> The 1998 Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen called for attention to individual capabilities and “instrumental freedoms.”<sup>10</sup> These new ways of thinking enriched and stretched the foci of development to a wide gamut of domains—all except for religion. Development scholars looked down on religion as a proven setback to development progress.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, though missiology as a discipline surfaced on the academic scene earlier than development studies (circa 1867),<sup>12</sup> missiologists seemed to lack consensus on incorporating development into their agenda. Conspicuous cases in point are Donald A. McGavran and M. Richard Shaull. In his 1955 publication *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions*, McGavran defended the “people movement” as an effective strategy for nurturing growing churches.<sup>13</sup> He relegated to the periphery all development initiatives aimed at improving human livelihood, deeming church planting as

core to Christian mission.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, Shaull advocated for participation in the struggles of the marginalized as authentic Christian mission.<sup>15</sup> Inspired by God's redemptive acts in history, Shaull believed that theological contextualization was necessary for social reform in the society to liberate the marginalized.<sup>16</sup> He appealed to Christians to submerge themselves in the world of the marginalized in developing countries.<sup>17</sup> Such disparity represented by McGavran and Shaull not only prevented missiologists from getting ahead of the game in development scholarship, but, quite ironically, it justified the role of religion as irrelevant to development. The disconnect, as I will demonstrate shortly, would cost a huge intellectual price.

### *The Turn to Religion in Development*

Having peregrinated a history that reveals the divorce of religion and development, one question demands our attention: can development achieve its goals while ignoring religion? I doubt it, considering that religion constitutes a quotidian way of living among most people,<sup>18</sup> especially in the global south where most development interventions are focused, where poverty is rampant and largely remains unabated. Several scholars have claimed that religion has important implications for these development settings. An example is Bryant L. Myers, who recommends a change of worldviews towards a biblical worldview, claiming that it uplifts all humanity and countervails the lies that trap the poor in poverty.<sup>19</sup> He challenges both the modern worldview because it has no place for a transcendent God, and the traditional worldview because it legitimates poverty and oppression of the poor as ordained. Note that Myers' work was originally published in 1999. Kurt Allan Ver Beek asserts that avoidance of religion results in less effective development programs.<sup>20</sup> Similar arguments have also been advanced by Ogbu Kalu<sup>21</sup> and Leah Selinger.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, as one would expect, perspectives on development are inevitably shifting focus to religion, a trend which Emma Tomalin has described as “the turn to religion in development research, policy and practice.”<sup>23</sup> This is evident in the rise of faith-based organizations or FBOs.<sup>24</sup> Also, collaborative efforts that are emerging between Africa and European countries attest to this shift as they display some religious base.<sup>25</sup> Further evidence of the turn to religion can be seen in the burgeoning literature on religion and development observed in recent years.<sup>26</sup> The emergence of Religion and Development (RaD) as a subdiscipline within development studies is perhaps the most compelling incident which highlights the importance of religion in development.<sup>27</sup> In her recent publication, Barbara Bompani, notes that today religion has gained traction and acceptance in development, leading to an emergence of a new subdiscipline dubbed Religion and

Development.<sup>28</sup> This perceptible shift calls into question the specific role of religion in development, and must turn us to the literature to appreciate the progress in understanding this relationship.

### *The Role of Religion in Development*

It is quite apparent that Neo-Pentecostalism is a major form of Christianity which is attracting mainstream development researchers to shift their focus to religion. Once severely criticized by scholars as worsening the plight of the poor, Neo-Pentecostalism is increasingly drawing the attention of researchers from different disciplinary traditions. As far back as the early '90s, Paul Gifford claimed that Neo-Pentecostal churches foster passiveness and fatalism among the poor.<sup>29</sup> Lovemore Togarasei and Kudzai Biri<sup>30</sup> have responded to critics of Neo-Pentecostalism (such as Gundani, Dada, Hasu, and Kroesbergen),<sup>31</sup> challenging their attacks as not relevant to all Neo-Pentecostals. Today, these critics have since been slowed down if not completely muted as research consistently shows that most Neo-Pentecostals are effectively promoting entrepreneurial activities among their converts.<sup>32</sup> Peter Berger, a former critic of religion, became a staunch defender of Neo-Pentecostalism for its commitment to improving the livelihood of the poor.<sup>33</sup> However, as we shall see in this section, while the implications of religion seem blatant, there is no progress in theory development. Development researchers appear to have run out of ideas to pin down the underlying processes that explain the role of religion, a situation which we may call a research stalemate. A quick analysis of a few randomly sampled studies on Neo-Pentecostalism and entrepreneurship reveals this stalemate.

