“What Should I Do with That by Which I Do Not Become Immortal?”: Religion, Freedom, and Development

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ABSTRACT

It is only in the last decade that the discipline of development studies has begun to engage meaningfully with religious understandings of the “good life” and human flourishing. This paper compares the views of “freedom” and the “good life” as understood by Catholic social teaching on the one hand, and the capabilities approach (regarded by many as the best alternative approach to welfare economics and development) on the other, in order to understand how these views can be better brought into a dialogue that would enable the creation of a more holistic understanding of human welfare. I argue that the capability approach can benefit from considering the objectives of development within a more explicitly moral framework, though I show also that such an undertaking is not without problems.

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Introduction

In the opening section of Development as Freedom, Sen relates a passage from the Brihadaranyakasha Upanishad, in which Maitreyee asks her husband Yajnavalkya whether she would achieve immortality if she were to attain all the riches of the world. Yajnavalkya tells her that, through the accretion of wealth, she would realize “the life of rich people,” but there would be no hope for immortality. In response, Maitreyee remarks, “What should I do with that by which I do not become immortal?” (Sen 1999, p. 13). Maitreyee’s rhetorical question has been cited repeatedly in Indian philosophy to illustrate the predicament of the human condition and the limits of the material world (Sen 1999). Though Sen admits to scepticism regarding Maitreyee’s otherworldly concerns, he suggests that her remark nevertheless alludes to the often-tenuous relationship between material comforts and the realization of a life one has reason to value. Wealth is only of use in so far as it enables its possessor to have more freedom to pursue a life imbued with value in the perception of the person living that life. By implication, development needs to be concerned not merely with economic growth or the expansion of people’s income, but with creating the conditions for enhancing people’s lives and the freedoms they enjoy.

This paper is an attempt to revisit Maitreyee’s question: to examine what it might mean to place at the centre of our understanding of development theory and practice something akin to Maitreyee’s concern with the “immortal.” What would it mean for economic and social arrangements to be conceptualized and evaluated
within a moral, or even a religious framework? In this paper, I will address these questions by examining what the capabilities approach on the one hand, and Christianity as it is embodied in Catholic social teaching on the other hand, have to say about development and human flourishing; in particular, I will compare and contrast the idea of “freedom” that each posit. I will argue that both of these frameworks are premised on specific moral views of the “individual” and the “good life”; the purpose of this paper is to bring these views into dialogue.

To begin with, it is important to consider the diverse ways in which religion and development have become associated for better or worse. In the public sphere, the interfaces between religion and development have been evident in varied contexts, for example: the Catholic-inspired mobilization efforts of peasants pressing for land reforms in Brazil, and the resistance of Buddhist monks to military rule in Burma (Bano & Deneulin, 2009; Kumar 2003). Yet, despite the salience of religion in the political sphere and its recognized significance in processes of long-term political, economic, and social change, it has until recently been largely disregarded by theorists in the field of development studies, as well as by post-colonial governments seeking to emulate the development trajectory of their western counterparts (Alkire 2006; Deneulin 2009; Deneulin & Rakodi 2011; Ter Haar & Ellis 2007; Tyndale 2007).

The reasons for this neglect are manifold and can be traced back to, among other things, the historical disjuncture between church and state in Europe; the legitimate reluctance of government agencies to engage in any activities that would be considered “proselytizing”; the belief that religions are in fact irrelevant to modern societies; and a more fundamental displacement of a belief in God by a faith in progress that governments could ensure through prudent planning and economic prosperity (Bano & Deneulin 2009; Deneulin & Rakodi 2011).

Bano and Deneulin (2009) argue that development studies as a discipline has also been predicated on the assumption that the process of modernization is also necessarily one of secularization. The assumption underlying this concept of the secular was that it was opposed to and in some way devoid of the sacred. In contrast, the idea of secularism as developed by others—Gandhi for example—was one of plurality. The secular was envisioned as a realm in which different faiths could exist in a state of harmony, with an equal amount of respect accorded to the beliefs and practices of each religion (Chatterjee 2005; Jordens 1987). The assumption that secular space (denuded of its associations with religion) should constitute the normative base for the relationship between development and religion is one that is culturally and historically specific (Deneulin & Rakodi 2011), and the idea of the secular itself remains highly contested as Casanova (1994) shows.

