Objectionable Beliefs?:
Religion, Business and Conflict

Edmund Terence Gomez
University of Malaya

Rationale of Project

The focus of this project is on the interlocking themes of religious freedom, identity and conflict. The primary aim of this study is to assess the impact of prominent non-mainstream religious groups on multi-ethnic societies, by determining if the proselytization activities of these communities inevitably lead to social fragmentation and polarization or if they can be a force for positive or progressive change in society. While the activities of some non-mainstream groups have led to religious conflict, others have created awareness about the institutional reforms that are required within major religions and have endeavored to rectify social injustices by providing welfare services or by exposing discrimination of various forms. In addition to this, as some religious groups have managed to capture political power or have clout over governments through their capacity to mobilize support, this project will trace the effect of the influence of such groups on multi-religious societies.

One common theme running through the literature on religion and economy is that dissenting voices within major religious institutions have broken away, forming communes as well as business enterprises to establish and practice new ways of life based on a revised understanding of their faith. Some of this literature suggests that these non-conforming groups have ventured into business to support and promote their belief in the distinctiveness of their faith. These groups are said to have created local and transnational business links that, among others, allow them to transfer funds to complement the activities of fellow communities in need of money for their proselytization work.

This study will indicate that while new movements have emerged from within all major religions, different religious groups within the same faith strive to achieve extremely dissimilar goals. Among Catholics, for example, the Focolare community promotes inter-religious dialogue and solidarity among peoples of the world, while the highly influential and purportedly well-connected Opus Dei is reputedly extremely exclusive in orientation. Among Protestants, the Mormons, a community that provides a range of social services, some through its business activities, has also captured control of one state government in the United States (US). The Moonies, a movement originally formed in South Korea but now based in the US and with branches in Africa, Europe and Latin America, owns a number of important firms and vast tracts of land in these regions. The Nation of Islam in the US has played a major role in highlighting the socio-economic plight of the Afro-Americans, specifically during the time when Malcolm X was a major force in this movement. The Muslim-based Mourides have captured political power in Senegal and has a growing business presence in the US and France. The Hindu organization, Shiv Udyog Sena, linked to
India’s largest Hindu revivalism group, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), helps its members develop business enterprises to create employment opportunities and generate funds for its activities. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), affiliated to the RSS, is now a leading political force in multi-religious India. The Buddhist breakaway group, Aum Shinrikyo, has been linked to a terrorist attack in Tokyo, while the Rissho Kosei-kai, also from Japan, has attempted to form collaborative ties with other religious groups to promote social harmony. All these religious groups have business operations in their home country as well as abroad.

This project seeks to understand how non-mainstream groups of different faiths have evolved and developed. It will attempt to examine the process of identity formation and transformation among members of religious groups through an analysis of their commercial ventures. This study seeks to understand the social, economic and political factors that have influenced or attracted people to join these groups. An assessment of these factors will also draw attention to the internal conflicts that have led to further splinter groups that are either more reactionary or inclusive in outlook. The corporate ties and activities of these religious groups will provide insights into the scale and scope of their impact on communal cohesion and co-existence in multi-ethnic societies.

From a theoretical perspective, while a number of studies have built on the works of Werner Sombart, Max Weber and R.H. Tawney that dealt with the impact of Protestantism and Judaism on capitalism and economic development, there has been no research to date on the links between religion, identity and business. While several scholars have challenged Weber’s argument that religious values condition the pattern of enterprise development, another misleading notion in the literature on religion and economy is the implicit assertion of the homogenous style of enterprise development of religious groups and of their cohesiveness. This literature contends that members of these groups have a pronounced or clearly delineated religious identity, the cohesiveness of which also is said to arise from their sense of being persecuted or feeling under siege by the dominant religious leaders or institutions. The underlying assumption here is that their feeling of repression and marginalization impels these members of society to come together to reinforce their religious identity, which in turn inspires or motivates their entrepreneurial activities.

The homogenizing assumptions and tendencies implicit in the literature on religion and capitalism echo the simplifying orientation of much of the studies on the business experience of immigrant communities in the US. The use of concepts like “ethnic enterprise” and “ethnic economy” tends to incorrectly homogenize ethnic communities and to essentialize their pattern of enterprise development. The theory that members of a similar ethnic or religious group share a strong collective identity that influences decision-making in business and the development of their enterprises is associated with the “culturalist perspective”; religion is, after all, an aspect of culture. This perspective often assumes a high degree of ethnic or religious congruence, with little or no acknowledgement of the class, gender, sub-ethnic or intra-religious variations or differences that exist within these communities. Such essentializing frameworks of analysis are also evident in the debates on the link between religion, business and fundamentalist movements, some of which ostensibly support terrorist endeavors.

One mechanism to deal with the distorting tendencies of this essentializing literature is to pay close attention to the issue of enterprise development. A study of a firm run by an individual or a group can help provide comprehensive information about its activities as well as important insights into identity formation and
reformation in society over a protracted period of time. As businesses are actor-centered rather than institution specific, a study of the key actors running these firms will be able to offer insights into the character, problems and divisions within the religious institutions they represent.

