The need for contextual analysis on the role of religion in the Swedish development cooperation

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Summary
This article aims to explore the role of religion in the Swedish Development Cooperation. Faith-based organisations (FBOs) have historically been social movements in development and in the forefront of service delivery and social justice, but religion as a societal phenomenon has until recently not been sufficiently taken into account by donors in international aid. But this is changing and religion is increasingly more visible in development policies. This raised interest at the global level can partly be explained by a shift in global politics and partly by a discursive transformation, a religious turn, within the social sciences, predominantly in Development Studies. Scholars and policy makers have also started to explore and analyse the influence of religion in development cooperation. It has been found that although FBOs have gained increased visibility, religion as a societal phenomenon has remained an invisible factor. Additionally, most analysis on religion has, until recently, taken its point of departure in the Global North. Most development actors, including the Swedish Government Agencies, have failed to comprehensively understand or recognize the importance of religion outside the dialogue with the Christian Aid Organisations. For those of us aware that religion influences norms, societies and politics at all levels and is a key dimension of poor people’s lives in all developing countries, this may sound surprising. The lack of knowledge about religion, religious practices and beliefs has been a hindrance to the development process. If there was a greater understanding about the role of religion in the context of development, better results would be achieved and development work would be relevant and thereby more efficient.

Introduction
Globally, the role of religion in public life has been radically reassessed. Religious agents have been experiencing somewhat of a renaissance as a consequence of a significant shift in global politics. The 9/11 attacks, and the new era of global terrorism, has led to a growing recognition of the role that religion plays in global politics, development and humanitarian assistance at the structural level. The subsequent ‘war on terror’, the Islamic State (IS) events in the Middle East and attacks by Boko Haram in Nigeria in parallel with growing xenophobia and islamophobia in Europe and elsewhere have all brought religion, in particular Islam and conservative forms of Christianity, to the center of foreign policy in general. Religion is today a key societal factor to consider in the shaping and implementation
of foreign policy and human rights agendas in connection to development cooperation globally. Sweden is currently moving in the direction to further support rights based development work and development programs aiming for freedom of religion and belief, interfaith dialogue and/or faith-based agents as part of the Swedish Development Cooperation. On behalf of the Swedish government, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) has taken a step in the direction of incorporating a directive on this, as part of the Sida strategy on democratic support to both faith-based and secular development agents. But a broader contextual analysis on the role of religion is still to be developed.

Christian FBOs have always played an important role in the Swedish Development Cooperation. Since the establishment of Sida, they have received a considerable amount of financial support. Swedish International Development Assistance is today channeled through these organisations as part of the Sida Civil Society Program. At present, four of the 14 core partners to Sida are Christian faith-based. Religious organisations (FBOs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and their global partners have in this context been considered legitimate actors in the local scene as voices of the poor and have long and extensive experience in development work.1 Over recent years, other FBOs like Islamic Relief have also entered the scene and started to channel Sida grants; in the case of Islamic Relief, through their membership in the Forum Syd.

Point of departure - defining religion

So who are the religious agents and what do we mean by religion? What do we find if we go beyond the formal structures of the FBOs in the Global North? Firstly we must take into account what role religion plays to the poor person’s identity by applying an intersectional approach. As a religious person or group you might be part of the country’s political and economic elite, or you might be a marginalised actor in political opposition. Working with a Rights-based approach in development implies that we have to be sensitive to the context: we need to avoid broad generalisations on religion. Secondly we have to be clear on how we define religion. In Sociology of religion we have historically classified religion into two main types: functional or substantive. Each represents a very distinct perspective on the nature and/or function of religion. For those who focus upon substantive or essentialist definitions, religion is largely about the content and religious beliefs. Examples include belief in gods, belief in spirits, or belief in something known as the sacred. For those who focus on functionalist definitions, religion is largely about what it does and what particular role religion has either in your social life or in your society at large. Hence we need a deeper and better informed discussion on both the content and the function of religion.2

