Losing (sight of) our Religion:
Exploring the foundations of ‘secular’ development
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Abstract
The field of publicly funded international development is ostensibly secular in its roots, execution and impacts. In this paper, written for the development administrator, the author explores how the sacred founds and permeates the practice of international development. Acknowledging that the secular is infused with the sacred enables secular institutions to become aware of a range of impacts and intervention strategies now closed to them; permits religiously inspired organizations to engage more honestly, completely and competitively in the ‘secular’ development debate; and offers people from the host countries more opportunities to comment on a range of practices and impacts that they find to be significant but have limited means to discuss within the current development vocabulary.

Introduction
Public funders of development activities often conduct their development work in partnership with non-governmental organizations and other elements of ‘civil society.’ While these public donors are agents of their respective governments, the groups they contract come to development with motives that range from pure commercial interest to service and/or conversion inspired by religious conviction. The relationship between the public funder and the more religious of their implementing partners is, to quote a book title, and Uneasy Alliance. This dis-ease is premised in part on the shared conviction that there is a difference in kind between the convictions that bring secular agencies and those that call religious organizations to engage in development and that there is an analogous difference between ‘secular’ development and religious activity. The purpose of this essay is to open for question the soundness of that shared assumption.

A document prepared by the Canadian International Development Agency at conferences with religious non-governmental organizations in 1993 and 1994 demonstrates quite succinctly and in unusually sensitive terms the kinds of distinctions that donors draw between the religious and the secular. First, demonstrating their commitment to the development theory of the day, “[t]he building of strong civil societies is essential for sustainable development in the South” and mapping the role of religiously inspired action “Faith-based organizations and institutions are integrally part of the strengthening of civil societies in the South.” (p. 2) In this context, then, faith based organizations have and are demonstrating their value in helping the government of Canada achieve ends that the government has identified …‘strengthening civil society.’

This document goes on to state that the Canadian International Development Agency has a mandate from the people of Canada to “contribute to the reduction of poverty in the South and provide humanitarian assistance” which coheres with the “teachings and mission at the heart of Christian faith regarding charity, compassion, solidarity and justice”. (p. 3) This agreement, however, does not extend to components of the Christian faith such as the “making of disciples” and the “building of the Church” nor might it extend to some of the foreign policy and trade objectives of the Government of Canada. In particular, the Canadian International Development Agency has three concerns: first, that an agency might use public funds to propagate a particular religious faith; second, that an agency might provide aid first to those who share their commitments; and third,
that the changes in religious belief introduced by the agency might “undermine local cultural values and the necessary cultural conditions for development” (p. 4)

Despite these possible differences, the document asserts that a “working relationship and partnership can be built around those goals, objectives and approaches that are held in common.” (p. 3) In fact, recognizing that the Western tendency to “treat religion as a private, subjective matter separate from the rest of life” (p. 4) is “not shared by many Christian NGOs, nor is it a common view held in many southern cultures” (p. 3) CIDA then acknowledges that it is natural and appropriate for these religious agencies to engage and respond in ways that a secular state agency can not.

Even though “[a]ll development agencies bring particular beliefs and values to the development process which they promote explicitly or implicitly, such as beliefs and values related to the role of women, protection of the environment, respect for human rights, democratic participation in decision making, the role of the market, or institutional development” (p. 6) the document is quite clear that, in the context of religiously inspired NGOs “CIDA has concerns, however, about how the spiritual dimension is integrated into relief and development programming [by religious NGOs] and wants to ensure that any public funds being spent are used appropriately.”( p. 4) The reflexive caution that the document commends is, in my experience, more closely enforced when the NGO is working from a religious rather than from a secular basis. For example the statement that “the wife of the Prophet (MPBOH) was a trader so we are going to do micro-enterprise for women” is more likely to attract scrutiny to the rest of the project with an eye to the blurring the secular/sacred line than the statement that “we are going to do women’s micro-enterprise because it is consistent with UNDP policy.”

While donors and their religiously inspired implementing agencies may be concerned about these questions, those who come from cultures outside that of North America, as the document intimates and the following vignette demonstrates, may not distinguish so clearly between the secular and the sacred.

Several years ago the International Development Research Centre in Ottawa hosted a conference on the topic of ‘culture and development.’ The participants at that conference were largely senior level development assistance professionals from western aid agencies brightened by a light scattering of senior level representatives from organizations in other countries. Rather late in the conference, and manifesting an unusual degree of frustration for someone of her position, a Thai woman stood up and said “you are all guilty of blind theological imperialism.” The collective response to this assertion was an uncomfortable silence. When conversation resumed, her statement was in no way present in the dialogue. From her perspective, it seemed that the divide between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘secular’ was rather blurry and, judging by the collective response, the participants at that conference seemed to be ill equipped to engage her properly in discussion.