A study of individual firms will draw attention to another weakness in the prevailing literature on economy and religion, that is, that it has overlooked or even disregarded the point that the persistence of new movements reveals that serious cleavages exist within a religious community. The values and the institutions of members within a religious faith are not common or universal. The variations or specificities within communities in the same religious grouping and the diversity of their interpretation of basic beliefs will be manifested in the mode of operation of their businesses. Through an evaluation of the business style(s) and practices of these groups, this project will determine if the beliefs seen to be distinctive to each religious group actually influence or condition how individual members run their enterprises. An assessment of the corporate ventures of these groups will also help determine whether intra-religious national and transnational networks have been created and if these ties play a crucial role in the capital formation and accumulation that is deployed for proselytization work or more extremist activities.

A close analysis of the links between religion and business will help reveal details about one fundamental aspect of politics and human rights, that is the capacity of these groups to influence state and society. Religious groups with a large following and with access to substantial funds possess the means to influence state leaders, giving them direct or indirect access to policy planning and implementation. On the other hand, marginalized groups with no influence over the state tend to resort to more confrontational or even extremist means to articulate their views or objections.

An investigation of the evolution of business firms will provide insights into how identity is perceived and represented. While identities are not constituted solely of religious beliefs, religious creed can serve as the basis or impetus for the forging of alliances to counter experiences of discrimination and alienation. In such a context, religion emerges as an important signpost for marginalized peoples and communities.

Objectives of Study

This project aims to understand if religious groups in business are reactionary in their orientation, contributing ultimately to exclusionary practices that serve to undermine social cohesion and, as in more zealous cases, promote extremist activities. The study will then contest recurrent and simplistic analyses that reduce the multi-faceted nature of identity to a single affiliation.

In examining this issue, the objectives of this project are to:

a) draw attention to the diversity or heterogeneity of beliefs among people who subscribe to a major religious faith through a study of the enterprises formed by religious groups;

b) use the information garnered from the evolution of these enterprises to gain insights into the pattern of growth of these groups and their impact on mainstream society;

c) trace the impact of these firms in funding and spawning religious movements locally and internationally;
d) emphasize how the context in which these groups operate, as well as the impact of global events which touch on their faith, have a bearing on how their resources are deployed and their activities are determined;
e) provide insights into social and economic policies that contribute to or encourage people to join religious breakaway groups;
f) assess the implications of this research on the practice of human rights, addressing the necessity of enforcing new policies that limit freedom of religion and of expression to ensure social cohesion; and
g) provide a revisionist view of the cultural determinants in the theoretical literature on religion, enterprise and economic development.

Key Questions

The key questions that will be addressed in this project are the following:

a) what are the factors that have contributed to the emergence and rise of these religious groups?;
b) does religion provide a basis for forging alliances, both local and global, to challenge perceived economic and political injustices?;
c) how have these religious groups developed their enterprises and to what degree do their beliefs determine decision-making in business and influence their entrepreneurial behavior?;
d) to what extent do these business ventures serve as an avenue to fund the proselytization activities of these groups?; and
e) are the theologies and activities of these groups reactionary to the point that they serve ultimately to undermine social cohesion, or are they legitimate endeavors that are in keeping with the tradition of democratic societies to respect the right to freedom of religion?

Methodology

The research method adopted here to gain insights into the activities and growth of religious groups is an evaluation of the business ventures of these groups. A study of the enterprises developed by these groups can provide valuable insights into the importance of religion to individuals running these firms and, by extension, the groups they represent. The form of development and operation of these firms in a particular country, either in the homeland or when these companies venture abroad, will provide information on the impact they have had on society, more specifically on whether they help promote social values and resolve problems or if their activities create tensions that can lead to social conflict. An analysis of the businesses of religious groups operating in a number of different countries can provide insights into their impact in different national, cultural and economic contexts.

The pattern of development of their enterprises will give us an understanding of:

a) identity formation or reformation – how it is influenced by developments within society as well as by global events;
b) social movements – why and how these groups have emerged as key movements;
c) gender – whether these groups hold reactionary views on the role of women in society or if women play a key role in enterprise development and proselytization activities; and
d) social policy – if, in reaction to the outcome of government policies, these groups have been able to galvanize support.

A study of the religious groups within various faith communities in business will be undertaken. The activities of these groups will be analyzed in both local and transnational contexts (see Appendix I). The groups that this project will focus on include the following:

a) Catholic groups in Europe, including the Opus Dei, Focolare, Communion and Liberation and Neocatecumenal Way;
b) the Christian right in the US, with a focus on the Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Moonies (Unification Church) and more obscure movements including the Christian Identity Church, Focus on the Family and Branch Davidians;
c) Islamic movements, including the Nation of Islam, People’s Mujahedeen, Ahmadiyya, Ismaili, Darul Arqam, Bohra (of India) and Mouride (of Senegal);
d) Jewish groups, including the Lubavitch, Breslov Hasidic and Mirzachi movements, and the Jewish Defense League (JDL);
e) Hindu-based Shiv Udyog Sena, linked to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the Hare Krishna movement;
f) Buddhist movements, including Aum Shinrikyo and Rissho Kosei-kai; and
g) Falungong in China, banned by the Communist Party as an “evil cult”.

All these groups have ownership and control of companies in their home country as well as abroad.

Implementation of Project

This project will comprise a team of about 20 researchers who will be commissioned to undertake the following:

a) an in-depth study of religious groups actively involved in business in a number of different countries in order to identify if there are traits particular to religious communities which determine how they do business and develop their companies;
b) provide group studies that will constitute chapters of an edited volume;
c) attend two workshops over the course of the project; and
d) prepare academic journal articles, occasional papers and magazine opinion pieces based on the research to be published as a book.