One of these functions is the political role religion might play. It is extremely difficult to draw any clear line between development work and mission work because it takes place in the context of collaboration and
partnership between FBOs and religious groups in the Global North and the South. Therefore scholars such as Tønnessen invite us to see diaconia as an integral part of mission as well as mission as integrated in diaconia, rather than simplifying and asking FBOs to downplay their faith or organisational set-up of religious values. When analysing the function of religion, it is not enough to look at the definitions of an organisation in the Global North; one must also look at the international structures through which it works. Only by looking at the networks and structures in the Global South is it possible to gain a deeper understanding of the role of religion in international aid.3

There are numerous available developed typologies for a more structural analysis on religion in development. I argue that faith and religion are multi-dimensional concepts (in a similar way as political ideology), and can be expressed through a number of organisational features. Studies from development work with Christian FBOs reveal that faith can make a difference in: (1) Structural affiliation and governance; (2) Values and staff motivation; (3) Mission; (4) Strategy and theory of development; (5) Selection of partners and choice of beneficiaries; (6) Faith practices and teaching in programming; (7) Staffing and leadership; (8) Organisational culture and decision-making; (9) Constituency and sources of funding; and (10) External relationships. Other typologies also look more into the function of faith in the work of FBOs more broadly: Faith-permeated organisations; Faith-centered organisations; Faith-affiliated organisations; Faith-background organisations; and Faith-secular partnerships. Another way to analyse religion is through an analysis of varieties of public performance of religion,4 or through models classifying actors depending on how faith plays out (Passive, Active, Persuasive and Exclusive).5

Unfortunately, most tools and typologies are too focused on the FBOs, and take its starting point in the Global North. Hence we need to develop new tools for analysing the role of religion in the Global South and in relation to other societal processes.

Religion through structures more than through individuals

When religion is discussed, policy makers and scholars often fail to pay attention to the political and religious role religious organisations (FBOs) might play. This includes question on what role religion and faith will play for secular development initiatives and how it all plays out in the Global South. There is a tendency among policy-makers and researchers to confuse individual promotion and inclusion of private beliefs with contextual analysis of religion and religious actors more structurally.

So how come the development work of FBOs is so highly valued when channeling development assistance, while religion as a societal phenomenon is kept out of the picture? I would argue that the secularization norm in the Swedish society has fostered a kind of religious illiteracy that is widespread today. Many have lost the terminology for talking about beliefs and religious
issues in a contextual and structural way. Hence many regard religion as having relevance only at an individual level rather than at structural level which would never be the case when, for example, analysing gender, trade relations or political ideologies. So the key explanation is that we are lacking experience and deeper contextual understanding. Until now, there has been neither a comprehensive policy in place within the Swedish Government, nor any common research initiative exploring the role of religion; hence, there is an urgent need for contextual analysis on the role of religion in Swedish Development Cooperation. Deeper knowledge and more informed analyses have to influence practical action, especially at the Swedish embassies in the recipient countries in the Global South.

In order to recognize the impact of religion, one needs to look at the role of religion through structures rather than through individuals. One must move beyond a focus on international FBOs and how they define themselves, focusing instead on their partners and their cooperating structures as well as the societal contexts in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the impact of religion in the Global South. Religion is not an isolated factor in the private sphere but a key dimension in the public sphere.6

Religion and development politics are closely linked in complicated ways, making this a very complex issue to analyse.7 This is because development cooperation takes place in the context of collaboration and partnership between religious actors in the Global North and the South through global networks. The development work of FBOs is also based on a holistic approach. As most religions do not make a separation between the material and the spiritual realm of life, development is often not solely looked upon as material progress and economic growth, but in a more multi-dimensional way. In many cases, religious actors utilise social capital generated through religious practice and belief for social development and it becomes hard to separate the two. However, in order to follow guidelines and to survive in a secular aid context, many FBOs (both Christian and Muslim) in Europe have downplayed their faith identity and not developed these aspects of their work. Sida has engaged in informal dialogues between Sida civil servants and FBO representatives on the matter of how to combine and/or separate development work and faith but until now there is still a prevailing uncertainty from both parts (Sida and FBOs).

