

Does religion contribute to or inhibit social progress?

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Introduction. This article is devoted to recently published research presented by a consortium of scientists – the *International Panel on Social Progress* (IPSP). The text of the article has been compiled by combining extracts from two publications written by the co-authors: the first is the *Summary* of Chapter 16 of the IPSP final Report (2018); the second is a short article published on the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) Religion and Global Society blog. The authors interrogate the following questions: why, and in what ways, is religion relevant to the pursuit of social progress?

Materials and methods. The authors' approach to the problem of religion and social progress corresponds to the general research paradigm of the IPSP (a consortium of some 200 scholars). This International Panel came into existence to assess and synthesize the state-of-the-art knowledge that bears on social progress across a wide range of economic, political and cultural questions. The goal was to provide the target audience (individuals, movements, organizations, politicians, decision-makers and practitioners) with the best expertise that social science can offer.

Setting aside Enlightenment assumptions that progress is somehow built into history, the IPSP sought innovative ways to understand this better. The notion of a compass was deployed as a metaphor in the sense that it sets the line of travel, recognizing that the map in question is complex and the destination elusive. What is considered progress in one situation may be differently assessed in another.

Results. The study focused on five interconnected themes: the persistence of religion in the twenty-first century; the importance of context in discerning outcomes – underlining the role of social science in this; the urgent need for enhanced cultural competence and improved religious literacy; the significance of religion in initiating change; and – especially – the benefits of well-judged partnerships.

Conclusion. The authors argue that researchers and policy-makers pursuing social progress will benefit from careful attention to the power of religious ideas to motivate, of religious practices to shape ways of life, of religious communities to mobilize and extend the reach of social change, and of religious leaders and symbols to legitimate calls to action. The continuing need for critical but appreciative assessment and the demonstrable benefits of creative partnerships are our standout findings.

Key words: religion, faith communities, social progress, International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP), creative partnerships.

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Introduction

The consortium known as the International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP) brought together a wide range of social scientists concerned with diverse aspects of social progress in the modern world¹. In 2018 the panel produced a ground-breaking interdisciplinary Report on the need to understand better how social progress can be pursued – “Rethinking society for the 21st century”. The final three-volume Report was published by Cambridge University Press. The Report is made up of twenty-two chapters. Every chapter is co-signed by a multidisciplinary team of authors and represents the views of this team, not necessarily the views of the whole panel. In total, 269 authors have been involved, with about 60% of contributors coming, in roughly equal proportions, from economics, sociology, and political science, and the remainder representing other disciplines. Each chapter starts with a long summary of its contents, so as to help readers navigate the Report.

The third volume of the Report is devoted to transformations in cultures and values, with analyses of cultural trends linked to “modernization” and its pitfalls. One of these chapters is devoted to the complex relations between religion and social progress – *Chapter 16 “Religious communities, ideas and practices”*². Work on this chapter began in 2015 under the leadership of coordinating lead authors – Grace Davie and Nancy T. Ammerman. The chapter team also included: lead authors – Samia Huq, Lucian N. Leustean, Tarek Masoud, Suzanne Moon, Jacob K. Olupona, Vineeta Sinha, David A. Smilde, Linda Woodhead, Fenggang Yang; and contributing author – Gina Zurlo.

Based on this chapter, the coordinating lead authors prepared a **Summary – Religions and social progress: critical assessments and creative partnerships** [3], which underlines why many assumptions about religion in the modern world are counter-productive. Broad generalizations are unhelpful; instead, the specific cultural situations must be carefully analyzed case by case.

¹ International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP). URL: <https://www.ipsp.org/>

² Chapter 16 can be downloaded here: <https://www.ipsp.org/download/chapter-16-long-version> (long version); <https://www.ipsp.org/download/chapter-16> (report version).

In 2019 Davie and Ammerman jointly published a **short article** – “*A lived, situated and constantly changing reality*”: *Why religion is relevant to the pursuit of social progress* [5]. This article spells out the social scientific perspectives that were introduced in the Summary of Chapter 16¹.

The Pushkin State University Journal editorial board invited the co-authors of the Summary and the article in the LSE blog to republish extracts from these texts in the format of a complete article, for the purpose of familiarizing Russian scholars with the main ideas and conclusions of the project “Religions and social progress”. The texts were merged, like an amalgam, into a single article, the title of which is the key question of the social study of religion in the modern world: *Does religion contribute to or inhibit social progress?*

Materials and methods

Defining the task and defining religion

The first meeting of the IPSP took place in Istanbul in August 2015. It was a learning experience in every sense of the term. Not only was this the first time that the chapter team had come together, it was also the moment when we appreciated that significant sections of the social-scientific community were hesitant about the relationship between religion and social progress as we were learning to understand this. This hesitancy took two forms: either religion was irrelevant (i.e. no longer of significance), or it was negatively perceived – in other words inimical to social progress. The fact that religion was (or more accurately was deemed to be) ‘back’ was therefore a problem². We worked hard on finding ways to counter these at best partial, and at worst inaccurate, views starting with a clear definition of religion itself.

