Article

Religion in the Age of Development

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Abstract: Religion has been profoundly reconfigured in the age of development. Over the past half century, we can trace broad transformations in the understandings and experiences of religion across traditions in communities in many parts of the world. In this paper, we delineate some of the specific ways in which ‘religion’ and ‘development’ interact and mutually inform each other with reference to case studies from Buddhist Thailand and Muslim Indonesia. These non-Christian cases from traditions outside contexts of major western nations provide windows on a complex, global history that considerably complicates what have come to be established narratives privileging the agency of major institutional players in the United States and the United Kingdom. In this way we seek to move discussions toward more conceptual and comparative reflections that can facilitate better understandings of the implications of contemporary entanglements of religion and development.

Keywords: Religion; Development; Humanitarianism; Buddhism; Islam; Southeast Asia

A Sarvodaya Shramadana work camp has proved to be the most effective means of destroying the inertia of any moribund village community and of evoking appreciation of its own inherent strength and directing it towards the objective of improving its own conditions.

A.T. Ariyaratne (quoted in [Bond 1992](#), p. 246)

Islam regards law as a tool, not as an end in itself. Law is a tool and an instrument for the establishment of justice in society, a means for man’s intellectual and moral reform and his purification. Law exists to be implemented for the sake of establishing a just society that will morally and spiritually nourish refined human beings.

Ayatollah [Khomeini](#) (1981, p. 80)

Religion has been profoundly reconfigured in the age of development. Over the past half century of diverse institutional interventions aimed toward the economic and social ‘improvement’ of society, we can trace broad transformations in the understandings and experiences of religion across traditions in communities in many parts of the world. From Muslim Indonesia to Buddhist Thailand, new visions of religion and its role in society have been crafted in ways that reflect complex entanglements between religion and development that emerged both parallel to and distinct from those centered in the Christian West.

1. Development Discovers Religion

The intersections of religion and development have become a focus of academic research that has resulted in a recent spate of production across fields including sociology, anthropology, and development studies. Much of this literature is characterized by a pervasive rhetoric of the ‘rediscovery of religion’ by the international development sector. At the same time, there is an

increasing critical awareness of a pre-history of entanglements between religion and development. Major works by Michael Barnett (2011), Thomas Davies (2013), Didier Fassin (2012), Peter Stamatov (2013), and Gilbert Rist (2014) have examined the diverse pathways by which religion has informed the history of development. From the perspective of scholars concerned primarily with ‘religion’, on the other hand, there have emerged new critical conversations on ways in which this redefined sphere of human experience was coming to be thought of in a new way, in relation to activist agendas for the improvement of life in this world. This history, however, has tended to be elaborated in relation to institutional and intellectual trajectories of a modernizing ‘West’.

In unfolding his genealogy of *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor (2007, p. 85) traced a progression of “deliberate attempts by elites . . . to make over the whole society, [and] to change the lives of the mass of people,” and “the rise of the disciplinary society” stretching back to the fifteenth century across the lands of Western Christendom. By the nineteenth century, he argues, this had emerged into a full-blown age of mobilization in which religious communities began organizing for diverse projects of social transformation as reconfigurations of religion’s engagement in the public sphere were inextricably intertwined with broader transformations in secularizing processes of modernization. In this paper, we aim to pursue another line of investigation to explore some of the ways in which religion has come to be reconfigured in diverse development and humanitarian contexts over the past half century—with reference to two particular trajectories traced through non-Christian traditions of Southeast Asia. In order to highlight their comparative value, they are set here alongside a critical review of established narratives of the origins of the religion-development nexus as it emerged in the US and the UK.

Activist movements driven by religious leaders substantively informed a number of the signature causes of twentieth-century progressivism, including prohibition, social welfare, and civil rights.¹ This also animated a host of transnational projects ranging from new institutional bodies for the coordination of international missionary activity and the proliferation of new organizations including the YMCA and the Scouts. As Robert Woodberry (2012) has argued, the missionary movement had far-reaching, if also frequently inadvertent, political and social consequences, significantly shaping development outcomes over the ensuing decades. In the United States, this broader mood of activism and social intervention was also manifest at the state level through major development initiatives. The most ambitious such project was the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) which combined new technologies with agendas for far-reaching social reform aiming to improve the lives of communities in Appalachia. David Ekbladh (2010) has drawn attention to the importance of the TVA for the elaboration of new American visions for global development through figures like Walt Rostow. This involved a conceptualization of the TVA as a ‘model’ which could be attractive for the newly independent nations of Latin America, Africa, and Asia during the Cold War period. In pursuit of this aim, leaders of many new nations were brought to the US to tour key sites of the project’s work with the intention of sending them home with new aspirations for development along the lines embodied by America as the ascendant leader of the ‘free world.’ At the same time, more practical efforts were also launched for the actual transplantation of the TVA model into areas of key strategic importance during the Cold War, including Korea and the Mekong Delta of French Indochina.

American endeavors also included the mobilization of a growing number of individual volunteers in the service of community level development projects. By the 1960s, development agents that Larry Grubbs (2009) refers to as “secular missionaries” began turning up in village sites across what was then known as the ‘Third World.’ In launching the most well-known of these movements, President John F. Kennedy commissioned Peace Corps volunteers:

¹ For more on the ongoing entanglements of Christian mission, social activism, and development interventions in Asia, see (Scheer et al. 2018).

Throughout the world, the people of the newly developing nations are struggling for economic and social progress which reflects their deepest desires. Our own freedom, and the future of freedom around the world, depend, in a very real sense, on their ability to build growing and independent nations where men can live in dignity, liberated from the bonds of hunger, ignorance and poverty.²

The Peace Corps combined in powerful ways both the volunteerism and the agricultural focus that came to be hallmarks of American development initiatives through the 1960s and 1970s (Cullather 2010; Immerwahr 2014).

These American initiatives became entangled with a range of other analogous projects which were also marked by a distinctly secular public profile. In the context of the Cold War, American visions for development became further entangled with models of statist five-year plans and associated mechanisms. Religion was largely eclipsed in emergent forms of post-colonial nationalism which were characterized to a considerable extent by the adoption of socialist ideologies and by the pragmatics of nation-building out of the diverse populations that came to form the new citizenries of countries like India, Egypt, Pakistan, Burma, and Indonesia.

