Introduction

The study of faith-based organisations (FBOs) and development has attracted rising levels of attention since the mid-noughties, as an element of the emergence of religion and development studies as a ‘sub-discipline’ (Bompani, 2019). This has resulted in studies that aim to define what an FBO is and to develop typologies to understand the range of organisations captured by this label, as well as research on examining the operations of FBOs and the work that they do (e.g. Berger, 2003; Hefferan et al., 2009; Clarke, 2008; Tomalin, 2012). The study of FBOs is part of a broader ‘turn to religion’ in development studies, which reflects shifts within international development policy and practice. This follows decades of neglect of religion in international development efforts that emerged in the aftermath of World War II (Tomalin, 2013; Deneulin and Banu, 2009). The engagement of faith actors in the delivery of services such as health and education, as well as advocacy on behalf of the poor and marginalised, is not new, with Christian missionaries playing a key role in service delivery in European colonies from the nineteenth century. What is new is the formalisation and NGO-isation of the faith response to addressing poverty and inequality with the construction of a novel type of faith-based development organisation (FBDO). This type of FBO has become situated as the preferred faith partner for multilateral and bilateral donors in terms of receiving funding and being invited to take a prominent place in decision-making processes, such as the consultations surrounding the Sustainable Development Goals, alongside their secular counterparts (Tomalin and Haustein, 2018). While this is heralded by some as evidence of the desecularisation and decolonisation of development spaces, others are critical that this ‘turn to religion’ is limited by its narrow assimilation into neoliberal development forms where religion is instrumentalised to serve the political interests of Global North states and institutions (Jones and Peterson, 2011; Tomalin, 2018).

I begin by tracing the emergence of this distinctive type of FBDO, mostly represented by Christian organisations, that had taken shape by the 1990s. As a construction of international development institutions and processes, I examine how its rise was shaped by political structures and interests that have dominated world affairs since the 1940s. In the second section, I critically examine definitions and typologies of FBOs to better understand where this NGO-ised FBDO sits within the broader category of ‘faith-based organisation’ and how different types of FBO are positioned vis-à-vis international development cooperation. In the final section of the chapter,
I draw attention to a limitation of existing typologies of FBOs where they have paid insufficient attention to the role of the local faith actor (LFA), including indigenous or traditional ‘religions’, and I propose a new typology of ‘faith actors’ that takes the local as a key point of reference. A focus on the ‘local’ has gained renewed significance in development and humanitarian studies, policy and practice in recent years with the strengthening of localisation discourses since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. Despite this, LFAs continue to be poorly represented in formal development cooperation as well as academic studies, even though they are amongst the most important actors for those affected by poverty, inequality and humanitarian crises.

The making of the faith-based development organisation

From Christian missionaries to international development

The contribution of faith actors from Europe to serving the poor in Asia, Africa and Latin America was well established and professionalised through missionary activity by the end of the nineteenth century (Haustein and Tomalin, 2018, p. 79). The argument that missionaries played a key role as precursors to later international development NGOs has been discussed by several scholars, with the proviso that the main goal of the missionary was to ‘save souls’ and of the NGO to ‘bring development’ (Burchardt and Swidler, 2020, p. 339; Manji and O’Coill, 2002; Deacon and Tomalin, 2015). Others have drawn out similarities between missionaries and development NGOs for ‘their related deployment of power’ seeking to impose Western norms upon other countries and cultures (Burchardt and Swidler, 2020, p. 337). Although the NGOisation of development was not entrenched until the 1990s, in the aftermath of the so-called Washington Consensus,4 which opened up a greater role for NGOs to fill the gaps left by state failure, government rollback and decentralisation, the international development processes that set this in motion can be traced to the period following the end of World War II (Pieterse, 2001, p. 166). As the USA sought to put in place measures to help Europe recover from the social and economic devastation wrought by World War II, through the Marshall Plan, these efforts were extended to ‘developing’ poorer countries in the Global South. Many of these countries were in the throes of decolonisation, at a time that coincided with the start of the Cold War, which from the perspective of the USA ran the risk that newly independent nations might turn to communism (Macekura, 2013). These commitments to European reconstruction and the ‘development’ of poorer nations were initially met through the setting up of the Bretton Woods Institutions5 in 1944 and the UN in 1945 and led to the emergence of a discourse of ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ or ‘under-developed’ nations, creating new binary that replicated the power relations of the colonial era. The Second Inaugural Address of President Truman in 1949 is often taken as establishing this new international development paradigm where he enjoins that ‘we must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas’ (Truman, 1949). It is clear then that the emergence of ‘international development’ or the ‘foreign aid business’ was rooted in political interests from its inception, where the pledge to help the poor and reduce inequality masked a range of other agendas.

