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Opinion
Inclusive Development

Opinion: Why religious literacy matters in the aid industry

The extent to which development practitioners view the significance of religion in their work varies greatly across institutions and individuals. Why should "religious literacy" be considered a key skill?

*By **Seiko Kanda** // 30 August 2024*

Why should "religious literacy" be considered a key skill? Photo by: Monstera Production

Two decades have passed since the development sector's "turn to religion." Yet despite the increasing number of seminars and reports addressing the intersection between religion and global development, many practitioners still view engagement with religion as a "tricky" topic, resulting in a general aversion toward it.

Having worked in a secular Japanese government development body before joining a faith-based NGO, I am often struck by how much our government agency could have benefited from greater religious literacy among its workers. The inability to take religion's role seriously in international development can lead to avoidance, mockery, or oversimplified explanations. This, in turn, means missing opportunities to fully explore the potential of what international cooperation can achieve.

With approximately 85% of the global population adhering to some form of religion, especially in lower-income areas, it is a given that religious beliefs, individuals, and institutions play important roles in international development work in many, if not all, settings.

Secular development agencies and donors recognize that religion is something aid workers have to be in contact with; at the very least, they are supposed to show some understanding. But in reality, the term “tolerance” often seems more appropriate to describe the prevailing attitude.

Therefore, it is no wonder that among the various skill sets sought after by development professionals, religious literacy seldom garners attention. Opportunities to improve this skill seem even scarcer.

Why religious literacy?

So, why do we need to talk about religious literacy?

The connotation and perception of the term "religion" differ from society to society. In Japan, the topic of religion often evokes a sense of taboo and even fear, especially given social problems and events involving religious organizations. The alleged connection between the Unification Church’s practice of collecting “excessive” donations and former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s assassination in 2022 is a prime example.

As the negative and problematic aspects of religions tend to be highlighted by the media, there’s a noticeable inclination to sidestep discussions on religion among my development peers. Many innocently view religion as a feature of the communities they work with in low-income settings, to be addressed only when absolutely necessary to achieve development goals. This perspective is probably not unique to Japanese practitioners alone, but seems to reflect a broader trend within the development industry, where secularism is the norm.

This somewhat condescending view among secular practitioners toward individuals with religious affiliations could rightfully be criticized from a post-colonial development perspective, revealing a misunderstanding of secularism as inherently neutral and objective.

If learning foreign languages is an important skill for individuals involved in international development work … I believe religious literacy is just as crucial, if not more so.”

— Seiko Kanda, program coordinator, World Vision Japan

However, I believe the fundamental challenge is not about such attitudes toward religions, but rather a broader lack of skills and sensitivity in engaging with what is, for many, the most powerful source of meaning and purpose in life. In times when “development” is far from a given reality, but a future to be sought after by collective efforts and imagination, it is a mandate for development professionals to seek to understand the worldview of others.

In my experience, whether in inclusive education in the Middle East, farmer income diversification in Africa, or advocacy work in Latin America, truly positive and lasting change rarely occurs without deep and personal connections among those involved. In contrast, witnessing professionals in

international aid — especially those from industrialized countries — tiptoeing around issues of identity and values has left me with a question: Are we not prepared to connect with our neighbors, whose religious values and traditions shape an essential part of who they are?

When disdain and avoidance — or tolerance at best — are the initial reactions to anything religious, we are likely missing opportunities to learn from and engage with partners in our work. If we seriously seek to establish fair relationships with local partners, as co-creators of a better future, we need the basic capacity to intentionally — and not merely tolerantly — address the roles of faith at the table.

What defines practical religious literacy?

What should religious literacy entail, then? What basic knowledge or capacity can benefit our efforts to move from tolerance to genuine engagement with others' faith, contributing to development and humanitarian work?

As I have alluded to so far, religious literacy is not merely about memorizing facts concerning major religious traditions, but is more importantly about developing the competency to communicate and establish connections with people from diverse spiritual backgrounds.

In other words, we, aid workers, need to understand the significance and relevance of religious beliefs as well as secular worldviews, in ways that help individual practitioners reflect on the meaning and purpose of their work in an increasingly complex world. The intricate challenges we face today demand our collaborative efforts to envision the goals of development projects together.

Opinion: The world is becoming more religious. That matters for development

As locally embedded institutions, faith groups can sow the seeds for long-term systems change and be key in a decolonized approach to development.

Religious literacy also centers around listening and asking the right questions at the right time. Basic knowledge about things such as the content of sacred scripts or religious teachings does matter, but much more important is being able to openly listen, and to have a willingness to see issues in a new light.

To enhance our understanding of others, the complexities of religion should inform our communication skills. Internal diversity within religious and "secular" traditions is often ignored, as well as the fluid nature of religion — namely, the fact that individual faith can evolve over time and may involve uncertainty and nuanced perspectives. Avoiding simplified understandings that are common among outsiders leads to greater mutual understanding.

If this competency is to be primarily used for fostering meaningful encounters and interactions among partners — whether donors, governments, or international and local groups — religious literacy should also include a better understanding of one's own belief system, whether religious or secular, especially how it can be described from outside the tradition. Efforts to have an objective perspective of ourselves help us observe not only our own but also our neighbor's ethical, epistemological, and spiritual frameworks, often with reduced bias.

Increasingly necessary skills

With the climate crisis, the pandemic, and the push for localization in the aid industry consistently warning against growth-oriented global economic development, the task of defining “development” continuously demands imagination and creativity, fostered by deeper dialogue.

To become religiously literate means to become better skilled in listening to the nuanced voices and deeply held values of other partners, and in constantly questioning and examining the direction and impacts of development work.

If learning foreign languages is an important skill for individuals involved in international development work as they engage with their cross-cultural counterparts, I believe religious literacy is just as crucial, if not more so.

Editor’s note: *The opinions expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not reflect the views of any affiliated organizations.*

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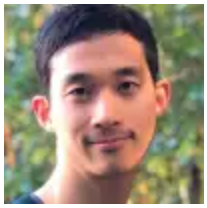
About the author



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