From religious taboo to increased interest?
The modernization thesis whereby religion was supposed to decline in importance has been proven wrong over and over again. But have we moved away from a religious taboo in humanities and social sciences to an increased interest? Or are we still stuck in prejudiced views on religion globally? Today growth of followers within the world religions is largely taking place in the Global South. The PEW Forum has shown that around 62% of the world’s Muslims live in South and Southeast Asia, with over 1 billion adherents. Indonesia is the home of 12.7% of the
world’s Muslims. Brazil and Mexico have the world’s third- and fourth-largest Catholic populations. Next comes the Philippines and United States. By all accounts, Pentecostalism and related charismatic movements represent one of the fastest-growing segments of global Christianity. Tens of millions of Latin Americans have left the Roman Catholic Church in recent decades and embraced Pentecostal Christianity. With 300 million followers worldwide, of which a large amount are based in Africa and Latin America, Pentecostalism is now a global concept.

If you also include other Protestant Charismatic movements we’re talking about a global movement of 500 million with elements such as spiritually renewing “gifts of the Holy Spirit” with speaking in tongues, divine healing and prophesying. Indeed, in five nations (Brazil, Chile, Guatemala, Kenya and the Philippines) more than two-thirds of Protestants are either Pentecostal or charismatic. In Nigeria, Charismatic Christians account for six-in-ten Protestants. Even though indigenous and ancient beliefs and traditions are still influential and integrated in contemporary religious life to a high extent, the religious landscape is very different today. Nevertheless, the development aid has, to a large extent, kept old perceptions and views on religion, which would never be the case when analysing market and private sector development. Due to global transformation it is no longer correct to say that Christianity is mainly driven from the West or that Islam is influenced solidly from the Middle East. Both world religions are transformed and highly influenced by social and political change taking place in South America, Africa and Asia, outside the “North and the West”.

There is an increased donor interest to understand the role of faith in development. But according to my interpretation of current development discourse within Sida, religion is still being viewed by many in the Swedish development context as potentially divisive and politically sensitive. In other words, religion as a phenomenon and FBOs as actors are still viewed as bringing considerable tensions, and if Sida supports one group, this could potentially upset another. Religious agents are also perceived by many as primarily competing for followers, thereby generating or contributing to conflicts within society. So why are some still perceiving religion as so sensitive and so problematic? I argue that because of a lack of contextual analysis on the role of religion, policy makers tend to view religion either in an over-generalised and simplistic way, or as being counter to modernization and counter to the kinds of developments that are being promoted by the Swedish Government. Gender equality as a mainstream perspective in the Swedish Development Cooperation is a good example of this.

Religion is also looked upon in a personal way, whereby the personal belief of a policy maker or development worker becomes central to the handling of the role of religion and religious actors in practice. Religion must therefore be better analysed in a more nuanced way without making broad generalisations and simplifications; the contextual analysis of religion should never be limited to a personal matter of a desk officer.
Obviously different faith-based agencies will come to different decisions on how to handle faith in these critical areas; this is what theory of change is all about. Some will interpret faith more broadly or narrowly than others. Religion and religious agents will often do harm but also contribute a lot to development and there is no clear solution one way or the other.

The conclusion is that the contextual analysis of the role of religion in development cooperation is a major requirement for understanding the context and thereby for reaching sustainable results. When a society is changing and becomes globalized, urbanized and further developed, religious life also changes, yet does not diminish in importance. It is true that development research with a focus on social capital, human development and human rights perspective has discovered this by placing religion and religious actors’ within civil society politics but this is only one aspect of religion. FBOs have gained increased visibility, financing and growth.

There are several examples of this at a global level, not least by the initiation of the global Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics (DVVE). DVVE, founded in 2000, is working with FBOs to reduce poverty in developing countries. The World Bank established a dialogue as far back as 1998 between faith leaders and the development agencies. As a result the World Bank published a series of studies called ‘Voices of the Poor’ that added weight to the role of religion in development and especially the work FBOs do in the developing world. Other European government aid departments are also seeking to develop their understanding in this area. Sida has initiated a number of seminars and workshops to explore the ‘The Role of Religion in Development Cooperation’, at the Sida Partnership Forum as well as a public seminar at the Sida headquarters: a so-called “Development Talk”. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights appointed a Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance in 2000, and the UN Human Rights Council extended the mandate for the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief in 2013. Furthermore, through the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations has started to more actively promote cooperation with faith-based organisations in the areas of health, social policy, poverty reduction and gender. Additionally, Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) in the Global South have benefited FBOs, enabling them to step in as key actors, thus ensuring social service delivery and realisation of health and educational rights for poor and socially excluded groups within development countries.

