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RESEARCHING RELIGIONS
AND DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction
Drawing together examples of empirical research and theoretical discussion found in the wide-ranging religions and development literature, the task of this chapter is to explore the various methodologies scholars employ in the study of religions and development. The focus here is on the ways that scholars have approached the study of religions and development, with an eye toward identifying competing perspectives on the best way for research to proceed. The chapter also explores various ‘types’ of methods used in the study of religions and development, with a focus on specific techniques that religions and development researchers employ. Through detailed discussion of examples found in the religions and development literature, the chapter intends to leave readers with a clearer understanding of the multiple ways to research the links between religions and development.

Is there a methodology distinctly associated with religions and development? A scan of the literature suggests that there is not. Rather, as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry, the religions and development literature draws from existing frameworks found within anthropology, economics, history, political science, religious studies, and sociology, among others. The methodological diversity inherent within and across these disciplines is mirrored within the religions and development literature. Thus the chapter will explore some of the ‘fault lines’ that divide religions and development research – and social science research more generally. The chapter also will consider some of the issues associated with the study of religions and development, including conceptual concerns surrounding religion, development, faith, and culture. Finally, the chapter turns to examples of various methods in action, looking at both the strengths and the weaknesses of different methods, including surveys, participant-observation, and various types of interviews.

Fault lines

Positivist versus interpretivist
Across the social sciences, and indeed within certain disciplines, considerable debate exists among scholars about the ‘best’ ways to go about studying the world. Certain debates emerge from epistemology, theories of knowledge, or ‘how we know things’ (Bernard 1995: 1). Competing
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Epistemologies within the social sciences centre on the utility of positivism. Positivism is an orientation built around the scientific method, where the attempt is to be objective, logical, and systematic (Bernard 1995: 3). Positivism intends to locate and identify patterns or ‘social laws’ that are generalizable across time and place. It does this through the ‘direct observations or measurements of phenomena’ (Krauss 2005: 760). For the study of religions and development, positivism often is associated with the ‘statistical recording of relations between [religious] data and variables’ (Berzano and Riis 2012: vii). For example, Barro and McCleary (2003: 36) draw on data collected in six international surveys to ‘construct a set of instrumental variables to . . . estimate the effects of religion on economic growth’. Through this analysis, they find that, for select countries and religions, increases in church attendance tend to reduce economic growth while certain religious beliefs – including those in heaven and hell – tend to increase economic growth (2003: 36).

In opposition to the positivist approach, interpretivism (also known as humanism, constructivism, and hermeneutics) argues that objectivity is an illusion. Rather, ‘knowledge is established through the meanings attached to the phenomena studied. Researchers interact with subjects of study to obtain data; inquiry changes both researcher and subject; and knowledge is context and time dependent’ (Krauss 2005: 759). Interpretivists, for example, believe that specific context is so central to any set of beliefs, values, or practices that insights from one context cannot be extrapolated to another. Berzano and Riis (2012: viii) suggest that interpretivism – which they formulate as hermeneutics – ‘has attributed importance to the comprehension of the subjective and symbolic structures on the basis of which individuals organize and interpret their relationships with others’. For the study of religions and development, interpretivism is associated with the quest for meaning. For example, how do religiously motivated development professionals conceptualize their work, its purpose, and its goals? What are the competing understandings of development that might exist among the staff of a particular faith-based organization?

Positivist versus interpretivist approaches represent ‘objective’ versus ‘subjective’ ways of knowing. Translated into practice, does the study intend to capture some sort of external truth about the reality of the world through observation or does it search for the internal reality created by people as they seek to make sense of the world (Krauss 2005)? For positivists, there is one objective reality that can be captured through rigorous scientific study. For interpretivists, there are multiple realities, which are ever shifting and context dependent.

Emma Tomalin (2013) suggests that these two competing paradigms exist alongside a third option in the study of religions and development: phenomenology. Arising from religious studies, which was founded in the 1960s, phenomenology is a distinct methodology focused on empathy, whereby the researcher ‘bracket[s] his or her own interpretation of religious phenomena and instead endeavour[s] to enter into empathy with the believer in order to describe and understand their religious beliefs and actions’ (Tomalin 2013: 1622). In so doing, researchers attempt to ‘get behind’ what has been ‘experienced’ in order find its ‘essence’ (Riis 2012: 98). This requires that researchers suspend judgement and, to the degree possible, do not impose ‘alien categories’ on to the study of religious phenomena but rather ‘bring out what religious acts mean to the actors’ (Smart in Tomalin 2013: 1640). The intention, then, for phenomenologists is to ‘produce convincing descriptions of what they experience rather than provide explanations and causes’ (Bernard 1995: 15).

These different approaches will be further explicated below.

Qualitative versus quantitative orientations

Epistemological orientation is important, for it directs researchers toward asking particular kinds of questions and designing specific methodologies. The result is that positivist research often
generates hypotheses that are tested through the collection and analysis of quantitative data, while interpretivist and phenomenological research searches for meaning through qualitative data collection and analysis. Despite this, however, many positivists collect qualitative data, while interpretivists may collect quantitative data (see Bernard 1995). And Guma and Lincoln note ‘both qualitative and quantitative methods may be used appropriately with any research paradigm’, whether positivist, interpretivist or something else (1994: 105). Indeed, there has been in recent years recognition of the value of ‘mixed method’ approaches, discussed below.