Her accusation and the gathering’s stunned reaction motivated me to look more closely at the issue of the stated separation of the secular and the theological in development. This essay is my first step in a larger project that I have had some difficulty picking out from the cracks between existing work and literatures. To place this project I will take a few moments to map out some of the other work and distinguish my contribution from those conversations.

There is a fairly well developed dialogue that concerns itself with the relationship between the institutionalized forms of religion and their secular counterparts. Historically this literature extends back in time to consider the relationship between the Jesuit Order and Spanish colonizing interests in South America, the Roman Catholic Church’s responsibility for providing education to indigenous populations in the Canadian North and the range relationships between various Churches and the American government during the settlement of the Nation. In the context of the questions I am posing, the work that most closely parallels my interest is The Uneasy Alliance
which does an exemplary job of exploring the nature and consequences of the relationships that have been struck in recent years between religious development organizations and American funders. In that text the author explores the various ways in which the interests of the government of the United States have determined the activities of religious organizations and how the actions and opinions of religious institutions have shaped US foreign policy. While critical, this work limits itself to institutionalized forms and is either silent on or accepts that there is a fundamental difference between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular.’

On a second topic, the International Development Research Centre is just wrapping up a project that worked with leaders from several of the world’s religions that explored how their faith brought them to and guided their efforts in international development. While crucial, this work has limited itself to those manifestations of ‘religion’ that are commonly accepted. I am more interested in identifying parallels between what is seen as ‘religious’ and what is transparently normalized as ‘secular.’

Moving from the relationship between the institutional forms of religion and development organizations and the life histories of prominent religiously motivated development thinkers, my essay may be confused with a third topic: Western cultural imperialism. I have not encountered any text in this conversation that makes the distinction between religiously and secularly inspired development activities nor have I read anything that attempts to discuss the issues I wish to raise on terms that are internal to the development community. Moving closer to my interest, a number of authors have looked at the unintended consequences of development activities and the significance of non-intentional aspects of development work (c.f. Leach 1994, 1995). While quite close to my interest, their work does not explore the issues in a manner that would enable me to respond to the accusation of theological imperialism.

Significance

This exploration may improve the honesty of the discourse in the development field and make it possible for us to improve the quality of our work. For example, I was recently employed by a university in a developing country that was founded by members of a religious tradition who had the express purpose of contributing to the emergence of a cadre of individuals who were both technically and morally capable of leading their nation. That university created a program to upgrade rural school-teachers from a certificate level to a full undergraduate degree. The curriculum the university developed for that purpose used as its core the moral and ethical teachings present in the holy books of the founders’ faith. Before approaching secular funding sources, the members of that institution found similar principles in a range of other sacred and secular sources. These external sources were, of course, cited to the extent that their suggestions were consistent with those of the primary Texts that they drew on in forming their initial vision of the program. The teacher upgrading program was funded, it has grown both within its country of origin is being adopted in neighboring countries, and, according to traditional indicators, it is a remarkable success.

This activity would never have been supported had its creators approached a public funder and said: “Look, our religious texts tell us that these are the moral qualities necessary for the emergence of a stable and prosperous nation. We want you to take your tax-payers dollars and fund us, an institution and individuals inspired to this service by these Texts, to create a teacher training curriculum that embeds these principles in high quality technical training.” This sort of reasoning would have been rejected as an inappropriate use of taxpayers dollars.

1 While conversion to the founders’ faith was not a stated institutional goal, individual staff member varied in their ability to maintain a separation between the service to others that their sacred Text counseled and the direct teaching of their Faith. For example, one instructor in the program stated that she would not teach her convictions in the program, but would invite participants to an evening discussion after the session was over.
Recognizing that they could not be fully transparent, and as mentioned above, these people drew on compatible sources to create a program that was ideologically consistent with the principles of their faith. When pushed by their peers in other development organizations to discuss the underpinnings of their program, however, these people often did not mention the fundamental core that lead them to make the choices they did when composing their program. This inability has consequences. First, it forced them to appear to be somewhat incoherent in their selection of ideas. Second, if their source is discovered, they would be immediately suspected of attempting to pursue religious ends with secular dollars. Third, being unable to discuss the core tenets that underpin the program compromises its replicability. As mentioned above, the authors of this program drew on secular sources to the extent that they were consistent with their sacred Texts. They were using those Texts in light of the context in which they found themselves. Were they in a different context, they may have highlighted different aspects of those Texts and, consequentially, drawn on different secular sources. So, in order for someone to be able to work with and adapt the program as necessary, it would be helpful to know the fundamental logic that underpins it.