Separating religion from international development

Another area where the politics of international development has been apparent is in the adherence to a theory of modernisation that takes the Western experience as normative, including the assumption that as societies embark upon the path to modernity they will secularise (Clarke,
This secular development paradigm assumes that in the process of becoming ‘developed’, religion will lose its influence as a public force and likely also as a source of meaning making for individuals (Tomalin, 2013). Religious language did not, however, completely disappear from the articulation of international development discourse, and with the US dominance in this field the tropes of American ‘civil religion’ have made their presence felt (Bellah, 1970). For instance, Truman in his inaugural speech, after outlining his ‘bold new programme’, invoked the Biblical Sermon on the Mount (‘Our allies are the millions who hunger and thirst after righteousness’ [Truman, 1949, cf. Matthew, 5:6]), one of the two Biblical texts he had rested his hand on when taking the oath of office and his closing remarks exhibited strong providentialist language where ‘With God’s help, the future of mankind will be assured in a world of justice, harmony, and peace’ (Truman, 1949; Haustein and Tomalin, 2018, p. 82).

Despite ‘civil religion’ enduring as a theme in US foreign policy up to the present day (Marsden, 2011), this is not evidence that religion has been more broadly considered in development in a way that corresponds with what Marshall et al. (2021) have called the adoption of ‘strategic religious engagement’. This necessitates taking account of the role that religion has continued to play in ‘developing’ settings, including building in attention to how religious values and identities contribute towards shaping development problems and solutions, as well as partnering with faith actors to define and reach development goals. Instead, this underlying invocation of ‘civil religion’ is another example of the power politics of international development, where such religious tropes are taken for granted as foundational to the efforts of Western-led development and not seen as threatening to the secularity and neutrality of development, or indeed the US Establishment Clause. Within development agencies, there has been an unease about engaging with faith actors from fear that they would jeopardize progress because of their conservative views, that they would inevitably combine development activities with proselytization and that they could not be trusted to treat beneficiaries fairly if they did not share their faith position. This secular bias within the Western development trajectory was also reflected in scholarship, where apart from the publication of a special issue of the journal *World Development* in 1980, development studies was largely silent on the topic of religions and development, until the 2000s. For instance, Ver Beek carried out a content analysis of the three leading development studies journals between 1982 and 1998, finding only ‘scant reference to the topics of spirituality or religion’ (Ver Beek, 2000, p. 60).

The emergence of contemporary faith-based development organisations (FBDOs)

Although in the decades following World War II religion did not feature as a relevant factor in international development discourse, policy and practice, this does not mean that faith-based development actors, such as missionaries, disappeared or did not develop and adapt their practices during this period. To return to the example of Christian missionaries, with decolonisation in the post–World War II period, ‘key missionary industries, especially in education and health, were nationalised rapidly or gradually’ (Haustein and Tomalin, 2018, p. 83). Nonetheless, they did manage to retain a significant presence and have continued as important development actors to this day. However, as Smith demonstrates, they have been ‘working in a parallel space to development workers, clearly distinguishable from development actors and even other faith-based organizations’ (Smith, 2017, p. 65). While there continues to be an ‘uncomfortable relationship between missionaries and development scholars and practitioners’ (Smith, 2017, p. 63), where they are viewed as prone to ‘coercive and insensitive proselytization’ (Smith, 2017, p. 63), there is little evidence from the current era to support this position.
Faith-based organisations and development

