

THE WORLD BANK ENGAGES WITH FAITH INSTITUTIONS: ON THE NEED TO SHIFT GEARS

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Abstract: In an effort to identify convergent agendas for cooperation, the World Bank has been engaging with faith institutions over different issues, such as the fight against poverty and diseases and the quest for a more humane approach to economic globalization. Cooperation, however, could run much deeper and give rise to much less contingent partnerships between the two parties. The purpose of this paper is to explain how. This will also allow me to show how major foundations that run programs on religion, culture and society as well as academia can work together with multilateral economic agencies to produce organizational change within the latter.

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Introduction

In an effort to identify convergent agendas for cooperation, the World Bank has been engaging with faith institutions over different issues, such as the fight against poverty and diseases and the quest for a more humane approach to economic globalization. Cooperation, however, could run much deeper and give rise to much less contingent partnerships between the two parties. The purpose of this paper is to explain how.

Whenever the market turns it into a full-blown secular religion, economic policy-making drifts into dogma; the processes of institutional diffusion that accompany economic globalization take up the traits of a crusade of faith; and the public sphere gets too stiff and too polarized to allow genuine deliberation, the diversity of opinions that are articulated throughout society shrinks and pluralism suffers. The religious transformation of the market sphere is undesirable for both parties. For faith institutions it constitutes a symbolic threat against historical religions and a latent source for civilizational clash while for economic agencies it represents a departure from economic rationality and a hindrance to policy learning. By cooperating with faith institutions, economic agencies, such as the World Bank, can build institutional capacity to detect the latent transformation of the market into a secular religion. They can work out the mechanisms to prevent it. And when such transformation turns out to be unavoidable, they can identify frames that allow an open ‘inter-religious dialogue’ between market institutions and other spheres of social life that function according to different systems of belief and practice. Faith institutions, in turn, can neutralize the symbolic threat to their gods that is inherent in a market turned into a secular god and can contribute to further open economic institutions to civil society.

Since the in-house institutional capacities and the incentives that exist in economic agencies may be insufficient to produce a gear-shift in their forms of cooperation with faith institutions, major foundations that run programs on religion, culture and society as well as academia can relevantly contribute to produce organizational change in this direction.

Before proceeding, I will lay out the structure of my argument. I will start by briefly reviewing the reasons that have led the World Bank to engage with faith institutions and the philosophy of its Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics Unit. I will then point to the chances for deeper cooperation that the Bank’s institutional practice has lately opened up vis a vis faith institutions, and discuss the conditions that may allow the Bank to shift gears in that direction. I will then conclude by suggesting how foundations and academia may come together with multilateral agencies to catalyze such a gear shift.

The World Bank partners up with faith institutions

During James Wolfensohn’s presidency, the World Bank started to systematically engage with faith institutions by establishing its Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics Unit.¹ This section will briefly introduce the philosophy of the Unit with the purpose of showing that the chance for a much deeper cooperation with faith institutions is already

¹ Katherine Marshall has acknowledged that the World Bank’s engagement with faith-based groups has been “largely due to the personal leadership and commitment of the President, Jim Wolfensohn.” See *The World Bank* (2004).

inherent in the current engagement practices of the Unit. To produce an actual gear-shift in the relations between the two parties, though, a richer conceptual framework is needed to guide institutional practice.

The Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics Unit belongs to the Human Development Network Vice-Presidency of the World Bank. It primarily engages with faith institutions over development issues and over the ethical dilemmas that are inherent in globalization. As Wolfensohn (2002) points out, development posits a number of ethical questions that call for multiple approaches and multiple perspectives to be properly dealt with: "Economics is not sufficient, nor is science, nor music nor literature. Breadth of vision, ability to see different perspectives, to engage in dialogue that goes beyond debate, beyond words, beyond explanation is the key." For this reason development calls for a "more "comprehensive," "holistic," and "integrated" vision. In an effort to gain it, the World Bank has increasingly engaged with civil society and through the Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics Unit the Bank has pursued "stronger, bolder partnerships" with faith institutions.² The Unit builds on the belief that "the deep-seated practical and ethical dilemmas that are part of the international development challenge ... are deeply rooted in cultures and different approaches, differences in religions, traditions, and values." (Marshall, 2002) It also acknowledges that on many issues such as poverty alleviation, a rights-based approach to education, social justice, welfare, and the meaning of progress religions have had a lot to contribute throughout history and that, as a result of it, they have been able to gain public trust, often above governments and other organizations (Marshall, 2003). Katherine Marshall, the Unit's director, has also stressed the importance of engaging with faith institutions in consideration of their role as influential critics as well as advocates of development and of their contribution to the mobilization "of energies and anger" in the current debate about globalization in support of some of the forces that push for social and economic change (Marshall, 2004a).