Throughout the Cold War, social scientists had tended to link these modernizing developmentalist projects with secularization. By the 1980s, however, it became clear that religion was not disappearing from the public sphere—quite the opposite.³ From the Iranian revolution to the rise of the Christian Right in the United States and other movements coming out of diverse religious traditions in India, Israel, and across the Sunni Muslim and Theravada Buddhist worlds, religion was once again something that could not simply be ignored. Across the social sciences there then emerged a new interest in, and attempts to come to terms with, this apparent ‘resurgence’ of religion. This same dynamic is also found in relation to development. An early and prescient study in this regard is Philip Quarles van Ufford and Matthew Schoffeleers’s (van Ufford and Schoffeleers 1988) *Development and Religion*, in which the authors attempted to open up a discussion of the ways in which these two spheres of religion and development—that had long been held at arm’s length from each other—were entangled in complex, and frequently conflictual, relations. These first sparks of new discussions about religion and development however, did not ignite much academic interest in the topic at the time. This critical mode of inquiry was overshadowed a decade later with the emergence of donor-driven lines of conversation on the potential resources that religion could provide for development work. The bell-weather of this shift is often identified in James Wolfensohn, then President of the World Bank, initiating the Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics that served as the primary focal point for engaging with religious leaders and faith-based organizations (Belshaw et al. 2001; Marshall and Keough 2004, 2005; Marshall and Saanen 2007; McDuie-Ra and Rees 2010; Rees 2011, 2013).

A key figure in these World Bank-initiated discussions was Katherine Marshall. Since 2006, she has been based at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, overseeing projects that have produced a substantial body of literature and established significant centers for conversations between academics and practitioners.⁴ In a major book-length publication in a new wave of scholarship on religion and development in the twenty-first century, Wolfensohn (2011, p. xviii) provided a preface that succinctly presents this perspective emerging out of the World Bank’s encounter with religion. He asserts that there are countless ways “in which a better understanding of how religion affects social decisions can improve the quality and impact of development work.”

² “Special Message to the Congress on the Peace Corps,” 1 March 1961, available at: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8515> (accessed on 11 June 2018).

³ See, for example: (Casanova 1994).

⁴ A critical exchange between Marshall and one of the authors of the present article can be found in: (Fountain 2013a, 2013b; Marshall 2013).

By that time, there had been a notable change in the atmosphere around donors and development organizations and the ways in which they imagined the possibilities for constructive interactions with religious communities and organizations. This coincided with some seismic shifts in the ways in which corporations and culture had been reconfigured, leading to new kinds of entanglements between religion and the market. In the United States, these “historically new conditions” included a conglomeration of discourses on family values, service ethics, and an openness to “faith at work” that shaped emergent forms of ‘Christian Capitalism’ over the last decades of the twentieth century (Moreton 2009). At the same time, the US Federal government was engaging in a far-reaching reformulation of the relationships between state and market that included spaces for engagement with, and subsidies for, religious organizations as mechanisms for the provision of social services and disaster relief. This was facilitated under the rubric of ‘Faith-based initiatives.’ While this was a prominent plank in the platform of the administration of President George W. Bush (2000–2008), the groundwork for this was laid under the previous administration of William J. Clinton (1993–2001).⁵ In 2004 USAID announced a new policy recognizing religious organizations as being on ‘equal footing’ with other organizations in their eligibility for Federal funding.⁶

These American developments, moreover, resonated with broader global reconfigurations—and in particular with renewed interest in engaging with religion as a means through which to facilitate humanitarian and development interventions. This can be traced, for example, through the successive formulations of programmatic statements of development goals promulgated over recent decades. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were formulated by the United Nations in 2000 as a series of identifiable targets in the areas of poverty reduction, primary education, gender equality, child mortality, maternal health, combatting disease, environmental sustainability, and the facilitation of ‘global partnership’.⁷ In 2014, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were announced to “mobilize the world” in order to complete “the unfinished work of the MDGs” (Moon 2014). The SDGs emphasized the necessity of consolidating broad global partnerships—including more explicit frameworks for the integration and instrumentalization of religious organizations in pursuit of their goals. Diverse multilateral and national development organizations have leveraged the focus on partnerships encouraged by the MDGs and SDGs to initiate new ways of engaging with religion.⁸

In the wake of this newfound interest in religion, academics in development studies and allied fields initiated a series of research projects attempting to follow up on the apparent quest of donors to establish working relationships with ‘religion’.⁹ One of the most important and influential of these studies was the project run by Carole Rakodi on Religion and Development at the University of Birmingham, funded by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID).¹⁰ One of the primary forms of scholarly production coming out of this was that of typologies and mapping exercises that attempted to provide a comprehensive and systematic view of this brave new

⁵ For thorough analyses of the US faith-based initiative, see: (Black et al. 2004); (Formicola et al. 2003); and (Hackworth 2012).

⁶ “Participation by Religious Organizations in USAID Programs,” 10 October 2004, available at: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2004/10/20/04-23566/participation-by-religious-organizations-in-usaid-programs> (accessed on 11 June 2018).

⁷ The MDGs are available at: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/> [accessed: 11 June 2018]. Oscar Salemink (2015a, p. 53) has critiqued the utopian vision of the MDGs as a “child’s wish list” that “sacralises the system producing both wealth and poverty by at once obscuring these interconnections and presenting paradoxically this system as the solution for the woes it produces” (emphasis in original).

⁸ See (Anderson 2015; Carrette and Miall 2017; Clarke 2007, 2013a; Hovland 2008; Karam 2016; KCRD Knowledge Centre on Religion and Development; PaRD International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development; Juul Petersen and Moigne 2016; UNFPA United Nations Population Fund).

⁹ For more on this shift in academic temperament see: (Jones and Petersen 2011).

¹⁰ Available at: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/government-society/departments/international-development/rad/index.aspx> (accessed on 11 June 2018). See also: (Rakodi 2007) and (Tomalin 2007).

world. The products of this were often aimed toward the instrumentalization of religion in the service of development projects.¹¹

On the edge of this emerging school of policy-driven scholarship,¹² however, we also see the beginnings of strands of work presenting critical ethnographies of religion and development. Many of the pioneers in this field were scholars that combined an academic interest in development with established research profiles in the study of religion. In the UK, this is seen clearly in the work of Jonathan Benthall and colleagues on Islamic charities,¹³ and in Maia Green (2003) research on Christianity and development in Southern Africa. David Mosse (2006, 2011, 2012) has produced a rich body of work that ranges from the anthropology of Catholic religious practice in India to pioneering ethnographies of 'Aidland.' Oscar Salemink has likewise produced a prodigious corpus of work equally at home in the anthropology of religion and the critical study of development discourse and practice.¹⁴ In the United States, new work in this direction was marked by the publication of Erica Bornstein's *The Spirit of Development* (Bornstein 2005).¹⁵ A number of other critical ethnographers have also published significant interventions on religion and development.¹⁶ Some of our own work has further argued for the importance of this kind of critical engagement and called for "more unabashedly empirical research . . . to provide case studies that can enable new understandings of on-the-ground religion–development dynamics in the key sites of negotiation of aspirations and the implementation of particular projects" (Feener et al. 2015, p. 244).¹⁷

In what follows, we present two case studies of the ways in which religion is transformed in the course of its deepening entanglements with the sphere of development through case studies from the trans-regional traditions of Islam and Buddhism in contemporary Southeast Asia. Our focus on two non-Christian traditions is designed to expand beyond, and facilitate comparative discussion with, the predominant focus on the Christian West in the analysis of entanglements between religion and development. Furthermore, by addressing both Islam and Buddhism in two quite different national contexts, respectively, we highlight significant points of congruence and intersection in the religion-development nexus that transcend confessional differences. Seen together, these cases present a story that is not simply one of an expansion of policy initiatives and trends from the global north growing out of histories of secularizing transformations in Europe. Rather, in each of these non-Christian traditions we see both distinctive features and parallel evolutions of mutually transformative dynamics of religion and development over the past half century.