If secular development institutions and activities are found to have sacred roots and impacts, then the organization I referred to above would be able to approach a public funder and say, “Our sacred Texts say that these values are important so we want to include them in our program” and expect to be received in exactly the same manner as an organization that stated in their proposal that “The United Nations human rights Declaration says that the following are important.” Similarly, when another agency approached them and asked how the program ticked because they wished to adapt it for a different context, they would be able to sit down with them and share the fundamental logic in a manner that increased the probability that their adaptation would be successful. Finally, quite apart from admitting the sacred, finding that there are sacred aspects and consequence of our ‘secular’ development work may improve development practice. That is, secular development work may have sacred consequences that are not anticipated in the design or evaluation of development activities. If ‘secular’ development has sacred significance, and if we can acknowledge those sacred dimensions, it might be possible to better design and evaluate development programs.

Now that I have hopefully painted a context and indicated the sort of contribution that might be made by finding grounds to accept that secular and religious development are similar in kind, my next step is to trace the history of development, identify religious roots, and find some way to link those roots to the modern secular development agencies that are held up as somehow different from their religiously inspired peers. Given that civil society is seen to be central in the development of ‘southern’ countries, I will begin with a very abbreviated and partial history of civil society in America.

The History of Civil Society in America.

In 1938 a series of addresses were offered at the First Church of Christ in New Haven Connecticut to celebrate the three hundredth anniversary of the foundation of that colony. The ninth address given in that series examined the Enduring Values of the Puritan Faith. The author of that presentation stated that the founders saw that there were two rather distinct forms of religious expression. The first is concerned with theological virtues. The second with moral and ethical virtues. While the first is limited to a rather small domain of a believer’s life, the second admits religion “into every part of life and subjects to it every phase of the human spirit.” (Maurer, 1938 p. 192) In keeping with this, those founders took a solemn covenant

that as in matters that concern the gathering and ordering of a church, so likewise in all public offices which concern civil order, as choice of magistrates and officers, making and repealing of laws, dividing allotments of inheritance and all things of
the like nature, they would be ordered by those rules which the Scripture hold forth. (Maurer, 1938 p. 194-5).

To move this discussion from the mid seventeenth century to the late nineteenth century I will turn to Peter Dobkin Hall’s examination of organization in America. He argues that it is “likely that both the rationales and the methods of bureaucratic and corporate organization [in America] actually emerged from the domain of religion and spread from there to economic, political and social situations.”(Hall, 1998 p. 101) Hall continues from this point by mentioning that a major industrial player (’Pope’ Dwight) and his companions in New England:

became early promoters not only of voluntary organizations with explicitly religious purposes — Bible, tract and missionary societies — but also secular organizations — reform, temperance, education, charitable, and other societies, as well as schools and colleges — which could act on the unchurched masses and move them towards the Light. (Hall, 1998 p. 104)

One of Dwight’s followers, who was centrally placed in the New England evangelical movement, recognized that once displaced by democracy the Church would loose its ability to act institutionally as a moral agent. The role of the Church under these new circumstance was to “empower individuals as moral agents and to enable them to extend their moral commitment into every sphere of their lives.” (Hall, 1998 p. 104) The prompting of individuals to scripturally inspired but secular action, combined with the encouragement to create “associations of a thousand other kinds” contributed to the formation of a “densely interwoven network of secular organizations operated by people whose motives were fundamentally religious, though the purposes of the organizations themselves were not.” (Hall, 1998 p. 104) In the same collection D. Scott Cormode extends Hall’s speculation on the lineage of civil society with the observation that “The secular children, of course, resembled their ecclesial parents.” (Cormode, 1998 p. 117)

Complementing the rather sacred roots of the forms of modern organization, Hall observes that the schools that were producing the leaders of those organizations had explicitly religious objectives. For example, Hall notes that in the second quarter of the 19th century fewer than a quarter of the graduates from Harvard and Yale, then still dominated by the clergy, were choosing lives of the cloth. They, instead, were going into law and business. (Hall, 1998 p. 111)