While organisations that retained their missionary identity have remained outside the international development mainstream and have resisted processes of NGO-isation, other faith actors developed and established themselves in the World War II period as ‘legitimate’ development partners as they gradually loosened their commitment to missionary activity. Their development mirrored the growth of global civil society and the rise of the ‘non-governmental organisation’, itself a construction of the UN system, appearing for the first time in Article 71 of the UN Charter, and prior to this being termed ‘private international organizations’ (Davies, 2014, p. 3). By the 1980s a formal and professionalised cadre of NGOs had emerged as the foot soldiers of international development cooperation, and some of these were faith-based, mostly Christian. For those organisations, including, for instance, World Vision International (WVI) and Tearfund, that shifted away from a focus on missionary activity to a more secular engagement with development action, conversations about how to maintain a faith identity as they have become professionalised and NGO-ised have accompanied this journey (King, 2019; Freeman, 2019). As King writes, WVI began life in 1950 as an ‘agency to raise funds for missionaries and orphans’ (King, 2019, p. 1). While it has never hidden its Christian identity, by the 1970s it had become more ambitious in its vision to help the world’s poor, children in particular. To secure government funding, as well as its place as a professional humanitarian actor, it was compelled to move away from supporting overt evangelism. By the 1980s, at a time when Western governments had turned to NGOs to carry out their development and humanitarian work, WVI had ‘evolved from an American mission agency to the world’s largest Christian humanitarian organization’ (King, 2019, p. 191).

A similar story can be told for Tearfund, which, as Freeman writes, was formed in 1968 ‘as a small evangelical organisation that made grants to overseas missionaries to alleviate material poverty and physical suffering’ (Freeman, 2019, p. 11) and today ‘is the UK’s largest and most influential evangelical development NGO’ (Freeman, 2019, p. 2). As with WVI, reflecting the growth of the professional NGO sector, by the 1990s Tearfund had moved away ‘from being an organisation that simply gave grants and sent expatriate staff to overseas church and mission agencies, to become a professional, coherent development organisation that worked with a network of increasingly professional partners to carry out high-quality work overseas’ (Freeman, 2019, p. 70). Questions about what the implications are for evangelism as Tearfund signed up to humanitarian standards have continued to shape internal debates about the kind of organisation it aspires to be (Freeman, 2019, p. 74). Debates within both organisations about how they could become mainstream development organisations and maintain their Christian identity reveal an unease with the perception that as they professionalised, they were by default becoming more like secular development actors.

While the field of FBDOs is dominated by Christian organisations, other faith traditions are represented. For instance, Islamic Relief is the largest Muslim NGO, founded in 1984 ‘by a group of medical doctors and activists’ in the UK in response to the famine in Sudan. It was the first Muslim NGO to receive funding from the UK government and is the only Muslim member of the UK government’s 15-strong Disaster Emergency Committee, alongside four other FBOs – Christian Aid, CAFOD, Tearfund and WVI. Nonetheless, Christian organisations are over-represented in the field of international FBDOs compared to those from other faith traditions. A study by Carrette and Miall (2012) identified three-quarters of the approximately 320 FBOs affiliated to ECOSOC at the UN as Christian as well as northern (Haynes, 2013). Carrette (2017, p. 215) argues that there is a ‘hidden Judaic-Christian and Western-bourgeoisie assumption’ shaping the historical ‘secular structures and discourse of the UN and civil society’, explaining why there are many more contemporary Christian FBOs than those from Hinduism or Buddhism. Moreover, the missionary experience of Christian
groups arguably gives them an advantage in organising their activities globally compared to those from other faith traditions.

**The global resurgence of religion and welfare reform: shifting relationships between faith actors and the state**

The rise of FBDOs during the 1990s, which as Freeman notes were mainly linked to evangelical Christianity (Freeman, 2019, p. 114), reflects shifts in the configuration of development processes, where NGOs had come to play a major role, and purely economic and technological understandings of development had been dislodged to also consider a broader conception of ‘human development’, influenced by Amartya Sen’s capability approach (Tomalin, 2013). While NGOs have increasingly focussed on a broad range of social issues including human rights and gender equality, not all faith actors have been willing to address gender inequality in particular, for fear that it will compromise religiously sanctioned values about men and women’s roles, and the sanctity of the family. Alongside these shifts, the ‘global resurgence of religion’, theorised in terms of the ‘post-secular’ or the ‘deprivatisation of religion’, has also been instrumental in the rise of the FBDO (Habermas, 2008; Casanova, 1994). The certainties of earlier theories of secularisation have become weakened by clear evidence of the ongoing public manifestation of religious identities in both ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ contexts, with the USA showing higher levels of religiosity than European settings that debunks a linear relationship between secularisation and modernisation. While the extent to which there was an actual ’resurgence of religion’ or if it was the case that public manifestations of religion could no longer be ignored is far from settled; what is clear is that globalisation was not leading to a universal weakening of public religious expression. Instead, it was giving rise to manifestations that were conservative and particularistic, underpinning rising forms of religious fundamentalism and violence, as well those that were liberal and ecumenical, seeking collective solutions to the global challenges facing humanity (Beyer, 1994).