In a special issue of the journal World Development, the editors Wilber and Jameson (1980) made a plea for reconsidering the role of religion in development. They argued that the moral base of society can often find its provenance in religion, and that successful development depends on heeding the limits set forth by this moral base. They conclude that “unless this tension between the moral base and development is resolved, the process of development will be self-limiting, and it is likely in many cases to engender major instability which can radically transform the entire experience” (p. 475). Though they do not consider the problems that arise when there may be conflicting moral bases, they nevertheless raise the importance of morality serving as a guide and check on the unrestrained pursuit of economic growth. However, their plea fell largely on deaf ears (Deneulin and
It is only with the growing concern in the West regarding the rise of political Islam, the increased presence of faith-based organizations in service delivery, and the internal shifts in the theoretical alignment of the discipline of development studies from its anchor in modernization theory to post-modernism, that an interest in religion has resurfaced (Clarke 2006; Clarke 2007; Deneulin & Rakodi 2011; Tomalin 2007).

Direct experience in the developing world also suggests that religion should be neither ignored nor circumscribed within particular boundaries, since it continues to exercise influence in the public realm (Bano & Deneulin 2009). Voices of the Poor, a landmark World Bank study, found that religion was an integral part of poor people’s conception of well-being in countries as diverse as Jamaica, Bangladesh and Indonesia (Narayan et al. 2000). A meaningful existence may even, for some, be the most basic of human needs (Goulet 1980). In the World Bank study, faith-based organizations were rated more favourably than state-based institutions in meeting the needs of the poor; and in the rural areas, they might even constitute the most important institutional presence in their lives. The study concluded that the findings required a reassessment of the meaning of development and the good life based on the views articulated by the poor.

For a widow in Bangladesh, the time for prayer was as essential to her well-being as a full stomach and mat to sleep on (Narayan et al. 2000). These considerations suggest that development theory needs to rewrite the dominant secular script and consider religion in its entirety, rather than as an instrumental force that merely facilitates or detracts from the realization of pre-established development goals (Bano & Deneulin 2009).

Sen’s capability approach performs an essential service in shifting development onto ethical grounds by recognizing that development needs to be concerned first and foremost with the “human,” that is to say the lives of individual human beings, and what they can or cannot be and do (Alkire 2009). The capability approach provides what some have argued to be the best alternative approach to welfare economics and development, even if it remains incomplete as a theory of justice (Alkire 2005; Sen 2009). Developed over twenty-five years, the approach rests on the proposition that social arrangements should be evaluated by the extent to which they promote the freedoms that people have reason to value (Alkire 2005; Alkire 2009). Sen argues that development should be “seen as a process of expanding the real freedoms people enjoy” (1999, p. 3). Though the capability approach is based on an understanding of four key terms (capabilities; functioning; well-being; agency), Sen’s later writings focus in particular on freedoms (Alkire 2009). Capabilities are understood to be a set of “functionings” (such as being healthy or being nourished) that reflect a person’s freedom to live one life or another of their choosing (Alkire 2009).

Sen (1999) holds that freedom is fundamental to the process of development, because development is both the exercise of one’s freedom and the primary basis on which to evaluate progress. He argues that it is important to understand freedom in a broad sense and to distinguish between processes (the freedom to act or make decisions at both a personal and systemic level) and the real opportunities that people have. Process freedoms are closely tied to the idea of agency and opportunity freedoms to the idea of capability (Alkire 2009). It is insufficient to focus solely on either processes or opportunities, because “unfreedom” can arise from either (Sen 1999).

Furthermore, Sen argues that freedom must be taken to be both the primary end and the means of development—in other words, he believes that freedom...
has both a constitutive and an instrumental role (Sen 1999). Substantive freedoms have intrinsic value and perform a constitutive role in development, as they enrich people’s lives. These freedoms include basic capabilities such as being literate and numerate, exercising one’s agency, and participating in civic and political life (Sen 1999). Freedoms that play an instrumental role in furthering human flourishing include political freedoms, social opportunities, economic facilities, transparency guarantees, and protective security (Sen, 1999).

