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**Faith in development:
What difference does faith make for
Christian NGOs working in
Bangladesh?**

A research thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the Degree of

Master of International Development

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Julian Samuel Doorey

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Abstract

Religious organisations are the oldest social service networks known to humankind. However, the underlying topic of religion and development has been mostly ignored in development literature until more recently. Rapprochement between proponents of secular development and supporters of religious-based social transformation is called for. Some writers claim faith-based organisations (FBOs), of which Christian NGOs (CNGOs) are significant actors, add value, make distinctive contributions and offer comparative advantages over secular NGOs. Seven motivational, organisational and institutional advantages claimed are that FBOs: reach and are valued by the poorest, have a long-term presence and low costs, offer an alternative to secular development theory, and motivate voluntarism and civil-society advocacy. Three spiritual advantages claimed are that FBOs: offer spiritual / religious teaching; hope, meaning and purpose; and transcendent power (prayer). In contrast, two possible disadvantages claimed are that: religion is part of the problem for development and churches are difficult to work with. Other writers claim a lack of evidence regarding these claims.

My research investigated six CNGOs in Bangladesh, with the research question being: ‘How do Christian NGOs working in Bangladesh, a Muslim majority country, perceive that their faith identity influences their operating characteristics, making them distinctive from secular NGOs?’ This sought to determine if the operating characteristics that the literature claims attribute to FBOs, were applicable to the CNGOs. The research method was primarily deductive, using the CNGO research data to test existing literature definitions, typology and claims. With much FBO literature seemingly sourced from broadly Christian cultural contexts, this research expands on this by researching CNGOs in a Muslim majority country, home to a very small Christian minority. CNGO representatives were interviewed using a structured questionnaire including qualitative and quantitative questions.

The research findings conclude that the Bangladesh CNGOs’ faith identity critical to their vision and mission, results in some perceived differences compared with secular NGOs. These are found in the CNGOs’ operating characteristics including distinctive contributions (to various degrees) in the seven motivational, organisational and institutional ways and three spiritual ways, along with one of the two possible disadvantages, claimed in literature. However, claiming advantages (or disadvantages) for FBOs over secular NGOs, without better evidence, is subjective and prone to bias, reflecting the claimant’s positionality. The question of comparative advantage between NGOs of various types (faith-based or secular), requires a universal evaluation methodology able to assess and score any NGO operating in any project context. Until this exists, I suggest the literature claims of FBOs having comparative advantages (or disadvantages) should be reframed as distinctive operating characteristics.

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Glossary of Terms

Awami League	Bangladesh political party.
Bangla	Bangladesh national language.
Bangladesh	The land (<i>desh</i>) of the Bangla language speakers. Official title ‘People's Republic of Bangladesh’.
Bangladeshi	A person from Bangladesh. Ethnicity may be Bengali or Tribal. Bangladeshi is both singular and plural.
Chittagong Hill Tribes	Various ethnic groups located in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in south-east Bangladesh, bordering with Myanmar. The majority are Buddhists with some Hindus and Christians.
Jamaat-e-Islami	A socially conservative Islamic political organisation founded by Abul Ala Maududi, an Islamist socio-political philosopher and theologian, in British occupied India in 1941. The party exists in a number of countries, maintaining global links. The Bangladesh party is the biggest Islamist political party in the country, but after much violence in 2013, it was deregistered by the Supreme Court.
Microcredit	Credit-based small loans.
Patronage	The giving of advantage from a patron (individual or organisation) to a client (family, friends, ethnicity, political party or religion), while excluding others. The advantage could be encouragement, privilege, money, a job or some other opportunity resulting in advantage for the receiver. Political patronage typically involves the use of public resources to reward a person for their political support. In a patron-client relationship, the client is dependent on the patron who controls the resources.
Shia Islam	A smaller branch of Islam believing that the Islamic prophet Muhammad selected Ali ibn Abi Talib to be his successor. Refer to Sunni Islam.
Sunni Islam	Islam’s majority group believing that the Islamic prophet Muhammad did not select his successor. They believe Abu Bakr was the correct successor. Sunni and Shia disagree with each other’s views of who was Muhammad’s legitimate successor. This later developed into theological and political differences.
Urdu	Pakistan’s official language, imposed on Bangladesh during the time when Bangladesh was East Pakistan. It is also spoken by the Bihari people in Bangladesh, along with five states in India.

Glossary of Abbreviations

BNGOAB	Bangladesh Non-Government Organisation Affairs Bureau
CNGO	Christian NGO (usually refers to the six Bangladesh CNGOs involved in this research, although sometimes refers to CNGOs in general)
DC	District Commissioner (Government local representative)
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
FBO	Faith-Based Organisation (often operating in some sort of development way)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HDI	Human Development Index (UNDP)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
MDG	Millennium Development Goal (UN internationally agreed development goals from 2000 to 2015)
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
ODA	Official development assistance (provided by one or more countries)
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
PTA	Parent Teachers Association
RAD	Religion and Development
RMG	Ready Made Garment (clothing production factories)
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal (UN internationally agreed development goals from 2016)
SHG	Self-Help Group
SMC	School Management Committee
Tk	Taka (Bangladesh currency)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VDF	Village Development Forum (graduated self-help groups arranged into secondary level People's Institutions to enable a long-term mentoring and monitoring presence)