That said, there is a pattern that can be discerned across the positivist/interpretivist fault line that roughly corresponds to two distinct orientations in the religions and development field: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative studies rely on mathematical measurement, whereby relevant variables are identified, with dependent variables measured ‘by categories, ranks, or scores’ and independent variables ‘measured, controlled, or randomized’ (Brink 1995: 467). Analysing data through descriptive and inferential statistical methods, quantitative researchers attempt to understand relationships between variables in mathematical terms.

Conversely, qualitative approaches are word based, open ended, and typically in depth. They often attempt to understand phenomena and behaviour from the perspective of research subjects, through interpretation of words, texts, art, context, and the like. Consistency and coherence are important criteria for interpretation (Riis 2012: 93). Ole Riis identifies a variety of qualitative approaches, including grounded theory, ethnography, case study research, and phenomenology. Often focusing on one to a few case studies ‘based on observation of humans in their “natural environment”’, qualitative research uses techniques like life histories, in-depth interviews, diaries, and content analysis (Riis 2012: 93).

While the research universe has these two poles – quantitative at one end, qualitative at the other – the reality is that many social scientists now appreciate the blending of methods and so situate their research somewhere in the middle. Indeed, social scientists increasingly are drawing upon ‘mixed methods’, relying solely neither on quantitative nor on qualitative approaches, but instead combining elements of both. This combination might reflect one approach more than the other, or it can be an equal pairing of quantitative and qualitative techniques (Riis 2012). The combinations might be concurrent, with both quantitative and qualitative techniques deployed simultaneously, or sequential, with the findings of one approach informing the development of another (Riis 2012).

As framed by Brink (1995: 463), the qualitative versus quantitative debate can be understood as one between richness and precision, as scholars debate the relative merits of each. While quantitative approaches often yield broad insights based on objective analysis, qualitative approaches typically are narrow and deep, yielding rich narrative descriptions of subjective experience and meaning. But, ‘since the accuracy of descriptions requires precision and their adequacy requires richness, both poles are essential’. This is to say, ‘a complete description of human experience’ requires both qualitative and quantitative data (Brink 1995: 463).

**Macro- versus micro-level analysis**

The religions and development literature can be sorted by its level of analysis. Does a work attempt to understand and analyse religion and development from the macro-, meso-, or micro-level? By macro-level, social scientists tend to mean nationally or globally. By micro-level, scholars refer to face-to-face or local-level interactions or individual understandings. The meso-level is sandwiched in between, with the term often used to refer to specific organizations, institutions, or segments of society. When thinking about types of religions and development research, scholars begin by identifying the ‘level’ they are targeting for investigation, as each
level has methods better suited to it. What’s the unit of analysis? Is it a specific local organization? A coalition of organizations? A multilateral development agency? Or is it the beneficiaries of a project? The pastors who are assembling medical missions? The activist blogging about her development work?

Clearly, level of analysis links with the above discussion, in that those interested in micro-level subjective experiences are more likely to be qualitatively oriented and interpretive in their approaches. Meanwhile, those interested in understanding regional characteristics of faith-based social services delivery, for example, would probably be more oriented toward positivism and quantitative methods. Assessing the religions and development literature as a whole, Ben Jones and Marie Juul Petersen (2011) suggest that much of the emerging literature tends to be situated at the meso- and macro-levels, as scholars attempt to make sense of how religion informs and is deployed by organizations. One example of this can been seen in the work of Laurie Occhipinti (2005, 2009), who explores the ways two Catholic development organizations working in Argentina challenge conventional notions of neoliberal, capitalist development paradigms.

Methodological considerations

Having located themselves according to the considerations above, scholars face the practical question of how to go about studying religion and development. As in all fields of scholarly inquiry, a literature review is essential. The review allows scholars to see what research already has been completed on their specific topic. While no single database exists to compile all relevant religions and development scholarship, there are many electronic databases, typically available through university libraries, that are useful. Some especially relevant to the study of religions and development include: Abstracts in Anthropology, AnthroSource, ATLA Religion Database, EconLit, First Search, JSTOR, the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), PAIS International, Political Science Abstracts, ProQuest Sociology, Social Sciences Citation Index, Sociological Abstracts, and WorldCat. Many relevant publications are also freely available through the Internet. For example, the website for the Religions and Development Research Programme, housed from 2005 to 2011 at the University of Birmingham, England, contains full-text working papers, research summaries, policy briefs, and other publications on religions and development topics.

What gets studied by religions and development scholars?