2. Islamic Law, Reconstruction and Development in Aceh, Indonesia

The case of post-tsunami/post-conflict Aceh presents us with a remarkable site for exploring entanglements of religion and development.¹⁸ Large parts of coastal Aceh were devastated by the earthquake and tsunami of December 2004. This disaster was quickly followed by the formal conclusion of decades of violent conflict between local separatists and the central government. Facing unprecedented destruction, this Indonesian province became the locus of one of the most ambitious and intensive experiments with reconstruction and development intervention carried out in the

¹¹ For further critiques of the typological imperative and instrumentalization in studies of religion and development, see: (Bolotta et al.; Fountain and Feener 2017; Fountain and Petersen 2018).

¹² Markers of the broad contours of this field can be traced across the production of two influential handbooks: (Clarke 2013b) and (Tomalin 2015).

¹³ Major work by Benthall and his collaborators include: (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2009; Lacey and Benthall 2014; Benthall 2016).

¹⁴ See, for example: (Salemink 2015a, 2015b; Salemink et al. 2004).

¹⁵ See also: (Bornstein 2012).

¹⁶ See: (DeTemple 2014; Hefferan 2007; Hefner 2006; Huang 2009; Occhipinti 2005; Scherz 2014; Weller 1999).

¹⁷ In addition to that volume (Fountain et al. 2015a), our contributions to this literature include: (Bolotta et al.; Borchert et al.; Fountain et al. 2015b, 2016; Wu and Feener 2015; Scheer et al. 2018).

¹⁸ The discussion presented in this section of the paper is drawn from: (Feener 2013). Further elaborations, broader contexts, and full citations for this argument can be found there.

twenty-first century. The traumatic contexts of loss and processes of recovery were also spaces in which religion came to be seen as playing multiple, complex roles.¹⁹ What is striking about these various responses, however, is the relative emphasis on considerations of ‘opportunity’ and the future lives of believers—rather than a sense of the disaster serving as a kind of retribution for past sins (Sanny 2008, pp. 157–63). As Annemarie Samuels has insightfully demonstrated, the disaster also altered conceptions of religious and worldly temporalities. New “improvement narratives”—normative frameworks for social and economic reform—came to inform diverse projects for rebuilding individual lives and communities (Samuels 2015). In this context, the implementation of *shari‘a* in particular was seen as a form of disaster mitigation and post-disaster reconstruction, as well as a potential means for avoiding future disasters (Fakhri 2007).

The groundwork for the implementation of *shari‘a* had been set in place a half-century earlier through a series of attempts at promulgating legislation aiming for the establishment of an enhanced system of state Islamic law in Aceh. While these particular proposals were not met with legislative success, they nevertheless established a precedent for religious reformers to seek to improve life through the establishment of a more religious social order. These visions proved to be fertile ground for Indonesian Muslim public discourse over the decades that followed (Feener 2013, pp. 132–33). With the dramatic political reconfigurations in Indonesia at the turn of twenty-first century, new space was created for formally advancing new Islamic laws, as well as the institutions to administer and enforce them. The fall of President Suharto’s government in 1998, a period of political transition known as *Reformasi*, heralded the end of the powerful New Order regime and inaugurated a more open and expansive political environment. Taking advantage of these changes, elements of ongoing Indonesian discourses of *da‘wa* and development were drawn together into more concrete plans for reshaping society. In Aceh, the state implementation of Islamic law was then specifically envisaged as one potential means of addressing not only the disasters of the earthquake and tsunami, but also of alleviating the increasingly violent conflict between the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian central government.

The form and substance of Aceh’s new state *shari‘a* system were officially established through various regional regulations that were promulgated over the course of 2002–3. These regulations mandated the formation of Islamic legal institutions, while also setting forth major elements of the substantive content of the new Islamic legislation that these state institutions were designed to implement. This included statutes on a key set of public morality issues that had been prominent in earlier Acehnese attempts at legislating *shari‘a*: alcohol, gambling, and relations between the sexes. It also, however, included new legislation that considerably expanded the legal remit for active state engagement with the particulars of Islamic belief and practice. In terms of institutions, the implementation of Islamic law was to be administered through a cluster of official bodies that, while formally distinct, were also closely inter-related. These new institutions included the state Ulama Council, the Shari‘a Courts, the *Wilayatul Hisbah* (WH; often, but somewhat inaccurately glossed as the ‘Shari‘a Police’), and the State Shari‘a Agency. The main thrust of the last of these institutions in particular has been to promote and encourage *shari‘a* sensibilities through a wide variety of means extended well beyond the formal legal sphere.

The extensive body of local publications produced and distributed by the State Shari‘a Agency are revealing for the kinds of social transformations that they endorse and seek to actively promote.

¹⁹ While theodicy tends to be highlighted in Western interpretations, this is by no means the only, nor necessarily the most important, mode through which religion is engaged and re-evaluated in post-disaster contexts. In post-tsunami Aceh, experiences of disaster and its aftermath were conceptualized by survivors in ways that included, but also extended well beyond, those of classical theodicy. In an initial mapping of Acehnese interpretations of the earthquake and tsunami it was noted that while there were some who regarded these events as purely ‘natural’ disasters, many Acehnese understood the tragedy as originating from God. However, God’s hand was perceived to be at work in the event in diverse ways, ranging from divine retribution for the sins of the people, to a test of faith, or something pre-ordained regardless of human actions in the world (Feener and Daly 2016).

Such materials thus provide invaluable insight into official views on the importance of matters such as the definition and enforcement of ‘modest’ dress codes for the success of the broader project of engineering social transformations in desired directions. For example, a small pamphlet on women’s head coverings that was distributed in 2008 explains that:

Clothing that conforms to the requirements made clear by God and His prophet must be accepted as a clear sign of Islamic identity for those that have faith. The work of the government in regulating dress is aimed at educating and fostering of religious awareness—not at punishing or making things difficult for people. These measures are intended to foster the spirit of Islam in everyday life, to the point that someday matters of modest dress will no longer need to be regulated by worldly institutions. (Sufyan 2008, p. 18)

In the meantime, however, there is an explicit program of using the coercive apparatus of the state to inculcate desired moral sensibilities. As the official ‘Clarification’ published together with the promulgation of Law No. 11 (2002) states:

The threat of a caning penalty for those who commit violations of the *shari’a* is intended to both make the perpetrator more aware of the severity of his deed, and at the same time, to serve as a warning to society at large so that they do not do the same. The intent is that caning penalties will be effective in accomplishing both because the person punished in this way will feel shamed, but will not create undue hardship for his or her family. Caning penalties are also less expensive than incarceration, thus saving the government funds. (“[Penjelasan atas Qanun Provinsi Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Nomor 11/Tahun 2002](#) tentang Pelaksanaan Syariat Islam Bidang Aqidah, Ibadah, dan Syiar Islam” (Aqidah 2009, p. 313))

As these examples illustrate, the implementation of Islamic law is promoted as a program that intends to reshape public morality as a central aspect of the development of the community. It aims to do so by reforming the behavior and practices of individuals through a variety of means—and at times even elaborates its agenda in markedly bureaucratic, ‘rationalized’ ways. When this new religious vision is effectively and sufficiently incorporated into daily practice, so the official view as expressed in such documents proposes, the values of Aceh’s Muslims will achieve new levels of religious, social, and economic improvement. The positive benefits of *shari’a* implementation are even directly elaborated by State Shari’a Agency officials in relation to contemporary global discourses of accountability, transparency, and ‘good governance’ (Jailani 2007).