Escaping the limitations of a purely Western perspective was the first step. We argued that religion is more – much more – than the broad range of institutions and beliefs traditionally recognized by social science; it is rather a very much larger cultural domain that encompasses the beliefs and practice of the vast majority (over 80%) of the world’s population³.

¹ This publication is available on the website of The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), at a research-led interdisciplinary blog “Religion and Global Society”, which promotes an understanding of religion and its relevance in world affairs. URL: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2019/01/a-lived-situated-and-constantly-changing-reality-why-religion-is-relevant-to-the-pursuit-of-social-progress/> Note: This piece gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Religion and Global Society blog, nor of the LSE.

² See: [4], where Grace Davie explores religion’s renewed visibility in public life.

³ World religion database. Institute on culture, religion, and world affairs. Boston University. URL: <https://www.worldreligiondatabase.org/>

Religion is a lived, situated and constantly changing reality, and has as much to do with navigating everyday life as it does with the supernatural [1; 2]. It follows that secularity should be considered an equally fluid entity, whose distinction from religion will vary from place to place – a division decided more by the context in question than by a pre-determined essence. That said, we recognized that what we term humanity’s “limiting conditions” – death, suffering, injustice – are likely to be confronted and explained in religious terms across a wide range of societies.

From this starting point we developed our approach to the relationship between religion and social progress. Our task was to scour the available literature in order to document our case, but we began from the belief that neither good nor ill could be assumed from the outset.

We had rather to look case-by-case in different social and cultural domains, and in different parts of the world, to see what was happening on the ground. We were well aware that particular forms of religion were perceived negatively, sometimes rightly so. Without doubt religion can take forms that are destructive of people and places.

Elsewhere, however, religious individuals and religious communities are manifestly associated with the health and wellbeing of their respective societies – an entirely positive feature.

Expanding the field

In order to get a grip on this agenda, we worked ‘upwards’ from the micro to the macro. Specifically, we began with the most intimate of human relationships (i.e. those that relate to gender, sexuality and the family), appreciating that these have been moulded from time immemorial by religious rules, rituals, and prohibitions – some of which have advanced human flourishing, but many of which have not.

The subsequent sections of our research deal with political issues. The first addresses the question of diversity – looking (a) at its shape and forms in the late modern world, and (b) at its governance. The second confronts directly the much talked-of connections between religion and conflict.

Here the core argument is easily stated. To ask whether religion – or certain forms of religion – cause conflict or violence is not the most helpful approach. Much more constructive are enquiries that look systematically at the circumstances in which a violent outcome is likely. Contestation over physical spaces is one such, as is an excess of regulation which leads all too often to negative consequences for religious minorities. Even more important is the considerable evidence that weak or failed states (and the fragile economies associated with them) encourage – by default – vio-

lent and authoritarian attempts to restore order, irrespective of any religious factors that may be present.

There are two further substantive sections of our research. The first deals with the place of religion in the wellbeing of individuals and communities. A striking example can be used to illustrate the approach. Faced with the seeming impasse between secular health professionals and faith-based initiatives in parts of the developing world, a series of contributions in *The Lancet*¹ offers an evidenced-based way forward – one that favours partnership whenever possible. The second examines the role of faith-based organizations in caring for the earth itself (the most ‘macro’ in our scale of analysis). Again, a single example captures the potential. *Laudato Si’* – the second encyclical of Pope Francis – was published in 2015²; it has become a defining moment in the debate about climate change.

An action toolkit

An important place in our research was given to the development of an action toolkit, which found its rationale in a set of cross-cutting themes. These include the persistence of religion in the modern world; the importance of context in discerning outcomes (both positive and negative); the urgent need to enhance cultural competence (not least religious literacy) in different parts of the world; the significance of religion in initiating change; and the gains that accrue from effective collaboration.

The detail cannot be pursued here, but the following stand out. First is the continuing need for assessment and – where necessary – constructive criticism of the role religious ideas and actors might play, bearing in mind that social progress not only evolves but looks different in different places. Second are the demonstrable benefits of well-judged partnerships, noting that “well-judged” is the crucial word in this sentence.

¹ See: Faith and Health: Andrew Tomkins and Richard Lane discuss controversies in faith-based health care. *The Lancet*: July 7, 2015; Summerskill, W. and Horton, R. Faith-based delivery of science-based care; Understanding the roles of faith-based health-care providers in Africa: review of the evidence with a focus on magnitude, reach, cost, and satisfaction / Jill Olivier, Clarence Tsimo, Regina Gemignani, Mari Shoji, Harold Coulombe, Frank Dimmock, Minh Cong Nguyen, Harrison Hines, Edward J Mills, Joseph L Dieleman, Annie Haakenstad, Quentin Wodon; Controversies in faith and health care / Andrew Tomkins, Jean Duff, Atallah Fitzgibbon, Azza Karam, Edward J Mills, Keith Munnings, Sally Smith, Shreelata Rao Seshadri, Avraham Steinberg, Robert Vitillo, Philemon Yugi; Duff, Jean F. and Buckingham, Warren W. Strengthening of partnerships between the public sector and faith-based groups; Beyrer, Chr. The proper study of mankind. – these articles are in: *The Lancet*, 2015. Vol. 386, No. 10005. URL: <https://www.thelancet.com/series/faith-based-health-care>.