In their review and critique of recent works on religions and development, Ben Jones and Marie Juul Petersen (2011) suggest the literature is characterized by three (problematic) trends. First, it is focused on the positive contributions that religion might make to development – ‘can religious organisations or religious knowledge inform development thinking or make development practice more effective?’ (1296). Much of the literature suggests that religion does have a positive impact on development practice. Second, the literature tends to be characterized by a focus on Christian faith-based organizations (FBOs), ‘at the expense of other types of religious actors, religious expressions or forms’ (1297). Third, the literature is ‘normative’. It assumes that religious practices and FBOs stand apart from – and provide alternative visions to – secular development. These are sound critiques of the emerging literature, though exceptions to these three trends are reflected both in the discussions below and elsewhere. For example, a more inclusive stance is put forth by Carole Rakodi (2012: 635), whose work demonstrates that ‘religion and development are not separate spheres of life – they are intertwined and each influences the other’, a point expanded below.
Emma Tomalin (2007, 2013) identifies another trend within religions and development scholarship: the lack of attention to gender considerations. While the broader development studies literature has built in recent decades a solid gender focus, gender analysis has yet to be fully applied to the religious dimensions of development theory and practice (as exceptions, cf. Hoodfar 2007; Pearson and Tomalin 2007; Bradley 2011; Adamu and Para-Mallam 2012; Bradley and Saigol 2012; DeTemple 2013). As Tomalin (2007, 2013) and others (e.g. Bradley 2011) have noted, this lack of attention to gender can produce a simplified version of reality, whereby religion in its ‘ideal’ form becomes divorced from religion as it is lived and practised. The ideal version is the dominant view, often expressed publicly by male leaders within a tradition, to the exclusion of women. But what people actually do on a day-to-day basis, how they live their lives and make sense of the world around them, can be very different from what a distant set of supposed ‘rules’ requires that they do (Ortner 1984; Abu-Lughod 2008).

Moreover, the ideal version suggests that religion is monolithic, with adherents interpreting teachings in the same ways, holding neatly defined beliefs and values, and behaving within a clearly bounded field of possibilities. The reality is that religion, like all dimensions of social life, is far messier than this simplified version allows. Such a misrepresentation of actual lived religion is further compounded by tendencies amongst researchers and religious actors to identify religion with official received teachings, which are typically promulgated by male religious leaders (the ‘official’ representatives of religious traditions). By contrast, in attempting to understand what religion is and its significance within different settings, including questions about the links between religion and development, it is important to be attuned to the distinction between ‘official’ and ‘popular’ religion, and received religious teachings and ‘lived religion’, and to select locations for research that reflect these observations.

**What is religion?**

While at the surface it seems self-evident, there is little agreement surrounding the content or character of ‘religion’ (see Tomalin, Chapter 1). This is owing, in part, to the great diversity of religions in the world, which makes it difficult – if not impossible – to distil all religions into a set of discrete traits or characteristics. Moreover, the very notion of ‘religion’ itself might be problematic. As Rakodi notes, “‘religion’ and the English words to talk about it, such as faith or belief, do not translate directly into other religious traditions and languages” (2012: 640). This raises the question of whether the concept is even meaningful cross-culturally or beyond Christianity (Rakodi 2012).

In trying to locate religion, some scholars discuss the distinction between ‘substantive’ and ‘functional’ definitions (e.g. Deneulin and Rakodi 2011; Rakodi 2012; Tomalin 2013). A substantive definition focuses on ‘what religion is, particularly, belief in a transcendental reality or spiritual being, the sacred’ (Rakodi 2012: 638). A functionalist definition focuses on what religion ‘does’ for society or a group (Tomalin 2013: 1483). For example, sociologists examine the role of religion in blessing the norms of a society, providing explanations for the otherwise inexplicable, or in promoting social cohesion and sense of belonging. Functionalist scholars sometimes draw on the classic understandings of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1993: 90–91), who frames religion as a ‘system of symbols’ that establishes ‘powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations’ for people, by creating understandings of a ‘general order of existence’ that seems true. Geertz here is suggesting that religion draws people together in systems of meaning making and belonging, and that these are seated deep within individuals and communities.
What is faith?

Some scholars and religious actors distinguish ‘faith’ from ‘religion’. They offer that ‘religion’ is associated with established traditions, characterized by a supreme being and codified in sacred texts, for example Christianity/Bible, Islam/Qur’an, and Hinduism/Bhagavad Gita (Clarke and Jennings 2008; Carbonnier 2013). By contrast, ‘faith’ ‘attempts to capture the dimension of religions that extend beyond the codification of values, rules and social practices within particular traditions’ (Tomalin 2013: 11). In this way, religion is formal and organized, while faith is more nebulous and expansive. But not all scholars and religious actors make a distinction between faith and religion, suggesting instead that this division is largely political, emerging from the 1996 ‘Charitable Choice’ provision that encouraged faith-based organizations in the USA to apply for federal funding to support welfare projects. Moreover, some suggest that the term ‘faith’ does not have relevance outside Western Christian contexts. Jeavons, for instance, suggests that the term relates ‘more closely with the religious tradition(s) of Christianity and distances it from others – like Islam or Hinduism – in which, in fact, faith is not a particularly meaningful concept or term’ (2004: 141).

What is the relationship between culture and religion?