Hall concludes his essay with the statement that, though inconclusive:

the historical precedence of large-scale bureaucratic enterprises in religion is indisputable. Second, the influence of these religious organizations both as models for bureaucractized secular organizations and as institutions that provided individuals with the values and skills needed for building and working in bureaucratic organizations, though circumstantial, points to the need for more detailed examination of the religious backgrounds of the founders of the modern economic order. Finally, the rationale for the transformation of the higher educational institutions without which the modern economic order would have been inconceivable seems to have been clearly grounded in theological rather than secular values. (Hall, 1998 p. 113)

In summary, Hall seems to be trying to argue from the foundation of the dense web of civil society/philanthropic organizations and the organization of elite education at a time when it was clear to influential and religiously minded individuals that the significance of religious organizations in the secular state would wane, to the statement that all modern day corporate forms in America are infused with religious principles. My project is somewhat more modest. Rather than

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2 This extract points to a very early distinction between private and public virtue that I will have to expand later
make the extension to all organizational forms in America, my interest is limited to those organizations that now occupy the philanthropic and humanitarian field initially populated by the organizations created by people such as ‘Pope’ Dwight.

In order to bring the analysis from the time of Pope Dwight to the current day I will on frameworks provided by my limited reading of neo-institutional theory.

**Institutional Theory**

In order to build this argument I will have to begin with the proposal that institutions embody the commitments of their founders. For this point I will turn to the idea of a modal level of development. Keniston (1974) offers the most general description I have found of this concept. He states that:

> People in any given society or subsociety tend to resemble each other not only because they have internalized the same roles (socialization) and the same symbols and values (acculturation) but also because they have “leveled off” at approximately the same point in their development in each of the sectors of human growth. (Keniston 1974, p. 160)

This is significant for two reasons. First the people who form that particular community may not be aware that the assumptions under which they are operating are unique to that group and the content and form of their shared developmental level may, as it were, become transparent to the members. Second, as illustrated in the following quote, those characteristics may inform the organizations they collectively create.

> People are the backbone of an organization. The mentality they use in formulating problems and making decisions is crucial in determining the level of development at which their organization operates. (Lavoie, 1978 p. 421)

The argument that founders leave their sometimes tacit impression on the organizations they found is somewhat trivialized by the rather short life of many organizations, their modern proliferation and the range of circumstances in which they are formed. Accordingly, my next step will be to try and extend my gaze from the immediate organizational progeny of a group of founders to an organizational field.

For this attempt I will turn to a sociological literature that is concerned with the formation and life of social institutions. While, as with any academic literature there is a range of contesting voices, most of the authors that I have read would agree with the broad statement that pre-dispositions to certain forms of organization become embedded (institutionalized) in a society and then preferentially selected and mated with other similarly embedded predisposition to rapidly create and operate organizations in response to those challenges for which we choose a collective response. I will now take a few minutes to unpack this rather dense statement.

Holland et. al. suggest in their work Induction that, much as in the process of Darwinian natural selection, each of us has a collection of competing decision rules from which we choose one when we face a new situation. Conscious or not, we make that selection on the basis of how well that rule has served us in the past and how well it seems to fit the current situation. (Holland 1989) While we develop some of these rules in the school of hard knocks, we inherit most of them from

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3 An ‘organizational field’ is the collection of organizations that make up a domain. For example, funders agencies, large multi-lateral organizations, International NGO’s and domestic partners can be considered to make up an organizational field.
our predecessors. That is, we benefit from the cumulative experience of our forbearers by inheriting what they learned during their lives and what is passed on from their predecessors.

While not explicitly stated, this vision is consistent with the structure proposed by Powell in the introduction to *The New Institutionalism*. That is, extending Holland’s metaphor somewhat, we have a common stock of organizational responses that we can invoke. When we collectively face a new situation, we will draw on those institutionalized forms (some might vaguely refer to this as institutional capital) to rapidly assemble an organizational response that seems to fit our current needs.

Like the decision rules that Holland employs in his exploration of learning, these institutionalized forms have their own histories. That is, they were initially created for—or adapted from precursor forms in—an organizational response to a novel situation for which we had no appropriate institutionalized responses. That institutionalized form, once having been slowly and often painfully developed, then entered into our collective ecology. Initially, when facing similar circumstances, we may explicitly make reference to the ‘exemplar’ institution (c.f. the Postscript to Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* 2nd edition, 1972). Over time, as has happened with Robert’s Rules of Order and the British House of Commons, the institutionalized form (Robert’s Rules) may become separated from its foundational organizational context (The House of Commons). If it proves itself to be particularly useful, it may even disappear from the realm of conscious thought and be taken as brute fact in a manner that parallels the externalization, objectification, internalization cycle in the creation of culture so succinctly described by Berger and Luckman in the opening chapter of their *The Sacred Canopy*.