We must note that scholars define entrepreneurship differently. In this paper, I adopt the more inclusive definition offered by Welter, et al.<sup>34</sup> rather than a view that limits entrepreneurs to those cyber business moguls of the Silicon Valley type.<sup>35</sup>

### *Research Stalemate in Religion and Development: Evidence from Mainstream Development*

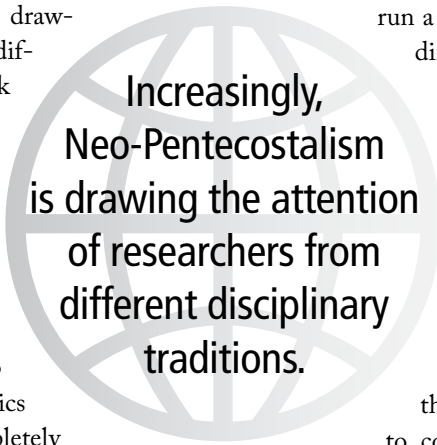
In his investigation of the nexus between religion and entrepreneurship, Andrew Henley claims that the influence of religion is mediated through the propagation of entrepreneurial norms.<sup>36</sup> However, this explanation fails to reveal what makes Neo-Pentecostals unique. Microfinance institutions also promote these same entrepreneurial activities among their clients but are not effective.<sup>37</sup> Noting the deficiency of

his methodology, Henley quickly recommends isolating the individual convert for analysis to explore the unique influence of Neo-Pentecostalism in further depth.<sup>38</sup> Other studies claim that Pentecostal effectiveness in entrepreneurial activities resides in their belief that their prosperity is ordained by God.<sup>39</sup> The problem with these studies is failure to demonstrate how the belief that one's prosperity is divinely ordained is actually connected to effectiveness in business. Although the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) further claims that Neo-Pentecostals teach converts how to run a business, it still does not explain how they differ from microfinance institutions that also offer business training.<sup>40</sup> Deena Freeman suggests that Pentecostal effectiveness in business resides in adoption of lifestyles such as work ethic, time management, and refraining from investing energy in sexual pleasure, heavy drinking, and gambling.<sup>41</sup> But is it a given that savings through expenditure reduction will be invested in business? I am inclined to think not, considering that one does not have to convert to Neo-Pentecostalism to espouse these lifestyles.

As much as these studies are insightful, their findings are not new. They do not go beyond telling us that Neo-Pentecostals are doing what some microfinance institutions and other development agencies do. But this is not too surprising since these researchers are not experts familiar with the domain of religion. For them it is like trying to beat a path in a foreign territory. Again, there is a research stalemate, and couching a theory of religion's role within development remains elusive. It requires experts in the domain of religion to explain the underlying mechanisms and processes through which Neo-Pentecostals inculcate the spirit of entrepreneurship successfully among their converts. Fortunately, missiologists have awakened and are gradually crawling into the game as evident in a parallel stream of literature that is budding unnoticeably within the field of religion and development. A footnote here is that some missiologists involved in religion and development research do not describe their work as development; but, nevertheless, the nature of their work and the questions they address engage this same interface of religion and development.

### *Missiological Contributions*

As one would expect, most studies from a missiological perspective highlight another key to Pentecostal effectiveness in business: the transformation of the individual into the likeness of God through the power of the Holy Spirit.



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David E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori found that the influence of Pentecostal rituals helps converts realize their human identity as created in God's image.<sup>42</sup> Lovemore Togarasei and Kudzai Biri claim that Neo-Pentecostal effectiveness in promoting entrepreneurial activities resides in teaching converts to run a business in a godly way, instilling in them a positive mindset that one can be successful through God.<sup>43</sup> Peter Heslam attributes Pentecostal effectiveness in business to empowering converts to realize their dignity and potential.<sup>44</sup> Tanya Nicole Riches claims that during worship, Pentecostal converts encounter the Spirit of God who enhances their sense of self-worth.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the role of Neo-Pentecostalism in transforming individuals is an important missiological insight, but it remains elusive to mainstream development researchers.

Questions remain as to the image of God and how it relates to effectiveness in business. How does the power of the Holy Spirit transform converts? What does it look like to do business in a godly way? These pneumatic explanations seem vague, if not entirely confusing. As it stands, these studies are not substantive enough to conclude that Neo-Pentecostalism is ipso facto the supreme purveyor of what makes its adherents effective in business.

An enhanced sense of self-worth, though also important, does not imply one will be effective as an entrepreneur. In addition, is the development trajectory of Neo-Pentecostals sustainable and one that needs to be promoted?