There are competing views surrounding the relationship between culture and religion. One perspective – dominant in anthropology and sociology – suggests that religion is part of the larger culture within which it is found. That is, culture is the umbrella concept, under which various institutions, traditions, identities, and customs – including religion – are brought together. Here, culture is holistic, in the sense that each dimension of culture is dependent upon, shaped by, and influences all the other dimensions. To fully understand a people’s religion, then, necessitates understanding the broader context in which it is lived and experienced, and how it ‘fits’ with other dimensions of the culture.

Religious studies shares a similar orientation. Jill DeTemple (2013: 111) describes the religious studies view as one that understands religion as a ‘flexible force woven throughout the fabric of society’. This force is at once dynamic and pervasive, and ‘not only shapes morality and worldviews’ but informs how adherents ‘negotiate everything from immigration to sexuality’ (DeTemple 2013: 111). Here again, the relationship between culture and religion is dense and entangled, suggesting the difficulty of trying to pick apart where religion starts and where it ends within a society.

Emma Tomalin (2013) identifies another view, one put forth by religious practitioners cautious about ‘reducing religion to culture’. Here, boundaries between religion and culture might be drawn as a way of bringing attention to – and distancing from – beliefs and practices that are thought to fall outside the religious tradition, and yet which are carried forth in the name of that religion. Tomalin points to female genital mutilation (FGM) as an example, where arguments are made that FGM is a ‘cultural’ rather than an Islamic ‘religious’ practice. Moreover, by rejecting the idea that religion is culture, practitioners avoid the implication that their religion was created or influenced by human agency rather than it being timeless or divinely inspired.

Another view of the relationship between religion and culture comes from within the field of international development, where religion is sometimes framed as a cultural ‘thing’ to be manipulated, deployed, or extinguished. This view can cut both ways, with religion variously understood to signal a cultural ‘backwardness’ that needs to be overcome in the push to modernize or as a valuable tool that can be put to use in meeting development goals. For example, Heather Marquette (2012) examines the ways that religion has been highlighted by economists, religious leaders, and others as a way to combat corruption. The more religious a country, the
less corruption it will have, and with less corruption comes higher income levels, say some scholars (Nussbaum 2006 in Marquette 2012). Hence, transforming religious values might allow a country to become more prosperous. Marquette’s article takes issue with this perspective, however, by showing the multiple situational factors that mediate how values are (or are not) translated into behaviour.

**What is religiosity?**

Religiosity is ‘how people are religious’, as well as ‘how religious people are’ (Rakodi 2012: 641). Religiosity has been conceptualized by Helen Rose Ebaugh et al. (2006: 2259) as ‘religious commitment’ manifested through ritual practice, ideology or belief, experience, and knowledge of religious matters. Applying this idea of religious commitment to faith-based organizations, Ebaugh et al. suggest there are three dimensions in which faith-based organizations often demonstrate religiosity: service religiosity, in terms of FBO–client interactions; staff religiosity, in hiring and staff interactions; and organizational religiosity, in how the organization manages its public impression.

**What is a faith-based organization?**

Discussed in more detail elsewhere in this Handbook (see Occhipinti, Chapter 22), Gerard Clarke and Michael Jennings (2008: 6) have defined a ‘faith-based organization’ as one that ‘derives inspiration and guidance for its activities from the teaching and principles of the faith or from a particular interpretation of the faith’. Jones and Juul Petersen (2012: 1298) contend that the religions and development literature has taken the term ‘faith-based organization’ to be a ‘relatively unproblematic category’. The issue is that the label ‘faith-based organization’ is so broad – capturing such a vast array of different types of organizations – that defining what precisely an FBO is proves difficult.

One way this complexity has been managed is through the production of ‘typologies’ of faith-based organizations. While typologies are critiqued for oversimplifying reality, they – by flagging particular dimensions of an organization for greater scrutiny – nonetheless help researchers to make sense of the religious and secular dimensions of an organization. Moreover, typologies can help to facilitate discussion among researchers who are working in diverse settings, with a variety of organization forms.

For example, Tara Hefferan, Laurie Occhipinti and Julie Adkins (2009) modified a typology put forth by Sider and Unruh – a typology focused on the US context – to consider what role ‘faith’ plays in FBOs working in Latin America and the Caribbean. By identifying several key areas for examining faith, the typology allows researchers to consider how ‘faith and religion are manifested in goals, mission, programming, and funding’ along six different faith axes, ranging from ‘secular’ to ‘faith-saturated’ (Hefferan et al. 2009: 9).

**What is development?**

‘Development’ is a contentious term, understood in a variety of ways across both scholarly and applied realms (see also Rakodi, Chapter 2). One dominant view suggests that development is both an ideology and a set of practices that arose in the post-Second World War era as a way to socially engineer progress, modernity, and economic growth in the global South. From this perspective – and drawing inspiration from US President Truman’s (1997 [1949]) Four Point Address – the world is divided into centres of economic and scientific progress and areas of poverty and ‘backwardness’. Those who have achieved progress have both the ability
and an obligation to share their economic expertise and technological know-how with those in poverty.