Many factors have contributed to the establishment of the Unit within the World Bank and to the possibility that the Bank thinks of itself and of faith institutions as "fellows of the road." (Marshall, 2003) First, the historical shift in the Bank's development philosophy that has laid increasing emphasis on human and social development has played a major role. To put it with Alfredo Sfeir-Younis, one could almost wonder whether a new "spiritual paradigm" currently guides the latest analysis of development (Marshall, 2003). Then, the new global consensus on poverty that surfaced in the Millennium Declaration, the ongoing rethinking within development studies about globalization, poverty, the role of the market economy and democracy, the explosive development of civil society, and the tragic events of September 11, 2001 have provided further ground for bringing the World Bank to work closer with faith institutions.

It is important to stress, though, that the progressive discovery of a potential terrain for convergence between the Bank and faith institutions is a rather recent accomplishment. After all, the literature has rarely accounted for the role of religion in development and the Bank's research has rarely taken religion explicitly into account. As Marshall (2004a) points out, the Bank has traditionally held unspoken assumptions with a

² See the homepage of the Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics at <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUTUS/PARTNERS/EXTDEVIALOGUE/0,,menuPK:64193238~pagePK:64192526~piPK:64192494~theSitePK:537298,00.html>.

negative cast on the role of religion in development, often echoing the perception among many development critics that religion is divisive, dangerous or defunct (Marshall, 2005). In particular, since the World Bank has historically avoided political interferences in the domestic affairs of member countries, and since it has permanently upheld the principle of separation between church and state, many within it have tended to believe that treading into the turf of faith might add unacceptable new risks to the Bank's practice. Also, many have felt that partnering up with religious leaders might hinder the development agenda as some of them may not necessarily be siding with modernization and social change. Finally, some have expected religion to decline with modernization and economic growth and have therefore considered it superfluous for the Bank to engage with faith institutions. As a result of such a set of beliefs, and despite the occasional contacts of many Bank staff members with the world of religion, – Marshall (2004a) continues –

most such engagement has been unheralded and unwritten, and thus outside the Bank's formal knowledge base. The upshot is that virtually no information or discussion about the relationship between religion and development, as seen by the World Bank, is in the public domain. We found that the Bank had little institutional knowledge of religious organizations, few institutional relationships, and almost no knowledge emerging from research.

Since the establishment of the Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics Unit the World Bank has progressively worked towards closing its knowledge gap on religion and religious organizations. Institutional analysis, however, has fallen short of institutional practice on one question that is crucial for the long term maintenance of partnerships between the Bank and faith institutions. In the rest of this section I will address this question, show in what way it may influence the interaction between the World Bank and faith institutions, and then discuss how the Bank's institutional practice has tackled it.

In one occasion Marshall (2004a) has referred to the tendency on the part of some to describe the Bank as religious because they think the Bank relies on a deep faith for an invisible force, like the market, because it preaches, because it appears as dogmatic, because it is perceived to be tempting people towards a material path. The religious transformation of such an economic agency as the World Bank does not seem to be an isolated phenomenon in market societies and Marshall seems to be aware of it. For example, in a different occasion she remarks that unrestricted free enterprise has occasionally been labeled by some as “worship of the market” and as “a god to selfish pursuits.” (Marshall 2004b) Despite that, institutional analysis within the Bank tends to fall short of systematically recognizing the full scope of such a latent religious transformation of the market sphere as well as its institutional relevance.

The possibility that in modern society religion may have undergone a process of transformation and displacement driving it underground and then having it resurface in other spheres, as Eliade (1959) puts it, as camouflaged mythology or degenerated ritualism, has been intensively debated for decades among philosophers, historians, political theorists and social theorists.

The theologian of secularization, Harvey Cox, for example, has drawn the attention to the myths of origin, the legends of the fall, and the doctrines of sin and redemption that covertly operate in public discourse about the economy. “The lexicon of The Wall Street

Journal and the business sections of *Time* and *Newsweek*” – says Cox (1999: 19) – “bear a striking resemblance to Genesis, the Epistle to the Romans, and Saint’s Augustine’s City of God.” Behind descriptions of market reform, monetary policy, and the convulsion of the Dow – he adds - it is possible to make out “pieces of a grand narrative about the inner meaning of human history, why things had gone wrong, and how to put them right.” The cultural anthropologist, Bill Maurer, in turn, has pushed this point even further as he set out to recover the theological unconscious of financial derivatives (Maurer, 2002).

