

● LATEST NEWS FROM THE FOUNDATION

Poverty and Conflict: Faith as a Solution or Cause?



Johnny Greig

Poverty and Conflict: Faith as a Solution or Cause? was the third seminar in the faith and development seminar series "New Perspectives on Faith and Development" which is being jointly hosted by The Tony Blair Faith Foundation, DIFID, Islamic Relief, World Vision and Oxfam and in association with the RSA.

This was a fascinating and wide ranging debate, packed with different perspectives on whether faith can be seen as a solution or cause in relation to conflict. And whilst one of the panellists could answer "The easy and obvious answer is that they do both", when the evenings chair called the evening to a close there were many questions still left to explore. Baroness Chalker, former Minister of State for Overseas Development gave the audience instances where she felt faith had made a positive contribution to development and consequently peace. However she was frank about the contradictory role religious communities can play in conflict and talked honestly about the deep challenge to her personal faith when Rwandans were herded to their death in churches during the genocide. Yet it was faith groups who are helping to rebuild the lives of victims today.

The contradictions did not stop here. Edicio dela Torre, a former political prisoner and Catholic priest, offered the instance of a guerrilla soldier in the Phillipines being asked how his actions could sit with his Christian beliefs who replied that guerrilla warfare was "simultaneously just and sinful", on one hand his actions killed but in another saved. He used the title of a statement from Latin American Bishops made some forty years ago, "Between Honesty and Hope", to describe where faith communities should stand today.



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Edicio emphasised the link between justice and peace and the importance of "intra-faith dialogue" asking the question what were the preconditions for the positive forces within faith communities to be realised. This link between fairness, justice, rights and conflict prevention lay at the heart of the evening's discussion. Katherine Marshall (a senior advisor to the World Bank) identified the theme of no security without justice as the thread running through all the evenings' contributions. Bedreldin Shutta, (Head of Asian Region at Islamic Relief) focused on the imperatives within the Islamic Faith to work for mediation, fairness and dignity as a means to achieve peace.

Gerrie Ter Haar explored the complexity of defining human rights given they are so deeply embedded in a cultural and religious context. She highlighted the danger of conflict mediators and development workers ignoring the strength of local authority structures and acknowledges that belief can be a factor in conflict. This demands a deep understanding of beliefs and an engagement with those who hold them. Dialogue was too often "I speak, you agree".

Katherine Marshall underlined the growing concern at failed states as the arena in which faith communities could play an important role and acknowledged a point from the audience that overpopulation could be a causal factor for conflict and the importance of child spacing in reducing poverty and conflict.

The complexity of the interaction between faith, poverty and conflict had become apparent by the end of the evening. Dialogue was needed between communities on the ground and development workers, between faiths but also within them with rootedness in a religious tradition. As Edicio said: "You do not start building a bridge from the middle, you need to have solid pillars on the bank before they can extend outwards".

The Guardian is hosting the discussion online on 'Comment is free: belief', where you can find edited versions of the speeches and lively discussion about them, [click here to take part](#).

Seminar schedule

Tuesday 20 October: Health and Education - Where Faith Fits?

Keynote Speaker: Douglas Alexander

Chair: David Aaronovitch

Discussants: Matthew Frost, Rudo Kwaramba, Richard Dowden

Wednesday 4 November : Towards a Sustainable Environment: What Can Faith Teach Us?

Keynote Speaker: Satish Kumar

Chair: Joel Edwards

Discussants: Andy Atkins, Mark Dowd and Michael McCarthy

Thursday 12 November: Closing keynote address

Keynote Speaker: Dr Rowan Williams

Chair: Rabbi David Rosen