Exemplifying this kind of thinking, W. W. Rostow’s (1960) modernization theory – which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 – was based in an evolutionary framework that located countries according to their stage of development. At one end were pre-modern societies, hampered by traditional beliefs and values that stood in the way of technological progress and industrialization. At the other end were advanced industrialized countries, with high economic growth and high living standards. While modernization occurred first in the West, Rostow believed that all countries could progress to become high-growth societies. But changing cultural values and attitudes that stymied belief in progress and discouraged individual achievement was a necessary prerequisite. Education was one way this transformation could occur.

Drawing from some of Rostow’s ideas, a growth-focused development agenda became entrenched in the 1980s, with a focus on advancing productivity, trade, and economic growth. Yoked with neoliberal policy prescriptions, this agenda was formalized as the ‘Washington Consensus’ and came to dominate development institutions like the World Bank, USAID, and others (Williamson 1993).

While growth-oriented development continues to occupy a privileged spot in development thinking and practice, there are simultaneously a number of competing approaches that emphasize micro-level processes or personhood and/or that critique capitalism. For example, ‘basic needs’ approaches in the 1970s emphasized that development should attend first to the primary material needs of those living in poverty (Gardner and Lewis 1996). Similarly, human development approaches have gained traction since the 1990s. These emphasize that development should lead to an expanding of people’s capabilities, enlarging their choices, and allowing them to lead full lives and to meet their potential (Sen 1999, 2009; Nussbaum 2000). These sentiments have been formulated as the UN Millennium Development Goals.

Moreover, there is ‘post-development’, a set of critiques expressed most prominently by Wolfgang Sachs (1992), Arturo Escobar (1995, 2000), and others (e.g. Ferguson 1994; Crush 1995; Rahnema and Bawtree 1997; Rist 1997). These scholars actively oppose the continuation of development thinking and practice, calling instead for its ‘death’. From this perspective, development has been a destructive force, replacing overt colonial management with the seemingly more benign development regime. But development ultimately is an ‘anti-politics’ machine, turning exploitation, suffering, resource imbalances, and the like into apolitical problems that can be addressed through technical solutions that reproduce and consolidate existing power structures (Ferguson 1994). That is, development is not really intended to promote social change or social justice; rather, it serves to keep the current system intact, to the overall benefit of those doing the developing.

While the approaches to development just discussed vary significantly in terms of focus and goals, they share a tendency to neglect or dismiss religion. Indeed, until fairly recently, development studies has been largely silent on issues related to faith and religion. But, for reasons traced elsewhere in the Handbook, religion is now on the development studies agenda, as evidenced by the World Bank’s ‘Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics’, the institutionalization of religion and development research programmes – including programmes at Georgetown University in the US and at Birmingham University in the UK – and the creation of a burgeoning literature, referenced both in this chapter and throughout the Handbook.

What problems might be presented?

Religions and development fieldwork – whereby researchers visit development organizations, study projects on the ground, engage in participant-observation, and the like – can be

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complicated by issues of access. Sometimes researchers have difficulty gaining permission to study people, organizations, or communities. Laura Reese (2000: 378), for example, discusses this difficulty within congregational settings, writing that ‘Several forces converge to almost ensure that clergy in congregations most active in economic development will be least willing to be interviewed, simply due to lack of time and scheduling conflict.’ Even when formal access to organizations is granted, the reality of actually having to interact with – and allocate time and resources to – researchers can lead an organization to be less cooperative than anticipated. Erica Bornstein (2005) recounts how she had ‘seven letters’ of invitation in hand, each indicating an NGO’s willingness to work with her. But their ability to host her sometimes ran up against time and labour constraints. Interviews, for example, can take hours to complete, and, when there is other work to do and deadlines to meet, organizations understandably prioritize their own goals over those of the researcher.

‘Lack of comfort with or suspicion of the research process’ can also limit research access, particularly when the benefits of the research are not immediately clear to participants (Reese 2000: 378). This was certainly true of my on-the-ground research tracing financial flows between churches in the US and Haiti. With the flow of money from North to South, US churches were particularly keen to account for how and where the money they sent was spent. By contrast, Haitian churches were reluctant to discuss with any degree of detail how money was being dispersed or who specifically was benefitting. And, given the power imbalances separating US and Haitian parishes, such suspicions of the research process are certainly understandable and perhaps self-protective (Hefferan 2007).

**Methods in action: some examples and lessons**

Social scientists increasingly have turned their attention to understanding the intersections between religions and development. Yet many of the works now emerging are void of explicit or detailed discussion of methodology (as exceptions, see Deneulin and Rakodi 2011; Rakodi 2011, 2012; Tomalin 2013). Perhaps this is owing to the general trajectory of the literature, which Jones and Juul Petersen (2011) suggest has largely been donor initiated, focusing on questions that have practical relevance to organizations and sponsors. Or it might stem from a bias in the literature, one that assumes that religion has a positive contribution to make to development.