Sen argues that there are close empirical ties between different kinds of freedoms, which mutually inform and create one another. For example, political freedoms (such as free speech or elections) augment economic security (Sen 1999). This focus on freedom contrasts with other narrower views, which equate development with economic growth, modernization, or technological advancement alone (Sen 1999). For Sen, economic growth or an increase in one’s income is important in so far as it enables the realization of freedoms one has reason to value.

This shift from the focal variable of income to substantive freedoms is important because it allows us to focus on the ends (human development) rather than the means of getting there (income). Inherent in Sen’s view is also the recognition that the freedoms that constitute the purpose of development are contingent on the values that people in a particular context hold. Capabilities (that is, the freedoms people value and have reason to value) are based on value judgments that individuals and collectivities make (Alkire 2009); the capability approach creates a framework that affirms and upholds the plural features of people’s lives and concerns (Sen 1999). Human development must necessarily include various dimensions that are important in people’s lives, including health, education, the freedom to exercise one’s agency, as well as cultural and religious rights. Sen maintains that the open-ended nature of the capabilities approach is one of its merits (Sen 2009). He argues that since capabilities are contingent on people’s values and the local context, they should be determined through a localized process of critical reflection and public deliberation. In contrast, Nussbaum (2011) believes that one ought to define a list of central capabilities, but the debate is ongoing (Alkire 2002).

Sen’s ideas have been influential, even if they do not readily lend themselves to implementation. Perhaps the human development reports published since 1990 represent the best attempt to make his ideas policy-prescriptive and easy to understand (Alkire 2005; Clark 2006). However, it is important to note that the capability approach is not widely implemented in development policy and practice (Deneulin & Rakodi 2011). Economic growth continues to assume primacy of place among objectives formulated in development policies. Moreover, over a third of the world’s poor live under governments with assertive economic growth policies (Deneulin & Rakodi 2011).

Many of Sen’s ideas find classical precedence, and he recognizes the verity in Aristotle’s claim that “wealth is not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else” (Sen 1999, p. 14). What is this “something else” of which Aristotle speaks? Aristotle himself recognized the intrinsic value of religious practice as a part of human flourishing alongside knowledge, health, and work (Alkire 2006). The capability approach, by recognizing the plural and value-laden nature of development, articulates an alternative that leaves room for the consideration of the loftier pursuits that people might have reason to value, including those rooted in religion.

However, Sen himself may be reluctant to grant religion a role in the process of development because of its association with identity-based violence. In Identity
and Violence (2006), the only monograph of his that deals extensively with religion, Sen discusses the ways in which religious identities have been used to foment hatred and violence through reducing the plural nature of people’s identities to a singular one, rooted in religion, thereby eclipsing their freedom to think and exercise their reason (Sen 2006). For Sen, religion is an aspect of identity rather than its source; when it becomes the primary mode of asserting identity, therefore, it begins to be restrictive rather than enabling. Sen’s view is influenced in part from his personal experience of being attacked by Hindu radicals: he is a self-proclaimed “godless scientist” (Sen 2005, p. vi). Yet his thinking has evolved over time, and he does also hold a more positive attitude towards religion. In the foreword to his grandfather’s introductory text on Hinduism, he suggests the book is worthwhile reading in a context of increasing religious intolerance, because it offers a vision of Hinduism that emphasizes liberty of thought, openness, and a history of creative interrelations with other faiths.

The “good life” for Sen is anchored around the realization of freedom, both in terms of the capabilities one has reason to value and in the exercise of one’s agency. Though the importance of freedom and agency in the process of development cannot be overstated, Sen’s view is not neutral, but premised at least in part on liberal assumptions about the individual and the good life that are to a large extent derived from the inheritance of the western, Enlightenment philosophical tradition (which is in itself not independent of a Christian, and thus religious heritage). Deneulin argues that for Sen, a human being’s capacity to exercise her agency is not just one among other equally valid capabilities, but more foundational, and might even be considered the essence of her identity (CAFOD 2010; Deneulin 2010). Though Sen never unequivocally states what constitutes the essence of a person, one could argue that he nevertheless affirms that the freedom to think without recourse to authority or dogma must be preserved, even if this may not be the essence of one’s identity. Religious identity becomes associated with violence when it displaces a person’s fundamental freedom to think independently. While this is a vision that has definite appeal, one could argue that it is still important to consider other views of the “good life,” freedom, and the purpose of development, such as that posited by Christianity.