Despite all this, during the early years of the new millennium, public enthusiasm in Aceh for the implementation of Islamic law was by no means overwhelming. The atmosphere shifted significantly, however, in the wake of the December 2004 tsunami. The massive destruction of this disaster and the subsequent ceasefire that effectively brought an end to the violent conflict in the region inaugurated a new era for Aceh. The massive influx of humanitarian relief, foreign aid workers, and international reconstruction and development agencies radically reshaped the province. The new organizations and personnel who arrived in Aceh during this dramatic period of social reconstruction introduced new ideas and models of how immediate disaster relief and longer-term reconstruction projects should be deployed and integrated.²⁰ The efforts and agendas of international aid programs varied in many ways, but they all shared an aspiration for the transformation of Acehnese society. A dominant understanding of how to achieve this was in the discourse of linking relief, rehabilitation, and development (LRRD) such that the initial humanitarian interventions were imagined as feeding into, and enabling, far-reaching societal changes.²¹ Various organizations that had rushed into the region after the disaster sought to move beyond immediate relief and recovery to develop not only

²⁰ For extensive documentation of these massive relief and reconstruction efforts, see: (Telford et al. 2006). A critical overview of these developments drawing on the TEC reports, see: (Telford 2012).

²¹ For more on the LRRD paradigm and its role in shaping responses to disaster in Aceh, see: (Christoplos and Wu 2012).

physical infrastructure, but also new modes of management that emphasized the potential for projects to promote particular agendas of economic development and social change.²²

The transformative ambitions of a number of post-disaster reconstruction projects in Aceh incorporated specific reference to what became known as ‘spiritual development.’ This aspect was, moreover, imagined as being a crucial component for the broader work of physical reconstruction and economic growth, and the overarching ideals for social transformation and improvement. As the Director of the Indonesian government body formed to coordinate reconstruction projects in Aceh (BRR) remarked:

Development encompasses more than just physical improvements, but also needs to include more intangible aspects of educating and enlightening the community (I. *umat* / Ar. *umma*). The BRR welcomes the input of the *ulama* in both advising on and providing the spiritual substance of the ongoing work of building a ‘new Aceh’. (Zamzani et al. 2007, p. ix)

The Indonesian government’s initial ‘Master Plan’ for reconstruction included specific policy strategies for addressing religious reform. Particular attention was paid to the areas of religious education, the recruitment and training of religious officials, the construction of mosques and offices for state religious bureaucracies, and fostering what was referred to as “spiritual tranquility recovery” (Regulation of the President of Republic of Indonesia 2005, p. 4). These goals were actively promoted in ways that were well established in the routine practice of international humanitarian and development organizations, including outreach sessions, focus group discussions, seminars, workshops, print publications, and social media. Through such means, many Acehnese came to embrace new ideas about peace, democratization, human rights, sustainability, capacity building, and gender justice. If initially the ubiquitous “build back better” slogan had been imagined by humanitarian workers as referring to their agendas for social and economic reconstruction, it soon became apparent that it could also be appropriated and deployed in the service of new religious agendas for development.

3. Buddhist Development Monks in Thailand

Our second case study is that of Buddhist development monks (*phra nak patthana*) in Thailand. Jonathan Rigg (2003, p. 43) has argued that ruling elites across the region have “shepherded their countries toward a vision of the future that is rooted in the desire to build modern states.” While such technocratic approaches remain firmly entrenched, since the early 1980s there has also been a notable rise in alternative visions of development, many of which have included localist ideologies rooted in Asian religious traditions.²³ Somboon Suksamran (1988, p. 23) has characterized the work of development monks as an “alternative” model of development—a “middle way” that takes into consideration both “material” and “spiritual” needs in ways “suitable to and applicable to the socio-economic environment and the cultural setting of the people.”²⁴ The work of these development monks was a major aspect of reformulations of the role of the *sangha* in Thai society over the second half of the twentieth century.

Pinit Lapthananon (2012, p. 245) traces the origins of development monks in Thailand back to the early 1950s. Their work in the rural north of the country came to be seen as increasingly resonant with the ‘people-centered’ and ‘sustainable’ development approaches advocated by the United Nations.

²² See, for example: (Multi Donor Fund 2006).

²³ In contemporary Thai economic and political discourse, ‘development’ is rendered as ‘*phatthana*’—a term that has distinct religious connotations originating in the *Abhidhamma* of the Theravada Buddhist canon. Eli Elinoff has highlighted the moral resonances of this term, noting that while: “It is almost certain that few, if any of the residents along the tracks, NGO activists, or architects I worked with had encountered this text in any meaningful way. However, the linguistic connection between the words demonstrates the moral link to the term development... Moreover, the idea’s Buddhist roots underscore the division between appearance and reality that plagues debates about development” (Elinoff 2013, p. 356, n. 65).

²⁴ This, it should be noted, represents a marked reversal of his initial skepticism toward the participation of monks in rural development programs in the 1970s (Cf.: Suksamran and Ling 1977).

However, projects like that of the “sufficiency economy” (*sethakit por piang*) which built upon the work of development monks have served in different ways to simultaneously both address and to perpetuate social inequalities (Elinoff 2014).

Proponents of socially engaged Buddhist visions of development have spoken in terms of “integral and total development”²⁵—in ways which echo themes also prominent in the religiously inflected models of social engineering that characterized the implementation of Islamic law during the reconstruction of post-conflict, post-disaster Aceh. As in Buddhist Thailand, this built on conversations about the relationship between religion and development that stretch back nearly half a century.²⁶ The parallels, and possible cross-fertilizations of engagements with development work by religious communities do appear to in some cases transcend confessional boundaries. For example, a Buddhist monk from northern Thailand has looked for inspiration to examples of a community in the Muslim south of the country on how religion might “become the real force of community development” (Phongphit 1988, p. 149).