In response to the realisation of the resurgence/continuing role of public religion, by the late 1990s, faith actors became pulled into processes of welfare provision and development that had previously been largely secular domains and the concept of the ‘FBO’ gains currency within practitioner and scholarly circles. This reflects an era of neoliberal welfare reform, beginning in the USA and spreading to Europe from the 1980s, with the ‘rolling back of the state’ and an increased focus on the charitable and voluntary sector (Evans et al., 2005). In the USA, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act in 1996, through its Charitable Choice provisions, made it possible for religious organisations, including places of congregations (e.g. churches, temples or mosques) to compete on an equal footing for federal funding to provide publicly funded services (Chaves, 2003). Prior to this, FBOs had been able to receive federal funding to carry out services but usually did this via separately incorporated organisations, distinct from congregations where religious activities took place (Name Redacted, 2006, p. 10). This shift was then further entrenched when George W. Bush came into power and set up the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and Centers for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in 11 federal offices, including USAID, the US government’s international development agency. The aim of these initiatives was to facilitate processes that encouraged and enabled a broader range of FBOs to apply for grants, including for international development and humanitarian work. Although as Haynes indicates, ‘FBOs remain underrepresented among USAID grant recipients’ (Haynes, 2021, p. 600) compared to secular organisations. She demonstrates that faith actors are deterred from applying for grants due to their perception that they are likely to be discriminated against.
Charitable Choice, not surprisingly, gave rise to significant backlash, with critics such as the American Civil Liberties Union arguing that this was a dangerous mixing of religion with public affairs that transgressed the Establishment Clause and that it could lead to ‘publicly funded proselytizing’ (Chaves, 2003). Although a stipulation of Charitable Choice was that public funds could not be used for religious activities and that religious activities had to be separate in time and space from publicly funded services, critics were concerned that this would be difficult to achieve in practice and that the boundaries between religious observance and professional service provision would become blurred.10 Although the term ‘FBO’ was already in circulation by 1996, it became more widely used after this period not least due to the proliferation of studies and commentaries responding to concern over which kinds of FBO should be eligible to receive government funding, including research that aimed to develop definitions and typologies of FBOs. This literature acknowledged that there was a lack of clarity over what counted as an FBO and the different types that existed. While the US government increasingly seemed to favour an inclusive and expansive understanding of FBO where congregations were included alongside separate faith-based nonprofits, through Charitable Choice, critics argued for a narrower conception that preserved the sanctity of the church-state separation (Jeavons, 2004).

The ‘turn to religion’ by international development and the rise of the faith-based organisation

These debates in the USA shaped the discourse about FBOs in international development. In addition to faith actors becoming more prominent actors in US welfare provision from the early 2000s, this period also reflects what has been called a ‘turn to religion’ in development studies, policy and practice (Tomalin, 2013). Bompani (2019) charts the rapid rise in academic publishing on the topic of religions and development from around 2006, from within development studies as well as other disciplines such as religious studies, anthropology, politics and human geography. Prior to this period there were literally a handful of academic publications and similarly few policy-maker/practitioner reports. This rise reflected shifts that were happening in development policy and practice (Marshall, 2021). Development actors were beginning to realise the importance of religion, with UNFPA taking a clear lead in this area reflected in a series of publications that explored the role of religion and culture in its work, including experiences of working with FBOs (e.g. UNFPA, 2005). A number of important initiatives emerged at this time, including the World Faiths Development Dialogue set up in 1998 by former World Bank President James Wolfensohn and former archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey of Clifton, today based at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University.11 In the UK, between 2005 and 2010, DFID funded a large £3.5 million research programme based at the University of Birmingham (Clarke, 2007; Stambach, 2005).