To begin with, it is important to state there is no single Christian view of human flourishing. It would not be possible here to examine all the various Christian perspectives on this matter; for the purpose of this essay, “the Christian view” is derived from the works of Deneulin (2010), and especially Alkire (1994), whose exposition of Roman Catholic social teaching is based on a post-Vatican II corpus of texts that deal explicitly with the “application of theological insights on the problem of poverty in its contemporary form” (Alkire 1994, p. 26).

The capabilities approach and the Catholic view of human flourishing share much in common (Deneulin 2010).¹ Both recognize that the purpose of development is human dignity, for the realization of which freedom and human agency are central. However, the Catholic understanding of human dignity stems from the belief that humans are created in the image of God; their dignity arises from this inherent reflection of the divine. Poverty alleviation is a fundamentally moral endeavour, for it is concerned with creating the conditions that allow for people to flourish in both material and spiritual terms, and to realize their inherently divine nature (CAFOD 2010).

An economic model that draws on a Catholic understanding of human flourishing is founded on the principles of equity, participation, sustainability, and human development (Deneulin 2010). As with the
capabilities approach, it recognizes the importance of opportunity and process freedoms. The Catholic view holds that each individual should have the opportunity to realize substantive freedoms (such as being healthy, educated, living in a peaceful environment, and engaging in civic and political life), and that development must involve the exercise of her freedom. Furthermore, this freedom must be exercised in a way that is sustainable and mindful of the well-being of future generations (Deneulin 2010).

However, Deneulin (2010) suggests that there are two key ways in which the Catholic perspective differs. The Catholic view of human flourishing holds that humans are not material beings alone (in need merely of health, education, food, shelter), nor inherently free, but rather are interconnected and dependent on God’s grace (Deneulin 2010). Economic development in Catholic social teaching (CST) is explicitly placed in a teleological framework that values the transcendent and recognizes that the purpose of human life is to realize God (Alkire 1994). The implications of this understanding for the development project are profound. Freedom is not solely a matter of having the resources or capability to act, but needs to be re-oriented to the moral order. It is in the freedom to do good that human flourishing and happiness reside (Alkire 1994). The “good”, in other words, is the purpose of freedom, through which one realizes God (Alkire 1994).

In CST, there is also a strong obligation to serve others and to act in the interest of the common good (Deneulin 2010). It is incumbent upon Catholics to fulfil the commandment to love, and to engage in acts of service that promote mutual fulfilment through the recognition of Christ in the suffering of the poor. This moral dimension of service prevents economic development and human fulfilment from becoming merely individualistic (Alkire 1994). Moreover, freedom from death and sin is possible through service and love and emancipation from moral evil (Alkire 1994).

An extension of this idea of the “common good” is the belief in what Deneulin calls the “universal destiny of goods” (2010, p. 11), namely the idea that resources are God-given and therefore must be held in common and distributed in an equitable way. Though the capabilities approach recognizes that goods need to be distributed in such a way as to enable human flourishing, it requires that this be done through a process of democratic deliberation. The Catholic views goes further in claiming that a skewed allocation of resources is unjust, since these goods are part of mankind’s common heritage from God (Deneulin 2010).

It is important to make two further points with regard to freedom in the Christian view. The first is that, as with Sen and other human rights perspectives, it is believed that the presence or absence of material resources is not a determinant of human worth. However, Catholicss believe that poverty is also not a constraint in attaining ethical or salvific liberation (Alkire 1994). This is not to suggest that poverty is condoned or not regarded as a social evil in need of eradication; rather, material deprivation alone does not limit the human spirit and might in fact in a strange way strengthen and beautify it (Alkire 1994). The point here is that the Catholic understanding of freedom is more expansive than Sen’s view, since freedom resides in material, ethical, and salvific liberation and is only achieved when these three aspects are cultivated in tandem; however, in contrast to Sen, primacy is placed on the non-material aspects of freedom (Alkire 1994).