As early as 1973, Steven Piker (Piker 1973) began raising questions as to the ways in which the religious role and social position of the *sangha* might be altered in the course of engagement with development work. By the twenty-first century, it has become clear that interactions of religion and development in Thailand have indeed been reshaped to integrate the participation of religious actors, and also religious doctrines and practices have come to be reconfigured in the process. As Lapthananon (2012, p. 9) has succinctly expressed it, “development monks try to reinterpret the traditional Buddhist practice of morality and merit-making to encourage the laypeople to assume an active social role.” He goes on to argue that:

... both development and interpretation of religion are dynamic ... [creating] the potential for further reinterpretation of the practice of Thai Buddhism itself in the daily lives of rural people affected by socioeconomic development, and in the practices and actions of the monks and other development agents who implement it.

For Ria Kloppenborg (1984, p. 102), the rise in development monks represents a significant shift from their traditional perceptions of monks’ “withdrawn presence” in society toward more activist and interventionist stances. This has served to alter profiles of Buddhist religious leadership in modern Thailand in significant ways. As a middle-aged male villager from Kham Sakaesaeng District told Lapthananon (2006, p. 19) during his fieldwork:

Development monks are monks who dedicate themselves to lead villagers to work in various activities for solving the community problems. When they realize that villagers have any problems, they don’t sit around and do nothing. They usually try to initiate some activities which are expected to solve the problems or respond to the community interests ... Having a monk to lead and promote development projects, the villagers will have more confidence of having no corruption problem. Everyone believes that cheating the monk and *wat* will be a big sin and will probably open a door to hell.

Views like this reflect evolving, on the ground, perceptions about the practical deployment of religious institutions and resources in the active service of development interventions.

Reflecting on his involvement with various development projects in Suan Poh, Phra Kru Visitnandakan elaborated a vision of engaged Buddhist development practice emphasizing the principles of “Diligence, Improvement, Change, Modification, Self-Reliance, and Solidarity” (Phongphit 1988, p. 108). Citing one particular example from the under-developed province of Samutsongkram,

²⁵ (Phongphit 1988, p. 26)) draws here on a lecture on “Religion and Development” delivered at Chiang Mai by Sulak Sivaraksa in 1976.

²⁶ For more on this genealogy in Muslim Indonesia, see: (Feener 2013).

Donald Swearer (1995, p. 120) presents a compelling picture of the impact that the abbot of Wat Yokkrabat had in promoting new initiatives for community development:

Teaching by example, Phra Khrū Sakorn solved the water problem by digging wells and constructing small canals from fresh water sources. Paddy lands were banked to protect against the intrusion of salt water. He encouraged villagers to plant coconut palms and when the market price of coconuts fell suggested that they should plant sugar palms. Other community development projects followed: cutting a new access road to the village to ease transportation of goods to the district center, building a dam to prevent the spread of salt water, electrification of the village, promoting new crops. To accomplish these goals the monk not only had to set an example and motivate villagers, he also had to fight against the exploitation of middlemen, traders, and creditors and he brought pressure to bear on government officials. Primarily he acted as a catalyst and coordinator among teachers, village headmen, local administrators and the police. By 1984 he had raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to establish a foundation for community development.

While cases such as this highlight the work of monks as responding to the development needs of villagers not yet reached by government projects, state imperatives for modernization and stability frame this activity in significant ways. Recognizing this, however, should not preclude serious consideration of the ways in which these religious actors were at the same time pursuing their own visions for development—in which the monks themselves are configured as important agents of change (Suksamran 1988). The motivations of monks in adapting such a stance toward social intervention was in part as a reaction to the perceived suffering caused by “rapid economic, political and social change” and in which “secular rationalism and materialism” were perceived as threatening Buddhist values (Swearer 1995, p. 142).

A movement that also gained prominence at this time was that of ‘ecology monks’ (*phra nak anuraksa*). This movement emerged parallel to, and was to a significant extent modelled upon, that of development monks. During the 1980s, rampant environmental degradation in some of the areas in which development monks had been active spurred cooperation between monks and NGOs in conservation and integrated/organic farming initiatives (Lapthananon 2012, p. 253). Susan Darlington (1998, p. 6) argues that the movement to ordain trees associated with ecology monks was an initiative that channeled Buddhist rituals as “tools of social action.” The later convergence of the work of these two new models of monastic social engagement over the turn of the twenty-first century, for example, can be seen in the ways in which tree ordination functioned as one aspect facilitating the development of Community Forestry Programmes in Thailand (Salam et al. 2006).

From an early focus on symbolic actions like the ordination of trees as a way of sanctifying the claims of local rights over land usage, the focus of development monks also came to conform to the goals of, and narratives presented, by the state—including monastic and pastoral care, agricultural work, education, and healthcare (Southard 2016).²⁷ Contemporaneous with this has been the ascendance of new types of lay Buddhist organizations that have further contributed to the reshaping of religious sensibilities in Thailand in the age of development.

A prominent example is the Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement. Its founder, Phra Phothisak, was born in Siisaket and reportedly raised as a Christian before, later in life, renouncing his wealth and taking ordination as a Buddhist monk (Taylor 1990, p. 143). The movement that he founded was “oriented toward economic and social justice from a radical Buddhist perspective . . . [aiming] to teach the people to follow the moral Buddhist path, which would ultimately transform the capitalist society

²⁷ For critical reflections on the ways in which religious actors and their visions of the wild and gentrified forest have shaped middle class Thai ideas about the environment, see: (Stott 1991).

into a *bunniyom* [merit-oriented] society" (Heikkilä-Horn 2010).²⁸ A lay member of this movement interviewed by Juliana Essen (2005, p. 30) concisely described their primary goal as: "to develop people. But before we develop other people, we must develop ourselves first." In such formulations of the work of these new Buddhist movements we perceive echoes of the sort of transformative *da'wa* discourses that animated projects like the implementation of state *shari'a* in Aceh described above. Like the *ulama* and administrators involved in that project, these forms of Thai Buddhism display a marked commitment to the establishment of a new, reformed social order "as restructured belief from present social and political realities and modes of experience" (Taylor 1990, p. 154). As such, they reflect in significant ways broader trends in middle class Buddhist revival movements in late twentieth-century Thailand.²⁹

In the 1970s and 1980s, as NGOs increasingly identified with 'grassroots' approaches to development, many such organizations seeking out local partners for the implementation of particular development projects turned to engagement with development monks who had already been working on various community initiatives (Lapthananon 2012, pp. 244–51). By the 1990s, the projects of development monks had increasingly come to be dependent upon NGO and state support—and following the 1997–8 economic crisis, the integration of monks into government agendas had advanced to such an extent that they came to be criticized as mere tools of the state (Lapthananon 2012, pp. 255–56).

Dylan Southard (2016, p. 1) notes that when the phrase 'development monk' first entered the Thai lexicon "it was primarily used to refer to monks who engaged in social activism in opposition to state-led development policies." Development monks of that time advocated models of "cooperative, self-sufficient living" (Essen 2005, p. 12). Over the latter decades of the twentieth century, this was often cast in an oppositional stance to state-led industrializing development projects. But following the 1997–8 economic crisis the Thai state, under the guidance of the King, embraced the philosophy of the 'sufficiency economy' (*setthakhit pho phiang*) as a prominent feature of its Eighth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997–2001), which made possible new forms of collaboration.³⁰ Such partnerships were not simply marriages of convenience, but were attempts at superscribing and encompassing activist religion by the Thai state.