The ‘turn to religion’ by development studies, policy and practice led to a remarkable shift in how FBOs were viewed with discourses about their comparative advantage compared to secular NGOs emerging by the mid-2000s (Tomalin, 2012). For instance, when George W. Bush created the Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives in 2001, he argued that FBOs were ‘the best, the most efficient purveyors of social services . . . since they often worked with low overhead and volunteer labor’ (Hefferan et al., 2009, p. 6; Chaves, 2002; Chambre, 2001). James similarly notes, with respect to the role of FBOs in international development, that ‘the donor context for faith is changing as donors recognise that many FBOs, even more than NGOs: provide efficient development services; reach the poorest; are valued by the poorest; provide an alternative to a secular theory of development; ignite civil society advocacy; and motivate action’ (James, 2009, p. 2). While it is likely that in some settings and with respect
to certain issues faith actors may have a comparative advantage, claims that they are in general always more effective must be seen in terms of an enthusiastic embrace of FBOs to make up for their previous neglect as well as the search for new ways of making ‘international development more efficient, effective, and relevant than it is currently’ (Hefferan et al., 2009, p. 6). Moreover, it is similarly difficult to identify the extent to which a presumed ‘distinctive’ attribute of an FBO is a product of its faith identity. Many qualities that supposedly distinguish FBOs are also characteristics of some secular organizations, suggesting that the distinction may not so much be between ‘faith-based’ and ‘non-faith-based’ but, for instance, between organizations that are local and embedded in a community and those that are more distant and formal.

One area where FBOs are distinctive compared to secular NGOs is with respect to their deployment of intangible assets, such as prayer, worship or ritual. However, these have tended to receive less attention than tangible assets, such as networks of trust, close links to the poor and low operating costs, that are commonly stated by international actors as reasons why FBOs make attractive partners. Secular development actors have tended to ignore these intangible dimensions as irrelevant to their goals and reasons for engaging with faith actors, FBDOs have tended not to draw attention to this aspect of their faith identity in order to conserve their image as professional development actors, and scholars have not prioritised this as an important area for research, mirroring instead the donor trend to focus on the tangible aspects. This ignores the fact that for many FBDOs, such as Tearfund, prayer and devotion play a key role across the organisation, from weekly prayer meetings to the integration of time for prayer in routine team meetings, including before strategic decisions are made (Freeman, 2019, pp. 12–13). Yet, existing studies provide few empirical insights into or theoretical tools to better understand the impact of the intangible dimensions of faith identity upon the activities of such organisations. Despite the general dearth of studies on this aspect of FBO distinctiveness, some scholars are beginning to address this gap (e.g., Schwarz, 2018). For instance, Rutledge et al. (2021) demonstrated that for the displaced Muslim women who took part in their study in Iraq, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey, prayer was seen as a primary need and survival mechanism, with faith practices central for creating meaning and routine during crisis. For these women, ‘informal and formal, female and male faith leaders’ (Rutledge et al., 2021) played a critical role not only in terms of the tangible practicalities of survival but also with respect to more intangible elements in their roles as leaders of prayer and worship, alongside their moral and spiritual legitimacy for affected communities.

My aim in this section was to chart the making of the international FBDO as a particular type of FBO that had emerged by the 1990s. Bompani, in her article about the emergence of religion and development as a subfield, notes the proliferation of studies to define FBOs and that ‘this was mostly dictated by the need to produce a clear set of tools, categories and a comprehensible language for the mostly faith illiterate and sometimes faith-scared academics, development practitioners and donors’ (Bompani, 2019, p. 173). In the next section I explore this literature with the aim of better understanding the broader terrain of FBOs of which the FBDO is a part.