The second point is that there is in CST an inherent ambivalence towards material liberation (Alkire 1994). On the one hand, there is the moral imperative to ensure that humans are freed from social deprivation and
oppression in its various guises; on the other hand, there is the danger that this material liberation will enslave in other ways (Alkire 1994). Real liberation is achieved when material things are renounced and one accepts suffering and complete dependence on God. Material liberation is only conducive to true freedom when temporal goods (such as health, housing, education, nutrition) are “ordered to God through charity “(Alkire 1994, p. 35). This perspective also questions the enlightenment view that progress in fields such as science and economics are conducive to freedom (Alkire 1994). The problem with heedlessly following a course of material development without subjecting it to moral and ethical deliberation is that temporal fulfilment comes to displace the higher purpose of humanity. Thus, it is important to pursue economic development in such a way that questions of its meaning and relation to furthering ethical and salvific fulfilment are always raised and critically reflected upon (Alkire 1994). Otherwise, CST warns that material liberation from poverty will likely result in spiritual impoverishment. In order to enable human fulfilment in its broadest sense, development must always take place in reference to ethical or spiritual values; assuming a stance of moral neutrality is indefensible and only results in economic decisions being made unreflectively (Alkire 1994). Therefore, according to this view, social arrangements should be evaluated by the extent to which they expand freedom in its broadest sense, encompassing material, ethical, and salvific aspects.

Of course, this begs the question as to whether it is possible to apply a religio-moral framework to secular social arrangements, or within a society where there may be competing views regarding the ultimate good. Alkire (1994) argues that secular institutions such as the World Bank must engage in a process of ethical reflection if they are to serve the true objective of poverty alleviation—human fulfilment. The process of engaging in religio-moral reflection is neither to compromise the plural nature of an institution such as the World Bank, nor to impose a particular view of the good, but rather to orient the task of poverty alleviation more fundamentally towards human fulfilment, which may be jeopardized if this does not occur. Moreover, the recognition that a life devoted to material pursuits alone is insufficient is shared by other faiths and non-religious philosophies (Alkire 1994).

Alkire (1994) also suggests that a multicultural community would likely share many Catholic views related to human fulfilment, including the importance of community; loving and serving others; the need to develop serenity and understanding in the face of suffering and uncertainty; and an appreciation of solitude and reflection (Alkire 1994). However, a complete agreement on the components of human fulfilment is not necessary in order for a secular institution to engage in religio-moral deliberation; what is necessary is for secular institutions to realize that there are non-economic consequences to the way in which poverty alleviation is pursued, which relate to human fulfilment (Alkire 1994).

As a moral framework, the capabilities approach also recognizes the limits of focusing on material needs at the expense of human development. However, it places primacy on freedom and agency above the realization of a spiritual vocation; social arrangements are to be evaluated by the extent to which they promote the former. As the preceding discussion has suggested, from a religious point of view, though freedom and agency are essential, they are ultimately subordinate to higher concerns; it is important not to disregard the significance of these concerns in many countries for large segments of the population. Moreover, there may be important ethical and moral concerns that religious and non-religious perspectives share. The Catholic view...
of flourishing performs an important task in requiring any approach to economic development to be deliberate in its consideration of the moral and non-economic consequences of development.

While we might concur with this view, it is also important to recall that not all persons share the concern with any sort of religious or salvific goals, and a development policy that is driven by the primacy of such aims is in danger of marginalizing opposing views. After all, how can a development policy be framed in such a way as to place a salvific aim at its centre, without defining in some way what such an aim might be, and what paths might need to be followed, or what institutions might need to be encouraged, that could assist in the achievement of such an aim? Yet the moment one begins to define this aim, other, potentially competing definitions may be excluded. Regardless of the fact that many—perhaps most—religions do indeed share a basic moral framework including aspects such as charity, an aversion to excessive materialism, and the need for reflection on the purpose of life, the forms in which these frameworks are enunciated, as well as the prescribed ways in which they are to be fulfilled, are not necessarily in harmony, let alone fully compatible. What is perhaps even more important is the fact that people may wish to not reflect on the purpose of life, and may rather wish to devote themselves solely to a life of material well-being. Would it be legitimate to deny people the right not to live according to a religious framework? Sen’s approach bears with it the danger that unless the more lofty goals that are at the core of all religions are at least acknowledged in a development model—which he may be reluctant to do—such goals might be marginalized, and the ideals behind them might be lost. However, his approach has the merit that it leaves people free to decide whether or not they wish to preserve such ideals.