How should we interpret this development? Firstly, the assumption that increased modernization would lead to secularization needs to be reconsidered. Religion still seems to be an issue of social and political importance, however now appearing in new arenas than earlier in history. As a sociologist of religion, I would argue that it is a two-sided process. Religion influences society but society also influences religion. Societal change has a huge impact on religion and religious actors; hence we need an improved understanding of the interaction between religion and current
social transformation. A key factor is that religious actors are situated in separate social, political and cultural spheres, thereby world religions should not be grouped together.

Statistics from the World Value Survey reveal that independently of specific religions and religious practice, values will differ across different countries. Confucian Asia, Protestant Europe and the English-speaking West are dominated by secular-rational and self-expression values. Similarly, survival and traditional values are predominant in Africa and South Asia; therefore an informed analysis can only be accomplished by studies on how the place of religion in the public sphere is negotiated within, for example the social sector, cultural practice, the political system and the media. Religion should not be looked upon as an isolated static factor. To quote Beckford “the greatest challenge for social scientists today is to realise that religious movements, far from being necessarily deviant or marginal, are an integral part of social and cultural change”.

Since religious agents are not simply the effects of external forces but also observers and critics of their own development, we should be open to the possibility that the conventional boundaries between religion, politics and ideology could be re-drawn in order to better understand particular situations in development processes.

The role of religion in development
- from a policy issue into a research question

My personal view is that the role of religion in Swedish Development Cooperation has evolved from a policy issue into a research question. In fact the notion and norm of secularism in development work in the Swedish context was first questioned by the FBOs themselves. So while development researchers in Sweden kept regarding religion as a marginal phenomenon within Civil Society discourses and development, religious actors themselves stepped up and started to jointly explore this perspective.

In this process, there is a contested notion whether FBOs ought to be as generalised as they are in today’s development discourses. Too often, sweeping and excessively generalized descriptions appears. As we know from the development dialogue, there are some core arguments for supporting FBOs. In fact what we have seen over recent decades is that FBOs often have the strength of commitment to increase development and fight poverty. For example, FBOs have some of the largest distribution systems in place for reaching the poor: the health infrastructure at the Panzi hospital in the DRC was in place long before the greater UN humanitarian operations started because of a well-established partnership between Pingstmissionens Utvecklingssamarbete (PMU InterLife) and Communauté des Eglises de Pentecôte en Afrique Centrale (CEPAC) that goes back as far as the 1930s. Fighting poverty is at the core of most of the major religious traditions in the world. There are several practices and
beliefs within Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism, for example, which are focused very much on improving the life of the poor. It is also argued by some that FBOs hold the potential of empowering socially excluded groups, when offering socially excluded opportunities to enhance their human capital and acquire skills of political participation. In this way, FBOs can provide the necessary tools for both stability and social change since they carry the potential of demonstrating pragmatic solidarity with the poorest while at the same time advocating on their behalf for the best social services.

On the other hand, religious actors and communities with strong social capital also hold the danger of exercising tight control over their members, resulting in increased levels of conformity and inclusion/exclusion mechanisms and potential restriction of other human rights. In this regard, religiously generated social capital can also reproduce, rather than tackle inequalities, as those with access to decision-making processes and resources build on and strengthen their position to the exclusion of those who do not. One interesting question is therefore: who benefits from the social capital that is generated by FBOs and religious actors more broadly? While there is considerable evidence which indicates that religion is a major generator of social capital, there still remain a variety of questions as to what extent religious social capital has social benefits outside the congregation and the surrounding setting itself, and its relationship to the state and wider society in different contexts.