A number of reflexive-minded economists have taken stock with the latent drift of their own discipline into the religious sphere. McCloskey, for example, has denounced economics as “modernist faith” with its own “Ten Commandments and Golden Rule,” its “nuns, bishops, and cathedrals,” its “trinity of fact, definition, and holy value,” its starting as a “crusading faith” and its later hardening “into ceremony.”³ Cramp (1994: 187) has argued that, to understand the economy, one needs the “knowledge of who we are and why we are here,” which is a fundamentally theological question. And Nelson (1991, 2001) has suggested that economics embodies a hidden metaphysics that provides a way of ordering, interpreting, and giving meaning to events, as well as a source of ultimate meaning and purpose for human beings. At the core of such metaphysics – he continues - there is the belief that scarcity is the primary cause of pain, suffering and death, and that by virtue of its inspirational power economics can save us from the consequences of scarcity. This gives economists moral ground to exercise today the authority that theologians used to exercise in the past (Nelson 1991: 8) and it is responsible for the ever-expanding role that economics and economists have taken up in modern society:

An economics devoid of theological significance would be cautious, hesitant, retiring – a pale imitation as compared with the central role of economic thinking in the events of the past three centuries. Only a religion, and not a mere system of ordering practical affairs, could have had such vast power to shape the modern era. Even when they intend otherwise, economists who join the economics profession may become part of the life and ritual of a community grounded in a powerful secular theology (Nelson 1994: 236).

Harvey Cox has suggested that the rise of an economic religion within market societies has unfolded against the background of a powerful economic theology that is comparable in scope, if not in depth, to that of Thomas Aquinas or Karl Barth. Within such a theology the Market occupies the place of an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God. Like God, it is enveloped by a divine aura of mystery and reverence. And like Calvin’s inscrutable deity, - Cox (1999) continues - the qualities of the market are not accessible to human rationality but only to true faith as evidence of things unseen, a faith that can go as far as immunizing the economist’s gaze from rationality itself and make him adopt Tertullian’s maxim - “*Credo quia absurdum est*” (“I believe because it is absurd”). Through an act of faith the economist will manage dissonance with reality. Following Saint Anselm, the economist will accept that “I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand: for this I also believe, that unless I believe, I will not understand” (Cramp, 1994: 187, 191). Cox also points

³ See in Nelson (2001: xx).

out that the Market has turned into a Yahweh of the Old Testament, a Supreme and uniquely true God before whom everyone is supposed to bow. It permeates everything around us but also everything within us. It has turned into a God - to tell it with Saint Paul - "in whom we live and move and have our being." This interpretation clearly echoes the reading that the economist Robert Nelson gives of the members of the third generation of the Chicago tradition such as Gary Becker, Robert Lucas, and Richard Posner:

Everything that happens in the world is said to be controlled by the economic forces of the market that replace the structural position of God. All the dimensions of life including altruism, love, political ideology boils down to the economic drive for individual gain (Nelson, 2001: 185-186).

Within the theologians' camp, liberation theologians have been the ones who have paid greatest attention to the operation within market societies of an economic religion. Hugo Assmann, for example, has remarked that "economic rationality 'kidnaps' and functionalizes essential aspects of Christianity ... it constitutes an economic religion that unchains an idolatric process" and segregates theological reflection to the ethical sphere (Assmann 1997: 27).⁴

Now, one may wonder why such a drift of the market and of market institutions into the religious sphere should at all be of any institutional interest for the World Bank as the Bank sets out to establish long-term partnerships with faith institutions. The transformation of the market into a secular religion constitutes both a symbolic and a power-institutional threat to historical religions as it implicitly threatens their God(s), their theological centers and their religious bureaucracies. As a result, even if economic agencies and faith institutions may join forces to fight against common enemies - poverty, hunger, diseases, and inequality - cooperation between them is bound to be a matter of opportunity and of opportunism. After all, in a world where the Market takes the place of God, economic agencies and faith institutions will ultimately face a zero-sum game whereby one party will win and the other will lose. For cooperation between the two parties to stretch beyond any contingent opportunism, it is necessary to do away with the possible perception on the part of faith institutions that the game between the two parties is zero-sum. This, in turn, requires that multilateral agencies credibly signal to faith institutions that they are not buying into the progressive transformation of the market into a secular religion and that their institutional action will not be functional to it. To do so, however, they will have to convince faith institutions that not only do they not need the transformation of the market into a secular religion but also that they have