4. Religion in the Age of Development

The parallel paths traced above reveal long gestations of alternative visions of development arising out of religious communities across the region over the latter decades of the twentieth century. Through these two case studies from Southeast Asia we can begin not only to envision a broader and more complex understanding of religion in the age of development, but also to form more nuanced visions that go beyond instrumentalist perspectives of religion as a potential handmaiden to development. In both Buddhist Thailand and Muslim Indonesia, moreover, we can trace the ways in which distinctive non-Christian traditions have emerged against a backdrop of global reconfigurations of political economy that shape global dynamics of the religion-development nexus. This also informs the contexts of emerging scholarly interest in religion and development since the turn of the twenty-first century.

²⁸ Here again we see striking parallels between Islamic and Buddhist development idioms. In the 1970s, the New Order regime in Indonesia courted the support of *ulama* stressing the identification of their own developmentalist visions with the Qur'anic ideal of living in "a good land under a forgiving Lord" (I. Baldatun Thajjibatun Wa Rabbun Ghafur/Ar. baldat tayyiba wa rabb ghafur). This phrase—taken from *Saba'* /34:15—has long been a central trope within modern Indonesian Islamic reformist discourse. It was broadly popularized by usage in Muhammadiyah circles in the early to mid-twentieth century. It thence became a common plank in the rhetorical scaffolding of campus-based *da'wa* groups in the decades after that, and it continues to resonate in contemporary debates over the direction of social change, and the role of religion in guiding particular projects of development.

²⁹ See, for example: (Mackenzie 2007).

³⁰ The philosophy of the Sufficiency Economy remained central to the Twelfth National Economic and Social Development Plan initiated in September 2016. For a nuanced treatment of the political complexities of contemporary Thailand's 'sufficiency economy' see: (Elinoff 2014).

Turn-of-the-millennium projects involving Buddhist and Muslim organizations, respectively, built upon foundations of engagements between religion and development that stretched back for decades in both countries. Almost simultaneous with the work described for development monks above, in Indonesia early experiments in cooperation between the German Neumann Stiftung and rural Islamic schools (*pesantren*) starting in the 1970s were followed by increasingly ambitious projects involving USAID, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and other international agencies (Oepen et al. 1988, pp. 182–87).³¹ Building upon this, there appears to have also been a dramatic convergence of new lines of discussion on the topic, in circles like Wolfensohn's Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics, formed at a time when the Bank was confronted with dramatic events in Southeast Asia accompanying the financial crisis of 1997–8. In both Thailand and Indonesia at that time neo-liberal restructuring projects opened new spaces for the participation of religious communities and organizations in the provision of social services, and the promotion of economic growth.

Beyond these attempts to recalibrate development to accommodate new concerns with religion, we also begin to see experiences and understandings of religion transformed through these entanglements with development. In the process we can witness the emergence of new languages of temporality and agency, as well as new institutional forms. This can be traced across multiple scales from the personal and affective through the communal and national to the global, as the very idea of "religion" comes to be re-thought by diverse parties who draw selectively on and dynamically interpret canonical texts and traditions as they engage with a host of other ideas and influences that manifest themselves through contemporary humanitarian encounters.

Over the 'long' nineteenth century, agendas of reform sought to purify doctrine, reformulate practice, challenge traditional sources of religious authority, and instigate projects for both individual and collective ethical improvement. These reforms facilitated shifts in the cultural value of new kinds of knowledge, and in the formation of new structures that could serve to mobilize innovative forms of social activism. Movements such as the abolition of slavery serve as striking examples of the ways in which select elements of a particular religious tradition could be strategically employed to support new kinds of engagement in projects for the betterment of society. As Margaret Abruzzo (2011, p. 127) has shown in her study of nineteenth-century abolitionism, the flourishing of Christian revivalism, "encouraged the growth of benevolent associations that aimed to cleanse society of its moral and physical evils."

Through the early twentieth century, the history of Christian missionary and activist projects demonstrates that the trajectory was not purely a secularizing one.³² Indeed, soon after the Second World War Christian initiatives of transnational social concern mushroomed across the denominational spectrum. By the 1970s, much Christian missionary activity had been thoroughly reformulated in relation to techno-political projects of development, including the green revolution (Feener and Scheer 2018; Fountain and Yoder 2018). New energies came to be interjected into the process at the turn of the millennium, facilitated by a new openness of some key powerful states toward engaging with Faith-Based Organizations (Tomalin 2013, p. 9).

Such transformations, moreover, were by no means restricted to Christianity, as parallel and sometimes intersecting trajectories of remaking religion can be traced across confessional traditions in the modern period. Marked reconfiguration and expansion of the social activism of religious leaders characterize the emerging public spheres of many societies in Latin America, Africa, and Asia over this

³¹ For reflections on USAID and other American engagements with Islamic NGOs in Indonesia, see: (Hefner 2009).

³² For fascinating examples of how religion has continued to play an animating role in projects of ambitious social reform, including discussion of the Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry and the high scientism of the "gospel of intellectualism" as well as its global projects of reform, see: (Vanderbilt 2018; Hu 2018).

same period.³³ One key arena for the elaboration of these new visions can be seen in the re-imagination of responsibilities toward the less fortunate.

We can recognize parallel and at times converging discourses of religious reform and social activism within a number of non-Christian religious traditions. It is clear that religion in the age of development has come to reimagine its own pasts while also constructing new visions of the future. This involved, in the case of Islam, re-conceptualizations of agency in the bringing about a better life in this world as well as in the next. The popular Arabic formulation of this pairing (*fi'l-dunya wa'l-akhira*) has, for example, come to be deployed in diverse rhetorics aiming to define a balance between immanent and transcendent trajectories of religious concern in activist agendas of social reform of the twentieth century. The work of Islamic reform organizations like the Muhammadiyah in Indonesia, for example, employed a range of new practical technologies that come to be used in the service of improving the conditions of life for members of their constituent communities. As the slogan of this organization boldly declared: “Less talk, more work” (*sedikit bicara, banyak bekerja*). In such formulations, we see a new spirit of activism at work, one in which considerable importance is placed upon the agency of individual believers in improving the conditions of their communities (Njoto-Feillard 2012).

Like many religious traditions, Islam has long cultivated dramatic eschatological, soteriological, and apocalyptic modes of envisioning the future. In the age of development an additional range of ways of imagining religious futures have come to gain prominence within some religious communities. While Islamic law has long been concerned with the inculcation of practices and behaviors rooted in Prophetic precedent, in the twentieth century modern visions of *shari'a* as a tool for social engineering have framed the dominant temporal vector not toward the preservation of tradition, but rather the creation of a new and improved society. Likewise, within engaged Buddhist circles an ultimate concern with liberation from an endless cycle of rebirths has not precluded the possibility for imagining ways in which expressions of compassion might serve to alleviate suffering in the here and now.