Definitions and typologies of faith-based organisations

The term ‘FBO’ has become current in domestic and international policy circles to refer to the proliferation of organisations involved in forms of service delivery and advocacy that profess to have a faith identity. It is a term that has been constructed externally to many of the organisations that perform these roles, which do not necessarily recognise themselves as FBOs. There are several reasons for this. First, it is a term that communities and organisations may not have
encountered. Those that use it are more likely to have been exposed to development discourses, using it strategically to identify their place in the international aid system. Second, the term FBO is sometimes avoided by organisations since religion is a sensitive and political topic, and could restrict their ability to obtain funding and acceptance. Third, in some settings, particularly those that are highly religious, the distinction between ‘faith-based’ and ‘secular’ organisations does not make sense, instead reflecting a world view that normalises the separation of the religious from the secular (Kirmani and Zaidi, 2010). Moreover, as noted by Smith and Sosin (2001), members of secular organizations may also be motivated by religious values. Finally, the term ‘FBO’ is sometimes considered problematic where the word ‘faith’ is more closely associated with Christianity and has a weaker resonance in religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism (Tomalin, 2012).

Within international development policy and practice, the term ‘FBO’ is mostly used as an inclusive umbrella term, reflecting, for instance, the UNFPA’s definition where: ‘Faith-based organisations are religious, faith-based groups, and/or faith-inspired groups which operate as registered or unregistered non-profit institutions’ (UNFPA, 2009). While Jeavons (2004) argued that congregations should not be included as FBOs, this exclusive understanding reflects the US context. In that setting, the Charitable Choice provisions had shaped discourses about what ought to be counted as an FBO by the US government when deciding who to fund. This consideration shapes Jeavon’s approach to outlining what an FBO should be rather than accounting for the different types of FBOs that exist more broadly. While international development policy and practice tends to use the term ‘FBO’ in a loose and inclusive sense, mostly not being clear which types are being referred to, scholars have attempted to use different labels to delineate the various types. Berger (2003), for instance, writes about ‘religious non-governmental organizations’ at the UN, while Bradley (2009) prefers the term ‘FBDOs’. Austin et al. (2022), by contrast, use several different terms in the same article, including those that delineate the specific focus of the FBOs they are interested in (i.e., ‘faith-based international humanitarian aid organizations’) as well as additional umbrella terms that are used instead of the term ‘FBO’: ‘organizations with religious expression’, ‘faith-based non-profits’, and ‘religious non-profits’. Thus, both the language used to describe FBOs as an overarching category, as well as to refer to the different types, is highly diverse and variable.

Alongside attempts to define what is included in the category of FBO, typologies have been developed in two main directions: those that classify FBOs according to different sorts of organisations and those that focus on the ways in which faith is manifested within organisations. Clarke (2008) developed a typology that identified five types of FBOs that carry out development and humanitarian work. He argues that international development actors have tended to engage with FBOs of the second type, what I have been calling FBDOs, and that these are normally Christian and express their faith identity in a passive way (Clarke, 2008, p. 33). He urges that there is a need for other types of FBO to be recognised for the important development and humanitarian work that they deliver, even though these may not be the natural partners for international development donors.

1 Representative organisations or apex bodies of faith traditions (e.g. the World Council of Churches or the US Conference of Catholic Bishops)
2 Charitable or development organisations (e.g. WVI, Tearfund or Islamic Relief)
3 Socio-political organisations (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt)
4 Missionary organisations (e.g. these are mostly Christian but also include Islamic groups carrying out da’wah, and others such as Hindu Nationalists in India seeking to extend their reach)
Radical, illegal or terrorist organisations (while this is a subjective category, as what counts as ‘radical, illegal or terrorist’ is not fixed, it would include groups widely recognised as such, e.g., ISIS)

Another approach to classifying FBOs into typologies is according to how faith is manifest in different aspects of an organisation. On this basis, Clarke (2008, pp. 32–33) suggests four types (passive, active, persuasive and exclusive) according to how they deploy faith along a spectrum where faith as an underpinning factor becomes progressively more central. Sider and Unruh take a similar approach examining how faith is manifest within different elements of an organisation: its mission statement, founding, affiliation, controlling board, senior management, other staff and sources of support (financial and non-financial) (Sider and Unruh, 2004). At one end of the scale are ‘faith-permeated’ organisations, in which faith is manifest across all the dimensions of an organisation and its work, and at the other are ‘secular’ organizations. Although, Sider and Unruh focus on the US domestic setting, others have adapted their approach for international development FBOs (e.g., Hefferan et al., 2009). A further variation on this approach is Thaut’s (2009) taxonomy examining different types of Christian humanitarian organisations, which assesses the ‘influence of faith across four dimensions – the agency’s mission, its ties to a religious base or authorities, its staff policies, and its base of donor support’ (Thaut, 2009, p. 329). Where the ‘accommodative–humanitarianism’ is ‘more difficult to distinguish from secular humanitarian agencies’ (Thaut, 2009, p. 333), ‘synthesis–humanitarianism’ aims to ‘maintain its distinctive Christian character’ (Thaut, 2009, p. 336) and ‘evangelisitic–humanitarianism’ aims ‘to meet the needs of and expand the fellowship of Christian believers’ (Thaut, 2009, p. 341).