⁴ Though liberation theologians tend to stress the idolatric nature of such economic religion, the pragmatics of the market would not seem to corroborate such interpretation. Idolatry lacks of a *deus absconditus*. As Sironneau (1982: 524-5) puts it, it lacks of the crucial internal tension between the need for the sacred to take a material form in order to manifest itself and the need to resist finitization through the embodiment in a material form. The Market, on the other hand, always keeps its fundamental ineffability. Economists will try to read it through divinatory practices it but will not necessarily manage to master it. For example, after the introduction of the Euro in Europe, the new currency started to lose value against the dollar. Economists tried to understand why that happened but ultimately they did not manage to come up with some consensual explanation. The Market, in other words, escaped their analytical grip. An idol, on the other hand, would have graciously conceded.

something to lose when such transformation takes its full course. One way to do it is by stressing that the transformation of economic knowledge into faith and of policy into dogma is an obstacle to institutional learning as it prevents economic agencies from seriously coming to terms with their policy mistakes. Also, by polarizing policy debates into the clash between irreconcilable visions of reality and into a matter of life or death, the religious transformation of the market precludes genuine policy deliberation.⁵ The public sphere will stiffen. The diversity of opinions that are articulated throughout society will shrink and pluralism will suffer. As a result, the public sphere will lose its capability of bringing together all arguments available within society that draw from different pieces of information. The information set upon which economic agencies can take their decisions will shrink and their capability of rationally weighing all policy options will therefore be compromised. In conclusion, economic agencies will lose in terms of institutional efficiency and civil society will lose in terms of pluralism, which in the end is what allows civil society to thrive.

It is important to stress, though, that the transformation of the Market into a secular religion turns into a greater threat against non-Western faiths if it loads the market with the imagery and the rituals of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In this case economic globalization will become inherently threatening from a cultural, or even civilizational, standpoint. This, in turn, will further exacerbate the perceived zero-sum nature of the interaction between Western multilateral economic agencies and non-Western faith institutions. To remove such hindrance to a systematic cooperation between the two parties, multilateral economic agencies will need to credibly signal to non-Western faith institutions that they have nothing to gain from the degeneration of economic globalization into a cultural crusade. One way to do it is by stressing that, particularly within non-Western contexts, (Western) multilateral agencies need to hear the local voices and get access to local knowledge in order to make informed policy decisions. As a result, they have a clear interest to resist the transformation of economic globalization into a cultural crusade as it turns out to silence those voices and to disrupt the channels of communication between the economic agency and its context of operation.

After arguing why multilateral economic agencies and faith institutions both within and outside Western contexts have a strong interest to resist the transformation of the market into a secular religion, it is necessary to ask whether cooperation between the two parties may be useful to resist such a phenomenon. I would suggest that indeed it may. Faith institutions have the knowledge and the tools to recognize the religious transformation of the market when it occurs. Such recognition on the part of multilateral agencies, in turn, is the first step agencies must take to credibly signal that they are not interested in reproducing such a phenomenon. Also, faith institutions that have engaged in inter-religious dialogue know how to communicate across radically different systems of belief and practice. This competence will therefore become particularly useful when the drift of the market into the religious sphere will appear to be inevitable and when, as a

⁵ During the transition to the European Monetary Union a reader of the *Financial Times* so summarized the reading of the Maastricht criteria by the European governments: "The difference between happiness and misery is a 0.2 per cent deficit of the gross domestic product! A 2.9 per cent deficit is fine and enables one to live in happiness and bliss, while a 3.1 per cent deficit condemns a country to chaos, misery, and eternal damnation." See *The Financial Times*, "No sense in strict 3% deficit as the magic figure for Emu. Letters to the Editor," June 3, 1997, USA Edition, p. 12.

result of it, economic agencies will need to keep the dialogue going with civil society and the public sphere open to public deliberation.

Now, the institutional practice that the Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics Unit has been establishing, particularly through its involvement with the Colloquium it helped to launch within the Fès Festival of World Sacred Music, seems to give exactly the above-mentioned signals.

The Fès Festival of World Sacred Music was launched in 1995. The World Bank participated since 2002 and funded the Fès Colloquium with the purpose of opening up a space for dialogue between the world views about globalization that are represented in the annual meetings of the World Economic Forum (Davos) and the World Social Forum (Porto Alegre). Marshall observes that, despite the variety of approaches to globalization issues that participated into the Colloquium, the dialogue at Fès managed to single out various practical, ethical and spiritual elements that turned out to constitute the common ground for people holding markedly different views:

There was a start to communication between some who described globalization as a vampire force, destroying traditional cultures, or as a juggernaut threatening fragile ecosystems, and others who reveled in their hopes for a world where frontiers to opportunity were broken down and prosperity helped to fulfill dreams of a just society (The World Bank, 2005).