One of the most fundamental changes has thus been the recalibration of temporal trajectories. While this is often thought of in terms of the future, it also involves the reformatting of relationships of religious communities to their remembered pasts. In the age of development, visions of the future have entailed some significant reworkings of how elements of tradition have come to be critically and selectively appropriated to fit the Geist of the times. While many if not all religious traditions contain elements that can be recognized as supporting charitable activity and interventions in the governance of society, many of these legacies have been substantially reimaged to fit with the concerns and the needs of development agendas.

For example, practices of almsgiving are regarded as one of the central ‘pillars’ of Islam. In line with modern currents of Islamic reform, *zakat* has come to serve as a major site for religious justifications of charitable and humanitarian projects. In many ways this fits with aspects of the tradition in which Islamic jurisprudence specified particular groups as being worthy to receive alms given as *zakat*, including orphans and the poor.³⁴ While a preponderance of traditional scholarship on *zakat* highlights its central importance as being vested not only (or even primarily) in beneficiaries, but rather in the transformation of the spiritual state of the giver, recent scholarship on religious giving in contemporary

³³ For example, in his monumental study *The Birth of the Modern World*, Christopher Bayly (2004, pp. 328–33) has synthesized a vast body of work on the history of religions, arguing that all across the globe during the modern period, processes of modernization have not undermined or eliminated religion, but rather facilitated the rise of a ‘new style’ for its expression in the public sphere. He thus claims that since the nineteenth century, religious reformers in many parts of the world have increasingly drawn “on rationalistic traditions and philosophies which had long been present in their respective religious traditions,” to sharpen and clarify their identities while “expanding ‘down’ into particular societies by imposing uniformity.” While Bayly highlights the ways in which these reconfigurations of ‘religion’ served to reify imaginations of reformed, rationalized ‘world religions’ and the ways in which these reforms related to the rise of various formulations of nationalism, we argue that equally important were the new ways in which religious communities came to be mobilized for diverse social and ethical projects in the modern period.

³⁴ On historical traditions of religious giving in Islam, see: (Singer 2008).

Muslim societies has highlighted significant shifts in discourses and practices of Islamic charity in the direction of rationalized social interventions (Feener and Wu).³⁵

Here we see an increasing importance placed on intervention into the conditions of life in this world. In the process, economic prosperity and this-worldly flourishing come to serve as key markers of salvation. In his reformulation of religion as upholding ‘the promise of salvation’ Martin Reisebrodt (2010) recognizes the central importance of human flourishing to it. The anxieties characteristic of Protestant religious formulations of saintly status in relation to both the blessings and the moral perils of worldly wealth have been the source of both popular preaching and learned analysis for centuries.³⁶ On board the *Arabella* bound for New England in 1630, John Winthrop (1956, p. 82) preached a vision in which economic prosperity was bound to a religious vision of communal solidarity and a particular fidelity to scriptural commandments:

The end is to improve our lives to do more service to the Lord, the comfort and increase of the body of Christ whereof we are members, that ourselves and posterity may be better preserved from the common corruptions of this evil world, to serve the Lord and work out our salvation under the power and purity of His holy ordinances.

In the age of development, however, there have been significant reformulations of what constitutes flourishing and how it might be measured. By the end of the twentieth century, American Protestants had pioneered new theologies of prosperity which synchronized not only with capitalist accumulation, but also with newly culturally accepted modes of conspicuous consumption.³⁷

Again, rather than seeing this as a particularly Western Christian phenomenon, one can recognize analogous transformations in diverse religious traditions across the globe.³⁸ In the two Southeast Asian contexts discussed above, we see that in Buddhist Thailand decades of economic growth have witnessed the rise of new interpretations of doctrine and forms of practice. In her ethnography of contemporary middle-class Thai religiosity, Rachele Scott (2009) calls attention to the ways in which select aspects of the tradition are deployed in support of visions not of ‘this-worldly’ asceticism, but rather in terms of aspirations shaped by contemporary consumer culture. At the same time, Jim Hoesterey (2015) has evocatively demonstrated how in Muslim Indonesia prayer, charity, and the emotional registers of religious practitioners contribute to specific conceptions of economic and political engagement. He thus highlights new dynamics in the formations of Muslim subjectivity in which hyper-modern reformulations of Islamic discourse and practice combine with visions of worldly economic success in ways that resonate with, but are not wholly subsumed by, global frameworks of neo-liberalism.³⁹

With the end of the Cold War, and in subsequent restructurings of dominant global political economy models, such Islamic discourses were further transfigured. Filippo Osella and Daromir Rudnyckij (Osella and Rudnyckij 2017) have highlighted the ways in which transformations in economic thought and practice have both influenced and been informed by visions of religious morality elaborated in the idiom of the market. Mona Atia (2013) has referred to this in terms of “pious neoliberalism.”⁴⁰ For Atia, this:

³⁵ For modern transformations of Islamic charity, see: (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2009; Fauzia 2013; Mostowlansky; Taylor 2015).

³⁶ The *locus classicus* for this is Max Weber (2013) treatment of “the Protestant Ethic of Capitalism” in *Economy and Society*.

³⁷ For more on the history of these developments, see: (Bowler 2013).

³⁸ Within emerging forms of Christianity beyond the West, for example, we find some striking examples of a diverse range of religious reformations in line with contemporary conceptions of material prosperity and economic development. See, for example, (Wiegele 2005; Kim 2014).

³⁹ For another compelling ethnography of related transformations in the experiences and understandings of Islam in contemporary Indonesia, see: (Rudnyckij 2010).

⁴⁰ (Atia 2013, pp. xvi–xviii) defines this as “a transformation in both religious practice and modalities of capitalism. It represents a new compatibility between business and piety that is not specific to any religion, but rather is a result of the ways in which religion and economy interact in the contemporary moment. Pious neo-liberalism produces new institutions, systems of knowledge production and subjectivities.”

represents the merging of a market-orientation with faith; it is a productive merger that leads to new institutional forms, like private mosques, private foundations, and an Islamic lifestyle market. Pious neoliberalism generates self-regulating and ethical subjects as faith and the market discipline them simultaneously. (ibid, p. xvi)

Here, we see a telling reflection of the reconfiguration of religion in the age of development. Atia thus illustrates some of the ways in which these ideational conjunctures relate to the establishment of new kinds of institutional forms.

Analogous conjunctures of activism, popular mobilization, religious enthusiasm, and the reconfiguration of the roles of the state and its relationships to Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) can be found across the globe. This passion for service as an expression of faith has, in the American context, come to find new outlets for what pastor Rick Warren (2006) has called the channeling of the “pent-up, latent power” of “millions of believers sitting in churches waiting to be mobilized” (Marshall and Saanen 2007).⁴¹ In her penetrating ethnography of volunteerist reconstruction of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, Vincanne Adams (2013) presents the increasing prominence of religious NGOs over recent decades as not simply a story of the withdrawal of the state from social service provision, but rather of its marketization. For through its reliance on unpaid volunteer labor as a “new twist on neoliberal profit seeking,” private-sector sub-contractor engagements with FBOs are serving to change the ways in which religion is experienced and understood (ibid, pp. 176–92). This mobilization, for Adams, is part of the growth of a new affective economy, which privileges sentiments of compassion and civic volunteerism. At the same time, state structures put in place under a neoliberal regime have created the structural opportunities for the dramatic expansion of such forms of religious volunteerism. This marketization of disaster relief and reconstruction not only allows for the provision of services no longer supplied directly by a state but it has also come to powerfully shape the religious experience of those involved with diverse church and NGO projects.