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In-depth analysis is therefore required not only to pin down how Neo-Pentecostals facilitate transformation of their converts, what really changes during transformation, how the change relates to entrepreneurship, but also to address questions of sustainability and viability. Ben-Willie Kwaku Golo may have brought to light what has eluded most researchers in both mainstream development and missiology. While applauding the Pentecostal pneumatic emphases as crucial for psychologically inspiring converts, Golo contends that an extreme emphasis on individual accumulation of wealth,

which is widespread in the Neo-Pentecostal context, is not a good development recipe for a communitarian context like Africa. It threatens disharmony between the individual and the community, especially when intended for egoistic satisfaction.<sup>46</sup> He adds that Neo-Pentecostal teaching on business and wealth acquisition for all converts is not only unrealistic, but also theologically misleading. It ignores the inevitable ontological realities of discipleship such as suffering, pain, and death.<sup>47</sup> There is absolutely no room for failure in Neo-Pentecostal teaching, as long as one is tithing or sowing (giving money to the pastor to receive abundant blessings). But what happens when one has done all they have been taught without acquiring the much-promised wealth? Golo wonders.<sup>48</sup>

Surely, the teaching of Neo-Pentecostals is questionable and threatens its own future survival should it fail to fulfil its material promises to adherents. Also, the modern emphasis on individual wealth accumulation undermines those believers who aspire for a life of modesty and are satisfied with the little they have. This is unhealthy for any context like Africa which is characterized by communitarianism.<sup>49</sup> Though seemingly promising, in truth the modernity perspective of Neo-Pentecostals reduces humans to beings whose sole purpose of existence is to pursue economic gains. Bryant L. Myers reminds us that we are relational beings whose aspirations must go beyond individualistic material desires.<sup>50</sup> According to Myers, our needs can only be met in our relational nature as we care for one another.<sup>51</sup> Surely the needs of a community must be ahead of individual egoistic pursuits. While wealth acquisition is not inherently bad, its use matters. Modernity poses the danger of creating a society of patrons and clients, as in America, where astronomical wealth is accumulated in a few hands, while the majority is mired in debt and stifled by insurmountable loans. Is this what the non-western poor need?

### *Reflection on a Disconnect*

Clearly, there is a disconnect between mainstream development researchers and missiologists. Their parallel streams of literature are evident and growing. As much as both streams of literature offer important insights, theory advancement on the role of religion in development will remain elusive unless researchers work together, seeing the strength and advantage of combining their different disciplinary orientations. As shown in the previous section, there are certain things which only missiologists can see because of their theological orientation, just like mainstream development researchers can observe certain things that missiologists cannot. For instance, that Neo-Pentecostalism transforms its converts into the likeness of God through the Holy Spirit is not easy

for development researchers to perceive. It appears harder for these researchers to pin down the threat of modernity to harmonious community and its reductionistic effect on humans.

However, missiologists have limitations as well and seem unable to go beyond identifying what fits with their Christian theology. They often struggle to concretize their observations in a more thorough analysis. As noted in the section on missiological contributions above, missiologists will often use vague terms and expressions that largely obfuscate the role of religion in development: terms such as “godly,” “God’s image,” “scripts of low self-worth,” and “power of the Holy Spirit.” This is where collaboration with mainstream development researchers would help their effectiveness and operationalization.

Unfortunately, some missiologists seem deeply suspicious of development scholars and researchers. Instead of regarding them as mainstream, they label them “secular”—a term which many innocent scholars have failed to resist in order to ensure the consistency of their work. It makes me nervous to see some missiologists critique the term “development” as a colonial enterprise. For them development is a colonial project, one inspired by works like Rostow’s *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*<sup>52</sup> which allegedly promoted western imperialism. Some consider development as mundane business unworthy of their attention, while others render it illegitimate or simply ignore it. Perhaps that is why mainstream development scholars ignore missiologists, because they do not observe much about development in their work. Rather, most missiologists use a wide range of terms that are confusing and sometimes controversial such as *diakonia*, *shalom*, witnessing, incarnational ministry, and servanthood. Some even appeal to change the term “development” without really offering a sufficient alternative. This is one of the major fetters that restrains theory advancement and widens the disconnect. But is development a secular project that has nothing to do with missiology? I believe the disconnect is misinformed and that which they share is unappreciated.