The identification of common grounds with civil society, however, has not been the only result that the World Bank has been able to harvest from its active engagement with faith institutions at the Fès Colloquium. Also, the exchange at Fès has given the Bank a chance to sharpen up its practical understanding of dialogue across different systems of belief and practice, and has provided a platform from which the Bank has managed to let civil society know about its institutional commitment in this respect. Dialogue – says Marshall (2004c) –

is not explaining, not preaching, not debate, it is not just words; it needs links to action. It requires that we work to understand the perspectives and assumptions of those with whom we engage in dialogue. It also requires that we understand how they see us. This can be sobering but is an essential part of the process.

Also, dialogue implies “a willingness ... to be transformed by the exchange.”⁶ The call by Katherine Marshall for the World Bank to engage with groups that are controversial, to reach beyond the circles of the “converted” out to “those that are at the boundaries of tensions and conflicts” is consequential to such posture (Marshall, 2005) Obviously, the Bank will need to follow through by accordingly adjusting its modes of operation as well as the values, norms and imageries of its staff.

To recapitulate, through its active participation into the Fès Colloquium the World Bank has managed to show a practical commitment to resist the transformation of the debate over globalization into a Manichean battle between the forces of light and those of darkness. Also, it has indicated its interest in countering the negative consequences of

⁶ See the homepage of the Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics at <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUTUS/PARTNERS/EXTDEVIALOGUE/0,,menuPK:64193238~pagePK:64192526~piPK:64192494~theSitePK:537298,00.html>.

such transformation upon the public sphere by taking up a dialogic posture with civil society and by considering adjusting itself accordingly. By doing so, the World Bank has implicitly signaled that the transformation of the market into a secular religion does not do any good to its operation, and that the Bank can work together with faith institutions to resist such process or at least to neutralize its downsides.

Now, is such an institutional practice *per se* sufficient to overcome the incentives that may bias the Bank's interaction with faith institutions towards short-termed opportunistic cooperation? I would argue that it is not. A whole new body of analysis must be built in order to systematically back such practice and root it within the organization. In order to firmly establish the new dialogic practice, the Bank will need to be able to detect all dogmatic religious forms that may have crept both into its organization as well as into its contexts of operation. This, in turn, will call for a systematic analytical effort at recognizing the different ways in which religion may come to permeate – often quite invisibly - the economy and its institutions within modern societies. This, however, is a challenge that the World Bank cannot take alone with faith institutions. Academia must bring its contribution and those foundations that run programs on religion, culture and society must come in to wield faith institutions, multilateral agencies and academia into a common analytical and action agenda that can help catalyze a move in the above-mentioned direction. The purpose of the next section will be to flash out the general structure of one possible agenda.

Shifting gears in the cooperation between the World Bank and faith institutions

An action program geared to lay the foundations for long-term cooperation between multilateral economic agencies and faith institutions may develop through two stages.

Stage One will systematically document and analyze the latent secular religious transformation of the market in modern societies and its implications upon its institutions. It will identify general strategies that can counter the negative effects of such transformation upon economic institutions and the public sphere. And it will launch new exercises or support ongoing ones both at the institutional and at the societal level that can help pilot such strategies. To achieve this, it will bring together academia, faith institutions, multilateral economic agencies, and private corporations within the western world.

Stage Two will systematically account for the way western religious representations, identities and practices that are attached to western market institutions tend to play out along with the processes of institutional diffusion that accompany economic globalization. Special attention will be devoted to distinguishing between processes of institutional diffusion into western contexts and into non-Western contexts. This will provide a systematic basis of knowledge that will enable Western economic institutions to assess the cultural threat that may be inherent in the process of economic globalization. Stage Two will also design and pilot strategies that can help anticipate such threats and promote a culture-sensitive process of economic globalization. To achieve this, it will bring together academia,

faith institutions, multilateral economic agencies, and private corporations across the globe.

In conclusion, Marshall has recently suggested that development agencies and faith institutions have still much to do to enhance their mutual understanding, to clear out mutual misperceptions and myths, “to confront confrontations,” to learn from many successful experiences of partnerships and advocacy alliances, and to advance dialogue over various contentions issues (Marshall, 2004d). The purpose of this paper has been to flash out one further front of interaction between the two parties that is crucial to keep all the other fronts of exchange open in the long term and that has so far passed unperceived. This latter front can constitute a new terrain for cooperation that can bring together multilateral economic agencies, faith institutions, academia and those foundations that run programs on religion, culture and society.

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