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Pushing the conceptual framework for religions and development forward

In the midst of the pandemic, this moment calls for a re-evaluation of the framings that have commonly been used in religions and development research and discourse. First, there has been an upswing in practical faith engagement work as development actors around the world have realized that faith actors can be an asset in a health emergency such as COVID-19. Second, the fields of humanitarian and development studies are questioned as never before as critiques of their colonial and racist underpinning grow. Third, writing and research in religions and development continues to fall into several ruts and there has not been a conceptual breakthrough in some time. The main ruts can be considered to be an interest in defining faith-based organizations and actors' roles in development, the assertion that faith matters to development, but it is often ignored or sidelined, and the assertion that there has been a surge of interest in religion, but this often leads to instrumentalization. These are now well-established points, but a lack of theorizing in the field of religions and development has led to the repetition of these points among scholars and a lack of forward direction to further our understanding. This paper outlines a new conceptual framework for the field, from a wide analysis of theoretical and empirical research. As religions and development work draws on many disciplines, this paper proposes a new conceptual framework for our field by analyzing the theories used by disciplines relevant to religions and development and drawing on theories used by scholars in this field but not yet integrated into a broader framework for the field overall. The result is a framework that pushes us to consider new ground, while affirming the common, but not yet definitively established, parameters of this field.

Keywords: religion, development, theoretical frameworks, critique, faith-based actors.