This provides a possible path by which the convictions of the founders of exemplar organizations as inculcated in the institutional forms they created and employed may live beyond the life of their immediate organizational children and may be unwittingly taken up by co-existing and successor organizations. While this might explain the persistence of the ideology of the founders in an institutional field it does not explain the apparent invisibility of the convictions to people both inside and outside of that field. For example, as in policing or military organizations, it might be possible for a particular institutional field to have embedded in it a set of very strongly held convictions that are transparent to those within it but quite obvious to those in the larger society. To make this step I will draw on some work that has been done in the sociology of religion.

**Sociology of Religion**

The literature in the study of the sociology of religion has been characterized by a debate that turns on the term ‘secularization.’ Demerath and Williams, both sociologists of religion, suggest that one way of viewing secularization that avoids many of the more trivial issues in the debate is to see it as “the retreat of sacred influences from the secular arena.” (Demerath, 1998 p. 29) Later in this same article, the authors note that the once dominant Liberal Protestantism has moved from the “core of a covenant community to the periphery of the secular city.” (Demerath, 1998 p. 29) To make my next point I must first introduce an excerpt from this same article. The authors state that:

> religion’s relationship to power varies, depending upon the particular religious group, the particular issue at stake, and the particular cultural and structural context. With more than 200 denominations and a bewildering array of issues and contexts no simple assertion will suffice. (Demerath, 1998 p. 34)

This citation, when combined with the ideas presented in the proceeding paragraph, appears to suggest that the influence of religion is exercised from the increasing plurality and peripherality of its organized forms. That is, religion is gradually retreating from the public sphere and the vacuum so created is being, presumably, filled with secular institutions in North America. This seems to
confirm the fears of ‘Pope’ Dwight and were the discussion to stop here I would be in fairly serious trouble. To counter this, in a related topic, in another article Demerath argues that the “decline of Liberal Protestantism may actually stem from success” (Demerath, 1998 p. 155) he states that the:

(values associated with liberalism are central to American civil religion but potentially cancerous for the organizations that spawned it. Individualism, freedom, pluralism, tolerance, democracy, and intellectual inquiry all have centrifugal implications for organizational structure and member commitment. (Demerath, 1998 p. 169)

That is, while these values were absorbed by and became increasingly important in the foundation of the nation, their practice undermined the organizational health of the Church that propounded them. Members of a Liberal Protestant Church learned well from their pastors and applied the taught principles to their own religious behavior. Further, the flocks, finding the convictions taught and maintained by the Church present in the surrounding society—perhaps a testimony to the success of ‘Pope’ Dwight’s project—were left with little incentive to remain within the organizational fold. They left, and continue to leave, in droves.

One of the directions in which this discussion is taken is the discussion of ‘Civil Religion.’ The literature on Civil Religion, as far as this essay is concerned, sorts out into two very rough categories. The first is concerned with finding secular equivalents for religious structures in the larger society, for example, what is the religious significance of the office of the President and is of little interest to me. The second strand focuses on the silent appropriation of originally theological virtues by the secular.

Returning to the quote by Demerath, the liberal Church sponsored a number of values, such as individualism, freedom, pluralism and tolerance that have since lost their theological shading. In a manner that is exactly parallel to the argument proposed in the discussion of the transmission of social institutions, these values may be carried by the individuals who create and form the humanitarian organizations that are directly implicated in the field of international development. The people who carry those values may not be aware of them and, if they are, they may not regard them as theologically inspired. Thus, combining the institutional and the sociological arguments that have been presented, then, it is possible to see how current ‘secular’ development agencies might reasonably be seen to be quite similar from an external perspective.

**Conclusion**

The dis-ease that can characterizes the relationship donors have with religiously inspired development agencies and sometimes results in religiously inspired development agencies presenting their intentions in a manner that anticipates rejection of their theological inspiration may derive from a shared and perhaps incorrect assumption that there is a difference in kind between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ development. It is possible within the context of North American history and without reference to other’s perceptions of ‘development’ to establish traces that link strong Christian convictions to the forms and commitments of modern North American ‘secular’ development agencies. The diffusion of these theologically inspired values into the society at large may have made it difficult for people born and bred in that environment to see the ‘religious’ precepts that guide our operations, but these same principles may be quite visible to those that development identifies as its ‘beneficiaries.’ Development may indeed be guilty of a ‘blind theological imperialism.’
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