The examples discussed above and many others from diverse religious traditions around the globe evidence what might be referred to as an ‘NGO-ification’ of religion in the age of development. In working to situate her ethnography of the Taiwanese Buddhist Tzu Chi movement “from grassroots to globalization” Julia Huang (2009, p. 184) examines the way in which an organization rooted in local forms of a major religious tradition is transformed through its formulation as an NGO. In Muslim Indonesia, on the other hand, a burgeoning “NGO Islam” arose over the latter decades of the twentieth century as Muslim communities came to reorganize themselves in ways that made it possible to access new funds for religious and social initiatives supported by international donors (Feener 2007, pp. 172–74).

This widespread adoption of the NGO form by religious groups has been accompanied by a whole host of new concerns and discourses on training, professionalization, expertise, systematization, transparency, and accountability. On the macro-level these innovations have been traced through organizations like Islamic Relief Worldwide and World Vision that have both maintained a sense of confessional religious identity while at the same time defining their organizations as humanitarian actors conforming to the requirements of the Red Cross Code of Conduct, providing relief irrespective of religious identity (Bush et al. 2015).

On a micro-level an important aspect of this has been a new kind of volunteerist ethic. For example, every year thousands of young Singaporeans leave home for short-term volunteer trips to neighboring Southeast Asian countries, and their number has been growing steadily over the past two decades. Many of these trips are facilitated by Church-affiliated organizations that model themselves on volunteer projects. They carry with them abroad diverse motivations among which a concern for

⁴¹ Similarly, a study of Thai Buddhist ‘development nuns’ has argued that “they represent a vast untapped resource with an enormous potential for social transformation” (Gosling 1998, p. 140).

Christian evangelism, a desire to do good, and a sense of adventure are comingled.⁴² On these trips many of them are also introduced for the first time to the structures and work of international humanitarian and development organizations in the field. These spaces of encounter have proved to be fertile for the cultivation of new kinds of expectations for what religion can do in the world. Activities like painting schools on village visits and impromptu short-term English conversation lessons fit neither the mold of traditional proselytization activities nor the model of social welfare provision characteristic of Christian mission in many parts of Latin America, Africa, and Asia since the nineteenth century—but are coming to comprise a significant space for new imaginations of religion in the age of development.

This diversification of interventions carried out by committed religious actors can take a range of, sometimes, unexpected forms. A particularly telling example of this is the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). While nothing in their name signals the Christian commitment of the organization, it has for decades played a crucial role in the geopolitics of Evangelical mission.⁴³ The primary stated mission of SIL is “[to serve] language communities worldwide as they build capacity for sustainable language development.”⁴⁴ SIL has been able to advance its projects around the globe through its involvement with the United Nations as a subscribing member—an affiliation which provides a prominent example of the ways in which religion and development have been inextricably entangled within the institutional form of NGOs (Jammes 2016).

Even across smaller scales, however, notions of the structure and governance of NGOs have been influential in reshaping the forms of religious community across diverse traditions.⁴⁵ We see this clearly for example in shifting profiles of religious leadership, as Don Swearer (1995, p. 117) presciently noted with regard to Buddhist monks in modern Thailand:

Formerly the monk had been, ideally and often actually, a community leader—educator, sponsor of cooperative work activities, personal and social counsellor, and ethical mentor—in the nearly static traditional village. Now, if he is to ‘resume’ such a role, he would have to become at least modestly competent in a whole range of ‘modern’ activities, such as literacy campaigns, modern and technical education, agricultural extension and ‘community development’ . . . All of these are activities designed to generate social and cultural dynamism as well as economic change. The important thing to grasp here is that there is some considerable difference between the essentially conservative ‘traditional role’ of the monk in the traditional village and any credible community leadership role today for many of the activities now proposed are of a radically different character from those to which a monk sometimes gave leadership a century ago.

The very nature of what constitutes religious authority in many communities today has been transformed significantly through engagements with development projects. In Muslim Indonesia, such encounters have introduced new concerns with accountability and audit culture that have deep ramifications for the ways in which rural Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) are structured and governed. Traditionally, the leaders of such schools (*kiai*) ruled over what amounted to private fiefdoms in which their authority was unchallenged and no mechanisms were in place for the oversight of their allocation of resources donated to the *pesantren*. In order to become partners in new development projects and to receive funding from both state and international donors, however,

⁴² Similar complexities of motivations among participants in short-term mission programs from the US have been discussed in the work of Brian Howell and colleagues. See: (Howell 2009, 2012; Priest and Howell 2013).

⁴³ For more on the religious vision and political entanglements of the SIL, see: Hartch (2006); Handman (2014); and Saleminik (2003, pp. 213–16).

⁴⁴ Taken from the organization’s website, available at <http://www.sil.org/about> (accessed on 15 November 2017).

⁴⁵ At the same time, however, we should also recognize the variety and malleability of the institutional forms referred to under the broad rubric of ‘NGOs’. For critical reflections on the shape-shifting nature of NGOs as an object of, and context for, anthropological study, see (Lewis and Schuller 2017).

many *pesantren* have since established their own affiliated NGOs and are thus required to introduce new visions of accountable leadership that present potential challenges to traditional charismatic religious authority (Feener 2007, pp. 172–75). Through all of this we have seen ways in which manifestations of religion in public discourse and institutions reflect significant reconfigurations in the age of development. One could also ask what these engagements with development have done to imaginations of transcendence in particular religious communities. If the early modern ‘Age of Reason’ spurred new conversations on strange gods like watchmaker deities, what new theologies might arise in the Age of Development? What, in other words, might a developmental god look like? Beyond this, a host of other new questions present themselves on the horizon. For example, does this open up new roles for transcendence to play as a space for the imagination of alternative futures and an inspiration for new types of social, political and economic interventions?

5. Conclusions

In an earlier work, we discussed both religion and development as ‘moving targets’ and in so doing attempted to move beyond static reifications of each to develop more dynamic understandings of both (Feener et al. 2015, p. 243). In this paper, we have attempted to delineate some of the specific ways in which these two fields not only shift, but also interact and mutually inform each other. The non-Christian case studies from Southeast Asia presented here provide windows on a complex global history that considerably complicates what have come to be established narratives privileging the agency of major institutional players in the international development sector. We have thus made a case here for pushing beyond both genealogy and instrumentalism, toward a more conceptual plane that facilitates better understanding of the implications of contemporary entanglements across diverse discourses and experiences of religion in the age of development.

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