The dearth of methodologically oriented articles is not unique to the study of religions and development, however. Berzano and Riis report that in their searching of the 2010 *Social Compass*, ‘among the many hundreds of articles [examining the sociology of religion], three addressed general methodological problems’ (2012: x). In their review of literature on faith-based organizations, Bielefeld and Cleveland (2013) found 611 US-focused books and peer-reviewed publications, dating from 1912. Of these, 64 focused on methods (2013: 44–45).

Thus the religions and development literature’s minor attention to methodology is not unusual within the broader framework of studying religion. That said, available discussion suggests at least three broad approaches in the study of religions and development: quantitative, case study, and ethnographic.

As discussed earlier, quantitative approaches gather ‘numerical data that are analysed using mathematically based models (in particular statistics)’ (Aliaga and Gunderson in Muijs 2011: 1). The aim is to understand the relationship between variables. While case study research is good for generating hypotheses, a point made below, quantitative approaches are particularly suited to testing hypotheses. For example, religions and development scholars might be interested in exploring whether there is a relationship between religious orientation and income levels in
Haiti. After reviewing the existing literature, perhaps they might generate a hypothesis that Catholics have higher income levels than others in Haiti. This could then be tested through the collection and analysis of quantitative data.

Case studies focus on a single unit for analysis, for example an individual, group, organization, or the like, during an identifiable point in time (Gerring 2007). As an inductive approach, case studies are beneficial as ‘first line of evidence’ research, when a topic has not yet been well studied or when it is being approached in a new way (Gerring 2007). They allow for deep understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, though such understanding cannot be generalized to other cases. Case study research can proceed in a number of directions, from single observations to multiple observations, or it might not include face-to-face interactions at all, while it can be either quantitatively or qualitatively oriented.

Ethnographic approaches bring researchers into prolonged face-to-face contact with research subjects. Through immersion with the group or in the culture being studied, researchers gain a grounded and deep understanding of the goings-on of a culture, in a particular place, at a particular moment in time. Ethnography relies heavily on observation, often participant-observation, discussed below. One benefit of ethnography is that it can locate the actual behaviours of individuals and groups. This is important, for as already mentioned there often is a gap between what people say they do and what they actually do in practice. Ethnography allows researchers to witness and record the lived dimensions of religion and development.

Each of these three approaches has strengths and weaknesses, which must be balanced against the objectives of the research and the researcher’s epistemological stance. After mining the available secondary data, researchers formulate a research question or hypothesis, and then decide which methodology is most appropriate to the aims and objectives of the study. That is, the research question drives the specific approach used. From there, the specific techniques, tools, or methods of data collection can be designed.

What follows below is a collection of different techniques ‘in action’, organized by method to illustrate how scholars have employed – or might employ – various techniques in their studies of religions and development. The discussion begins with techniques more closely associated with quantitative approaches and ends with those more closely aligned with ethnography.

**Survey research**

Economics, political science, and some branches of sociology rely heavily on survey methods, using structured questionnaires to gather data about religiosity, demographic characteristics, income levels, and more. Survey questionnaires are typically standardized so that each respondent is presented with an equivalent – if not identical – set of questions. This technique has advantages. First, in many contexts, survey questionnaires can be self-administered via mail, telephone, or Internet relatively quickly and inexpensively, meaning interviewers need not be hired and trained. Interviewers are typically necessary when surveying illiterate populations, however. Second, because their identity remains confidential, respondents might report on sensitive research topics that cannot be pursued openly. Third, survey research allows for the drawing of representative samples, from which generalizations about the wider population might be drawn.

The World Values Survey (WVS) (http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/) is ‘a global network of social scientists who are analyzing the basic values and beliefs of people throughout the world’. In collaboration with the European Values Survey, the WVS reports carrying out nationally representative surveys in over 100 countries, containing 90 per cent of the world’s
population. While the WVS has completed six ‘waves’ of surveys to track changes in values and culture over time, secondary researchers have taken the existing data to run their own analyses, producing more than 4,000 WVS-related publications.

For example, Stephanie Seguino (2010: 1317) has drawn data from waves 2–5 of the World Values Survey to analyse how religiosity impacts gender attitudes. Seguino (2010: 1309–10) uses WVS questions that measure the intensity of religious beliefs (e.g. ‘How important is religion to your life?’ ‘Do you belong to a religious denomination?’) and religious participation (‘Apart from weddings, funerals, and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?’), as well as questions that capture gender attitudes around women’s roles (e.g. ‘A woman needs children to be fulfilled. Agree?’) and gender hierarchies (e.g. ‘When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women. Agree?’). Using multivariate regression techniques, Seguino (2010: 1317) is able to demonstrate that ‘the gender attitudes index has a negative and significant effect on all measures of gender equality and well-being’. Another example of macro-level research drawing from survey research comes from Ambe J. Njoh and Fenda A. Akiwumi (2012), who assess the role of religion on women’s empowerment in Africa. First, they used the CIA World Factbook to determine the religious affiliations of Africans in 47 African countries. The UNESCO Institute Data Center website was used for data on education and literacy levels (UNESCO Online). Women’s political participation levels were gathered from Inter-Parliamentary Union website. The International Labour Organization (ILO) was the data source on women’s participation in the labour force. Finally, the World Bank’s World Development Indicators online data were used to compile development information. Njoh and Akiwumi looked at eight variables, with religious affiliation as the independent variable and women’s education, labour force participation, political participation, and empowerment as dependent variables. Through statistical analysis, they identified significant positive associations between predictor variables and women’s empowerment, measured as improvements in women’s rates of participation in schooling, non-agricultural labour, and government, as well as increased literacy levels. Indigenous religion, for example, links with women’s participation in the formal labour force. Christianity positively impacts women’s literacy and labour force participation, which they note runs counter to assumptions put forth by Mama (1996) and Sudarkasa (1986) about Christianity in Africa as disempowering for women. But Njoh and Akiwumi suggest the ‘most important revelation of the study’ is that ‘religion [religious beliefs] explains a statistically significant portion (22%) of the variability in women empowerment as a Millennium Development Goal (MDG). This suggests that any meaningful effort to empower women especially as an MDG must pay more than passing attention to the influences of religion’ (2012: 16).