However, even though the discussion arises as a policy issue on the role of FBOs in development, the discussion should not be limited to that area. Religion as a societal phenomenon is still relevant to focus on beyond the function of the FBOs. Statistics from the PEW Forum on religion and public life reveal how important religion is to a majority of the people in developing countries. For example, belief in only one God and Muhammad as His Prophet is a unifying foundation for Muslim identity around the globe. In sub-Saharan Africa, overwhelming percentages say religion is very important to them. In Senegal, Ghana, Cameroon, Guinea Bissau, Kenya and Tanzania, 95% or more share this assessment. Similar attitudes are widespread among Muslims in Southeast Asia, where nine-in-ten or more in Indonesia (93%) and Malaysia (93%) attest to the centrality of religion in their lives. In the South Asian countries of Pakistan and Afghanistan, overwhelming percentages (94% and 92%, respectively) say religion is very important to them. In sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia and South Asia, at least eight-in-ten Muslims in every country surveyed say that religion is very important in their lives.

This is also evident from my own empirical study in Tanzania where religion is central to development in all areas of society, not only concerning religious beliefs and values, but also in social service delivery. Through Public Private Partnership between religious organisations and local governments, religious organisations are responsible for delivering about 40% of all health care services. Similar numbers are valid for the
educational sector. In political life, religious actors are closely linked to the Tanzanian Government in complex ways; for example, both umbrella organisations for Islam and Christianity have jointly developed “Preacher’s Guides” with the Tanzanian Government on how to instruct religious leaders to incorporate public messages and information into religious preaching. In the private sector, leading companies such as Azam Ferries are encouraging travellers to participate in Muslim prayers and to follow the five pillars of Islam while enjoying the ferry ride. Hence one of the main arguments in this article is that religion is more or less present everywhere, and that religion influences norms and politics at all levels, and is a key dimension of poor people’s lives. A fundamental principal in the Right-based approach is the question of legitimacy. If we are serious about hearing the voices of the poor, some of the voices will likely contain religious messages. It is therefore time for all actors within the Swedish Development Cooperation to ask if the civil society partners in the Global South truly reflect the voices of the marginalised people. If not, how can new ways be found to initiate a better dialogue with religious actors on the ground?

As I have argued, FBOs are widely present almost throughout the world, and they are often well-established community organisations, particularly in places with the weakest-level government structure or with the weakest infrastructure. However there has been too much focus on the added value of working with FBOs in terms of gained infrastructure, social service delivery, and global networks while tending to ignore their function as critical collective voices from the ground. As a critical voice or value guardian, religious actors can act as defenders of, and advocates for, various human values. If the value guardian role comes into conflict with the existing political regime and is actively expressed, it can turn into a direct political role: in theological language, this is often called a prophetic-critical role. Within Sociology of religion studies, this has been labelled a prophetic or political diaconia, as it means to demand political action and is an unexplored field within the Swedish Development Cooperation.

In summary, it is not possible to make any broad generalisations on the role and function of religion since it differs from one societal context to another. If Swedish Development Cooperation wants to make a difference, it has to better understand the contexts in which faith and religion are significant for people. By understanding the role of religion, political processes and societal developments can be better understood. It is crucial for Sida and other development actors to develop tools for enhanced analysis on the role of religion in development cooperation. One way to address this is to add religion as a main factor in Sida’s guide to power analysis and create guidelines for deeper analysis on religion among Sida’s core partner organisations. Sida has already made a first step in the right direction by including the need for a contextual analysis of religion in the Sida Civil Society strategy for 2016 – 2019.
Policy recommendations

A more systematic approach and understanding of how and why people engage with religion is a prerequisite if development actors in the Swedish Development Cooperation want to achieve improved societal change and impact in development cooperation. Religion as a driving force can take many different forms of expression, from counter-hegemonic movements for radical social change, to fundamentalist projects striving to establish or strengthen conservative social orders. In order to strengthen the Swedish Development Cooperation, I would suggest the following:

- To further mainstream religion as a factor in Sida’s guide to power analysis.
- Integrate methodologies for the preparation, implementation and evaluation of policies with a greater focus on religion in the Swedish Development Cooperation.
- Contextual analysis on the role of religion should not remain limited to FBOs but should be considered a priority mainstream issue for all actors within Swedish Development Cooperation, including in country strategies at Development Units/Sida offices at the Embassies in the fields.
- Earmark research funding for the study on the role of religion and religious actors in development policy and practice in the framework of Swedish Development Cooperation.
- Bridge the gap between policy and practice and the North/South divide by analysing the role of religion jointly with researchers from developing countries through mutual research collaboration with African and Asian universities.