### *The Relationship between Development and Missiology*

The relationship between development and missiology seems evident in a shared concern for human flourishing and environmental conservation. In simple terms, development has two dimensions, practice and scholarship. These are directed towards its central concerns of global poverty and inequality.<sup>53</sup> Following the recently adopted United Nations’ (2015) Sustainability Development Goals, we may add environmental sustainability as a third concern. At the core of the development agenda, therefore, is human flourishing in all spheres of life, including health, literacy, and income. Thus,

development strives to create a world with equal opportunities for all humans to achieve their aspirations and to preserve the earth and its endowments for future generations.

Likewise, missiology is the study of Christian mission which involves practice and scholarship, and it pursues human flourishing and environmental conservation (good stewardship) as part of its agenda. I must admit that “Christian mission” is a topic which cannot be fully exhausted in a journal publication. The volumes of various leading missiologists like David Bosch, Francis Oboji, Scott W. Sunquist, and Amos Yong speak to a range of mission without claiming a final word on the definition. I will not pursue this discussion in any depth, but it’s worth noting that these missiologists embrace multiple facets of mission which include creation care and helping the poor.<sup>54</sup> Golo hits the bull’s eye when he views development as grounded in a Christian idea of the “possibility of a world that is just and liberating and that engenders a flourishing life.”<sup>55</sup>

The relatedness of missiology and development will find no greater proof. It seems illogical to think of development as mundane and unconnected to missiology.

### *A Call for Collaboration*

Although missiology actually emerged as a domain in the academy earlier than development, it is not as advanced in the area of development as mainstream development studies. Mainstream development researchers have been in the game longer and have learned many important lessons—except for the area of religion. Also, considering that mainstream development researchers are now interested in religion, there exists an unprecedented opportunity for collaboration with missiologists. Missiologists should tap into this intellectual interest to contribute meaningfully toward theory advancement, rather than beat their own path and simply reinvent the wheel. Disparate theoretical pathways will impede progress in theory advancement. It is intellectual suicide in academics.

I recommend our research should emulate Bryant L. Myers’ approach as he engages both mainstream development theorists and missiologists in his work.<sup>56</sup> His approach helps advance theory on the role of religion in development, and his point of departure models for missiologists how to engage literature in mainstream development. Mainstream development researchers should be perceived as collaborators rather than aliens or adversaries. Similarly, mainstream development researchers have weaknesses that inhibit research progress and will need to cooperate with missiologists. As articulated in this paper, each discipline can complement the other through collaboration.

## To Avoid Reinventing the Wheel

The role of religion in development needs clear articulation. Not only must we consider religion as an important factor in development, but we also must improve effectiveness in the fight against global poverty. The formulation of theory to advance knowledge in the field of religion and development remains largely underdeveloped. Researchers from both sides have run out of ideas and offer no new insight—a situation I describe as research stalemate in religion and development. I have pointed out contributing factors such as the lack of theological knowledge by one side, and the dearth of skill and research experience in the other. Collaboration between mainstream development researchers and missiologists is, therefore, strongly recommended. They must complement each other's weaknesses if theory building in religion and development is to advance. Otherwise, as it stands, the different literatures of religion and development can easily be dismissed as irrelevant noise. The potential for collaboration is so much greater than advancing theory magically by working alone. Capitalizing on each other's strengths will speed up progress. It actually reminds me of a famous story which I think challenges both missiologists and mainstream development researchers.

Once upon a time in the ancient land of Bharat, there lived a Guru and his bramcharyas or, as you would call them, disciples. Each disciple was supposed to pick as his test a very difficult task to perform. He was to work exceedingly hard

for several years to perfect himself in the task that he, himself, had set. There was this one disciple, somewhat brighter than the others, yet so very shy and timid.

"And what task have you set for yourself, my son?" asked the kindly Guru.

"Master," answered the disciple, "I want to be able to walk on water. I will practice until I'm able to do it. To walk on water—that is my goal."

Years passed and under the gentle guidance of the Guru, most of the disciples accomplished what they had set out to do. Finally, the shy disciple approached the Guru. "Master," said he, "I have toiled and practiced without ceasing, lo, these many years. See that city across the river? I can now walk on the water and go over to the city. Master, I have overcome. I can walk on water."

Looking at the young disciple the old master sadly asked, "Why did you not take the boat? You would have saved so much time."<sup>57</sup>

Mainstream development researchers and missiologists must not continue to practice a cerebral hygiene that isolates their domains. No solo effort will yield a monumental discovery that will set religion and development on a completely new path. The intention may sound good, but I worry just how long it will take to make a breakthrough. Beating a path to a destination where others have explored is a waste of time and defies logic. This old story would say, "When you can walk on water, take the boat." **IJFM**

## Endnotes

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