Quantitative studies of this kind are sometimes critiqued for being methodologically ‘insufficient for proving – one way or another – a causal relationship’ (Marquette 2010: 4). The fault lines identified above, between positivism and interpretivism, qualitative and quantitative, and macro and micro, are in evidence here. Indeed, the critique that Marquette and others (cf. Deneulin and Rakodi 2011) make concerns the quality of country-level data, and how such data fail to capture micro-level attitudes, beliefs, or practices. ‘The [religions and development] literature is largely quantitative, with a dearth of empirical, fieldwork-based evidence. The results are often contradictory, depending on which international dataset has been used’ (Marquette 2010: 4). Moreover, such surveys often ‘detach’ religion from the broader socio-historical and cultural frames within which it is seated (Deneulin and Rakodi 2011: 50) and can lack validity, as the self-reporting of religiosity is notoriously problematic. The reasons for this might include respondents’ desire to appear more religious than they actually are by over-reporting their attendance in worship services, for example, or conversely their attempts
to appear unaffiliated with a politically marginalized religion by under-reporting their religious activities or disavowing unpopular religious views.

**Interviews**

For many religions and development scholars, particularly those working from an interpretivist orientation, in-depth interviews serve as a primary data collection technique. Interview techniques can range from highly structured – where an interview schedule is strictly followed, with each respondent answering the same questions, in the same order, without deviation, as with survey questionnaires discussed above – to largely informal, perhaps consisting of chats with informants or conversations with those with knowledge the researcher seeks to understand. Many researchers prefer a semi-structured protocol, where a list of questions is used to guide research, but researchers have the flexibility of following new directions in the midst of the interview, should the occasion arise.

Gerard Clarke (2007) relied on face-to-face and telephone interviews in his research into why governments and donors have turned toward faith-based organizations in recent years. This question is subjective, asking respondents about their interpretation of history. Looking at the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID)’s engagement with faith-based organizations, Clarke interviewed 21 staff members at DFID headquarters. Additionally, Clarke interviewed 15 FBO representatives and representatives of three donor agencies.

Through the interviews, as well as archival research of DFID and FBO publications and documents, and an email survey to 36 DFID offices, Clarke identified policy shifts at the World Bank, changes at the political level, for example US Charitable Choice legislation or more civil society focus within DFID, and activist movements, such as Jubilee 2000 and Make Poverty History, that contributed to FBO interest among government and donors.

Distinctions can be drawn between individual interviews and group – or focus group – interviews, as well. Group interviews bring together a relatively homogeneous group of individuals with the goal of collectively exploring a topic or set of topics. Group interviews can have advantages over individual interviews when time constraints exist, since several people can be interviewed simultaneously. Moreover, because focus groups tend to be conversational, they create space for respondents to engage with one another, jointly reconstructing key events. They might also permit more open exploration of sensitive topics, given that participants can talk ‘in general’ about such topics rather than identifying controversial viewpoints as their own.

**Free-listing**

Cultural domains are those areas of culture that respondents are able to list (Bernard 1995). Free-listing is a technique that researchers can use to study a particular domain. ‘In free-listing, you tell informants: “Please list all the X you know about” or ask them “What kinds of X are there?”’ (Bernard 1995: 240). For example, in my research on Catholic parish twinning, partnerships that link parishes in the US and Haiti in economic and religious relationships, I was interested in the ways lay Catholics in Michigan, USA understood economic development. To get at this, I gave informants a piece of paper, divided into three columns. I asked them ‘When you think about development, about what it means to be developed, what sort of things come to mind?’ I asked that they list, as quickly as possible, their answers in column one. After a few minutes, I then asked respondents to rank-order their responses according to importance in the middle
Finally, I asked respondents to use the right column to explain the ordering of their lists (Hefferan 2007: 123). From this exercise, I was able to identify the development ‘domain’ and – combining this exercise with in-depth interviews and participant-observation – compare the degree to which lay conceptualizations of development among respondents reflected or challenged more conventional, professional understandings.

This type of free-listing exercise works best in contexts where respondents are literate, though a modified version could be crafted for other contexts, perhaps using drawings, pictures, or other visual sources.