While these efforts take a nuanced approach to understanding how faith manifests in an organisation is important to challenge the assumption that all faith-based organisations share similar orientations to how they express and operationalise their faith identity, I argue that they are limited as they fix different FBOs along a spectrum. At one end they are virtually indistinguishable from their secular counterparts, and at the other end their overt evangelism and expressive faith identity can make it difficult for secular development actors to engage with them, particularly in forming partnerships that involve funding. Although Thaut allows that her ‘taxonomy is not static . . . That is, agencies may migrate across the taxonomy over time’ (Thaut, 2009, p. 346) it is also the case that organisations can simultaneously and strategically occupy multiple points on the spectrum at the same time according to the audience they are engaging with. As I have argued elsewhere, FBOs shift in register between secular modes of communication with global development actors to religious modes with local faith actors (Tomalin, 2018, 2019). This helps explain how Tearfund, for example, can appear as ‘faith permeated’ in terms of the centrality of prayer to it internal operations, while at the same time successfully bracketing its faith identity in its public interactions to suit the preference of secular donors for faith actors that are not expressive in the articulation of their faith position. This analysis is crucial to understanding development action and the role that faith identity plays from the point of view of FBOs themselves, an ‘actor-oriented approach’ (Long, 2001), rather than from the vantage point of international development institutions and processes. While the latter suggests that FBOs are passive constructions of the international aid business where their tangible assets are instrumentalised to serve neoliberal secular goals, an ‘actor-oriented approach’ indicates a more strategic engagement.

Existing typologies of FBOs not only have failed to account for how FBOs shift register between the interfaces of secular international development language and the faith-inspired language of their local faith partners (Tomalin, 2018, 2019) but have also neglected explicit attention to the ‘local’ as a category of analysis. I suggest that this has become increasingly important
following the ‘local turn’ in development and humanitarian action. This has gained momentum since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and its ‘Grand Bargain’ commitment towards the goal that at least 25% of international humanitarian funding should go as directly as possible to local and national actors by 2020 (World Humanitarian Summit, 2016, p. 5). Despite this ‘local turn’, attention to the role of LFAs has been a neglected area, both within localisation studies and the study of FBOs and development, reflecting the broader neglect of LFAs within development and humanitarian policy and practice. In the final section, I explore the implications of localisation discourses for the study of FBOs and development.

Localisation, faith-based organisations and development

Some scholars and practitioners are beginning to draw attention to the marginalisation of LFAs in international development cooperation and argue that there is a need to intentionally include LFAs in classifications of types of FBOs, where earlier typologies have not paid specific attention to the local in their analysis (Wurzt and Wilkinson, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2022). It is important to emphasise that a distinction between the local and the international does not necessarily neatly reflect the focus of organisations, with international FBOs often having local branches and LFAs having institutional links and leadership structures that might extend beyond the immediate locality. Moreover, in sticking with the word ‘faith’ neither does the new term ‘LFA’ address claims that it reflects Christianity more so than other traditions. This is particularly the case at the local level, where a focus on faith actors means that the great variety of traditional indigenous cultural systems, that are not normally viewed as ‘faith traditions’ alongside the Abrahamic and Indic religions, are overlooked. As with the term ‘FBO’, ‘LFA’ has been ‘created purely for international actors and the frameworks within which they operate’ (Wurtz and Wilkinson, 2020, p. 147) and is not used by LFAs themselves unless they have chosen to strategically adopt it and use it. While there are limitations to the term, and it should not be taken as a deterministic, essentialist and inherently inclusive category, it does serves as a useful heuristic device to bring additional nuance to the broad-brush term ‘FBO’ and to push for local actors, including those representing traditional indigenous worldviews, to be included within and to speak into the existing dominant FBO discourse.