² *Laudato Si’* Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment and human ecology. URL: <https://laudatosi.com/watch>.

Results

The study starts from the premise that some 80 percent of the world's population affirms some kind of religious identification, a percentage that is growing rather than declining. Emphasizing the significance of belief and practice in everyday lives and local contexts, we analyze the impact of religion and its relevance to social progress in a wide variety of fields: family, gender, and sexuality; diversity and democracy; conflict and peace; everyday wellbeing; and care for the earth. We also identify a series of cross-cutting themes that establish a foundation for policy-making.

Our overall goal was to provide ways to assess the nature and significance of religion in the specific local contexts in which social progress is pursued. Careful assessment includes attention to everyday practices, not just official doctrines. We demonstrate that religion – understood as identity, practice, belief, or membership – may either facilitate or hinder social progress. In addition, religion is in itself a cultural good; thus, social progress must include nurturing spaces in which individuals and collectivities can pursue religious ends [6].

Examining family, gender, and sexuality, we affirm that domestic and gendered relationships have always been shaped by religious rules, rituals, and prohibitions. Here we offer tools for assessing both religious obstacles and the potential for partnership in the quest for progress in these most basic of social locations. Setting aside a lingering binary between secular progress and religious reaction is the first step. A burgeoning literature reveals both a strong defense of the nuclear family on the part of some religious organizations, but also progressive reinterpretations and tactical uses of existing tradition on the part of others.

Regarding diversity and democracy, there is a range of religious ecologies that arise from population movement and media connections. As multiple religious communities encounter each other, the goal remains constant: to discover how religiously diverse people learn to flourish in each other's company. This implies the development of governing structures that are accountable to, and representative of their citizens. We consider different understandings of multiculturalism, secularism, and democracy, noting that religious traditions themselves have capacities to promote democratic governance. Not least, "street-level ecumenism" (pragmatic cooperative activity) is often more effective than a dialogue between religious or secular elites.

Do religions feed conflict or promote peace? A clear conclusion emerges: religion is neither inherently violent nor inherently peaceful, but includes practices, beliefs, values, and institutions that can lead in either direction. A careful assessment of the particular context and the particular religions in play is likely to enhance social progress. Close attention is paid to sites – geographical, political, and social – of potential destructive violence and effective peace-making. The sometimes tense relation between human rights and religion is central to the discussion.

Religion also affects many dimensions of everyday wellbeing. Specifically, we argue that economic wellbeing, education, and healthcare are goals shared by religious groups and are often woven into religious worldviews. That said, there are many places where religious ideas and practices are at odds with secular norms. Finding common ground can be difficult, but well-chosen partnerships can vastly extend the reach of programs that enhance wellbeing. States, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), faith communities, and religiously-infused local cultures all have a role to play.

As far as “caring for the earth” is concerned, one must recognize that religious understandings of the earth and faith-based activism on behalf of the environment share much with secular groups. Once again, effective partnerships enhance the capacities of the diverse players in this field. More profoundly, at least some faith communities assert a moral stance which contests the very framing of “environment-as-resource” in global capitalist society, challenging thereby entrenched systems of power, knowledge, and technology [7].

Finally, our “action toolkit” captures the essence of the chapter. It starts by drawing the threads of the chapter together in five interconnected themes: the persistence of religion in the twenty-first century; the importance of context in discerning outcomes – underlining the role of social science in this; the urgent need for enhanced cultural competence and improved religious literacy; the significance of religion in initiating change; and – especially – the benefits of well-judged partnerships. Each of these themes concludes with an action toolkit¹.

Conclusion

In sum, we argue that researchers and policy-makers pursuing social progress will benefit from careful attention to the power of religious ideas to motivate, of religious practices to shape ways of life, of religious communities to mobilize and extend the reach of social change, and of religious leaders and symbols to legitimate calls to action. The continuing need for critical but appreciative assessment and the demonstrable benefits of creative partnerships are our standout findings.

¹ Further discussion of this topic took place in a panel discussion via Zoom in June, hosted by Friends of Europe – *The Role of Religion in the Pursuit of Social Progress: A Participatory Online Exchange*. Subject to discussion was the role of religion in the pursuit of social progress. The event was co-organized by the Bahá’í International Community (BIC), the Faith Centre of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), and the International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP). URL: <https://www.ipsp.org/announcements/the-role-of-religion-in-the-pursuit-of-social-progress-a-participatory-online-exchange>.

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Personal co-authors' contribution

Both authors were responsible for all aspects of the chapter on which this article is based. The text was agreed and signed by the chapter team as a whole.

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