**Life histories**

In micro-level, qualitative research like ethnography, life histories provide an in-depth and subjective accounting of the ways individuals experience their worlds. Typically, life histories are ‘retrospective’ accounts of respondents’ lives, or a dimension of their lives, relayed in their own words (Plummer 2001: 19; Lewis 2008: 560). Indeed, life histories might be thought of as ‘case studies’ of individual lives, where the intersections between biography and history are illuminated through the telling of one’s own personal stories (Sokolovsky 1996: 282; Mills 2000).

While much of the religions and development literature has been focused on either macro-level religious indicators or meso-level religious organizations, Nanlai Cao (2007) looks at individual Christian entrepreneurs in post-Mao China. The research uses both participant-observation and life history interviews to explore ‘embodied systems of beliefs and processes of meaning making in daily life’ (2007: 48). Cao traces the contours of the lives of Wenzhou ‘bosses’ to discover the ways that individual Chinese Christians negotiate the meaning of the market and Christianity. For example, ‘Brother Liu’ requires that his managerial staff attend weekly bible study meetings to learn the ‘culture of Christianity’. Combining business development with evangelization, Wenzhou Christian entrepreneurs are creating ‘a Christianity-based enterprise culture that they perceive as modern, progressive, and productive’ (Cao 2007: 57).

**Participant-observation**

Ethnographers – particularly those situated within anthropology and sociology – draw on participant-observation as a primary research technique. Participant-observation entails spending time ‘in the field’ in order to get ‘close to people and make them feel comfortable enough with your presence so that you can observe and record information about their lives’ (Bernard 1995: 136). As the label implies, researchers are at once participating in the life of the community while also observing and recording the goings-on around them. Indeed, researchers often spend a year or more ‘in the field’ participating in and recording daily life.

Erica Bornstein (2005) writes about the joys and challenges of doing participant-observation among Christian NGOs in Zimbabwe. Working as an intern at Christian Care and World Vision, Bornstein also interviewed and ‘hung around’ with workers from several other local NGOs. Working in NGO offices, going to church services with development workers, and attending community meetings, Bornstein honestly discusses the methodological challenges of studying evangelical Christians, with whom she is at once friend, colleague, and potential convert. ‘The first time someone tried to convert me and I actually considered it, I was sitting in church in Harare with a friend’, she writes (2005: 30). As a ‘cultural Jew’, Bornstein found immersing herself in the worlds of evangelical Christians led to unexpected existential crises. She says she became hyper-attuned to a world of good versus evil. ‘Perhaps
being surrounded by so much “goodness”, I came to embody its opposite: transgression’ (2005: 36), she writes, while reflecting on a sudden and unprecedented urge to steal during fieldwork.

Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that researching religions and development is a complex and diverse endeavour, as scholars work across positivist/interpretivist, qualitative/quantitative, and macro/micro fault lines. The lessons to take away from this discussion are these. First, as a field of inquiry, religions and development scholarship requires researchers to be conversant across such fault lines. Research situated firmly in any one camp will be critiqued by members of the other as partial and incomplete. To understand why this is the case requires that scholars working in different traditions take seriously the insights of those situated within other frameworks. Second, religions and development scholarship can inform the broader social scientific debates surrounding these fault lines. As a field of inquiry that at once attempts to delineate the development enterprise while also understanding how individuals construct and make meaning relative to it, religions and development has at its centre a mixed methods imperative – if not within any single study, then through broader discussions and analyses of individual, local, national, regional, and topical concerns.

For scholars interested in entering this field of inquiry, the question is how to identify what constitutes ‘religions and development’ and then how best to study it. The methodological and practical suggestions contained herein offer preliminary answers. Listed in the ‘Online resources’ below are some additional resources that might prove useful to the novice (and more experienced) religions and development scholar.

Notes

1 This chapter draws on the distinction between methodology, as a ‘theory and analysis for how research should proceed’, and method, as ‘techniques for gathering evidence’ (Harding 1987: 2).
2 Here, the focus is on social scientific versus theological or philosophical approaches to religions and development. While social scientific approaches often come from ‘outside’ the religious tradition being examined, ‘insider scholarship’ is situated from within and often is an attempt to interpret and communicate religious thinking to adherents of the religion. Debate exists about whether a researcher should be an insider to the religious tradition being researched. Some argue that only those inside a religion have the ability to understand it fully. By contrast, others suggest that objectivity and perspective can be compromised when studying within one’s own tradition. Moreover, an outsider’s perspective allows one to see the taken-for-granted assumptions that might be naturalized by adherents.

Online resources

Afrobarometer: http://www.afrobarometer.org/
Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies: http://www.asarb.org/
Center for Religion and Civic Culture: http://crcc.usc.edu/research/expertise/scholarly-resource-development.html
Luce Project on Religion and Global Civil Society: http://www.global.ucsb.edu/luceproject/
Religions and Development Research Programme: http://www.religionsanddevelopment.org/
World Faiths Development Dialogue: http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/wfdd
World Values Survey, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan: http://www.isr.umich.edu/cps/project_wvs.html

References