Another implication of the adoption of a local lens to examine faith-based development action is the realisation that an emphasis upon ‘organisations’ is a poor fit and is rooted in the NGO-isation of development rather than on an analysis of faith dynamics at the local level. In addition to organisations, religious leaders of various types play a key role in development action, from formal and recognised, usually male, leaders that represent faith traditions to their followers as well as the outside world, to informal leaders including women and youth. Moreover, for traditional indigenous cultural systems and the communities that follow them, a focus on organisations is further reason why they are not usually included in FBO typologies, despite the central role of indigenous world views and traditional religious specialists for development and humanitarian action. For this reason, the broader category ‘faith actor’ allows for a ‘broad understanding of a diverse group of actors that are commonly referred to in different ways, including local, national and international faith-based organisations (FBOs), religious communities, and religious leaders’ (Wilkinson et al., forthcoming). In Figure 28.1 I present a new typology for not only including FBOs beyond the FBDO, but that also takes the local as a key reference point for identifying who the relevant faith actors are. The typology also includes ‘regional/national’ faith actors, who sit between international and local in terms of their relative engagement with international development cooperation through organisations such as the UN.
While FBOs have become increasingly important for international development cooperation over the past 20 years, I have demonstrated how a particular type of FBO that resembles a secular NGO came to be the preferred partner for international development actors. Following decades of neglect, by the early 2000s there had been a ‘turn to religion’ in development, policy and practice. A key element of this ‘religious turn’ was a rise in publications that aimed to define what an FBO was as well as to outline the different types that existed. There have been two main contributions of this literature. First, it has demonstrated that there are a range of types of organisations beyond the formal FBDO that contribute to development and humanitarian action, from missionary organisations to religious political parties (Clarke, 2008), yet development donors rarely form partnerships with these organisations nor do they consider the contribution that they make to social welfare regimes of the countries they work in. Second, the literature on FBOs has developed typologies that locate different FBOs along a spectrum.
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according to how strongly faith manifests in different aspects of their work. Sider and Unruh argue that classifying FBOs in this way could help funders choose appropriate organizations with which to work and also help FBOs to understand and describe their religious character – ‘for purposes of strategic planning, fundraising, and evaluation’ (Sider and Unruh, 2004, p. 132). Despite the contributions of these typologies, I identify two limitations. The first limitation relates to the fact that plotting individual FBOs along a spectrum as to how faith manifests in their operations overlooks the way that FBOs ‘shift register’ and strategically adopt different positions along such a spectrum according to their audience. The second limitation relates to the lack of an explicit focus on the ‘local’ in most existing FBO typologies, even though LFAs have been the most marginalised from dominant FBO discourses while being amongst the most important actors for those affected by poverty, inequality and humanitarian crises. I suggest a new typology of ‘faith actors’ that takes the local as a key point of reference.

Notes

1 By ‘international development’ I am specifically referring to institutions and processes of development that emerged after World War II, led by Western nations, in particular the USA. More broadly, the term ‘development’ can be used to refer to impulses and initiatives to generate social and economic change to improve people’s lives with reference to different benchmarks of progress. These can exist in support of the international development project, opposed to it or parallel to it, led by individual governments and civil society.

2 Where NGO refers to non-governmental organisation.

3 International development and humanitarianism are related fields with many organisations carrying out both types of activity. Development usually refers to goals and activities that refer to processes of change that take place over time. Humanitarianism usually refers to activities that involve immediate responses to disasters or conflict.

4 This is the name given to the set of neo-liberal economic policies introduced by international financial institutions, under the influence of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in Washington, DC, to be applied to ‘developing’ countries to manage the ‘Third World Debt Crisis in the middle of the 1980s’ (Babb, 2013, p. 275). As Babb writes, it ‘specified both a goal and a policy instrument to achieve that goal. The goal was market-liberalizing reform in developing countries; the policy instrument was collaborative conditional lending by IFIs’ (Babb, 2013, p. 275).

5 International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the International Monetary Fund.


References


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