An example of the potential problems arising from these issues can be found in the case of Bhutan, where the development plan is explicitly tied to a particular religious perspective (Hirata 2005). This appears to be having some success in preserving various moral and religious aspects of life while also improving material well-being, but it is not entirely clear whether the balance between these two facets of development that is striven for in Bhutan genuinely reflects the free choice of the majority of the people, nor whether younger generations, exposed to a less traditional lifestyle and greater material comforts, would wish to preserve such a development model (Aris 1994; Dahl 2002). Even more of a concern, perhaps, is that the Bhutanese model may also have led to the marginalization of minority religious and cultural ways of life (Saul 2000).

A further concern arises when we consider that in certain circumstances, some groups may prefer to renounce certain freedoms for the sake of religious benefits, for example, freedoms in the forms of dress, of consumption, of culture (Tomalin 2007). A religious perspective might well plead that, for the greater moral good, certain kinds of freedoms need to be restricted, as they bear with them the danger of distracting from, or perverting, the striving for salvation. This is indeed a valid objection against certain kinds of freedoms from one point of view, but when translated onto a larger scale, beyond that of one small, more-or-less homogenous community, it potentially imposes a single, hegemonic point of view on others, which could be seen as depriving some of freedoms—which is itself a moral problem, even if those freedoms are viewed in the religious perspective as being immoral ones. For example, many aspects of life in a modern, prosperous, consumer-driven society, from forms of dress to what is consumed, are seen as reprehensible by many religious traditions, and members of these traditions often try and
restrict certain forms of consumption within their own communities. When there is a complete consensus within these communities, no problem need arise; but we must question whether there ever is complete consensus. Equally significant is the fact that when these communities are embedded within a wider world with potentially differing values, clashes may—and often do—arise, which relate explicitly to what freedoms and values are deemed more important (for example, the values of living a life pleasing to God, in opposition to the freedom to consume, which may even be defined as an imperative rather than a freedom, given the structures of modern capitalist economies and the need for constant economic growth). A more explicitly religious approach to development would need to find ways of addressing these problems; one should note, however, that even the capabilities approach does not quite address all such issues of competing freedoms, since while leaving issues open to individual choice is laudable, even at a community level, competing freedoms may clash; they inevitably do at the level of a multicultural state.

Both the capabilities approach and a Catholic-inspired economic model provide alternatives to the dominant utilitarian economic model by recognizing that human flourishing must be the goal of development. Though there are problems with the uncritical adoption of a religio-moral framework in assessing social arrangements, what the Catholic view of human flourishing requires of policy-makers, development practitioners and even institutions—perhaps more explicitly than the capabilities approach—is that they be reflective, consider the moral nature of their objectives, and raise questions about how a development program or policy enables or hinders human flourishing in its broadest sense (even if fundamental disagreements are bound to emerge). This process of reflection and critical deliberation is at the heart of the capabilities approach as well. Though Sen himself may discount a role for religion in the process of development, he nevertheless draws from Indian and Western religious and philosophical writings in developing the capabilities approach—recognizing perhaps the wisdom inherent in both traditions. The questions of “who we are” and “what is a good life” must be the perennial concerns of any development endeavour. Though answers to these questions might stymie an unequivocal response, they are nevertheless always worth asking, and must remain at the heart of any discourse on the nature and purpose of development.

Footnotes

1. We should note that the principles of Catholic view of human flourishing could apply to other branches of Christianity. However, for the purpose of this paper I choose to focus on the Catholic view of human flourishing.

References


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